

From Nowhere to Know How

Sydney College of Divinity: The First Twenty Years

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MONDAY, 15 SEPTEMBER 2003, marked the twentieth Anniversary of the official incorporation of the Sydney College of Divinity (SCD). To state the fact so glibly and leave it at that, would be to neglect the long period of negotiations, stretching over almost seven years, that preceded this faltering beginning, or to dismiss the context in which all of this happened. Bishop George Augustus Selwyn in response to the question of how he would like his own life to be written, replied: "Tell first of all my faults, and then tell whatever the grace of God has enabled me to do in spite of them."¹ That is what I propose to do in recounting the story of the SCD.

Nevertheless, this article has been a necessarily selective attempt to distil and delineate the essence of the major phases of the SCD's life. That there are omissions is hardly surprising, and for those of you who would prefer a more detailed account of the earliest years, I would strongly recommend John Hill's definitive articles, "The Foundation of the Sydney College of Divinity"²

Perhaps my treatment of events has been blemished and restricted in its charity. Some may claim that I am simply too close to the Sydney College of Divinity, having now been associated with it for exactly half of its life. All I can claim is that my intention has not been to downgrade or discount, but to affirm and advance. In presenting this paper it is also my earnest hope that, by being more informed of the past, we might more easily master the challenges and events of the present, and therefore move forward with greater confidence and with a sure hope.

1. Quoted in Raymond Nobbs, *George Hunn Nobbs 1799-1884* (Norfolk Island 1984) 1.

2. John Hill, "The Foundation of the Sydney College of Divinity", *Journal of Christian Education*, Papers 88 (April 1987), pp. 39-53 and Papers 89 (July 1987), pp. 35-51.

CONTEXT

Up until recent times actual departments of theology have been conspicuously absent from the faculties of most of our public Australian universities. Instead, private colleges of divinity were formed to take their place, and the Sydney College of Divinity stands in that tradition. This absence was largely the result of the establishment of Australia's first universities at a time when the effects of sectarian bitterness were being felt most keenly at all levels in society. The establishment of a university requires an Act of Parliament, and state governments in the mid-nineteenth century, not wanting to see religious bigotry carry over into its fledgling seats of learning, were far from keen to have divinity or theology included among its programs. Nothing was said, for example, in the 1850 Charter of the University of Sydney about theology. Although there is a vague reference to the "advancement of religion and morality", the emphasis is very much on the "encouragement for pursuing a regular and liberal course of education". On the other hand, the Charter of the University of Melbourne specifically excluded the teaching of theology or divinity from all curricula. Of course, this was the very antithesis of the European universities, or of several of the early American foundations, for there it was the study of theology that had first called a community of scholars together, and then other disciplines such as law and medicine had developed

Following white settlement in Australia in 1788, clergy were either imported or, in later years if locally born and showing promise, sent overseas to study. Such a situation could not prevail for ever and various efforts were made, with varying degrees of success, to train clergy locally. While some theological understanding and pastoral competencies were undoubtedly gained in this way, no official degrees could be granted as the programs lacked civil recognition. Clergy thus trained in the colonies felt disadvantaged, especially those from denominations which were part of the establishment in other countries. Back "home" clergy normally held a degree of some sort, and it was considered as unusual for them to be otherwise as it was for a lawyer or physician to practise without an appropriate qualification. While in several cases the Church of England, appreciating this sensitivity on the part of some of its more senior clergy, had conferred honorary Lambeth degrees, this had nothing to do with furthering theological training in the antipodes.

Two institutions were therefore called into being. The first was the Australian College of Theology (ACT), founded in 1891 by the General Synod of the Dioceses of the Church of England in Australia and Tasmania for "the systematic study of Divinity, especially among the clergy [of the Church of England]". The awards were to be Licentiate of Theology (ThL), Scholar of Theology (ThSchol) and Fellow of the

College (ThSoc). The second was the Melbourne College of Divinity (MCD) which was constituted by an Act of the Victorian Parliament in 1910, and offered in its early years the LTh and BD.

In Sydney (and Brisbane too) the first developments came much more slowly. Here the Anglicans were not pressing for a state-based award, and were content with teaching programs authorised by the Australian College of Theology. Moreover, as the Melbourne College of Divinity offered its BD externally from the beginning, several of the other Protestant colleges presented candidates in this way, although the degree could only be taken by graduates. Nevertheless, two of Australia's older establishments, the University of Sydney and the University of Queensland, did ultimately come to offer the Bachelor of Divinity (a secondary degree only) for some years: at the former from 1937 until 1993, and at the latter for a much shorter period, 1953-1975. At neither institution, however, was proper respect given to this serious, traditional, faith-related academic enterprise. The normal structure of a Faculty, for example, was never established at Sydney. Moreover, in the 37-year period (1942-1978) there were only 66 graduates. In 10 of those years there had been none at all, while in 11, there had only been one in each year. The number peaked at 8 in 1985 but then fell away so that there were only two graduates in each of the final two years of the degree.³

At Sydney University particularly, the introduction of the BD degree was long and tortuous, for the University and Colleges Act 1900 had expressly stated that the Senate could confer degrees as it thought fit "in all branches of knowledge, except theology and divinity".⁴ It was, therefore, a decision of considerable importance when in 1916 the Senate approved an alteration to the Act of Incorporation to enable the University "to grant degrees in Divinity". By so doing it was in fact repudiating the beliefs of the founding fathers that the university should be secular in nature. Nevertheless, the issue very quickly raised sectarian ire, just as it had in 1850 at the time of the establishment of the University. In the mid-nineteenth century the only option open to legislators had been to ban the teaching of theology altogether. The result here, as elsewhere in Australia, was an "inclusive" higher education that resolved the problems of pluralism (or perhaps more accurately expressed as sectarianism) by virtually excluding all religious perspectives from the nation's highest academic life. But then in 1916, when the university was prepared to review its position, and the whole

3. *Graduation Proceedings, 1979-1994* (Archives of the Registrar's Office, Fisher Library, University of Sydney.)

4. Minutes of the Senate, 7 May, 11 June, 13 August, 3 September, 1917, quoted in Clifford Turney, Ursula Bygott and Peter Chippendale, *Australia's First: A History of the University of Sydney, Volume 1, 1850-1939* (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1991) 420.

world was focused on a much bigger conflict, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, Michael Kelly, and the Principal of St John's College, Maurice O'Reilly, were the stumbling blocks: they were foremost in condemning the move to introduce theology into the curriculum. Archbishop Kelly is quoted as saying, "they must not Protestantize the University like they have tried to do with the public schools".⁵

After this abortive attempt during World War I (and the bitterness engendered by the war-time conscription issue did little to improve the situation) the matter was not raised again until August 1932, when the Board of Joint Theological Studies requested the Senate to establish a course and degree in divinity. This request did not involve the teaching of theology by the University itself. The Board simply desired that the University should control the examinations and confer the degrees. Moreover, mindful of the risk of raising once again the sectarian issue, the Government of the day was assured that the subjects to be studied would have no doctrinal elements and that such a course would not involve substantial financial assistance, since all lectures would be given voluntarily by existing members of university staff qualified in the necessary fields, and by the heads and staff members of colleges.

The current Departments of Studies in Religion are therefore relatively recent and are the legacies of these earlier endeavours in theology at Sydney and Queensland. But the course units on offer now and the graduate supervision at these institutions tend, for the most part, to be only in the areas of comparative religion or non-Christian studies. I suspect that the values of "liberalism" and "tolerance" that the establishment championed eventually, and perhaps inevitably, led to their own disappearance from the educational milieu, as sectarian came to mean exclusively secular.⁶

But other forces were at work in New South Wales in the 1950s that would eventually see (although some three decades later) the establishment of an ecumenical college with a primary degree in theology. Such an institution would be private, thus guaranteeing an acceptable level of autonomy and allowing its Member Institutions to teach theology from a confessional base, but it would be structured in such a way that processes for association and accountability would guarantee academic standards comparable with, or even better than, those at a university.

CONSIDERATION

There was a variety of events in NSW that paved the way for the establishment of the Sydney College of Divinity, although the

5. Turney, Bygott and Chippendale, *Australia's First*, 519.

6. See Raymond Nobbs, "The Place of Theology in the Australian University" (Debate: Heaven Aflame) in *Body, Mind & Spirit* 1999 at <http://www.openplanet.com.au>.

participants did not recognise it at the time. An early step forward was taken by the Faculty of Theology within the seminaries of the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney. It gained approval in 1954 from the Sacred Congregation of Seminaries and Universities in Rome to offer the Baccalaureate and Licence, thus providing the first primary degree in theology in New South Wales, albeit from an overseas source. The next action was taken by the NSW Government itself when it passed the NSW Higher Education Act, 1969. Unlike the acts passed by the other states, this Act invested in the Advanced Education Board (also established by the Act) the power under section 6.a.i.ii "to make reports and recommendations to the Minister...[on]...the approval of courses as advanced education courses" to be offered by institutions other than just universities and colleges of advanced education. Here then was a fresh way forward for the civil recognition of theological awards.

But the various theological colleges in Sydney, at this stage anyway, were not thinking of acting collaboratively. They had for too long been accountable to no-one except themselves, and besides, even though the seeds of ecumenism had been sown for some time, there had not been much flowering to date. Besides, Moore College and several other colleges had already approached the University of Sydney about a primary degree in theology. The Catholic colleges meanwhile were exploring ways of greater cooperation amongst themselves with the intention of bringing the Marist Seminary at Toongabbie, the Columban Seminary at Turramurra, and the Vincentian Seminary at Eastwood into some form of federation with the Springwood/Manly Faculty. But even here, within the one tradition, nothing could be resolved. As John Hill tells us,

....the Faculty was jealous of its status, and unwilling to close the door to an approach to the university; and the other theologates were suspicious of what they regarded as its excessively academic approach. They preferred a more vocational approach at the undergraduate level, reserving their interest in the Faculty to graduate work.⁷

If it was a problem for the Catholics it was equally a challenge for the other denominations, each having its own priorities with respect to vocational training for ministry and academic pursuits. (This tension remains to this day, and many debates at Academic Board still arise as the SCD is committed to catering for both of these dimensions in theological study.) On the other hand, since 1910 the Melbourne College of Divinity had been successful, not only in developing a focused curriculum, but also in cooperating ecumenically. But Sydney had

7. Hill, "The Foundation of the Sydney College of Divinity", *Journal of Christian Education*, Paper 88, 41.

always had its own distinctive theological perspectives (perhaps best described as distrust or mistrust of other traditions) and, moreover, anything emanating from Melbourne might have been disdained on the grounds of colonial differences.

In fact, in 1974 the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools (ANZATS) had, either cheekily or somewhat innocently, proposed that a similar model to Melbourne's should be contemplated for Sydney. Such a suggestion was not appreciated by Sydney at the time. However, the wisdom of such advice became only too obvious when the MCD later that year introduced a primary degree, the Bachelor of Theology (BTheol), to sit alongside the BD that could, of course, be taken by distance education. Where did the Sydney colleges now stand nationally? A second blow was felt when the University of Sydney shelved for the time being any further discussions about an undergraduate degree in theology. A third blow came when many of the Sydney institutions were at last galvanised into action and applied individually to the Higher Education Board for degree accreditation for their programs, but they then were shocked to discover that they were only approved to award Diplomas. What the Board sought⁸ was "a rationalisation of resources...and the establishment of a degree supervising authority administered by the institutions" before it would consider anything at a higher level.

At a meeting of representatives from a number of Sydney's theological colleges, held on 16 May, 1977, it was explained that what the Board really wanted, in fact, was something like the MCD model. As those present then resolved to move forward collectively, it could well be argued that the Sydney College of Divinity was thus formally conceived "in principle" on that day. However, it was still to be many years before it was "brought into the world, and thrust into the unwilling arms of the various theologates, Catholic and Protestant, to do what they would with it."⁹

COMMENCEMENT

Having received this mandate in May 1977, the Reverend Dr Graeme Ferguson (founding Principal of the United Theological College) called a meeting of Heads of Colleges in June 1977 to discuss how the member institutions could move in the ways suggested by the Higher Education Board. Meetings were held, roughly at monthly intervals thereafter. Quite understandably problems and tensions soon surfaced: there was, for example, considerable disagreement on admission standards, on the examinations (internal or external), and on external versus internal

8. Letter from HEB, 22 March 1977 (SCD Archives).

9. Hill, "The Foundation of the Sydney College of Divinity", Paper 88, 43.

control of the curriculum. Wisely, the Heads of Colleges resolved to set up two sub-groups, one to work on the curriculum, and the other, on the statutes.

While the Board had provided the necessary stimulus, it was now left to the individual colleges to work out by themselves the necessary details and appropriate procedures. (This can only be seen as a naïve move by the HEB which, it should be noted, had hitherto itself had no experience in processing applications from private providers.) The MCD on the other hand had been assisted extensively by the Victorian Government before the passage of the Bill that authorised it in 1910. Similarly, experienced university administrators were at hand when the ecumenical consortia in three of the other states were established about this same time – the Adelaide College of Divinity (1979) with Flinders University, the Brisbane College of Theology (1983) with Griffith University, and the Perth College of Divinity (1985) with Murdoch University. In fact, with little experience and left to their own devices, it is little wonder that it took the Sydney colleges a further boisterous six years to “make the running”, and to at last present an acceptable proposal.

In many ways the potential players in this game were far from equal. There were three colleges particularly which, because of their size, the quality of their faculty, their library resources and the firm underpinning by their denominations, were viewed by the HEB as being crucial to the successful operation of a future Sydney College of Divinity: they were the Catholic Institute of Sydney, Moore Theological College and the United Theological College. It stood to reason that those who would have a larger than average share in the gains that would come from the civil recognition of their courses were the smaller member institutions: the Union Theological Seminary (a federation of the Marist, Columban and Vincentian Seminaries; St Paul’s National Seminary for Late Vocations; the Baptist Theological College of NSW (later Morling College); and the Churches of Christ (NSW) Theological College (formerly the Woolwich Bible College).

If this was to be a “Sydney” College then its membership would of necessity range from the prestigious to the weak. But this diversity had other dimensions as well. While several colleges saw theology as best taught in an ecumenical context, there were others who were quite anti-ecumenical, and those who were quite indifferent.

The key issue, however, was a consideration of the very nature of theology itself. As now, so then, there were those who held that anyone could do theology, even without a belief in God. If this particular position had been embraced by the founders, then the HEB would have been quite within its rights to have insisted that the SCD be structured in the same way as any college of advanced education. But such a

concept of theology had no currency with the member institutions. Rather, it was resolved that it was impossible to study theology except from a committed view-point and that, given the present denominational divisions, that commitment was at least partly confessional. The member institutions entering the SCD accepted the need for accountability and association, but they also insisted on some degree of autonomy. However, it was the zeal to maintain this admirable integrity over theology that was to lead to the breakdown of many of the negotiations, as well as to the rejection of a number of submissions that must at times have bewildered the HEB members. The particular challenge for the Sydney theologians was to make a highly professional case, but one that the Higher Education Board could also readily understand.

I have no intention of retelling the tortuous story of the frustration of those many long years of discussion, negotiation, applications made, applications denied, and, in general, finding the way through the trackless wastes of bureaucracy. All of those details have been clearly identified and most ably assessed by John Hill, and I again commend his detailed study to you. However, perhaps I might be permitted to identify five salient issues from this particular road to establishment. History has lessons for the present and the future.

CONSTRAINTS

First of all, the member institutions had to accept the reality of a government body, in this instance, the Higher Education Board. Several colleges did not appreciate the need for sound regulations that clearly defined the basic structural principles, administrative structures, entry requirements, curriculum and provisions for adequately resourcing faculty and libraries. When the United Theological College expressed severe misgivings on several of these matters in a letter¹⁰ dated 13 November 1979 through its principal, Dr Graeme Ferguson, others could not see what was at issue. In fact, Ferguson had prophetically even gone so far as to describe the emerging submission as little more than “the basis of the first stage of negotiations” with the Higher Education Board.

When the submission was at last “finalised”, and presented to the Higher Education Board on 7 January, 1980 (almost two years after the Higher Education Board had expected it) the Board took its time in replying, and the member institutions became impatient. Finally, on 27 August, 1980, the Board responded.¹¹ The Board noted the application with interest; drew attention to the importance of the mode of government in an institution to be registered under 11(4) of the Higher

10. Letter from Ferguson to Coffey, 13 November 1979 (SCD Archives).

11. Letter from HEB to Dr David Coffey, 27 August 1980 (SCD Archives).

Education Act 1975; and then went on, in a manner that was to dismay the Heads of Colleges:

The Board is therefore grateful for the opportunity of examining the preliminary document and offering comment on aspects of its content. The Board would also be prepared to examine drafts of the draft memorandum and articles of association by which the College is to be incorporated, should you wish it.

The response to the Higher Education Board by Dr Coffey, which emerged from the Heads' meeting on 1 October, was calm, accepting most of the comments, and seeking a meeting to discuss several of the other issues. That meeting was held on 17 October when the member institutions were instructed more fully on the Australian Council on Awards in Advanced Education (ACAAE) criteria for approving courses.

The second element that I would identify is that the input from the University of Sydney was a mixed blessing. It did guide and recommended on certain standards, but it had its own agenda and I believe, on balance, that it may have done more harm than good: the keen interest expressed by the University in the late 1960s destabilised several of the colleges; its lack of coming to any clear decision unduly delayed many of the processes; and, in the end, it was not able to offer what was really needed. In fact the university was a beneficiary of the SCD for, following the early dialogue with the Heads of Colleges about a first degree in theology, it saw the wisdom of establishing its own Department of Religious Studies under the direction of Professor Eric Sharpe. While this did not attract candidates for the ministry it did appeal to a large number of other university students.

The third element is the role played by Dr Broughton Knox, Principal of Moore Theological College from 1959 until 1985. The heads of the other colleges, keen that Moore should be part of the consortium, had over the years accommodated as many as possible of Knox's proposals. This led, however, to many irregularities in the regulations. Knox opposed many of the proposed structures to facilitate creativity or innovation, and to guarantee sufficient oversight of standards, comparability of courses, and methods and forms of assessment. He would not agree, for example, that there were insufficient "people with experience in tertiary education"¹² on Council. Moreover, he fought for maximum autonomy with minimal central supervision. He was adamant in his belief that comparability was incompatible with the independence of Moore: he further maintained that theologians should be masters in their own house, and so should not have to submit to the opinions of

12. Letter from Knox to Coffey, 20 October 1978 (SCD Archives).

“people with experience”.¹³ The Higher Education Board would obviously and quite naturally think otherwise. The bitter irony was that when the time came to formally join the SCD, Knox/Moore refused to do so.

Granted Knox’s positive involvement in other enterprises of an ecumenical nature, it would seem that his principal concern throughout the SCD negotiations was the independence of Moore College. He appeared to travel reluctantly with the committee because it seemed, for some time, that this was the only way Moore would get its programs recognised. Involvement with the SCD was simply a means to the end that the participating colleges might be able to gain collectively a degree which the Higher Education Board would not otherwise grant to the member institutions individually. As negotiations proceeded further, and it became more obvious that the SCD was not going to be simply the umbrella organisation he hoped it would be, Knox hinted that the Australian College of Theology, of which Moore College was still a member, was willing to give Moore special status, and that he could get from the ACT what he could not get from the SCD.

In the end that is just what the Australian College of Theology granted. The ACT’s Board of Delegates, at a meeting in June 1983, resolved that colleges fulfilling certain conditions (and Moore College was the only one) should be accorded a status amounting to virtual independence. The Moore College Committee, meeting just a fortnight afterwards, resolved to take the ACT option, and its reply to an ultimatum from the SCD was not unexpected. In a letter dated 16 June, 1983 the Committee reported, among other things, that they did not wish to “find themselves compromised with regard to doctrines of the faith regarded as being vital by being compulsorily associated through their membership of the Sydney College of Divinity with activities agreed upon by the council in furtherance of some of these wider objects”. It suggested, therefore, that the Sydney College of Divinity should proceed to incorporation without including Moore College.

In referring to these events, the conservative paper of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, the *Australian Church Record* (of which one of Moore College’s own staff members, Dr Robert Doyle, was editor and Knox himself a member of the board) commented:

In explaining the reasons for Moore College’s withdrawal from the proposed College Dr Knox stressed that Moore College had built its reputation on its firm stand for the Gospel and for the principles of Reformed Theology. He said that, under the new proposals, it would be possible for Moore College, through the Sydney College of Divinity, to be involved in activities which were inimical to the

13. Knox to Coffey (SCD Archives).

Gospel.... He cited the proposal that the Sydney College of Divinity do those things desirable to promote professional training as a source of possible problems. "What if the Sydney College of Divinity decided to sponsor a lecture series by someone whose view of theology was unacceptable to us. We would be associated in advertising, could be asked to preside at the lectures and even be expected to propose a vote of thanks to the lecturer," the Principal said.¹⁴

The remaining members of the SCD team were understandably saddened by all of these events. They had all grown together during the negotiating process in a way that Moore College had not shared. At first it was naturally feared that Moore's withdrawal could jeopardise the whole submission. The reverse was to prove to be the case. The SCD's Legal Reference Committee, at a meeting on 11 July, recommended that the amendments be reversed which had been adopted to satisfy Moore College. This was accepted unanimously and the Articles were lodged with the Corporate Affairs Commission on 23 August, and the SCD was duly incorporated on 15 September 1983.

An encouraging letter¹⁵ was sent to the Chairman of the Interim Council on behalf of the Chairman of the Higher Education Board on 5 January 1984, and the Chairman of the Higher Education Board wrote¹⁶ to the Chairman of the SCD on 17 February, indicating the conditional approval of the SCD BTh as from the beginning of 1982 (when most of the member institutions introduced the BTh programme which was eventually approved).

But all consortia are fragile or fluid entities because individual colleges are invariably forced to answer to a denominational constituency. This is another case of the one who is paying the piper invariably calling the tune. The crisis for Morling occurred in September 1985 and revealed this fourth constraining element – an institution's dependence on, and accountability to, its denominational base. Any college that neglects this does so at its own peril.

In September, 1985, the Rev J. O. Hogg of Stanmore Baptist Church published (with a Foreword by the Rev J. Farr of Blakehurst) a pamphlet entitled "*Triumph" or Tragedy?*" which strongly protested against Baptist participation in the SCD. One of Hogg's principal objections was that the SCD was ecumenical and as such would be subject to the "anaesthetising influences of the World Council of Churches and Rome". He contended that "many of the men who fill our pulpits will have been influenced by these futile ecumenical exercises and will lead this denomination into the fold of the World Council of Churches and from

14. *Australian Church Record*, No.1781 (11 July 1983), 1-2.

15. HEB to Dr John Hill, 5 January 1984 (SCD Archives).

16. HEB to Dr Graeme Ferguson, 17 February 1984 (SCD Archives).

there into the welcoming arms of the Roman Catholic Church". He suggested further that Moore College had withdrawn because it might be "involved in activities which were inimical to the Gospel". He was alarmed that Baptists would be joining in prayer with Roman Catholics at SCD Graduation Ceremonies, he feared that participation in the SCD involved recognising men training for the Roman priesthood as men "in training for the Christian ministry", and postulated that "other member institutions teach and practise doctrines which undermine and even deny our Baptist distinctives and evangelical heritage". The pamphlet concluded with a motion to be presented to the 1985 Baptist Assembly: "that this Assembly debates and comes to a conclusion regarding our involvement as a denomination in an ecumenical association with the Sydney College of Divinity".

Both the Baptist Theological College and the Executive Committee of the Baptist Union were highly embarrassed, but many Baptists in New South Wales, sadly, were alarmed by Hogg's arguments. As a result, the 1986 Baptist General Council voted that Morling College (as it now was) "give notice forthwith of withdrawal from the Sydney College of Divinity to take effect from the end of 1989...."

The withdrawal of Moore and Morling took place for different reasons. On the one hand, Moore was seeking far greater autonomy than the SCD was prepared to concede, and the ACT, alarmed at the consequences for itself of Moore's secession, granted what Moore wanted; whereas Morling College, on the other hand, withdrew because of a fundamental opposition to anything savouring of ecumenism and association with Roman Catholics.

There is no doubt that the event also upset the SCD. However, the remaining participants learnt from the experience and developed skills in negotiating, in communication and in setting common goals, as well as in working collaboratively and in giving support to each other. In that way they were better equipped to handle future growth and expansion when it came.

In the following years a number of institutions did apply for membership, although some were rejected, mainly because they did not meet the SCD's standards. From 1987 until the present no less than nine additional colleges were to join.

CONSOLIDATION

Although the College was to experience several minor setbacks over the years, the second decade of its life as a whole evidenced a considerable degree of consolidation and growth. Perhaps one of the most notable features was the broadening of the range of awards. In its first years the SCD had offered only the Bachelor of Theology degree: this was soon to be augmented by a Diploma in Theology for those for

whom it was either thought that a less rigorous program of studies was desirable, and/or who were not preparing for “ordained” ministry. At the same time, however, there were others who wished to pursue further formal studies, and so a raft of Graduate Diplomas was introduced leading finally to the Master of Theology. The University of Sydney had formerly attracted a number of graduate theologians to its course work MTh award with the total number graduating reaching a peak of 9 in 1992. However, with its subsequent shift away from the mainstream disciplines in theology, by the mid-nineties this degree was **losing** its appeal, and so an alternative was needed.

The Academic Board, when preparing for the 1997 reaccreditation of its awards, was challenged to reconsider its whole theological curriculum. A survey conducted in 1995, for example, had revealed that only about half of the BTh candidature was planning to pursue some form of full-time ministry after graduation, and further, slightly less than one half of these would be seeking formal ordination. Moreover, several members were seeking closer links between their students’ secular studies and theology, while another substantial issue was to allow candidates to undertake research studies to the highest level. The SCD currently offers 17 separate awards.

Flexibility, a particular hallmark of the SCD, is ably seen in the various modes of delivery of its programs. The College moved quickly from not only being non-residential, but also to allowing selected Member Institutions to offer courses by distance education. Institutions so approved are in the forefront of electronic delivery providing high quality services to students in distant parts of Australia as well as overseas. Intensive and extensive courses are available. In early 2002, and not without many months of extended and heated debate, and the determination of a series of accountability mechanisms, it was eventually agreed to allow Wesley Institute for Ministry & the Arts (now simply called Wesley Institute) to teach the Bachelor of Theology in a language other than English (LOTE), namely Korean.

It is somewhat ironic that the SCD’s demands from the centre to its Member Institutions, to give evidence of adequate resourcing in plant and personnel, have not been applied as rigorously to itself. It was not until 1995, for example, that there was such a thing as an SCD Office, or even a listing for the College in the Sydney Telephone Directory! From 1985 until 1995 the “Sydney College of Divinity Ltd” plaque could only be displayed at one of its Member Institutions, on the boundary wall near the entrance gates to the Catholic Institute of Sydney (formerly, St Patrick’s College, Manly). The relocation of that Institution to Strathfield in 1995 and the happy coincidence in that year of the establishing of the first SCD Office within the grounds of the Australian College of Ministries (formerly the Churches of Christ [NSW]

Theological College) saw the plaque's eventual transfer. Furthermore, it was not until 2000 that the first (and to date the only) full-time staff appointment to the SCD Office was made. Although it was suggested in some circles at the time that these events clearly signalled the beginning of a trend to centralise functions away from where it had traditionally been held, namely the Member Institutions, such a move was as inevitable as it was imperative. While the SCD is only its member Institutions, and certainly a consortium in every sense of that term (a federation of theological providers), the demands for advice, reporting and accountability by government alone justify a more centralised model. The SCD Office also exists to support the endeavours of its Member Institutions both individually and collectively, and to represent SCD interests in the whole tertiary education sector.

Nevertheless, many of the SCD processes and procedures are still maintained by staff, both academic and administrative, drawn from our Member Institutions. This rationale not only continues to reaffirm the collaborative nature of SCD operations, but also guarantees input on policy decisions at every level. Like most other church-based enterprises the SCD is also dependent on a raft of volunteers. The College has been, and continues to be, ably advised by a large body of educational experts drawn from our universities, other tertiary institutions, government bodies and the wider community, who serve on its numerous boards and committees.

One of the SCD's greatest assets is its highly-qualified faculty that currently numbers 184 and it is one of the largest in the country. The Report of Research and Professional Activities that is published annually confirms the high calibre of staff, with no less than 92% having a higher research degree. Those Institutions that place a high value on the Academy, not surprisingly, record the largest listings of refereed articles in learned journals and monographs under the imprimatur of a leading academic press: where an institution's emphasis is more on training for ministry, then there is sometimes less emphasis on publications and a focus on "professionalism in the field".

Perhaps one of the best indicators of sustained progress is the profile of graduates and college membership. At the first graduation in 1985 there were forty-one graduates, all of whom were male, and all taking the one single award (the BTh) from just five of the then six Member Institutions. For the last five years graduate numbers have exceeded 170, and the awards conferred now range from Diplomas through to Doctorates in Theology, Ministry and Philosophy. It is regrettable that the faithfulness of these 2,143 graduates in sharing the Gospel and ministering to human needs, or the deepening of their encounter with God, will probably never be recorded. For the SCD, about whom this story is being told, is not an end in itself, but a mere facilitator.

CHALLENGES

But the College has not been without its difficulties and I suspect that it will need to be resourceful if it is to continue to meet new challenges. Escalating costs probably remain the greatest threat. While universities currently complain loudly about underfunding from the Commonwealth, our own colleges, as private institutions, have never received any government monies. While several of our institutions do receive some direct funding from their denominations, this is not the experience of all. The price is often overworked staff who suffer burn-out, illness and sometimes premature death.

Some institutions such as St Mark's National Theological College, the Perth College of Divinity, and the Adelaide College of Divinity, have become theological departments within the faculty of a public university – CSU, Murdoch and Flinders respectively. But there are prices involved here as well. Not all churches would want their theology taught from a non-confessional base, or have limits imposed on the number of students that could enrol in a particular course. Curriculum design and content, as well as a faith perspective, and control over the appointment of those who teach, still remain important issues in many traditions.

Regrettably, and for far too long, theological research has had a singularly unprivileged place in Australia. Australia's theological colleges cannot yet compete with the mystique or cachet of Europe's oldest universities, but they can easily match the quality of higher-degree supervision.

The ever-increasing cost of books and periodicals strikes at the very heart of scholarly enterprise. All libraries (including universities and other public institutions) are being forced to rationalise (i.e., make cuts in) their purchases. It is fortunate that the SCD has had a long tradition of a strong Libraries Committee and one that has negotiated reciprocal borrowing rights with our metropolitan universities.

Some may want to argue that the SCD should adopt a new model. In some of Australia's newer universities during the last twenty years or so formal theological studies have appeared in a different form to ours, or to those described earlier at both the Universities of Sydney and Queensland. For the most part the process has been one where a number of former private theological colleges have formed a regional consortium, and then affiliated with a university for the purposes of accreditation and funding. Examples of this are not only the Adelaide College of Divinity (1979) with Flinders University, but also the Brisbane College of Theology (1983) with Griffith University, and the Perth College of Divinity (1985) with Murdoch University. Just as the academy rightly made room for feminist and multicultural perspectives, so on a limited front some room was once again given for traditional religious

viewpoints as well as a possible acknowledgment of the relationship between religious faith and scholarship.

Nevertheless, these departments are, as I see it anyway, still marginalised both physically and intellectually. Their buildings are generally not on the same campus as the university and, furthermore, while their work is exemplary, they are often defined in such a way that they can hardly participate in cutting-edge intellectual activity.

What George Marsden says in *The Soul of the American University. From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*¹⁷ is often true in this situation:

One of the ways that religious perspectives were largely eliminated from the intellectual business of the rest of the university was to confine such concerns to divinity schools.... Even where they are academically relatively strong, their presence is an anomaly and a puzzle to much of the rest of the university...ministerial and theological education has not had a lasting impact on defining the central features of American academic life.

On the other hand, in recent years the SCD has been one of the instruments that has not only brought theological study back into the university, but has paved the way for bringing the subject into dialogue with the other disciplines. Commencing in 1995 the SCD began a process of affiliation with a number of our metropolitan universities: the University Sydney, ACU National (1996), the University of Western Sydney (1997) and Edith Cowan University (1998). (The establishment of schools or departments of Theology within the faculty of Arts at the Australian Catholic University and at Notre Dame are also examples of this move.)

Here a step has been taken towards demonstrating what the ancient relationship between faith and learning might mean for the academy today. I trust that in so doing our religiously diverse culture of Australia today will become an intellectually richer one. George Marsden's challenge to his largely American audience in another of his works, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*¹⁸ is equally applicable to us here in Australia: "It is time for scholars and institutions to take the intellectual dimensions of their faith seriously and become active participants in the highest level of academic discourse."

It has been my privilege to be part of the SCD over the last ten years. It is my earnest hope that you and the institutions with which you might be associated should have a long and productive history too.

17. George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) p.viii.

18. George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 4.