

Interchurch Bioethics Council

Report

1 Who we are

The InterChurch Bioethics Council (ICBC) is an ecumenical body supported by the Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist Churches of Aotearoa New Zealand. The Presbyterian members are Dr Helen Bichan (Wellington), Dr Stephen Garner (School of Theology, Auckland University) and Joy McIntosh. The ICBC relates to the tangata whenua through one of the members. ICBC members have among them considerable expertise and knowledge in science, ethics, theology, medicine and education. The ICBC calls in assistance and advice from outside experts as appropriate. The Council is charged with responding to ethical, spiritual and cultural issues raised by new biotechnologies that are seen as important to the church membership and to the community in general.

2 Work done

The ICBC meets four times per year and also does a considerable amount of online consultation preparing submissions and responses to Government Discussion Papers or proposals with bioethical implications from other organisations. In 2008, the ICBC responded to a discussion document “Who Gets Born?” and made submissions on discussion documents on (i) the use of frozen eggs in fertility treatment, and (ii) the use of pre-implantation genetic diagnosis to select an embryo that will result in the birth of a child designed to help the treatment of another person. In 2009 the ICBC made two submissions to the Advisory Committee on Assisted Reproductive Technology (ACART). These were on the draft guidelines on the use of donated eggs with donated sperm and the use of in vitro maturation in fertility work. A further submission was made to ERMA in response to the notified application: Developing genetically modified organisms in containment.

In response to the Government’s decision to disestablish Toi Te Taiao, the Bioethics Council of New Zealand, the ICBC wrote to the Prime Minister and a number of members of Parliament in all parties expressing strong opposition to this move. We pointed out that in an era of rapid advances in knowledge and technology it is important to have a dedicated independent group able to address bioethical issues and inform Government. (It has to be said that our protest, along with many others, was not taken seriously.) In view of the loss of Toi Te Taiao, we feel that the ICBC will need to become more proactive in identifying and discussing bioethical issues. This will be assisted by the attendance of some ICBC members at the biennial New Zealand Bioethics Conference, and the Australasian Bioethics and Health Law Conference.

3 Work in progress

The ICBC study “Real, Urgent and Personal; A Christian Approach to Climate Change” was released in February 2008. Following a discussion with Christian World Service on Pacific issues, we are planning to update this. As we are aware that our study guides, to date, have been more applicable for the pakeha/palangi parts of our churches we are currently developing bicultural dialogues on a number of specific issues. We are also exploring how best to contribute to bioethics in the secondary school science syllabus. At the time of reporting a response to the J Craig Venter Institute’s announcement of the creation of a self replicating synthetic bacterial cell was being developed for publication in the Nathaniel Centre’s next publication on bioethics.

We are aware that there is a report on the use of nanotechnology about to be released, and anticipate that ICBC will respond to this. We also note that the issue of euthanasia is likely to remain in the public arena so are reviewing our 2004 paper.

In April this year we met with Prof Andrew Bradstock, the newly appointed Director of the Centre for Theology and Public Issues (University of Otago). We anticipate that this will be the start of a fruitful co-operation on issues of mutual interest.

4 What we provide to member Churches

Articles have been published in the local and national press including Taonga, Spanz and Touchstone on such issues as “Pre-birth Testing for Sex Selection” and Climate Change. Members have made themselves available to speak to local congregations and interested groups and to produce liturgical material. Members keep up with new issues by attending Ethics and Bioethics Conferences both nationally and, in the case of our University based members, internationally. Study material is produced and is available online. In addition, members are invited to take part in regional meetings on ethical issues hosted by other bodies.

We are about to launch an ICBC website that will then be linked to the three participating churches (and any others that are interested). We intend that, in addition to the study guides, other material, such as papers, reports and information about current issues that the ICBC is responding to, will be posted on this site, and that there will be an opportunity for people to engage in online discussions. A brochure is currently being prepared.

Currently our study guides and submissions may be downloaded free from the Anglican justice website (www.justice.anglican.org.nz/icbc).

Barbara A Peddie
Chairperson