

NATIONAL DAY OF THANKSGIVING

5 May 2004

The Hon. A.L. EVANS: On 29 May 2004, Australia will celebrate the inaugural National Day of Thanksgiving. The theme to launch the first ever National Day of Thanksgiving is: 'Thanking God... thanking each other'. The National Day of Thanksgiving was launched by His Excellency, the Governor-General of Australia, Major Michael Jeffery, on 11 February 2004 at Government House, Canberra. In his speech, His Excellency drew a distinction between Australia Day and the National Day of Thanksgiving, explaining that the National Day of Thanksgiving is different from Australia Day—the former being a chance to publicly celebrate our faith, and the latter being a celebration of our nationhood. The National Day of Thanksgiving has come about as a result of numbers of individuals and organisations making repeated calls for a national day to give every Australian the opportunity to express gratitude of and give thanks to God and to others.

The momentum to mark a day of thanksgiving has been building for many years. Indeed, over the past two decades, certain events are acknowledged as being major building blocks towards the final concept. In 1988, 50 000 Christians from all over Australia travelled to Canberra to dedicate Australia and the new Parliament House to God and prayer. This was followed by prayer and fasting events in 1996 and 1998 convened by Praise Corroboree; and then finally, in 1998, about 30 000 Christians gathered for an all night prayer vigil at Parliament House in Canberra to pray for the nation. In 2004, Australia's most significant prayer organisation, the Australian Prayer Network, put forward for comment the concept of the National Day of Thanksgiving to various organisations. The idea quickly gained support, including from the National Prayer Council.

The conveners of the prayer events during the 1980s and 1990s had gained their inspiration and conviction from the preamble to the Australian Constitution, which says 'Humbly rely on the blessings of Almighty God'. The National Day of Thanksgiving on 29 May will be a day to give clear celebration to the

expression of the words found in the Australian Constitution. Even history notes Australia's foundation of God and prayer. De Quiros, when he journeyed across Australia in 1606, declared this land to be Terra Australis del Espirtu Santo, or 'The Southern Land of the Holy Spirit'. Particular support for the National Day of Thanksgiving has been given by many Aboriginal Christian leaders, who have suggested that it could be a day when Aboriginal people express thanks to God for those who have come to share their land with them, thus incorporating reconciliation as part of the concept of the day.

Understandably, on the day a significant demonstration of prayer and thanksgiving leadership will come from the church. Other prayer and thanksgiving suggestions include an opportunity for people to appreciate and thank their parents and grandparents; for employers to express thanks to their employees in their efforts in the workplace and employees to do the same for their employers; families could be encouraged to see the National Day of Thanksgiving as an opportunity to express love and thanks for each other for what each means and contributes to their life; churches could use the day to bring together people of many cultural and ethnic backgrounds who make up the community; and family fun festival days could be organised by churches to bring people together to celebrate all we share in common and to bring hope and renew our community spirit.

I look forward to seeing the National Day of Thanksgiving become a significant unity building day on the nation's calendar. Indeed, the Prime Minister in his prime ministerial statement offering his support to the day said:

'Such a day encourages us to recognise the values and people that sustain us as a nation and to be grateful for those precious things we sometimes take for granted.'

In time, I believe that the day will become one of the country's most significant days of celebration because it has the potential to contribute positive benefit to both the physical and spiritual dimensions of the nation.