

Religious representatives meet with ABC

The controversy that followed the axing of "The Religion Report" on ABC Radio National has not been silenced following the introduction of replacement programs. As I understand it, a representative consortium from the major Christian denominations and the Jewish and Muslim communities had been trying to see Managing Director, Mark Scott, over months following the revelation of the cuts way back in October. Eventually, a delegation saw him on Friday 6 February (the Muslim representative was unable to attend). Yesterday, they issued the following news release.

The reference to "religion will feature in Background Briefing" is, without naming him, to Stephen Crittenden who has been transferred, on his reinstatement to working staff, from the Religion Unit to that program.

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Science writer & broadcaster

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On Friday 6 February 2009 representatives of the Uniting Church, the National Council of Churches in Australia, the Australian Catholic Bishop's Conference, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry and the Anglican General Synod, met with Mark Scott the Managing Director of the ABC, to discuss religious broadcasts on the ABC.

The faith leaders requested that:

1. the ABC maintain a religious program unit, with appropriate staff, editorial and budget resources;
2. there be a return to the broadcast schedule of a dedicated religious current affairs program along the lines of The Religion Report under the editorial control of the religion unit; and
3. specialist religious journalists continue to be employed and supported by the ABC.

Mr Scott told the faith leaders that the ABC had no plans to scrap the religion unit or to scrap specialisation in reporting, but that it proposed to continue to modify programmes, noting that in the past the Religion Report has been removed from the broadcasting schedule and brought back when appropriate.

He noted that in addition to other programming slots, religion will feature in Background Briefing which will reach a broader audience and allow for in-depth reporting. He also referred to the ABC's plans for future specialisation which will manifest itself in different ways, such as a portal on religion (archival records,

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research, old programs, transcripts) and program choices, looking at the best way to use all available time slots.

Mr Scott assured the faith leaders that the effects of the religious programming decisions made late last year are being considered within the review of radio currently underway. The appointment of a new head of radio in mid-2009 will be of significance to the review. The review will provide scope to better articulate questions on specialities, digital media and rural broadcasting.

The faith leaders and Mr Scott agreed that 2009 will provide a suitable period to monitor and review the impact of the recent changes which will remain on the ABC's agenda and that the concerns expressed could be discussed further after that monitoring period.

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