

This is a verbatim transcript of my interview with Jana Wendt, for the *Sunday* Program. Recorded May 18th 2005. Sections of this interview were subsequently used in the program broadcast on the 3rd of July which largely dealt with the HillSong church but also touched on the Family First connections.

JW= Jana Wendt

NZ= Nathan Zamprogno.

JW: Nathan, how long have you been a member of the Church?

NZ: I joined in May 1988, so that would be seventeen years.

JW: What does the Church mean to you?

NZ: The Church gives me an avenue to express my faith as a Christian. We believe that, as Christians, your fellowship with other believers is an important part of how you express your Christianity; with other believers. I grew up in that church. I found my wife in that church, now I'm raising my family in that church.

JW: And why particularly Assemblies of God? What does it have to offer?

NZ: I've never gone "church shopping". I've always grown up in the one church. For me, I like its relevance to people. It isn't "old and dusty", it's contemporary, it meets people where they're at, it does excellent work in the community, and it has a vision that I support.

JW: And can you conceive of your life outside of that church?

NZ: Only in the sense that I can't conceive of life outside of being a Christian. I mean, there are other churches, but I strongly believe that God has *placed* me in my church, and I'm not going anywhere unless I feel called elsewhere.

JW: In the lead up to the last Federal election, it was said that Family First, despite claims to the contrary, was directly linked to the Assemblies of God. Was that true?

NZ: Family First have admittedly had their genesis in the Assemblies of God church, and are trying hard, I hope, to disentangle themselves from that genesis. There were associations, and things that occurred in the church, that gave me cause for concern, yes.

JW: What kinds of things?

NZ: Well for example, the fact that on the one hand Family First were so keen to deny that there were any links whatsoever, and yet it was patently obvious that they were drawing the majority of their candidature, their support, their financing from Assemblies of God, or church-related networks; not formally, but informally.

JW: Do you know if there was any "from the pulpit" support in AOG churches for Family First candidates?

NZ: The thing that gave me the most concern I suppose was that there was always this patina of "we can't tell you how to vote", but that was always followed by actions that were contrary to that statement. So that, ministers of religion, indeed, Pastors of Churches were standing *as* the candidate, drawing in parishioners with no interest in politics, even church *staff* to stand as dummy candidates in other seats to bolster the campaign of another person.

JW: Why do you say "dummy candidates"?

NZ: Because Family First said in their own press releases that "the majority of their candidates were local"¹, and yet there were ten people from my own church,

¹ <http://www.familyfirst.org.au/mr/greens-ffp060904.pdf> and <http://www.familyfirst.org.au/mr/4thmajparty140904.pdf>

including five paid staff who were standing in seats as far away as Cessnock and Bathurst and how had absolutely nothing to do with the areas they were purportedly seeking to represent.²

JW: So what was the purpose of standing dummy candidates?

NZ: The Party was up front about it. They said “we want to stand as many lower house candidates as we can to support the campaign of our Senate candidates, which is where we have our only real chance.”³

JW: So you’re saying they stood those candidates in order to successfully play the “preference trading game”?

NZ: Yes, and in as much as they were up front about it, that was above board. I just didn’t think it was *ethical* to do so.

JW: So you’re saying that there was support from within Assemblies of God Churches for Family First candidates?

NZ: I think that the church was profoundly double minded about this, and I think there were misgivings at a number of levels. On the one hand, there was a genuine desire to keep themselves at arms length, and to convey that message to people that “we *can’t* tell you how to vote”. But if it was followed by “preferential airtime” for a particular party, or allowing parties like Family First to “take the service” for 15 minutes for the purpose of getting supporters, booth workers, membership, fundraising... You couldn’t sustain the claim that the Church was keeping itself at arms length⁴ when those kinds of things were happening.

JW: And you know that this happened in assemblies of God churches, that Family First candidates were given preferential treatment?

NZ: I can’t⁵ say that it happened in my church, I’ve heard of instances of it happening in other churches

JW: And why do you believe that Family First was so intent on claiming that there was no connection whatsoever?

NZ: Because they wanted to find a broader base for their appeal. If they were seen as a solely church-based party then they would only have the same demographic as the Christian Democrats. I think it’s an attempt to try and establish themselves as a mainstream party. So far, they haven’t done a very good job of it.

JW: But one of the Senate candidates went so far as to say that suggesting there was a connection was very close to slander, I think were his words?

NZ: I know, and this is an example of the double-mindedness that I found troubling; that they would be *so* keen to deny the church connection that they actually stepped over a line and brought scorn upon themselves.⁶

² As recounted in my original blog article, <http://baliset.blogspot.com/2004/10/family-first-one-christians-view.html> and widely commented on, including http://dogfightatbankstown.typepad.com/blog/2004/10/between_a_rock_.html (which was greatly encouraging)

³ <http://www.familyfirst.org.au/mr/pollvffp150904.pdf>

⁴ In other words, despite some people having the genuine intention of not have the church be seen to be in a position of seeking to influence votes among their congregation, such behaviour made it impossible, in practice, for such a promise to be kept.

⁵ I should have said “I *won’t* say it happened in my Church” instead of “I *can’t*”.

⁶ I am aware that John Lewis, the Queensland Senate candidate this refers to, has since resigned his pastoral position to pursue his political ambition. This is a principled move that other intimately church-connected candidates should heed. However, the move is

- JW: What in essence is your problem with this? Family First has family values which presumably reflect the beliefs of The AOG. Why shouldn't there be a connection?
- NZ: Because there is a question of "Church and State" that people have largely forgotten about. The Australian Constitution has an "Establishment Clause" (concerning an "official Church") just like the American Constitution does⁷, but beyond that Australia has inherited a lot of historical ambiguities in terms of the relationship between Church and State; whether it was State Aid for religious schools in the 1960's, or the growing role of "faith-based" organizations in the provision of welfare and employment services⁸. It's an open ended question and debate will go on into perpetuity. It's a question of *spiritual headship*. In the Church we make a personal investment in our ministers, and they deserve a degree of qualified deference in terms of the fact that God has put them there. But as soon as they wander in to the political sphere, they need to understand that it's "fair game", and they can't take this mantle of spiritual headship in to the political sphere. Unfortunately, they haven't made that distinction.
- JW: But what in essence is wrong with it, if the political party supports the position of the Church itself. Why shouldn't it go out there?
- NZ: Because people that go to those churches and hold a different political flavour end up feeling uncomfortable. If they vote left of centre for example there's a danger that people will think less of their Christianity.
- JW: Did that happen to your knowledge? Within the Church?
- NZ: I believe it has.
- JW: So people who were not inclined to vote for Family First were made to think less of a Christian?
- NZ: There was probably no intent for people to feel that way. I'm not saying that anybody looked down their nose at those people, but they would have to ask questions about whether it was still "their church", when the church was taking such an overtly political stand, and at one end of the political spectrum. I can't agree with that.⁹

too late to undo the perception of hypocrisy that was created and perhaps even acts as confirmation that those concerns were real and damaging- a fact few Family First identities would admit publicly, but which I am informed are been frankly aired since the election by AOG leaders in Queensland and elsewhere.

⁷ Chapter five, section 116. The wording of the Australian "establishment clause" mirrors closely the equivalent one in the U.S Constitution, and deliberately so. A small example of our founding fathers seeing an idea and a form of words that worked and borrowing it.

⁸ And of course the infamous schism in the 1950's that caused the DLP to split from the mainstream ALP along religious rather than ideological lines. An excellent anniversary analysis of this episode in history appeared on ABC radio national's *Perspectives* program, and three 5 minute vignettes can be found at

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/perspective/stories/s1369600.htm>

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/perspective/stories/s1373389.htm>

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/perspective/stories/s1380350.htm>

⁹ So again, why isn't this a case of "*the lady doth protest too much*"? (Hamlet, act 3)

It's because of the fact that, as much as I might agree or even benefit from the co-opting of Christianity as an essentially right leaning belief system, and that it might seem *superficially* good for right-politics, it is in fact an unwholesome influence on the integrity of the Church. Actually, it's not much good for politics either. The most

- JW: Do you think that members of the church in the lead up to the election felt pressured in some way to vote for Family First?
- NZ: I think that the preferential airtime...
- JW: When you say "preferential airtime" that is speaking to...
- NZ: Speaking to congregations and so forth. I mean, church newsletters that were circulated to every pastor in New South Wales¹⁰ and Queensland¹¹, that I'm aware of, specifically pushed Family First and the fact that Assemblies of God people were standing as candidates in aid of their candidature. I think that creates a sense of obligation that people shouldn't have upon them.
- JW: So if you were a member of an AOG church before the last election, you would have had the strong impression that your church was supporting Family First.
- NZ: That would have varied depending on the individual church and how they handled that particular issue. I'm sure it varied from church to church. I'm sure that in some churches you would have felt rather uncomfortable that you were being goaded in a certain direction.
- JW: You are taking this step of speaking out on this issue. You are clearly a loyal, devoted member of your church, but you feel strongly about it. Do you think there may be repercussions for you in this?
- NZ: Definitely. I mean, I hope not. It won't make life any easier for me!
- JW: How do you think it's going to make it difficult?
- NZ: I'm not going to answer that one.¹²
- JW: Has your feeling about this altered the way you think about your own church?
- NZ: It does put your faith in a crucible, and it forces you to think about *why* you support your church, or why you support your leaders. But my faith as a Christian is rock solid. It's crystallised some things for me, but I'm not going anywhere as a result of it.
- JW: And have you spoken to your fellow members of the church about your concerns, about your churches entry into politics?
- NZ: I've spoken publicly about my point of view on a website that I maintain. But beyond that it's not my intention to stir dissent because that would be disloyal.
- JW: Do you have a feeling that other members of your congregation, other members of the AOG, have similar concerns?
- NZ: Yes. Definitely.
- JW: Because you've spoken to people with similar concerns?
- NZ: Because people have approached me saying "I agree with what you've said. I'm glad it's your neck on the block and not mine."¹³ We'll see if any change results.
- JW: And is there any potential damage to the church in this involvement?
- NZ: Yes! I believe the integrity of the political process and the integrity of the church are both damaged when the entanglements between church and politics

vigorous democracies in recent Western history are those instituted along areligious lines but populated by men and women with a firm moral, and indeed, Christian, compass. This is a long way from the kind of influence certain religious activists would like to wield on our political processes. I've got more to write on this subject, but it deserves it's own piece.

¹⁰ http://www.pnc.com.au/~jwcs/Michael_Murphy.pdf

¹¹ http://www.aogq.com.au/data/images/newsletters/stateconnections_july2004.pdf

¹² As Jana says after the interview: I find it difficult to believe that criticism that is so measured will be misconstrued. I replied "You find it difficult to believe. I don't."

¹³ See <http://www.signposts.org.au/index.php/archives/2004/09/21/putting-the-family-first#comment-3403> for a small example

become too enmeshed. There needs to be a greater attempt at keeping them at arm's reach. If Family First can leave the orbit of the church where they found their genesis, they can achieve that. They've either got a bright future or they're heading for oblivion over precisely that issue.

- JW: How sophisticated a party do you think Family First is today?
- NZ: Well resourced, well funded, well organised, still just starting out. That's why I say they've either got a bright future or are heading for oblivion: The churches, the *charismatic* churches are very well organised. They're very... corporate.
- JW: Do you think that the AOG realise that there is a downside to this kind of political involvement?
- NZ: I think that in the fallout from the last election there's *had* to have been some soul-searching, but how that manifests itself we will only see in future elections¹⁴, State and Federal.
- JW: And why shouldn't AOG churches be patting themselves on the back, after all, they have a new Senator?
- NZ: They do, and rather unexpectedly. They won that success and they're entitled to any degree of self-congratulation they want.
- JW: If you look at the coming political term, how do you think Family First will conduct itself in the parliament?
- NZ: They will vote overwhelmingly with the Government, being a conservatively aligned party. They'll stick their head up and they'll get some airtime by articulating certain issues through their prism, which is "we put families first". That's to be expected.
- JW: Do you think they are being taken seriously by the Government?
- NZ: In the sense that they are fellow travellers on the conservative end of politics, I think they're being seen more as an ally than a threat.
- JW: And what do you think is the possible value of the "family impact statements"?
- NZ: It's just another lens, another prism through which you can see all government policy. If we can look at all policies for the impact that they could potentially have on families then that's a good thing.
- JW: Do you think that for the Prime Minister to have agreed to family impact statements that he was making a significant concession or not?
- NZ: No, I think he was merely being very pragmatic and a very canny politician.

(interview break)

- JW: What is it that worried you about this attempted public separation between the AOG and the political scene?
- NZ: The claim that the church is keeping itself at arms length from the political process cannot be plausibly sustained when you have somebody who is a Pastor, preaching from their pulpit on one Sunday, and then putting on another hat and saying that they are a Family First candidate for the Senate the *next* day, and *then* going out and saying that suggestions of connections between the party and the Church amounts to slander... That's so transparently ridiculous it brings both the Church *and* the political process into disrepute.
- JW: And that is in fact what happened in some cases?
- NZ: Oh yes, definitely. In Queensland.¹⁵

¹⁴ There's little evidence of such soul searching in my own neck of the Woods. Questions I have posed on this matter since the election have brought spittle embellished denials of any downside. That's a story for another time...

¹⁵ <http://www.familyfirst.org.au/mr/undemocraticlabelling300904.pdf>

- JW: You want more Christians in politics?
- NZ: I would love all Christians of conviction to join a political party because the Gospel is a call to social action as well as a message of salvation. I'd rather see them though outwork their faith in a mainstream political party of their choosing, rather than be drawn off into the fringes of politics and into a party that has no constitution, no branch structure and big impediments to popular appeal.
- JW: That's a very pragmatic call that you're making, isn't it?
- NZ: Yes, I suppose so.
- JW: And that's what needs to be done. Can you encapsulate what it is the AOG Churches believe in?
- NZ: The AOG is a mainstream, Protestant church. We believe Jesus is our Lord and Saviour, and we believe those other mainstream trappings of the old and new testament. I suppose what we add to that it a contemporary relevance. We have to meet people *in* the culture that they're at. We also believe that if you live your life according to the model of Jesus then you will live a satisfied, fulfilled, maximised life as well.
- JW: And where do the AOG churches stand on issues like Creationism?¹⁶
- NZ: The AOG is full of closet Creationists, but Family First would be very unwise to let that cat out of the bag.
- JW: But in terms of the AOG's beliefs, many of them would believe in Creationism.
- NZ: Certainly, and unfortunately.
- JW: So that's not something that you believe in?
- NZ: No.
- JW: But when you say that the AOG is part of the mainstream, *that* is what we would call a fundamentalist belief, is it not?
- NZ: The word "fundamentalist" has had a number of unfortunate labels attached to it. I mean, in it's purest sense it means you believe in "the fundamentals" of the Bible. It doesn't necessarily mean that you're a "crazy", or that it's a cult or anything like that.
- JW: But one of the "fundamentals" of the Bible was that the Earth was created in seven days.
- NZ: People would argue that point (laughter)... Look, *I* would argue that point!
- JW: I suppose what I'm trying to establish is that there's a substantial body of belief inside the AOG that would hold to the theory of Creationism.
- NZ: Yes.
- JW: Is there such a thing as the "Religious Right" in this country?
- NZ: No, and I don't know that it would be a good thing if there were. People say that if you want to know where Australia is going to be in ten years then look at where America is now. The religious right certainly has a vice-like grip on the conservative end of politics in the United States. What's ironic is that despite the fact the religious right has such a grip in the American psyche and American politics, the kind of proselytising Family First have attempted to do in many churches would actually be *illegal* in America.
- JW: Why is that the case?
- NZ: Because there's a clause in their tax code that says that Churches have to abstain from any political involvement to maintain their tax exempt status.¹⁷

¹⁶ http://www.ag.org/top/beliefs/christian_doctrines/gendoct_15_creationism.cfm

- JW: And you'd like to see that kind of law established here?
NZ: I didn't say that! But it's a debate that I think Australia needs to have.
JW: So do you think that Australia is headed the American way as far as religious influence on politics is concerned?
NZ: The influence will only increase, yes.
JW: And that's a bad thing?
NZ: No, I would like moral people and Christian people to be involved in the political process. I just don't want that to be manipulated by the Church.

The interview proper ended here.

These are Jana's remarks made after the interview proper and during incidental footage:

You've stood for local government and obviously you have a strong involvement in the social fabric of the place and very pronounced views. You're not afraid to put your money where your mouth is, because as you say, the repercussions may not be all that comfortable. Although, I can't imagine an organisation, that is, a *Christian* organisation that has the values that you admire could be *so* narrow as to not be able to deal with such measured criticism. I mean, you've staked out your ground very carefully. I think it would be very disappointing if there were consequences for you that were other than... mild.

¹⁷ <http://www.au.org/pdf/religiousleaderletter.pdf> or
http://www.au.org/site/PageServer?pagename=issues_churchelectioneering