CANBERRA — What is the best way to engage Australia’s new Prime Minister Scott Morrison, on issues of aid and development?

It is a question that is being asked across the development sector. New Assistant Minister for International Development and the Pacific Anne Ruston, has presented herself as particularly receptive to a development audience. (https://www.devex.com/news/anne-ruston-on-australia-s-changing-aid-program-93478)

But since the aid budget is often an easy cut for Australian governments, achieving an audience with the prime minister has not been a guarantee.


In her first sit-down interview since taking on the role of assistant minister for international development and the Pacific, Ruston talks about the impact of changing political leadership on the aid program, Australia’s commitment to climate, and what her new role means for Australian aid.

On Sept. 20, a group of Christian women leaders representing Hillsong Church, Baptist Church, Citipointe Church, The Grainery, Anglican Deaconess Ministries, and The Salvation Army (https://www.devex.com/organizations/the-salvation-army-australia-58436) headed to Parliament House to discuss the foreign aid budget and offshore asylum seeker detention with senior ministers and members of parliament. The group of women was facilitated by Micah Australia Executive Director Tim Costello to provide a unified faith-based message on development and humanitarian crises.

Their audience included the prime minister.

The discussion with him was brief — only five minutes — with foreign aid the main point to discuss. It was organized late in the day but considered an achievement that surprised many in Australia’s development sector. And it has provided an important foot in the door to emphasize the large portion of the Australian population supporting international development.
Achieving an audience with the prime minister could have simply been because one delegate, Eloise Wellings, founder of NGO Love Mercy, was from the prime minister’s electorate. But it came at a time when the prime minister has been showing his strong affinity with religious groups — including increased funding for Catholic education and for Catholic education and proposed changes to discrimination law to cover religious freedom.

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Asked what may have influenced the premier’s decision to meet with them, Beck Wilesmith, senior adviser at Micah, said: “I’m not sure, to be honest.”

“We were organizing this [event] before the leadership spill and had to re-issue the invites. But we were upfront in every meeting that these were women of faith and church leaders.”

**Insights from the meetings**

Kate Harrison Brennan, CEO of Anglican Deaconess Ministries, discussed with Devex the nature of the meetings and key outcomes, saying there was an “openness right now” to hearing from faith-based groups.

Bringing together women from across different churches was an important part of opening doors for meetings, she believes, showing uniformity in messaging from the sector. And the asks were kept consistent, with slight tweaks on how particular parties could go about addressing those concerns.

“Our messages were really consistent — starting with, we believe in foreign aid because we believe in life,” Brennan said.

“This is a significant component on that in wanting to see Australia take a strong position in how much we gave. That message was really consistent as well as the message about wanting to see children off Nauru — this is a humanitarian crisis, with 102 children there and it is obviously no place for a child. Across government, the message can have a different tune from speaking with opposition where we were calling for Labour to create a policy platform that puts aid back in the center of foreign policy.”

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With Australia’s government struggling to understand their “political base” and what their electorates want, the group came in highlighting that their views are representative of at least 15 percent of the population who attend church on a monthly basis — approximately 3.75 million people.
improvement in engaging with politicians,” Brennan said. “Especially among those who feel their constituency doesn’t really perhaps understand the point of foreign aid. Pressure is often from those who voice an opposition to foreign aid. It is important for us to ask for meetings with those who feel really constrained by what they hear from some of their constituency and feedback from churches in their electorate. We can give them a different picture — to show that members of their electorate are incredibly supportive of aid.”

With the openness to hear from Christian leaders, Brennan said it was clear that hearing from a united group of church leaders under the Micah banner was an important avenue for discussion and impact. They plan to continue that work and have a prophetic voice into federal parliament.

“There was real interest in keeping the discussion going,” Brennan said.

It also means going back to the various church groups to communicate the importance of the impact they can make — locally and internationally — through their programs of work and a unified voice.

And though the day was focused on a messaging of the aid budget and children on Nauru, the leaders they met with wanted to get into the finer points of aid policy — what makes an effective aid program, what ensures Australians can be confident in what we are doing.

“We hope to follow up on that,” Brennan said.

**Keeping the conversation moving**

In December, Micah will be continuing the conversation as part of the Voices for Justice conference, with the anticipation that politicians will be involved in discussing development challenges from a faith-based perspective. Based in Canberra, the conference will allow attendees to lobby their local members of parliament.

With Australia now entering a period where politicians are focusing on the 2019 federal election, it is timely for development to be under discussion with influential politicians.

“It’s incredible what the whole sector does, but the faith-based component is an element of unique to what Micah does and we don’t shy away from that,” Wilesmith said. “As a sector, we all have to do our bit.”

But beyond that, Brennan said there is a focus on ensuring long-term relationships are formed to support a bipartisan approach to aid, to achieve sustainable development outcomes.
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Lisa Cornish is a Devex Reporter based in Canberra, where she focuses on the Australian aid community. Lisa formerly worked with News Corp Australia as a data journalist for the national network and was published throughout Australia in major metropolitan and regional newspapers, including the Daily Telegraph in Melbourne, Herald Sun in Melbourne, Courier-Mail in Brisbane, and online through news.com.au. Lisa additionally consults with Australian government providing data analytics, reporting and visualization services. Lisa was awarded the 2014 Journalist of the Year by the New South Wales Institute of Surveyors.

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