

Landmark covenant signed

Nicolas Kerr, Journalist for the 2004 NCCA Forum

Church leaders have hailed the signing of a Covenant as one of the most significant events in Australia's ecumenical history.

"It's an international benchmark," James Haire said. "No one else, I believe, anywhere in the world, has been able to produce anything quite as comprehensive as this. It's true that the US is working towards something similar – but that doesn't include the Catholics."

In different parts of the covenant:

ALL 15 member churches of the NCCA reaffirmed their commitment to one another "as partners on the ecumenical journey".

ALL 15 agreed to join in common prayer with each other and care for each other.

ALL 15 also pledged that they would explore further steps "to make more clearly visible the unity of all Christian people in this country".

TEN of the churches agreed to support initiatives for sharing physical resources and to consult each other before major new developments are undertaken.

SEVEN churches agreed to explore issues and strategies for mission together. This would make the possibility of common mission a priority.

NINE churches agreed to recognise each others' baptism and to promote the use of the common baptism certificate.

TWO churches – the Churches of Christ and the Uniting Church – agreed to "invite and welcome members of each other's church to share in the Eucharist according to pastoral need".

FOUR pairs of churches agreed to "continue to work towards the goal of sharing with each other a mutually recognised ordained ministry". These are the Anglican and Lutheran churches; the Anglican and Uniting churches; the Churches of Christ and Uniting Church;

and the Lutheran and Uniting churches.

James Haire described it a "a covenant in progress". "In future we can add new pages. In the past churches didn't recognise each other. There are two particularly interesting parts to the covenant. One is those churches who have undertaken not to buy new buildings, or sell buildings, without consulting with other churches. That's very significant.

"Then there are the churches that will not engage in mission – what Catholics call evangelisation and Protestants call evangelism – unless they consult with the others.

The Reverend Dr Dean Drayton, President of the Uniting Church in Australia, summed up his reaction with the words: "Thank God! And it's happened in Australia! Sometimes, he said, an event can open up whole new

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horizons. I believe this is the first time in any country that all the Orthodox, Catholic and all the Protestant groups that have a national body – other than the Baptists – have covenanted together to move on the road to Christian unity. It couldn't have happened anywhere else but in Australia. No other country I know of has even got the infrastructure like the NCCA. This is more than a formal structure. It's looking forward towards the future and asking God to take us on the way of moving beyond our differences to work together, in the name of Christ."

Catholic ecumenist, Bishop Michael Putney, said the covenant was "a most important step in the ecumenical movement". Some people think the ecumenical movement has slowed



Photo: Nick Kerr

Archbishop Mor Malatius Malki Malki, Syrian Orthodox Patriarchal Vicariate of Australia and New Zealand signs the covenant while Rev Professor James Haire looks on

down," he said. "I don't believe it has. In fact, we've achieved so much that the next major steps are more difficult and will take longer. Covenants serve the purpose of enabling us to harvest all that we've achieved and to use that as a platform for actually doing concrete things that are possible at this point of history – so that we can keep the momentum going and move the ecumenical movement forward.

"In fact we've reached much deeper levels of communion through our dialogues, our collaboration and our councils. But we're not living as though we'd reached those newer levels of communion.

Signing the covenant was an historic moment for the churches of Australia, he said. The churches did three things. They named the level of communion that they've reached. They expressed a commitment to try to live out that level of communion. They named, therefore, a goal of carrying the ecumenical movement forward into the future for the churches in Australia."