

Australian Churches COVENANTING TOGETHER

A PREAMBLE

The invitation to the churches in Australia to engage in a process of covenanting together at the national level, has been grounded in the conviction that ecumenical renewal is fundamental to the integrity of the Church's mission.

'Covenant' in the Ecumenical Movement

While the language of 'covenanting' is not the language familiar in some traditions, it has been found to be helpful and used widely in an ecumenical context.

Referring to the formation of the World Council of Churches, the Second Assembly (Evanston, 1954) said "our churches entered into a covenant to form this Council, and affirmed their intention to stay together"¹. A conference on Faith and Order (Nottingham, 1964) invited churches "to covenant together to work and pray for the inauguration of union ... so that all in each place may act together forthwith in mission and service to the world".

The Seventh Assembly of the WCC (Canberra, 1991) spoke of the ecumenical movement "as a reconciling and renewing movement towards full visible unity"², and described the unity of the church as "a *koinonia* given and expressed in the common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognised and reconciled; and a common mission witnessing to the gospel of God's grace to all people and serving the whole of creation"³. But while acknowledging, with gratitude to God, "a certain degree of communion already existing between them", the Assembly noted that "churches have failed to draw the consequences for their life from the degree of communion they have already experienced and the agreements already achieved"⁴.

Covenanting in Australia

In Australia, the formation of the National Council of Churches in 1994 was an expression of the churches covenanting together, seeking to draw some of the consequences for their own life. Now, their response to the invitation to engage in a covenanting process is another act of commitment to one another as a further stage on the way to visible unity.

The nature of the current covenanting proposal – set out on the following pages ("A Commitment to Covenanting") - is multi-dimensional. This is because it is recognised that the possibilities for co-operation and commitment between the churches are many and varied. In other words, the nature of the covenant / agreement into which a church will enter with each of the other churches will have different dimensions that express the extent of the co-operation and commitment that is possible between them at this stage of the ecumenical journey.

The process since 1996 has been an invitation to the churches, at the national level, to take specific steps towards a more visible expression of unity, to move towards a deeper experience of communion (*koinonia*).

Covenanting together at the national level will also give a lead; it will be 'permission-giving'! The nature of the agreement between any two churches nationally will open possibilities, provide guidelines, and give encouragement to their congregations to covenant together locally. Above all, any agreement between two or more churches will be a sign that we are being called into that unity of the Church, which is Christ's future for the Church.

¹ Evanston Speaks: Reports from the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches, 1954, SCM Press, London, p.10

² "The Unity of the Church as *Koinonia*: Gift and Calling" (3.2), Signs of the Spirit: Official Report of the Seventh Assembly, edited by Michael Kinnamon, 1991, WCC, Geneva, pp. 172-4.

³ Ibid., (2.1)

⁴ Ibid., (1.3)

Biblical Basis of Covenant

The motif of covenanting permeates the story of the people of God in the Judeo-Christian tradition. God covenants with people, and people make covenants with each other, under God's oversight. The idea of a covenant implies a significant commitment. It is a reliable and lasting relationship, which includes both promises and obligations. Biblically, the relationship is usually sealed with a ritual action.

The covenants God makes with the people stem from the sovereign, gracious, free initiative of God, and have their basis in this God, who is holy, righteous and extravagantly merciful. One style of covenant includes those made with Noah, signifying God's everlasting promise to the whole creation, and with Abraham and David, which emphasise God's promises to individuals, and through them to the whole people of God. Another style of covenant is that made with Moses and the people of the Exodus. Here, the stress is on God's merciful delivery of oppressed peoples and, in turn, on the obligations that flow to the people as a result of the covenant. The Bible witnesses not only to the need for obedience on the part of the people, but also to the possibility of the covenant being threatened when the people fail to live up to its obligations.

A highly significant development arose with the prophets who, aware of the people's failure to live up to the covenant, restlessly began to seek and hope for a different and better covenant, a true faithfulness. Jeremiah discerned God's purpose to establish a new covenant, written on the heart, in which everyone, being forgiven, would know God and walk with God in a relationship of responsible faithfulness.

Covenants between people are seen as being under God's oversight, or enacted in the sight of God. But they follow different patterns. There are covenants between equal nations, between conquering kings and their subject kings, between a king and his people, and between two individuals.

This web of understandings of covenant, which is woven through the Old Testament, is developed in the New Testament, where the covenant imagery persists. The most significant way that this theological motif is taken up is the understanding that Jesus embodies a 'new covenant', seals it through his life, death and resurrection, and signifies it in his Last Supper, calling people to a radical change of mind and style of living.

The old covenant is fulfilled in the new. The new covenant is opened to all; it is made accessible through the action of the Spirit, who draws the covenanted people into communion (*koinonia*). They are thus rightly seen as a covenanting community.

Implications of Covenant

A biblical theology of covenant enables an ecclesiology of covenanting. We make covenant with one another in grateful response to God's initiative in making covenant with us.

The covenant theme thus has important implications for the church: it offers an alternative understanding of how things are and how things could be. Because of the divine initiative and because God is totally committed to all humankind, a new beginning is possible for the church and for the whole human community. Therefore, the covenant requires a constant, solid commitment in the circumstances of life. Within the one faith community – the Body of Christ – there is a mutual responsibility and solidarity with one another for the fulfilment of this commitment.

With these implications in mind, and grounded in the conviction that ecumenical renewal is integral to the Church's mission, the challenge of this covenanting process for the NCCA member churches is to explore, and to be open to, "what is possible if we go to the limits of what is permissible".

A COMMITMENT TO A COVENANTING PROCESS

The Basis of the National Council of Churches in Australia:

The NCCA gathers together in pilgrimage those churches and Christian communities, which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and commit themselves

[i] to deepen their relationship with each other in order to express more visibly the unity willed by Christ for his Church, and

[ii] to work together towards the fulfilment of their mission of common witness, proclamation and service,

to the glory of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Given the commitment we have made to each other by becoming members of the National Council of Churches in Australia, we are prepared to renew our commitment through this act of covenanting.

It is noted that some member churches belong to the NCCA subject to clause 5.02 of the constitution

It is noted that the use of the word 'covenanting' in this document may differ from, but does not diminish the special significance of, the use of the word 'covenant' by some member churches.

THE COVENANTING DOCUMENT

Part A

DECLARATION OF INTENT

As member churches of the National Council of Churches in Australia,

We RE-AFFIRM our commitment to one another as partners on the ecumenical journey;

We BELIEVE that we are being blessed in our generation to witness the action of the Spirit in drawing the Churches in a common search for a fuller expression of unity;

We REJOICE in all we have in common and GIVE THANKS for the richness of our diversity, though recognising that our disunity is a hindrance to the Church's mission;

We RECOGNISE ONE ANOTHER as Communities of Faith, Hope and Love, committed to following Christ and pledged to serve God's kingdom;

We therefore MAKE A COMMITMENT TO EACH OTHER to engage in an ongoing process of growing together (covenanting), not knowing what visible form unity, which is God's will and gift, may take, but believing that, by taking the steps to which we now commit ourselves, we shall be led to grow ever more deeply into that unity.

Anglican Church of Australia

Antiochian Orthodox Church

Armenian Apostolic Church

Assyrian Church of the East

Chinese Methodist Church in Australia

Churches of Christ in Australia

Congregational Federation of Australia

Coptic Orthodox Church

Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia

Lutheran Church of Australia

Mar Thoma Church

Religious Society of Friends

Roman Catholic Church in Australia

Romanian Orthodox Church

The Salvation Army

Syrian Orthodox Church

Uniting Church in Australia

Part B

THE PROPOSED COMMITMENT

a. Dimension One: General

We AGREE together

- To join in common prayer with one another
- To intercede and care for one another
- To explore with one another our Christian convictions and their present application

Anglican Church of Australia

Antiochian Orthodox Church

Armenian Apostolic Church

Assyrian Church of the East

Churches of Christ in Australia

Congregational Federation of Australia

Coptic Orthodox Church

Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia

Lutheran Church of Australia

Religious Society of Friends

Roman Catholic Church in Australia

Romanian Orthodox Church

The Salvation Army

Syrian Orthodox Church

Uniting Church in Australia

b. Dimension Two: Shared Use of Physical Resources

We AGREE together

- To support initiatives for sharing physical resources, such as buildings, and to encourage consultation between the appropriate governing bodies of our churches before new major developments are undertaken

Anglican Church of Australia

Assyrian Church of the East

Churches of Christ in Australia

Congregational Federation of Australia

Coptic Orthodox Church

Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia

Lutheran Church of Australia

Religious Society of Friends

Roman Catholic Church in Australia

The Salvation Army

Uniting Church in Australia

c. Dimension Three: Common Mission and Ministry

We AGREE together

- To explore with one another issues and strategies for mission, so that the possibility of common mission is recognised as a priority, information is shared, issues of mission are discussed, and strategies for evangelisation are planned in consultation
- To seek to develop clear and sensitive guidelines dealing with how our churches together can best meet to needs of people in local (especially rural) situations:

Anglican Church of Australia

Churches of Christ in Australia

Congregational Federation of Australia

Coptic Orthodox Church

Lutheran Church of Australia

Roman Catholic Church in Australia

The Salvation Army

Uniting Church in Australia

d. Dimension Four: Common Sacraments

i. We AGREE together

To recognise the Sacrament of Baptism administered in each other's church, and to promote the use of the common Certificate of Baptism.

Anglican Church of Australia

Antiochian Orthodox Church

Armenian Apostolic Church

Congregational Federation of Australia

Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia⁵

Lutheran Church of Australia

Roman Catholic Church in Australia

Romanian Orthodox Church

Uniting Church in Australia

ii. We AGREE together

To invite and welcome members of each other's church to share in the Eucharist according to pastoral need

Churches of Christ in Australia

with

Uniting Church in Australia

⁵ While acknowledging the Certificate of Baptism (© 1988, Australian Consultation on Liturgy) is evidence of Christian Baptism, the Archdiocese uses a baptismal certificate that specifies that the Sacrament was performed "according to the rites of the Eastern Orthodox Church".

e. Dimension Five: Shared Ordained Ministries

We AGREE together

- To continue to work towards the goal of sharing with each other a mutually recognised ordained ministry

Anglican Church of Australia

with

Lutheran Church of Australia

Anglican Church of Australia

with

Uniting Church in Australia

Churches of Christ in Australia

with

Uniting Church in Australia

Lutheran Church of Australia

with

Uniting Church in Australia

Part C

THE FUTURE PLEDGE

We PLEDGE ourselves

- To continue to discuss and articulate within our churches the meaning and significance of our involvement in the quest for a more visible expression of unity and the possibilities for further engagement in ecumenical partnership
- To explore such further steps as will be necessary to make more clearly visible the unity of all Christian people in this country

Anglican Church of Australia

Antiochian Orthodox Church

Armenian Apostolic Church

Assyrian Church of the East

Churches of Christ in Australia

Congregational Federation of Australia

Coptic Orthodox Church

Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia

Lutheran Church of Australia

Religious Society of Friends

Roman Catholic Church in Australia

Romanian Orthodox Church

The Salvation Army

Syrian Orthodox Church

Uniting Church in Australia

AFFIRMATION OF COMMITMENT

On behalf of our churches,
we affirm our commitment
to this covenanting process.

At this point in our journey towards visible unity,
we confirm those places in this document
where the name of our own church appears,
as a sign of what we can covenant to do together.

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