

COVENANTING CONGREGATIONS IN VICTORIA

In Victoria, covenanting covers a range of relationships – between congregations, between parishes and between clergy. Both metropolitan and country churches are involved. Some covenants are longstanding; others have been developed much more recently. The Trinity Declaration and Code of Practice between Anglican and Uniting Churches provides guidelines and ongoing support for cooperating congregations.

Christ Church Kensington has been a joint Anglican-Uniting parish for twenty years. The members always worship together and there is no distinction between them. One of the tasks has been to keep the two traditions alive – hard work! There has been heartache, as being a joint congregation has not always been easy. However, the congregation values its ecumenical nature and its openness, flexibility and inclusiveness. Children especially value their place in the congregation. Besides membership from the two founding traditions, members have come from other traditions; there are several Catholics among the members. The increasing gentrification of Kensington has placed the congregation in communal change, but members value the opportunity to witness to the rest of the church. Until recently there have been two clergy, one from each tradition, but currently there is an Anglican priest.

In Melbourne, one of the oldest covenants is that between three traditions at **Toorak**. In this suburb, St John's Anglican, St Peter's Catholic and Toorak Uniting churches are in the same street, in close proximity, encouraging a tightly knit community. The **Toorak Ecumenical Covenant** has been renewed annually at Pentecost for seventeen years. The congregations pray for each other at every service and together each month. Among the activities are an opportunity shop and the Food for Christmas appeal over ten days, which raises about \$4000. The Covenant has been encouraged by very sympathetic leadership from the clergy, but remains the priority of the lay people and the community.

Toorak Ecumenical Agreement

We renew our pledge:

To pray for each other's parishes by name at our Sunday services.

To continue the regular meetings of the clergy of our parishes and of the Ecumenical Council.

In appropriate ways to observe together the great Christian festivals of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost.

To continue to celebrate together the World Day of Prayer.

To continue the joint program of Religious Education for children in the local state school.

To continue to develop the program of ecumenical Bible Studies.

To make available for each other, so far as possible, the facilities and programs sponsored by each congregation.

To encourage our members to act as volunteer helpers in joint community ventures.

To work together, as need or opportunity arises, on social justice or welfare projects for the wider community in Australia and overseas.

To seek in every way to demonstrate to the world that we are united in our commitment to Christ and to the coming of his kingdom.

Frankston Covenant Churches, St Paul's and St Luke's Anglican, St Francis Xavier and the Uniting Church, developed the Frankston Community Breakfast program four years ago, bringing to fruition the dreams and prayers of numerous parishioners. Daily numbers range from 14 to 40, aged 13 to 70 and mostly men, who are served juice, cereal with fruit, a main dish, toast and coffee. While the breakfast is the focal point, counselling is available and clothes may be borrowed for court appearances or job interviews. Over 70 people are involved in the breakfast teams which are supported by community assistance in the provision of food and equipment. The Breakfast has no religious thrust but develops the trust and friendship. However, two breakfasters have attended Alpha courses at St Paul's and another now attends church weekly.

Doncaster: The Covenant, between St Gregory the Great Catholic and Pilgrim Uniting congregations was signed at Pentecost, 1999 to help make visible the unity of Christ's church. It is unlikely that the congregations will join, but a very healthy situation exists with mutual moving of groups from one congregation to the other. An Annual Covenant Service is held; the Covenant Committee meets regularly. Each congregation supports the other through their newsletter. A Men's Breakfast for the unemployed is held and new ventures are planned, including a family camp. Young people are driving these ventures.

Beyond the metropolis, a wide range of covenanting and cooperation has been developed.

In **Bendigo**, nine clergy have covenanted as follows:

We as shepherds in the City of Greater Bendigo covenant together in the following terms:

1. We acknowledge Jesus Christ alone as Lord and Saviour and Head of the Church.
2. We come together in the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We recognise that Jesus sees the Church in Bendigo as one and we covenant to pray for all pastors and congregations in the city.
3. We acknowledge the divine authority of the Holy Bible and accept it as God's revelation of eternal truth.
4. We accept our God-given responsibility to seek the peace and prosperity of our city (Jer. 29.7) and to pray for all those in authority (1 Tim. 1.1-2).
5. Through the enabling of the Holy Spirit:
 - * We will build relationships with each other through intentional worship, fellowship and friendship.
 - * We recognise the weakness of our own humanity and covenant to extend grace and mercy to one another and open ourselves to mutual correction.
 - * We will guard and honour each other's reputation with trust, confidentiality and mutual respect.
 - * We will seek to resolve issues when people come from another congregation for the benefit of all concerned.

We covenant to do all things to the glory of God and for the building of his Kingdom in Bendigo and beyond.

Sea Lake has an Anglican and Uniting cooperation, currently with a Uniting Church minister called for a three-year special project.

At **Ouyen**, the *Central Mallee Cooperative Parish* is between Anglican and Uniting Churches. Here the Anglican church became the worship centre. The Uniting Church was sold and the proceeds used to build a multi-purpose hall next door to the church on Uniting Church land. Anglican and Uniting clergy alternate for three-year terms; currently an Anglican priest ministers to church and community.

Woomelang offers the Hospitality model. Here the cooperating congregations are Anglican and Uniting, the Uniting Church caring for the Anglican congregation. Currently, the clergy are from the Churches of Christ.

At **Quambatook**, *Quambatook Cooperating Parish* is also Anglican-Uniting. The Anglicans sold their property, putting the proceeds into the Uniting Church property, as stated in the Deed of Trust. Clergy from the two traditions alternate for three years; the Bishop of Bendigo licenses the Uniting Church minister.

Wentworth counts as Victorian for this exercise! *Wentworth District Joint Parish* has four centres. Of these, at Wentworth, the former Methodist hall was moved to the rear of the Presbytery property which forms the centre. At Dareton, there was also consolidation on the Presbyterian property. Methodist buildings were moved there to add a kindergarten and meeting room. The Presbyterian building became the hall and the Churches of Christ building was moved to the site to become the chapel and kitchen. The Joint Parish owns five acres of vines and all buildings except the Churches of Christ manse.

Southern Mallee Cooperating Parish is a Baptist-Uniting Church cooperating parish.

In the north-east, at **Wodonga West**, *Emmanuel Anglican and Uniting Church* had a unique origin. With the expansion of the city to Wodonga West, a five-acre site was offered to the churches. The Uniting Church bought the land and built the church; Anglicans and Uniting Church have contributed equally to the Mission and Service funds of each tradition.

At **Shepparton**, an agreement (1999) between Uniting Church and Salvation Army established joint services to youth, including the UCA Cutting Edge Youth Services and the Salvation Army Brayton Youth Accommodation programs.

In Gippsland, Churchill Cooperating Parish is between three traditions, Anglican, Uniting and Church of Christ. Here the Anglican church is used, the Uniting Church providing the manse.

At **Mallacoota**, *Croajingolong Cooperating Parish* has three cooperating congregations, Anglican, Catholic and Uniting Church. A community church was built on the Anglican site, raising problems of how other churches put money on to this site.

Bolarra-Yinnar Cooperating Parish and *Neerim South and District Cooperating Parish* are also in Gippsland. Both currently have Uniting Church clergy.

At **Somerville**, Anglican and Uniting Churches work together: The Uniting congregation uses the anteroom off the chapel for services during the week. A new form of cooperation is imminent.

At **Airey's Inlet**, cooperation is between Anglicans and Catholics, with some Uniting involvement. A very complex legal agreement was proposed, but something simpler is being sought.

A most significant occasion for covenanting and cooperating congregations in Victoria was the 1999 signing of the **Trinity Declaration for Local Cooperation in Victoria between the Anglican Church of Australia and the Uniting Church in Australia**, by representatives of the Melbourne, Ballarat, Bendigo and Wangaratta Dioceses and the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria. The Declaration was approved by the Dioceses and the Victorian Synod and by the General Synod of the Anglican Church and the Assembly of the Uniting Church.

The Declaration is:

Our two churches hold the Christian Faith as set forth in the canonical Scriptures and the Apostles' and Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creeds, and recognise the sacrament of baptism as administered in each church.

We accept one another as churches within the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

We commit ourselves to work together in the mission of Christ. As far as conscience and church order permit, we shall seek

1. not to do in separation what we may do together, and
2. to do together what we are not able to do in separation.

The Declaration is accompanied by the Code of Practice, which offers guidelines for cooperation at parish level and in chaplaincies and other ministries. The intention is to provide norms acceptable to all dioceses and presbyteries to encourage consistency of practice across the state and from appointment to appointment.

Currently the collection of covenants and details of agreements for holding in property registries is being undertaken.

MJ CcR-B March 2001