

Australian Churches COVENANTING TOGETHER Locally

In many localities, the relationship of churches with one another is marked by obvious co-operation. This co-operation is an essential stage in the relationship between churches of different traditions. It has been expressed in the formation of local inter-church councils and by working together in a variety of activities in terms of both worship and mission.

But on the journey to Christian unity, the stage of co-operation is only a passing one. What is the next stage? What more is possible? How can the churches together become a more visible sign of unity-in-diversity within their own local communities? What would be possible if the churches were to go to the limits of what is permissible?

However, what can and does happen locally will always be shaped, at least in part, by the wider context.

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, for their own life, some of the consequences of the degree of communion that already exists between them.

Then, in 1996, the churches began to engage in a process intended to lead to more particular expressions of this covenanting together at the national level. This intention to enter into a specific Covenant is another act of commitment to one another as a further stage on the way to visible unity.

The nature of the proposed Covenant is 'multi-dimensional'. This is because it is recognised that the possibilities for further co-operation and commitment between the churches are many and varied:

- only one or two of the suggested dimensions may be possible for an agreement between two particular churches, whereas all of the dimensions may be possible for another two churches, and some other combinations of the various dimensions will be possible for other churches;
- some of the suggested dimensions (for example, Shared Ordained Ministries) may be possible for only two or three of the churches, whereas other dimensions (for example, Shared Use of Buildings) may be possible for almost all of the churches.

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, even commitment, that is possible between them at this stage of the ecumenical journey.

The process since 1996 has been an invitation to the churches 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 give an important 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.

While this process is happening nationally, similar possibilities can be explored locally!

Grounded in the conviction that ecumenical renewal is integral to the Church's mission, the challenge of this covenanting process is to explore, and to be open to, "what is possible if we go to the limits of what is permissible".

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.

BAPTISM

Many churches mutually recognise Baptism as administered by each other. This clearly signifies that the fundamental unity we have as Christians resides in our incorporation into Christ in Baptism.

- Locally, churches can explore the practice and understanding of baptism in our different traditions by using (in ecumenically based study groups) a study resource – *Life After Drowning: Making Waves Together* – which is designed for use over five sessions

COVENANT

What are the implications of baptism for the way in which the churches relate to one another and show commitment to being a more visible sign of unity?

A very tangible way to celebrate our common baptism in local churches would be to enter into a local covenant for greater co-operation and commitment to one another.

Other Resources

- To facilitate increasing understanding of one another in our local church communities, a new study resource – also consisting of five sessions – is being prepared on eucharistic practice
- Exploring issues relating to reconciliation in Australia is a vital part of our ecumenical endeavour, and a resource kit for discussion of ‘Treaty’ is also in process of preparation.
- The video, *Portraits of Unity*, has been produced as a resource to stimulate the imagination of people in local churches in exploring what is possible for them.

Local Covenants

What is a Local Covenant?

In a local Covenant, Christian communities commit themselves first to God and then to one another, for it is a formal and solemn declaration in which local churches pledge themselves to serve God together.

A Local Covenant is a commitment, and one with great potential, for ecumenism implies trust; and where there is trust the Churches can do anything, and where there is no trust, they can do nothing.

What is the Purpose of a Local Covenant?

In 1952, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches invited the churches to agree to act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately (the “Lund Principle”).

A Local Covenant offers a simple and direct way of giving practical expression to this ambition.

A Local Covenant adds a new dimension to the discussions that go on between churches at both the national and international levels. It points towards what is possible already, even though the formal union of churches may be still some distance in the future.

Sharing resources locally is a partial but natural expression of unity. It provides an opportunity to explore the essential relation between mission and unity. It brings together the wisdom and experience of different denominations to discover new ways of undertaking their mission, recognising that even where local churches are strong their resources can be deployed to greater effect.

Does it have to be official?

When two or more churches make a public commitment to begin to grow together in their life of worship and witness, they are walking in faith into the unknown. In this they need and deserve all the support and encouragement they can get. Any Local Covenant must be planned in full consultation with the appropriate authorities within the denominations involved. They could advise on the drafting of the Covenant and offer support. The NSW Ecumenical Council could also provide such advice and support.

It is also essential that denominations should recognise that they are involved in the development of a Local Covenant not just in providing support and giving approval, but also in discovering the lessons that are being learnt and drawing appropriate conclusions for the future.

Can a Local Covenant be changed after it has been agreed?

Yes. But it is important to plan carefully from the start, so that the Local Covenant is not rushed into, but entered upon with care and understanding and the full support of the church and its members. Of course, any Local Covenant needs to be flexible enough to respond to changing local needs and relationships. It is important also to undertake regular evaluation of the commitment so that progress can be assessed and new steps encouraged.

The enclosed copy of the possible dimensions of a local covenant is provided for guidance to local churches all round Australia.

In developing this invitation to the churches, the intention is to stimulate significant and practical initiatives by which the churches can move with greater confidence and determination into their ecumenical future.

Everything the churches do needs to be guided by the chief principle of ecumenism:

NEVER DO ALONE WHAT COULD BE DONE TOGETHER!

SUGGESTIONS FOR A LOCAL COVENANT

DECLARATION OF INTENT

We, the people of _____ (names of participating local churches)

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

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;

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;

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

THE AGREEMENT

First Dimension

We AGREE together

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

Some Participating Churches may be able to include also one or more of these additional Dimensions

i. Decision Making

We AGREE together

- To consider prayerfully, in all our decision-making processes, the question "can *this* be done with our covenanted partners?", so that no major decisions are taken without consultation with each other
- To continue to develop methods of decision-making in common

ii. 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

iii. Common Strategies for Mission

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 co-operate with one another in Christian education, especially in the public school system

iv. Common Witness

We AGREE together

To expand, with one another, the practice of engaging in ministry together, so that the potential for common witness is realised through the development of joint ministries (*such as youth ministry, responding to need in the local community*) and the search for reconciliation and justice (*such as by responding to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers*)

v. Sacraments

We AGREE together

To witness to our common baptism

- By using the ecumenically agreed Certificate of Baptism
- By celebrating the sacrament of Baptism jointly at least once a year

THE NATURE AND USE OF COVENANTS

“Covenanting is a concept of visible church unity that seeks to be responsive to the diversity of traditions within the unity Christ gives to and wills for the church. As a modified expression of organic union, it calls the churches to unite in ‘sacred things’ (*communio in sacris*) – faith, baptism, eucharist, ministry and mission – without organisational unity. In covenanting, each church maintains, for the present and as long as each church shall decide, its ecclesiastical structures, traditions, forms of worship, and systems of ministerial placement. Nevertheless, in a solemn act the churches ask God through the Holy Spirit to create out of their separated life a new ecclesial community committed to common mission in the world”¹.

‘Covenant’ in the Ecumenical Movement

While the language of ‘covenanting’ is not 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”². 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”³, 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”⁴. 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”⁵.

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.

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 significant development arose with the prophets who, aware of the people’s failure to live up to the covenant, 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 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, 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.

¹ Paul A. Crow, “Covenanting”, Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement, edited by Nicholas Lossky, et al, 1991, WCC, Geneva.

² Evanston Speaks: Reports from the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches, 1954, SCM Press, London, p.10

³ “The Unity of the Church as *Koinonia*: Gift and Calling” (3.2, 2.1), Signs of the Spirit: Official Report of the Seventh Assembly, edited by Michael Kinnamon, 1991, WCC, Geneva, pp. 172-4.

⁴ Ibid., (2.1)

⁵ Ibid., (1.3)

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. 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.