FAITH AND UNITY COMMISSION

FURTHER STUDY ON *AUSTRALIAN CHURCHES COVENANTING TOGETHER*

Following the recommendation from the Forum of the NCCA, the Faith and Unity Commission has continued to study covenanting with a view to assisting the Churches to further engage in the covenanting process begun in 2004. To help focus our work we sent to the Churches and to the state councils of Churches two questions for consideration: *What is it about our Churches which makes the process of implementation of the "Australian Churches Covenanting Together" difficult? What makes it work when it does happen?* Responses to these questions came through the members of the Commission on behalf of their respective Church. From among its members the Commission received papers from the Anglican Church, the Churches of Christ, the Lutheran Church, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the Roman Catholic Church, the Salvation Army, and the Uniting Church; and input from the General Secretary on the roles of councils of Churches, and from NATSIEC. One comment was also received from a state council. This material has enabled the Commission to reflect further on *Australian Churches Covenanting Together*, and to offer these reflections to our Churches. Our hope is that this report may assist churches to keep thinking about covenanting and to better understand the possibilities the covenanting process provides for deepening relationships with each other in practical ways.

Stories of Covenants

We heard stories of some recently formed covenants, the most prominent of which were those between the Anglican and the Roman Catholic Churches at a diocesan level. In NSW there is the tri-diocesan covenant between the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle and the Roman Catholic dioceses of Maitland-Newcastle and Broken Bay. A feature of this diocesan covenant is the conscious attempt to have local Anglican and Roman Catholic parishes enter into a local covenant. More recently the Roman Catholic Diocese of Toowoomba has become part of the long-standing covenant between the Anglican Diocese of Brisbane and the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane.

Other stories of covenanting focused on rural and remote Australia. Two examples were considered, involving the Anglican Diocese of the Northern Territory and the Lutheran Church of Australia, South Australia and Northern Territory District. These covenants reflect the special situation of rural and remote areas, especially in the provision of ministry. Among other things, they enable the minister of one church to provide pastoral care to the members of the other church, and to lead worship – usually according to the rites of the minister's church.

The South Australian Council of Churches indicated that it was focusing on baptism/initiation as a way to look more deeply at covenanting. The purpose was to arrive at concrete and practical ways for the Churches to implement *Australian Churches Covenanting Together*.

From these stories there emerged certain elements that seemed to facilitate covenanting.

- The importance of church leadership was crucial. This seemed to work well when the respective leaders had a close personal and professional relationship and had already been engaged together in a variety of activities and projects in the church and in the

local community. The diocesan structure of the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches seemed to facilitate this sort of leadership, especially where the local bishops had been resident for some years and had been able to gradually develop good relationships.

- Another element that facilitated covenanting was the support of the local clergy. A commitment to regular joint clergy meetings also seemed helpful. This not only enabled clergy to get to know each other, but also to consider together the pastoral needs in their local area and then to seek ways of jointly responding.
- A further element that facilitated covenanting was good formation at all levels of church life. When this happened the covenant was not something that came out of the blue, but was seen as a natural step in the relationship between the Churches. Moreover, good formation helped people understand both the scope and the limitations of the covenant.

The situation in rural and remote communities brings out more clearly the link between covenanting and already existing inter-church relationships. In these places the natural, local community that exists in a town or district contributes to the good relationships between churches. Further, the fact that these church communities are often responding to pastoral needs (and often a crisis in the provision of ministry) highlights the concrete nature of a local covenant.

Covenanting has both theological and existential dimensions. The theological basis is the common faith that the Churches can recognise they share. The existential dimension is the concrete way in which that faith is shared – sometimes out of necessity, to help sisters and brothers in need, and sometimes as an aspect of a shared civic life. When two or more churches enter into a covenant it comes to expression in a concrete, existential form.

It was noted that among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christians there was already a highly developed capacity to work across denominational boundaries, because their sense of communion as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was stronger than their denominational identity. A concrete example of a commitment to a practical goal is the *Make Indigenous Poverty History* campaign.

Some Questions and Difficulties Arising in the Churches

Our study has shown that many Churches still face difficulties with the idea of covenanting. In some cases there are conceptual difficulties, especially when there could be a variety of meanings of covenant. Some may expect too much from a covenant, as if it represents full church union. Others who regard it as a solemn act feel that some acts of covenanting appear rather trivial. For all of our Churches, our self-understanding as a church affects our understanding of the nature and purpose of covenanting.

The structures of authority in some churches have resulted in a questioning of the significance of a national Church body entering into covenant. Is this done on behalf of the local congregations? In other words, it would seem that the significance of the original act of covenanting is interpreted differently in different churches. Some have interpreted it as paving the way for similar covenants at the local or congregational level. Others have appreciated the significance of the original event and are happy to live within the spirit of that

original act of covenanting without seeing the need for more local expressions of the covenant.

It is quite clear that there are many local initiatives involving prayer together, joint pastoral care, joint public advocacy etc that have never been formalised in an act of covenanting. The question posed by some is what difference a formal covenant would make. Or again, could these instances be seen as concrete expressions of the national act of covenanting. While it is true that these situations should be considered in relation to their respective Church's engagement in the national covenant, the argument for a local covenant is that by covenanting together the participating Churches bring before God in a solemn act a commitment to unity and common mission.

Closely connected to this is the question of whether the act of covenanting is more about affirming an already existing unity, or more about a stage taken on the way and a means to reach the final goal. Our Commission does not opt for one or other of these alternative interpretations, and suggests that the act of covenanting involves both an ontological and a functional dimension. In the act of covenanting, Churches acknowledge before God the unity already received as gift, no matter how strong or weak that unity may be. At the same time the covenanting Churches make a commitment to each other to act together to the extent that they are able. They also commit to using this present situation as the basis for deepening their unity. The very nature of their act of covenanting means that it is always dynamic and should be renewed periodically.

These different responses have also highlighted a question about the role of the NCCA and local councils of Churches in the covenanting process. Our exploration of this question reminds us of the aims of councils of Churches to keep before the Churches the imperative of unity and to help them find ways to express the unity they already share. A council of Churches provides a forum where Churches take seriously their commitment to each other.

Our study also suggests that the structures in some Churches are less conducive to acts of covenanting. For example, the Uniting Church in Australia wonders if the relatively short tenure of its leaders makes it difficult to develop the sort of interpersonal relationship with the leaders of other churches that will lead to a solemnising of its ecclesial relationship with other churches. Moreover, the different territorial configuration of the Churches (diocese, district, presbytery etc) could make it more difficult to enter into a covenant relationship beyond the congregational or parish level.

It was also observed that many smaller Churches feel that the Anglican Church, the Roman Catholic Church and the Uniting Church do not often make it easy for smaller Churches to enter into these covenanting relationships. Perhaps a slightly different form of covenanting might be possible.

It is well known that a change of leadership can bring a different set of priorities for a Church. Without the commitment either to enter into a covenanting relationship or to reaffirm an existing covenant any acts of covenanting will be weakened. It was observed that for some Churches, especially those with a strong evangelical focus, acts of covenanting would be a low priority.

It was also noted that the issues facing a particular church and its internal life could make any acts of covenanting impossible for the time being. Pressure can come from within the

membership of the church to resist the idea of covenant. On another front, some churches have resisted entering into a new relationship with a church that is debating doctrinal and moral issues.

Recommendations

At the most recent Forum of the NCCA new members were invited to sign *Australian Churches Covenanting Together* in those places where they were able.

1. We recommend that this become the accepted practice in relationship to membership of the NCCA. In this way, *Australian Churches Covenanting Together* becomes for the NCCA an instrument by which it assists the Churches to enter into deeper relationships with each other. For the Churches, the multilateral act of covenanting concretises their commitment to each other and to the unity of the church.

Australian Churches Covenanting Together was always intended to by a dynamic document that reflected the growth in unity among the Churches. National heads of Churches signed it on behalf of their Church.

2. We recommend that Churches be encouraged to regularly evaluate their ecumenical relationships at all levels of church life in the light of their commitment to each other at a national level.
3. We recommend that the various dimensions of *Australian Churches Covenanting Together* be reviewed at each Forum of the NCCA, with a view to broadening them when member Churches can recognise new developments in their relationships.

There are many instances across the country where local congregations join each other for such things as prayer, bible study, and support for the poor and marginalised. There are instances where they share buildings and other resources.

4. We recommend that the Churches invite those at parish level to acknowledge what they are already doing and to bring this before God in a solemn act of covenanting.
5. We recommend that these local covenants be renewed annually, perhaps at a time of the year that is significant for all the Churches involved, or else during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Most of the stories we have heard of covenanting have involved bilateral relationships.

6. We recommend that covenanting be a topic for consideration at the next Forum on Bilateral Dialogues. The aim of such a consideration would be to help the Churches recognise the agreements that have been reached with their dialogue partners and to prompt them to look for ways to bring the unity they already share to concrete expression.

Faith and Unity Commission
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