



# The Future of Christian Churches’ Engagement in Queensland

## Introduction

---

Queensland Churches Together (QCT) has been the main ecumenical body for Qld Churches for the last 30 years. It has delivered on supporting the prayer of Jesus in John 17; *“that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”*

As Christian churches in Queensland, our Lord still calls us through that prayer into a deeper unity, and thereby into a clearer witness to Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, and all his life and ministry means for the life of the world.

Here in Queensland, at this time in the church’s life, and in QCT’s life, it’s timely to look at how we are called to bear witness to that unity to ourselves and the world, and also how we can continue the path to a deeper unity.

QCT’s Executive Committee has commissioned the **John1721** project to engage with member and non-member churches to explore what is the best way forward at this time and place for the church to continue the journey to a fuller obedience to Christ’s prayer.

We want to engage with you in that discernment. What follows are some short reflections and themes for discussion.

## Our Situation in Queensland Life

---

The media and social environment are increasingly sceptical and critical meaning that we are all seen “in the same boat”. What happens to one part of the church affects other parts – just like Paul said in his first letter to the church at Corinth!

Our “social license” to operate is being challenged on a number of fronts, including: perceptions on the place of women in the life of the church; issues of sexuality and gender; perceptions of inequality and exclusion; forms or motivations of evangelism that offend some sensibilities; Royal Commission findings regarding our ministry with vulnerable people; and funding mechanisms for government funded community service work.

Generally across society, historic voluntary and social institutional structures are in considerable challenge, and the more institutionally structured churches are also experiencing a number of serious challenges.

We are seeing – generally – a separation between the traditional Anglo-Saxon cohort of the Australian population and the Christian church. This is partially mitigated by immigration with a number of churches experiencing growth, or maintaining their presence by first and second generation immigrants. We are also seeing the rise of significant numbers of ethnically based churches in SEQ with some of these being quite large.

Alongside that the traditional Ecumenical movement that grew strongly after World War 2 has lost momentum. The World Council of Churches now seems to focus mainly on issues of social justice, care for creation, rather than its originating charism. Encouragingly, new ecumenical streams have emerged – like “receptive ecumenism” – and they have gained traction in non-institutional ways.

### *A Strong Foundation*

We see all around us the Spirit calling forth new expressions of engagement: local and city based ecumenical endeavour, with a deepening sense of fraternity and common cause. That “Cinderella ministry”, Religious Instruction in State Schools, continues to enjoy significant support of parents and caregivers across the state. Currently over 200,000 state school children are signed into the RI program. In fact, the churches struggle to respond to this level of demand for parents who wish their children to discover and explore the Christian faith. A number of faiths now participate in RI, and the Christian sector works closely with them in engaging with the department and political parties. The establishment of the Christian RI Alliance has strengthened RI across the state.

The Archbishops of the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican church in Queensland have generally enjoyed warm and positive friendships since the 1930s. This has been a theme that has influenced how the church sees and understands itself in relation to its significant communions, and other denominations have noticed the example they have set.

Queensland’s decentralised economic and social structures, along with a culture of seeking to work collaboratively for positive practical outcomes locally, has meant that some of the deep historic divisions in the church were mitigated somewhat in rural and regional Queensland. Our decentralised nature has also proved a challenge for state-wide collaboration.

Emerging Christian faith communities are showing signs of vitality and growth, and within traditional denominations there are manifestations of new life emerging. Much of the exclusiveness in attitudes in these churches towards other Christian communities is declining. They seek better engagement with other Christian traditions and seek wisdom in the life of the church across the ages.

The informal (Brisbane based) “Heads of Churches” gathering six times a year has seen significant expansion in recent times, with a wide variety of denominational leaders gathering to pray and read the scriptures together and discuss common challenges. From this body, initiatives have emerged that have become a part of the life of the church.

We are also seeing a strong appreciation of chaplaincy style ministries, and the emergence of bodies to deliver chaplaincy services. This is emerging in new fields – sports, social organisations, disaster response - alongside state institutions such as hospitals, schools, corrective services. Some of the traditional institutionally orientated chaplaincies are struggling, while other emerging chaplaincies are flourishing.

Faith based schooling is growing strongly.

## The Future

---

With all this in mind it is timely to reflect on our future and together explore *what benefits could a future collaborative and supportive engagement for the church in Queensland bring?*

We offer below five possible themes that could form the basis of a revitalised future. A future that could see the church work more closely together, and help us journey towards a more common witness. In doing so, we would be drawn into a deeper appreciation of the gifts we all bring. These themes are possible areas of focus for us. They are not mutually exclusive and we may choose to focus on one or a combination of several.

**Mobilising.** That is, a renewed QCT, or a new body, could help mobilise the member churches, or a subset group, to take collective action on issues the key leadership body discerns is needed. We have seen this already on a number of fronts with fruitful results.

For example, we faced a significant media crisis about RI in state schools in early March. Three years of professional engagement with the Minister's office and the department saw the Minister's office hose the drama down. Compare this to 2017 when we had a similar crisis, and the then Minister was fulminating in Parliament about RI, threatening to shut the program down.

We have also seen this in response to the Anti-Discrimination Act Review. Here our churches' collaboration has extended to interfaith collaboration on this issue. This has been the result of investment in relationships over the past couple of years.

A new ecumenical body for Queensland can build on what has already happening, making us more effective in our presence in Queensland. The focus here would be not only the networks of collaboration established, but making church leadership central in the discernment process. It would have to be the leadership of the churches that authorise action, with the ecumenical body supporting that work.

**Representation.** While never positioning to take the place of key church leaders at civic and state engagement events, the lower level collaboration and representation to church member bodies, and bodies like Qld Faith Communities Council, and their individual members, is a space where a renewed churches' body can build the relationships that are needed when further collaborative action becomes needed. This relationship-building space is critical for further action, and to support "open doors" for the leadership of the churches to be present and engage in their own right.

**Community.** I'm reminded of Elijah and his battle with the prophets of Baal. He felt very alone after it all, and had to be reminded that he was not alone. The (Brisbane based) "Heads of Churches" meeting has become a prioritised place in leaders' diaries because of a strong sense of collegial support. The gathering affirms that what churches are dealing with, they're not dealing with these things alone. This has also multiplied across the churches in some aspects of ministry, for example, safe ministry with vulnerable people and professional supervision programmes. A broader network of churches can provide oversight for some of the specialist activities to engage in communities of practice, encouragement, wisdom sharing, and support. The informal leadership relationships, the gathering of those overseeing specialist ministries, the collaborating on matters of common interest does bring us all along on the path to unity. In rural and regional Queensland there are places of significant ecumenical fellowship and ministry.

**Participation.** A broader organisation would facilitate a greater degree of support for themes and issues the churches are facing and wishing to deal with together. Probably the prime example here is what is

being explored in terms of Disaster response chaplaincy. Collaboration in this area means that quality training will be available to Christian ministry agents across Queensland resulting in , the church offering its services at the Local Government Authority level to support the community when it is in crisis. Deeper collaboration here also ensures agreement on the ethical conduct of chaplains, and a quality assurance that government bodies are looking for. Programs already present such as the Joint Churches Domestic Violence Prevention Project and the Qld Churches Environmental Network, could find a stronger profile under a broader ecumenical body.

**Provision of Services.** There is a plethora of services to congregational life across the church; congregational ministers are inundated in their email inboxes with so many offerings of all kinds of services, wisdom, and insight. So a new body would need to be careful about where it invests time and resources. However, a new body could provide resources and run events that address particularly the Queensland context, and resource the church for its mission. Examples of this are the pastoral skills courses being offered, and the recently launched “VAD resources” website, where ministry agents can readily access information on the VAD legislation, pastoral resources, theological reflections, and their church’s position on VAD.

## Walking Forward Together

---

Beyond all this is the simple call to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us; and to provide spaces for that welcome to be lived out, and places where we can take time to pray together, to open the Scriptures, and to appreciate the gift we are to each other in the body of Christ. Will there need to be significant conversations around divergence of views? Absolutely; in order to receive the unity Christ offers us, we will need to risk being offensive and challenging to each other. We will need to listen and hear things that challenge us.

I’ll finish this section with the words attributed to St. Paul in the letter to the Ephesians, Chapter 4, who beyond all the practical things, writes to our hearts: *I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.*

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

---

1. What would be the benefits to your communion of a new ecumenical body?
2. What is the discernment we need to do together?
3. What else is being called for in our journey together as God’s People?
4. What risks and challenges do you see in a renewed ecumenical body for Queensland?
5. How could greater collaboration with Rural and Regional Queensland be achieved?

David Baker (Rev)

General Secretary, Qld Churches Together

March 2023.