

CHRISTIANS IN DIALOGUE

CHURCHES IN COVENANT WITH ONE ANOTHER

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LEADER'S GUIDE

1. Gathering

People coming to a group for the first time will often have some anxiety –

- ◆ Will I know anyone?
- ◆ What will be expected of me?
- ◆ Did I switch off the oven?
- ◆ It is important to help them through this first awkward stage. Have all your preparations done well beforehand so that you are able to greet each person warmly on arrival, introducing them to one another, and perhaps having tea and coffee available.

2. Beginning

- A. When all have arrived get the session started by giving them a clear statement of what the group is about -
Welcome the group
- ◆ who we are;
 - ◆ why we're here;
 - ◆ when we will finish.

It might go like this: "Welcome to my place, and I'm delighted that each of you has been able to make it. We are a group of people from Churches gathered together to reflect and share our ideas on ... (*name of study*). Tonight we will be looking at Study One

- B. Then invite the members to introduce themselves saying:
- ◆ who I am;
 - ◆ why I'm here;
 - ◆ what I hope to get out of the program.

Lead yourself by giving a short response to each of the three areas. Then invite each of the others to do likewise. Don't worry if some respond to only one or two of the areas.

- C. Then distribute copies of the program.

Encourage participants to listen to one another's ideas with respect.

3. Opening Devotion

- A. You may wish to play some music quietly in the background and give the group a few moments to reflect on the opening devotion. Then call for volunteers to lead it.
- B. You might like to choose an appropriate song for the group to share

4. Reflection on the Topic

Invite a couple of people to read the teaching. Encourage the readers to pause between each section.

5. Discussion

Allow a few minutes of quiet time to reflect on the questions. Encourage participants to share responses to each question but there is to be no pressure put on anyone to speak. Be sure to make some response to each speaker if only to say e.g. "Thank you John". This makes sure the participant feels that he / she has been heard.

6. Closure

Thank the participants for their participation. Check to ensure venue is right for next session.

Closing Devotion

Cuppa

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Churches in Covenant with One Another

Study One - Biblical Background to Covenanting

This week we will reflect on Covenanting in the Old and New Testaments as a background to how we will be covenanting among ourselves.

To prepare ourselves to move into the session let us pray.

Opening Devotion

Song: *(Of own choice)*

Leader: Let us be still and remember that we are in the presence of God the Father, Jesus our Saviour, and the Holy Spirit.

(A short period of silence)

We will hear a reading from *Jeremiah 31: 31-34*.

Reader: The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Pause for silent prayer and reflection.

Leader: Let us pray together

All: God and Father of our Lord Jesus, You are our God, and we are Your people. We come to you with many different personalities and many different ways of worshipping. Lead us through this journey to discover and rejoice in ways to celebrate our relationship with you and each other. Through Jesus’ name. Amen.

Introduction:

The fifth Forum of the NCCA was held at Lincoln College in Adelaide, South Australia from the 9-13th July 2004. Approximately eighty delegates from member churches, observers from ecumenical organizations and special guests were in attendance. One of the major issues of the business meeting was the work done on the Covenanting Process. This culminated when the Australian member churches signed a covenant, to the degree each church was able, at a service of worship in St Peter’s Anglican Cathedral during the Forum. Church leaders have hailed it as one of the most significant events in Australia’s ecumenical history.

“It is an international benchmark,” NCCA president, Rev Professor James Haire, said. “No one else, I believe, anywhere in the world, has been able to produce anything quite as comprehensive as this. It is a work in progress. In future we can add new pages, as it were, to the document.”

Who are the Member churches of the NCCA?

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	

Covenants and the Bible

Covenants occurred regularly with the peoples of the early Biblical world. To the early Hebrew mind, while covenants were legally binding, they also implied a relationship between the participants and a bond uniting people.^① The Old Testament records many different covenants. We will take a closer look at some of these.

Noah

Genesis Chapters 6 to 9 records the Great Flood that God called upon the earth when he saw the wickedness of human beings. Noah was obedient throughout the Great Flood. He built the ark, waited out the flood and after stepping on the renewed earth offered burnt offerings to God.

Reading: *Genesis 9:8-17*

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

1. Who instigated this covenant and who were the participants in it?
2. Are there obligations on one side or both sides of this covenant?

^① The New Lion Handbook to the Bible, 3rd Ed. Pat and David Alexander, Editions. Lion Publishing 1999. p 110.

3. What blessings from God could the people expect from this covenant?
4. How do you respond to the idea of the rainbow being the sign of the covenant?

Abraham

In response to a call from God, Abram gave up his homeland and travelled to the land of Canaan. He had been promised great blessings (*Genesis 12:2*), but he and his wife Sarai remained childless into old age. (When God called Abram to be the ancestor of many nations He gave him the name Abraham.)

Reading *Genesis 15:1-6*

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

1. What is God’s role in this covenant? What is Abram’s role?
2. What promises are contained in the covenant?
3. What does this covenant tell about God’s relationship with his people?

God’s Covenant with the People of Israel through Moses

Exodus tells that after the Israelites escaped from Egypt, they camped in front of Mt Sinai. Moses climbed the mountain to hear God’s words.

Reading *Exodus 19:3b-6*

Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.”

1. What does it mean to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation?
2. Do the promises that God makes change in the three covenants we have looked at?
3. Which of the three covenants is easiest for people to keep? Why is that so?
4. Were these covenants intended for a set period, or were they everlasting?

The Last Supper

All the talk of covenants did not disappear with the close of the Old Testament.

Reading *Matthew 26:26-29*

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

1. Jesus speaks of "the covenant". What is your understanding of the new covenant that Jesus instituted?
2. Who receives blessings from this covenant?
3. What blessings does the covenant give to the people?
4. Is the covenant breakable? Is it in place today?

Discussion Questions:

1. How is a covenant between churches or human beings different from the covenants we have explored today?
2. What would the characteristics of an ideal covenant between churches be?
3. Who should benefit from the covenant?
4. If churches were in covenant with one another, what signs might the wider community be able to see?

Closing Devotion

Pause for silent reflection and prayer.

You may now wish to pray spontaneously.

Lord God, we are all your children under your everlasting covenant. Bless us as we work together to put away the idols of our denominational thinking and become your people alone. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Churches in Covenant with One Another

Study Two

The National Covenant
Part A: Declaration of Intent
Part B: Dimensions 1, 2, & 3.

Introduction:

Last week when we gathered we reflected on the Biblical background to “Covenant”. We saw that while Covenants are legally binding documents, they were grounded in the relationship of God to God’s people. This week we will be introduced to:

The National Covenant.

Part A - The Declaration of Intent and

Part B - Dimensions 1, 2, 3.

Opening Devotion

Song: *Choose a song related to the prayer*

All: Let our prayer rise before you, God of all peoples and nations.
May your grace fill the world. Sanctify the work of our hands.
Bring forth the reign of your justice and mercy.

Leader: Let us listen to the reading of the *Basis of the National Council of Churches in Australia taken from page one of The National Covenant:*

“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.

Pause for prayer.

Leader: Let us pray together

All: God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you look on us with love. You redeem us and make us your children in Christ. Help us to work together to make Christian Unity a reality in our world today. We make this prayer in Jesus’ Name. Amen.

Towards an understanding of Christian Unity

Rev Professor James Haire, President of the N.C.C.A. wrote an article, titled *In Reality, What Can We Achieve Now in the Ecumenical Movement* in the Newsletter for the National Council of Churches in Australia. I quote:

“In 1942 William Temple, the Archbishop of York, became Archbishop of Canterbury. He was dying at the time and had only two years to live. He was quite a figure in the life of the United Kingdom. In those two years he produced some of his most remarkable work. His image of the ecumenical movement is particularly powerful. He talks about the vision we have of the church, and he uses the picture of spectacles, bi-focal spectacles, spectacles that have double lenses, at that time a relatively new invention. With the lower part of the lens, Archbishop Temple says, we see the church as it is day by day, all those things we have to do, one wretched thing after another. With the upper part of the spectacles, we see in Temple’s words, the church “realistically”. William Temple uses that word in this theological sense, that is, the church as it should be, as it was intended to be: united, confessing its Lord according to the Scriptures, engaged in its common calling to the glory of God. That’s how we see it in the upper part. We can be realistic in the pragmatic sense, of looking through the bottom of our lenses or we can be realistic in the “God sense” by looking through the top part of our lenses. However you and I have to deal with the day to day world. That is to say, the Churches are organizations – they have to pay bills, organise stipends, fix the plumbing, arrange heating or cooling; in other words, we are forced to look through the bottom as well. With the lower part of the lens, Temple says, we see the church as it is day by day. With the upper part of the spectacles, we see in Temple’s words, the church realistically.”

For more information consult the newsletter *IN Unity* on <http://www.ncca.org.au>

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does this image of Ecumenism help you in your understanding of Christian Unity?
2. Have you an image of Christian Unity which you would like to share?

The National Covenant:

Given the commitment the Churches have made to each other by becoming members of the National Council of Churches in Australia, the official delegates of member churches at the National Forum in Adelaide in July 2004 were prepared to renew their commitment through this act of covenanting. The Covenanting Process is clearly defined in three sections:

Participants take time to look at the headings before beginning a more detailed study.

Part A: Declaration of Intent

Part B: The Commitment

Dimension 1: General

Dimension 2: Shared Use of Physical Resources

Dimension 3: Common Mission and Ministry

Dimension 4: Common Sacraments

Dimension 5: Shared Ordained Ministries.

Part C: The Future Pledge.

Affirmation of Commitment.

PART A - DECLARATION OF INTENT (*The National Covenant* page 2)

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.

Take a moment to reflect on this Statement.

Question for Discussion:

What are the implications of this Declaration for you and for your Church?

PART B - DIMENSION ONE: GENERAL

(*The National Covenant* pages 2 & 3)

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.

All 15 member churches agreed to join in common prayer with each other and care for each other.

All 15 member churches of the NCCA reaffirmed their commitment to one another as "partners on the ecumenical journey".

All 15 also pledged that they would explore further steps to make more clearly visible the unity of all Christian people in this country.

Questions for Discussions:

1. Identify ways in which the Churches in your locality pray together. What more could they do?
2. What signs do you see in your local community of churches caring for one another? exploring their Christian convictions together? applying Christian convictions ecumenically in practical ways? are you able to help the process in any way?

For further information see <http://www.ncca.org.au>

DIMENSION TWO: SHARED USE OF PHYSICAL RESOURCES

(*The National Covenant p3*)

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.

For further information see <http://www.ncca.org>

Eleven of the churches agreed to support initiatives for sharing physical resources and to consult each other before major new developments are undertaken.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What steps have been taken by some Churches to share physical resources?
2. How ready are our churches / communities to take up these challenges?

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 the needs of people in local (especially rural) situations.

(*For further information see <http://www.ncca.org>*)

Eight of the churches agreed to explore issues and strategies for mission together. This would make the possibility of common mission a priority.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Have initiatives already been taken by Churches in your local area to explore issues on common mission and ministry?
2. One document which sets out guidelines for Churches working together in the missional situation is *Being Church in Rural Queensland*. Share anything you know about this or any similar document. www.qct.org.au admin@qct.org.au

Closing Devotion:

Loving God, pour out your Spirit on your Church and guide and direct her to come to that Unity for which Jesus prayed. We make this prayer in Jesus' name. Amen

Blessing:

May the Lord bless us and keep us,

May the Lord let his face shine on us,

May the Lord be gracious to us and fill us with love. Amen.

Churches in Covenant with One Another

Study Three: Sacraments, Ordained Ministries and the Future

Introduction

In the first two sessions we have studied the idea of covenanting and seen that, because it is basic to the relationship between God and God's people, it is also an appropriate way for God's people to understand their relationship with one another. We have seen how the National Council of Churches in Australia invited the churches in Australia to engage in a process of covenanting together, and how this process has begun to bear fruit in the signing of the Covenanting Document in July 2004. In Session Two we reflected upon the Declaration of Intent in the document, and upon the commitments made in the areas of prayer, mutual care, study of the Christian faith and its application, the sharing of physical resources, and common mission and ministry in the community.

In this session we will continue our study of the commitments made as we look at 'Dimension Four: Common Sacraments', 'Dimension Five: Shared Ordained Ministries', 'Part C: The Future Pledge', and the Affirmation of Commitment with which the document concludes.

Opening Devotion

Reading: *Matthew 28:16-20*

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

From the Preamble to *Australian Churches Covenanting Together*:

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.

Pause for silent prayer and reflection.

The Preamble also contains these words:

A conference [of the World Council of Churches] 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', and described the unity of the church as 'a *koinonia* [fellowship] 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.'

Prayer

We give you thanks, O Lord,
for our fellowship with one another in the one faith in Christ;
for the ways in which the churches have worked together in the past
in service to the world and in mission;
and for the movement of your Spirit
which inspired the idea of strengthening their commitment
to one another by means of a covenant.

We confess

that we have been satisfied with co-operation in practical service
and have been complacent about our failure
to worship together regularly as one body.

Keep us aware of our ongoing need for renewal,
and in the hearts of each nurture the desire for reconciliation,
until your Church is truly one, as you prayed for it to be. Amen.

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.

Nine of the member churches of the NCCA pledged themselves to this section of the Covenant.

The common Certificate of Baptism is worded as follows:

.....[Name]..... was baptised with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit onatby

On the back cover is a note: 'The following churches have agreed that a certificate used by them in this form is evidence of Christian Baptism', and a list of the churches is given.

Questions for Discussion

1. Recall a baptism you have attended in the church to which you belong. Describe the service to the other members of the group.
2. Do you know whether your church uses the common Certificate of Baptism or not? Can you find out?
3. In what ways could the churches which recognise one another's baptisms share this Sacrament together?

DIMENSION FOUR: COMMON SACRAMENTS (cont.)

(ii) We agree together

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

Two member churches of the NCCA pledged themselves to this section of the Covenant.

For Reflection and Discussion:

Different churches have different practices in relation to who may receive the elements when the Eucharist is celebrated. Respect for one another's sincerely held attitudes, and a willingness to try to understand them, are essential.

1. Share your experience of the Eucharist through the teachings and practice of your church. How has your participation in the Eucharist deepened your Christian faith?
2. Does your Church have Guidelines on sharing the Eucharist? If so, share aspects of this that are significant in an ecumenical setting.

DIMENSION FIVE: SHARED ORDAINED MINISTRIES

We agree together

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

Four pairs of churches pledged themselves to work towards this goal.

Subsequent to the signing of the Covenant, the Anglican, Lutheran and Uniting Churches agreed to dialogue on a tri-partite basis.

Discussions aimed at mutual recognition of ordained ministries are conducted on the national level.

For Discussion

'In relation to the quest for shared ordained ministries, the only role for the members of local parishes is to support by prayer and by keeping themselves informed.'

Do you agree? Why or why not?

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

Questions for Discussion:

1. What information on this topic have you received within your church since the signing of the Covenant in July 2004? Or, who in your church can you ask about this?
2. What ideas do you have for 'further steps' that the churches could take 'to make more clearly visible the unity of all Christian people in this country'?

Affirmation of Commitment

The Covenanting Document concludes with the following 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.

All fifteen member churches of the NCCA signed the Affirmation of Commitment.

For Reflection

‘Openness to each other holds the possibility that the Spirit may well speak to one church through the insights of another.’ (*Paragraph 54, ‘Ministry’, in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1982*)

Closing Devotion: Romans 12:1-5

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

Reflect on this passage in silence, and conclude with prayer as the group thinks best.

Churches in Covenant with One Another

Study Four: Covenants between Local Churches

Introduction

We have studied the Scriptural basis of covenanting, and the Covenant of July 2004 between member churches of the National Council of Churches in Australia, in all its dimensions. In this session we will explore possibilities for covenants between local churches.

Opening Devotion

Reading: *Philippians 2:1-8*

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross.

Silence for quiet reflection upon this passage as words to ourselves and to our churches.

Prayer

O God, through the words of your servant Paul
you confront us with our pride, our ambition,
our lack of love, our resistance to reconciliation.

May our common life in Christ stir our hearts.
May your Spirit move in us and in our churches
to have in ourselves the mind of Christ,
ready to empty ourselves
and to give you our full obedience.
May we abandon our selfishness,
and look instead to one another's interests.
Stir up in us the warmth of true affection
for our fellow Christians,
and through our love for one another
bring us to a common mind,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Overview of Possibilities

By signing the Covenanting document, the national leaders of churches committed their churches to keep the promises they made, not just at the national level, but at the parish level as well.

In a leaflet, *Australian Churches Covenanting Together Locally*, the NSW Ecumenical Council says:

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.

1. Which dimensions of the Covenant did your church sign? Compare with the other members of the group and make a list of the commitments shared by all the churches represented in the group.
2. For each commitment on the list:
 - Is this being done locally already? In what ways?
 - In what ways could it be extended and deepened (or started if it is not already in place)?

From Co-operation to Covenant

The second paragraph of *Australian Churches Covenanting Together Locally* goes on to say:

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?

Our next task as a group is to explore the possibilities for a local covenant.

Consider the following extracts from *Australian Churches Covenanting Together Locally*, a paper produced by the NSW Ecumenical Council:

In 1952 the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches accepted a suggestion that the Churches *should 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.

Any Local Covenant must be planned in full consultation with the appropriate authorities within the denominations involved. . . .

The actual Covenant is a declaration of intent. It should describe and define your Local Covenant. When finally agreed it should be formally signed by Church Leaders and by Ministers and lay representatives of the local congregations entering the Local Covenant. The declaration should include

- (i) The names of the Churches entering the Covenant
- (ii) The basis of faith upon which the commitment depends

- (iii) The areas of the local churches' common life which will be affected by the Covenant
- (iv) A commitment to regular evaluation to assess what progress has been made and what further steps can be taken.

Examples

Churches in some Australian communities have already entered into covenants with one another.

For example, in Epping, NSW, the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches have signed a Covenant that commits them to

- occasions of common worship
- occasions of common study
- collaboration on social justice
- sharing of pulpits
- at least one joint meeting of the three church/parish councils

Another example is the community of Stanley River, Queensland, where the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Uniting Churches have covenanted in the following words:

- to work together in love
- to pray and care for one another and for our neighbour, and
- to live together in fellowship to the greater glory of God

Which of the ideas in these examples inspire, excite or scare you?

Covenanting in our own local community

At the Third National Forum of the National Council of Churches in Australia, Rev Dr Ray Williamson, Secretary of the Faith and Order Commission of the NCCA, said, 'Covenants must arise out of existing friendships. They must have a genuine commitment to the future. They need a real and manageable content. And they must be tailored to local and national dialogue.'

Assess the readiness of the churches in your local area to enter into a covenant with one another:

1. What depth of friendship is there between the leaders of the churches, and between the people of the churches?
2. How strong is the churches' commitment to working together, both now and into the future?
3. What *practical* ways of working together might the local churches be able to commit themselves to?
4. What structures could be put in place to facilitate ongoing dialogue between your local churches?

What is the best next step towards a local Covenant in your area?

As a group work out how you can help this process along.

Closing Devotion

Reading: *1 Corinthians 13:4-7*

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things

The following prayer is from the *Order of Service, Covenant Celebration, 1 June 2001, Stanley River Ecumenical Community*. Pray it in faith and hope.

O Christ, you said that you are the Way. Help us no longer to walk side by side in indifference. We need courage if we are to leave behind our self-centredness and walk on the way to unity. Give us the grace to join with each other in working for reconciliation and for the healing of our land and all its people. May our various traditions lead us to mutual enrichment in the full communion within your Church that we seek for the glory of your name.

Lord, hear us.

O Christ, you said that you are the Truth. Make us attentive to your truth. Only in this way shall we be ready to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches today, to proclaim salvation for the world and no longer provoke scandal by our divisions. Give us such openness to the truth that we may live honestly together in this land. May we be gathered together in your truth, from every corner of the earth, to the glory of your name.

Lord, hear us.

O Christ, you said that you are the Life. Guide us to live out our baptism, to be agents of reconciliation, and to find the unity which will give us your life in its fullness. May our unity be a visible expression of the life of the Blessed Trinity for the salvation of the world and the glory of your name.

Lord, hear us. Amen.

NATIONAL COVENANT
signed by
MEMBER CHURCHES
of the
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN AUSTRALIA
IN JULY 2004

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 NATIONAL COVENANT

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

Armenian Apostolic Church

Churches of Christ in Australia

Coptic Orthodox Church

Lutheran Church of Australia

Roman Catholic Church in Australia

The Salvation Army

Uniting Church in Australia

Antiochian Orthodox Church

Assyrian Church of the East

Congregational Federation of Australia

Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia

Religious Society of Friends

Romanian Orthodox Church

Syrian Orthodox Church

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

Armenian Apostolic Church

Churches of Christ in Australia

Coptic Orthodox Church

Antiochian Orthodox Church

Assyrian Church of the East

Congregational Federation of Australia

Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia

Lutheran Church of Australia
Roman Catholic Church in Australia
The Salvation Army
Uniting Church in Australia

Religious Society of Friends
Romanian Orthodox Church
Syrian Orthodox Church

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
Churches of Christ in Australia
Coptic Orthodox Church
Lutheran Church of Australia
Roman Catholic Church in Australia
Uniting Church in Australia

Assyrian Church of the East
Congregational Federation of Australia
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia
Religious Society of Friends
The Salvation Army

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 the needs of people in local (especially rural) situations:

Anglican Church of Australia
Congregational Federation of Australia
Lutheran Church of Australia
The Salvation Army

Churches of Christ in Australia
Coptic Orthodox Church
Roman Catholic Church in Australia
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
Armenian Apostolic Church
Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia[Ⓞ]
Roman Catholic Church in Australia

Antiochian Orthodox Church
Congregational Federation of Australia
Greek Lutheran Church of Australia
Romanian Orthodox Church

Uniting Church in Australia

① 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”.

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

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

Armenian Apostolic Church

Churches of Christ in Australia

Coptic Orthodox Church

Lutheran Church of Australia

Roman Catholic Church in Australia

The Salvation Army

Uniting Church in Australia

Antiochian Orthodox Church

Assyrian Church of the East

Congregational Federation of Australia

Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia

Religious Society of Friends

Romanian Orthodox Church

Syrian Orthodox Church

AFFIRMATION OF COMMITMENT

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

At this point of 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.

Signed by All Fifteen Member Churches