

Australian Churches Covenanting Together: a Commentary

At the 2004 Forum of the National Council of Churches of Australia, all fifteen member churches signed the historic document, 'Australian Churches Covenanting Together'. While skeptics have noted the obvious continuing gaps in the ecumenical sharing which it records, we should give thanks to God for the renewal of the commitment of our churches to each other, in obedience to Christ. The NCCA itself was only ten years old when this document was signed. At the least, the document confirms the intent of the member churches to share together in the mission of God in Australia. All fifteen churches have agreed to the following statement:

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.¹

The commitment is to the ongoing process of growing together. The form that this will take has a number of dimensions. Participation in the ongoing life of the NCCA is one practical expression of this commitment at the national level. All churches have agreed as follows:

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

This is a spiritual commitment. It is not backed by sanctions or legal requirements. It is backed only by the seriousness of the intentions expressed, in dependence upon the ongoing power for unity of the triune God. The practical commitment here is to pray together, to pray for each other and to talk. We should note the open-ended nature of these commitments. Nothing is said about limits or conditions for these requirements.

Implicit in these commitments is an invitation to other Christian groups not part of our fellowship of churches to join this circle of spiritual solidarity. The basis of this unity is not our similarities or even our good intentions, but the reality of the Lordship of Christ over the church. All who come to recognize this reality and to hear Christ's call upon their own collective life are challenged to consider joining this ongoing process.

There is an urgent need to promote this document and the commitments that it articulates among all the member churches of the NCCA. It is effectively a 'permission-giving' document, in that it expresses the intention of each church to be open to the other churches at all levels of church life. Every section and level of our churches is encouraged by this document to meet and pray with other Christians from the NCCA member churches. The document records the fact that there is no doctrinal or canonical barrier to such engagement.

¹ All quotations are from the document, 'Australian Churches COVENANTING TOGETHER'.

Because of the spiritual nature of this commitment, it can only be made real by concrete actions, events and agreements entered into by groups at all levels of the life of our churches. Nothing in the document requires any section of our churches to do anything specific. Yet every member and every section of every church is challenged by the document to look for those members and sections of other churches with whom common prayer and conversation and mutual concern is possible. This is perhaps a refreshment of the Lund principle, that churches should do all things together for which there is no specific reason to do apart.

The document is progressive in identifying specific areas of further sharing to which only some of the NCCA member churches can currently commit themselves. These areas are the sharing of physical resources and the development of a shared approach to the mission, ministry and sacraments which we, as churches, receive from God. When we focus on these knotty problems of mutual recognition and the pain of historic separations, the ecumenical journey can look overwhelmingly daunting. Co-operation has its costs as well as its benefits. What seems important here is to recognize that no progress will be made in these practical areas without the achievement of mutual recognition and trust between our separated bodies before God. The wisdom of looking to the spiritual commitment to eventually produce co-operative fruit in these practical areas seems evident. It is also important to note that unity is a gift from God which comes to us in the power of the Holy Spirit, in God's time. We need to recognize the eschatological shape of our ecumenical commitment. We seek to contribute to the making visible of that spiritual unity which – we believe – is already fulfilled in God and which becomes all in all with the full coming of God.

The document concludes with a future pledge which is now our present task.

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

The main challenge of this document is to the insular thinking so prevalent in our churches which equates our own church with the body of Christ without regard for all our fellow Christians. How can any of us seek to be the body of Christ in this country on our own? This future pledge needs our earnest attention now if we are to honour the commitment that our leaders have articulated.

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