

## Section 1

# GETTING STARTED

## Initiators

Local **ecumenism** can be seen as a partnership between Christians seeking to witness together to their common faith in God and to act together in matters of common interest in their communities.

The initiative for doing things **ecumenically** may be taken by lay people, clergy, or, ideally, both together. First steps may be on a personal level or at the church level.

An essential element for initiators at this early stage is to feel a call or a spark of enthusiasm for joining with like-minded people to act together ecumenically. Once the Spirit has touched and enthused people in this way, they will be ready to move forward.

Churches in Australia are committed to ecumenism and through their administrative authorities encourage local churches to act together ecumenically.

## First Steps

**A. ON A PERSONAL LEVEL** - Because lay people from one or more local churches often already know each other or are introduced at some gathering, the prospect of acting together ecumenically may be introduced in the course of conversation. In any event such conversations can be readily set up and the ensuing dialogue can be the forerunner of joint action. In other words, start talking!

From the outset, keep your respective clergy informed of developments and seek their encouragement, support and involvement. But let them know that while their active participation is welcome, they are not expected to be the main **initiator/s**.

Similarly, if the initiative has been taken by the clergy, lay people should be rallied in encouragement, support and active involvement.

**B. ON A CHURCH LEVEL** - A local church through its governing body may take the initiative to seek an ecumenical working relationship with another church. Usually when this happens it will involve both lay people and clergy. However, it is important to make sure that those who are asked to be in the vanguard of these relationships are enthusiastic about their mission, otherwise the initiative will run the risk of floundering before it gets under way.

## Next Steps

- Support and surround the initiative with prayer. Encourage those engaged in the conversations to pray together; include prayer for the matter at hand, for each other, and for their churches.
- Develop a way forward even if it is only tentative at this stage.

- Issues for discussion should include:
  - What is our purpose? (See Sections 2, 'Practical Ideas', 3, 'Resources Available' and 5, 'What is Ecumenism?')
  - What will we do together? (See Section 2, 'Practical Ideas')
  - What about structure and organisation? (See below and Section 4)
  - Who else needs to be consulted or informed?
- Dialogue should focus on specifics to develop trust in relationships and heighten expectations about the future. Be encouraged that groups in other locations find they have much in common, which is understandable given that they serve the same Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Structure and Organisation**

Groups may choose to have a formal structure as this is the easiest to maintain. Eventually decisions will need to be made about a name, the number and role of office bearers, the purposes of the group and relationships with the churches involved. It might be helpful to let these things evolve over an agreed period.

Some groups are formed by representatives, who have been appointed by the local churches. The merit in this approach is that the churches make a commitment to act together **ecumenically** and to accept responsibility for maintaining their representation in the group, thus ensuring its ongoing life. But try to ensure that chosen representatives are enthusiastic about their task.

An alternative approach used in some instances is for interested people to form a 'working group' responsible for administration and planning. This relatively informal approach benefits from enthusiasm and flexibility. While it can work well, it runs the risk that replacement of group members becomes difficult and the same people end up doing jobs for longer than they would wish. It also has the disadvantage that the local churches may not be sufficiently involved to feel committed to the cause.

## **Spreading the Message**

In order to foster enthusiasm within the local churches for acting together with other churches, ask each church to appoint an '*Ecumenical Promoter*' to talk up ecumenical initiatives, to write about them and to bring people together.

Encourage the 'promoters' to link up and co-ordinate their efforts.

## **Benefits of Acting Together**

Bishop Roger Herft, then Anglican Bishop of Newcastle, addressing a Forum on Local Ecumenism in 1999 stressed "the important, indeed essential, character of local ecumenism". He went on to say, "If we are not engaged in ministry ecumenically in our local faith communities - where we live our Christian belonging - then there is little point to the theological dialogue and to all else that happens in councils of churches and at other levels in the churches' life".

If we are to work ecumenically at the local level, we need to know in our hearts that significant benefits will accrue from such action. The benefits will, of course, vary from place to place depending on the circumstances unique to each location. The following list of benefits, however, gives a glimpse of what is possible (it is by no means exhaustive):

- Because God wants it! It promotes the unity for which Christ prayed for the Church.
- It allows a common approach to "big issues".
- It provides a stronger witness to the community, and assists our common mission.
- It builds understanding and trust.
- It makes some things possible that may not otherwise happen. Therefore it makes for greater efficiency and effectiveness; reduces duplication; facilitates pooling of resources.
- It benefits family unity for interchurch marriages.
- The joy, support and encouragement that comes from being together, from worshipping and praying together, from engaging in dialogue. These are natural outcomes for people who love and worship the one Lord Jesus Christ.
- Ecumenical co-operation might be the only way in which small communities are able to support and maintain ordained Ministry.

## NCCA Multidimensional Covenant

The signing of the **National Council of Churches<sup>5</sup> Multidimensional Covenant** in July 2004 by the leaders of all fifteen NCCA member churches provides encouragement and endorsement of acting together locally. The text of this Covenant is included in the Kit (see **Appendix 3**) together with examples of local covenants (see **Appendix 4**) implemented in recent years. These resources can provide models for discussion of new commitments to cooperation between local churches.

### Section 2

## PRACTICAL IDEAS

### 1. Within Your Local Church

- Encourage private and corporate prayer for unity, for other churches in the area, and for ecumenical endeavours; develop prayer circles; find a symbol (e.g. candle, cross or ship) to stimulate prayer for unity (it could also be used in a different church each month with prayer, and be used on ecumenical occasions).
- Conduct major decision making in a way that takes seriously in a tangible way the existence of other churches.
- Attend a worship service in a church other than one's own - get to know how others worship; as a congregation consider regular worship with another church; consulting over and sharing a specific aspect of mission; negotiating shared ministry; sharing pastoral work; sharing spiritual retreats with other churches.

### 2. Between Churches

- Prayer and Worship
  - Annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and/or Reconciliation
  - Prayer associated with local or national or international events
  - Prayer Groups
  - Prepare roster for prayer for local churches each Sunday
  - Combined worship service e.g. Christmas Carol Service, World Day of Prayer, World Community Day, Fellowship Day
  - Celebrations during Lent, Easter, Pentecost e.g. Stations of the Cross or Good Friday Service
  - Taize worship and study

## 'Quiet Days'

### Pulpit Exchanges

- Bible Study and Discussion Groups
  - Form a group to discuss scripture
  - Ecumenical Lenten Groups or Advent Groups
  - Interchurch discussions
- Combined Social Action
  - Develop a combined social issues group
  - Search out the issues in your local area; what are the unmet needs in your area?
  - Youth support e. g. drop-in centre; combined seminars or presentations in the High School
  - Share in the organisation of an Op-shop
  - Christian counselling/healing/support centre
    - Combined hospital visitation or other pastoral programs
    - Take a wider view - writing letters, visiting poor, action against domestic violence
- Other Possibilities
  - Refugee Resettlement
  - Sharing of Religious Education in local schools
  - Annual Ecumenical Dinners
  - Evangelistic Outreach
  - Invitations to functions held by other churches
  - Church "crawls"
  - Spirituality in the ... cafe, pub, club
  - Men's Breakfasts
  - Needs of interchurch marriages/families
- Ecumenical Partnerships
  - Support ecumenical appeals such as the Christmas Bowl,  
*Partner's4Peace*
  - Hold an ecumenical street stall in aid of a common cause e.g.  
refugees/asylum seekers
- Join Ecumenical Friends to support the NCCA and your state council
- Hold joint meetings of Parish/Church Councils to plan ecumenical events

NOTE: Many of these activities have already been implemented in local churches. You may like to hear from those who have introduced one or more of these initiatives locally. Please contact the Ecumenical Council to be linked with a parish or congregation, which has already tried a similar activity.

### Section 3

## RESOURCES AVAILABLE

### **Personal** - Don't under-estimate people!

- Key resources are clergy/lay people with vision-action can begin in a small group
- Encourage dialogue
- Bring together those with common responsibilities in e. g. outreach, visiting, youth work, education, finance, lay leadership

### **Parish/Congregation**

- Local ecumenical action need only involve two churches at the outset (but aim to involve all of them if possible)
- A Ministers' Association may have a role though if all clergy cannot meet regularly together, maybe groups of 2 or 3 can do so
- Develop an environment where respect, trust and friendship can grow easily; focus on common interests and witness
- Identify a core of people to carry it forward, to develop a mandate for change
- Take care to avoid duplication or overload; the rule of thumb is

*Never do alone y<sup>^</sup>hat could be done together.*

### **Church**

- As local churches are under the administrative oversight or supervision of their **diocese/presbytery/region/Bishop** and are part of diocesan, state or national bodies, they have extensive resources on which they can call for information and guidance.
- The formation of the National Council of Churches in Australia in 1994 was

an expression of the churches covenanting together, seeking to draw some of the consequences for their own life. Now, their response to the invitation to engage in a covenanting process is another act of commitment to one another as a further stage on the way to visible unity. The endorsement of the national leaders of the fifteen member churches of the **NCCA** to the process of Covenanting Together will encourage local congregations in their progress towards unity with one another.

The **NSW ECUMENICAL COUNCIL** - As the state ecumenical body, the Council is able to help local churches with information about ecumenical activities, to offer guidance on establishing ecumenical organisations and programmes, and to arrange contact with other local groups. The Council's officers will be very interested to hear what is happening in your local area. Reports of any local initiatives can be included in the Council's newsletter *Sharing*, which is sent to all congregations of member churches of the Council in NSW and the ACT.

The **NSW Ecumenical Council** can be contacted at the following locations:  
SYDNEY:  
CANBERRA:

Level 6, 379 Kent Street, Sydney  
Postal Address: Private Bag 199, Sydney 1230  
Phone: (02) 9299 2215 Fax: (02) 9262 4514  
e-mail: [nswec\(a\)ncca.org.au](mailto:nswec(a)ncca.org.au)

**Website:** [nswec.org.au](http://nswec.org.au)

The Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture,  
15 **Blackall St.** Barton ACT 2600  
Phone (02) 6273 8805 Fax: (02) 6273 8809  
e-mail: [rocomaan\(a\)csu.edu.au](mailto:rocomaan(a)csu.edu.au)

#### CHURCHES COMMUNITY HOUSING

9 **Grose Street, Parramatta**  
[P O Box 2725 North Parramatta NSW 1750]  
Phone: (02) 9890 7455 Fax: (02) 9890 3522  
e-mail: [info\(a\)churcheshousina.org.au](mailto:info(a)churcheshousina.org.au)

The Council has a **Local Initiatives Commission**, which is available to assist

local groups as needed. Speakers and resources can be made available on request.

## Reference Material

Books, articles, tapes etc. on a range of ecumenical subjects are available from the NSW Ecumenical Council's Office. Denominational bookshops may also have a range of ecumenical resource material.

A video resource, "**Portraits of Unity**", produced by the National Council of Churches in Australia, promoting the covenanting process between churches is available from the NSW Ecumenical Council. The cost is \$22 (incl. GST). A Study Guide for use with this video follows on the next page of this Kit.

The following questions are designed to help you explore the possibilities for 'covenanting'<sup>5</sup>. Not all have to be used - choose those which relate best to your own situation.

### *General Responses*

Spend 1-2 minutes thinking back over the video. Was there something that surprised you?

Members can share briefly their "surprises", noting why they responded in this way. What

possibilities might such 'surprises' suggest for your own situation?

Is there something about one of the stories shown which disappointed you?

What reasons lie

behind this response? Some may be due to long-term church policy, others to the immediate

situation. What 'blockages' to covenanting do these reasons highlight? How could they be

faced locally?

### *Specific case studies*

1. The four **Frankston** churches shown are engaged in daily, practical action in their community.

What similar challenges might be met by local congregations in your area?

2. At **Seaford**, five different Christian churches are worshiping in the same building. In what ways do they stay apart? What reasons might be given for this? What ministry opportunities have come about because of the common building? What problems / opportunities do you see for such cooperation in your own area?
3. In **Kensington**, one congregation embraces two Christian traditions. How significant was the ethos of the local community for this coming together? What struggles did the two congregations pass through? When someone is baptized at Kensington, do you think they should be regarded as an 'Anglican' or 'Uniting' Christian, or in some other way?
4. Outback situations, where people must work together, raise fundamental questions about cooperation between the churches. How have Queensland churches responded to this challenge and opportunity? What lessons can be learnt from such situations for city and suburban ministry? What aspects of church identity can't be 'glossed over', even in the bush?
5. On the video a number of Australian church leaders speak about the importance of covenanting together at the local level. What challenge does this present for you, especially the words of a leader from your own tradition? What challenges do these leaders see ahead for Christian unity in faith and mission?

### ***Taking 'Covenanting seriously***

- Share any 'dreams' which members may have about local covenanting – no matter how 'impossible'. What ideas do these spark off about practical possibilities?
- Read the document 'Australian Churches Covenanting Together' (see Appendix 3). Focus on one or two areas, which the group believes could be followed through locally.
- What first step needs to be taken to get a local covenant going? Who should take it? Who needs to 'own' the idea for it to take off?
- If at all possible, begin to plan for local covenanting to begin in a particular area: the two initial keys needed are prayer, and a few people to see it through.

## WHERE TO FROM HERE?

This section addresses the questions "Where are you at?" and "Where would you like to go?"

### **Where are you at?**

Having started on the ecumenical journey, it is good to take stock to see just what is happening - at what level you are operating. When we speak of churches doing things together, different descriptive terms are used and are not always properly understood.

- **NON-DENOMINATIONAL** - This is the lowest common denominator approach, which ignores or glosses over differences. It suits the Australian preference for non-demanding goodwill and "tolerance", and the secular, post-modern mind.
- **INTER-DENOMINATIONAL** - This is a collaborative or co-operative experience, where there is some consultation over 'ad hoc' or annual arrangements. Many participants may be quite content with this level of engagement.
- **ECUMENICAL** — This term is widely used but not always sufficiently understood. In an 'ecumenical' environment, all involved are committed to a future of growing together, of working through differences, of bearing one another's burdens, etc. There is a vision for the future, and efforts are directed to this joint future, while recognising that there are many stages along the way.

"... Our concern for the visible unity of the Church only makes sense in relation to our understanding of God and God's purposes for the universe, revealed in creation and redemption, ... We must **learn** again and again to put God **first**, then God's universe and God's Kingdom - and only then,

**God'S Church**" (Mary Tanner, former Moderator, Faith and Order Commission, **WCC**).

• **OTHER TERMS** - At the local level, Churches might be more comfortable with terms such as 'Churches Growing Together', or 'Churches Acting Together', or they might want to invent their own unique title.

• **LOCAL INTERCHURCH COUNCIL** - Formation of a Local **Interchurch** Council may be undertaken at the outset or come as a next step following initial establishment of arrangements for working together. Such Councils usually arise from the development of more formal and deeper relationships. In a local Council, clergy and lay representatives come together to give a vision and hope for what it means for Christians to be one in the local context; to discover the joy of working on the creative edge between the church traditions, and to enable the churches to be a sign of reconciliation to the wider community. It is in what we do together that our unity in Christ will be seen by the rest of the community.

• **LOCAL COVENANTS** - In many locations, 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 **Local Covenants** traditions. It is expressed in the form of **interchurch** councils and by **prophetic role** activities in terms of both worship and **mission**.

The nature of the national covenanting document is multi-dimensional. This is because it is recognised that the possibilities for co-operation and commitment between the churches are many and varied. In other words, the nature of the covenant/agreement into which a church will enter with each of the other churches has different dimensions that express the extent of co-operation and commitment that is possible between them at this stage of the ecumenical journey.

The process began in 1996 was an invitation to the churches, at the national

level, to take specific steps towards a more visible expression of unity, to move towards a deeper experience of communion (*koinonid*). Covenanting at the national level also gives a lead; it will be 'permission-giving'<sup>5</sup>!

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. 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.

But on the journey to Christian unity, the stage of co-operation is only a passing one, and to advance to the next stage of mutual commitment may well require a different vehicle designed just for that purpose. Hence, the importance of local covenants!

Covenants are a way forward in bringing churches together in a local community. Churches enter into a local covenant as a way of committing themselves to some significant sharing. The NSW Ecumenical Council is able to advise and assist in the development of local covenants.

## Local Covenants

“When a local covenant is established, it creates a space that can be a kind of laboratory, in which possibilities for greater visible unity of the Church can be explored locally.

“The significant value of such local initiatives is that they:

- have a truly prophetic role to play in the journey towards unity,
- are a local sign, symbol and foretaste of the full visible unity of the Church, and
- offer a living example and encouragement to others”.

Revd Dr Ray Williamson  
*General Secretary*  
*NSW Ecumenical Council*

### **Beware!**

In today's environment, there are some factors, which make people cautious about establishing new (and added) relationships. There is an impatience with 'structures' and with formal meetings. There is a preference for the immediacy and creativity of acting informally with one or two others to meet a need. Some feel that this approach brings a greater sense of ownership of a venture, and attracts 'credit'<sup>5</sup> to the collaborating churches. But such informal arrangements are

often difficult to sustain (how is the flame kept alive when key people move, lose energy or interest?).

Beware also of apparent overload. The cry "but we have too many meetings or events already!" may need to be dealt with at the outset of new relationships between churches. It might even be true in some situations. But remember that local ecumenical action should be seen as a new and better way of doing things - of acting together. Potentially it could reduce the number of separate meetings or events.

## **Section 5**

### WHAT IS ECUMENISM?

#### **1. Biblical and Theological Basis for Ecumenism**

A presentation by Rev. Dr Ray Williamson, NSW Ecumenical Council's General Secretary, on the Biblical basis for ecumenism is provided in **Appendix 1**.

#### **2. Ecumenism is God Given!**

Ecumenism is not simply everything that Christians of different confessional or cultural backgrounds do together.

Ecumenism is the process through which Christians strive for unity in faith and action. Taking this farther, ecumenism refers to the efforts of Christians, acting under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to make visible our given oneness as a

community in Jesus Christ. **It** is marked by a coherent vision rooted in the Gospel.

Three essential elements are:

- the conviction that the Church is God's and God's Church is, in its essential nature, one. Our reconciled life is to be a sign of God's reconciling purpose in the world;
- the conviction that unity, which is distinct from uniformity, is essential to the Church's renewal - and vice versa. Any renewal that does not seek to overcome barriers between followers of Christ is not ecumenical;
- the conviction that the unity and renewal of the Church are intimately linked to the unity and renewal of the whole human family.

### **3. The Ecumenical Movement Defined** (See also Section 6, for examples)

*"In the ecumenical movement the churches -walk together in mutual understanding, theological convergence, common suffering and common prayer, shared witness and service, and they draw close to one another".*

(World Council of Churches, Canberra Assembly Statement, 1991)

*"It is absolutely clear that ecumenism, the movement promoting Christian*

*Unity, is not some sort of 'appendix' which is added to the Church's traditional activity. Rather, ecumenism is an organic part of her life and work, and*

*consequently must pervade all that she is and does; it must be like a fruit borne by a healthy and flourishing tree which grows to its full stature<sup>></sup>.*

(Pope John Paul II)

*"The commitment of the Catholic Church to the search for Christian Unity is irreversible. My primary task is to work tirelessly to rebuild the full and visible unity of all Christ's followers. This requires concrete gestures which enter hearts and stir consciences, inspiring in everyone that inner conversion that is the prerequisite for all ecumenical progress<sup>></sup>".*

(Pope Benedict XIV, Rome, June 2005)

### **4. Ecumenism is more than Interdenominational Co-operation**

Whereas co-operative activity is the result of human decision to work towards some end, ecumenism is in response to God's will for the Church (*John 17: 21*). It is God's unity, not ours, that we seek to make visible.

Whereas the aim of co-operative activity is the achievement of a particular

immediate purpose, the goal of ecumenism, by way of contrast, is the realisation of comprehensive, long-term community.

Whereas co-operation is usually more successful when differences are ignored, the ecumenical vision is that Christians need each other, and are given to each other, in order to be the Church. It sometimes requires that we live intentionally through disagreement.

While churches can co-operate without being changed, ecumenism involves participants in the renewal and transformation of the Church.

### **5. Dealing with Differences**

Ecumenism demands that we know our own tradition and understand and appreciate the differences, working with them as a source of enrichment, not division. **Appendix 2** provides information on the variety of traditions present in churches comprising the **NSW** Ecumenical Council.

Co-operation should not be seen as a sufficient expression of, or alternative to, *koinonia* or 'communion'. If co-operation becomes an end in itself, it can reinforce the status quo and undercut the impulse for renewal. However, co-operation is an important 'stage' and an integral part of the ecumenical movement.

**Note:** Parts of this section have drawn on writings by **Dr Michael Kinnamon**, Professor of

## Theology and Ecumenical Studies at **Lexington** Theological Seminary, USA