

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and Reconciliation 2009

24-May – 3 June

“That they may become one in your hand” (Ezekiel 37:17)

A new century



Last year the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity celebrated the 100th anniversary of its inception as an Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity in 1908. You can find information on the history and theological background of the WPCU on the website of the World Council of Churches (WCC):

<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/programmes/unity-mission-evangelism-and-spirituality/spirituality-and-worship/week-of-prayer-for-christian-unity.html> .

We are now entering a new century of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity as one significant marker of ecumenical life all over the world.

In countries in the northern hemisphere, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is celebrated in January. In Australia we celebrate the Week of Prayer in May, ending with Pentecost.

Reconciliation Week

This year the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity overlaps with Reconciliation Week (27 May – 3 June). For this reason the two are commemorated together.

Sharing locally

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is meant to provide a focal point for activities and prayers that are ongoing. Below you can find some ideas for activities which you could carry out in your local context, not just in the Week of Prayer.

If you have further ideas, please let us know. We are keen to receive information about what you are planning – or what you have already put into practice. Please contact your state ecumenical council to pass on information.

Many of these ideas would benefit from having a small ongoing ecumenical group made up of representatives of various denominations in the local area. However, many ideas could also be put into practice if an ecumenical team is put together on a short-term project basis, and they could involve people other than the “regulars” who usually get involved in ecumenical events. Perhaps something more ongoing could result out of this.

It is important that lay people be involved if possible, not leaving everything up to the clergy. Involving lay people could give the congregation a different dimension of “ownership” of the process, as well as spreading the responsibility across more pairs of shoulders.

Following the list of ideas you will find some **Principles of Ecumenical Sharing**. We invite you to ponder these and share with us any thoughts you may have.

SOME IDEAS FOR ECUMENICAL SHARING

1. Sharing each other’s joys and burdens through prayer



If there is a ministers’ association, ask your minister/pastor/priest for regular information on what is happening in other parishes, and ask him/her to include points of thanksgiving and intercession in the prayers of the congregation and in its bulletins.

It may be helpful in some congregations to have one member assigned to a particular neighbour church, to keep touch with the office and/or clergy of that church (or another lay person appointed by that church) to find out prayer points – a “prayer scout” – even if there is no ministers’ association. From time to time some action points may arise out of this.

2. Ecumenical study groups

Find out if there are others in other denominations who might join you to go through one of the ecumenical study materials listed under “Resources” on the website of your state ecumenical council. These take varying numbers of sessions to complete. When you have finished, find ways of sharing your experiences with others in your congregation, e.g. by means of an article in the church bulletin or a short presentation in a worship service.

There may be people interested in setting up specific ecumenical study groups, e.g. an ecumenical bible study group for women.

3. Covenants

Do you know about the National Covenant signed by all the member churches of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) in 2004? You can find this covenant on the NCCA’s website:

http://www.ncca.org.au/departments/faith_&_unity_commission/_edit/_data/page/104/A_National_Covenant.pdf

There it talks about the biblical basis of covenanting and its implications, as well as listing the various levels of cooperation covered by the covenant, and the member churches which signed up to each of them.

You could examine those items signed by your church and ask your church leaders about them: how is each of them being lived out? Has anything changed for your church since the signing of the covenant? Would your church now be in a position to sign up to more items?

You could also study this topic in a group, preferably an ecumenical group, using a recent publication in the *Christians in Dialogue* series, “Churches in Covenant with One Another”. For more details, see the website of Queensland Churches Together (www.qct.org.au) or contact QCT: gensec@qct.org.au , phone 07 3369 6792.

There are several towns and regions in which churches have set up and signed their own local covenant. To find out more about local covenanting, contact your State ecumenical council (*see contact details at the end of this document*).

4. **Worship together**

The most common activities undertaken by ecumenical groups are joint services at Easter, Christmas and on other significant occasions in the Christian calendar, or on fifth Sundays when these occur. When organizing these, pay particular attention to the Principles of Ecumenical Sharing written below.

5. **Being church together**

Whenever your congregation is preparing a particular activity or event, encourage those involved to ask: do we have to do this alone? Could this be an activity/event that is shared with another church/churches in the area? This is the Lund Principle (adopted by the members of the World Council of Churches in 1952, at a conference in Lund, Sweden). The Lund Principle states that “given unity in Christ” churches “should do together everything except what irreconcilable difference of sincere conviction compels us to do separately”.

6. **Go glocal**

“Glocal” is a recently-coined term to illustrate the link between global and local.

Since the very beginning of ecumenical endeavour, churches have united to promote global justice. In Australia the Christmas Bowl has become an iconic symbol of joint global responsibility . Why not organize an ecumenical Christmas Bowl meal or other fundraising activity in your area?

You could also form an ecumenical committee to inform your churches about the projects which **act for peace** (www.ncca.org.au/actforpeace) supports. **act for peace** is the international aid agency of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) and is the organization that runs the Christmas Bowl each year, with support from each state. At the same time you could work together to encourage churchgoers in your area to become **act for peace** Regular Givers.

7. **Getting to know you**

Get to know your neighbours through social events: pot luck suppers, barbecues, talks, concerts, cinema visits. Enjoy each other’s company, make friends.

If you already have groups in your own congregation organizing social events, see if in some cases they would be prepared to broaden the scope of their membership either permanently or occasionally.

8. Know your church's history – and your neighbour's

Systematically learn about the denominational and local history of neighbouring churches and faith communities. (This assumes that each church gives its members sufficient grounding in their own traditions.) Learning about other churches could provide an incentive to deepen this knowledge. At the same time, it is a joy to discover common ground while understanding why we differ. See the website of your State ecumenical council or contact your State ecumenical council for resources to help on this journey. (*see contact details at the end of this document*).

9. Linking up

If you have a website, make sure it contains a link to any local ecumenical websites and to the website of your state ecumenical council, as well as to that of the National Council of Churches in Australia (www.ncca.org.au), where people will be able to find resources, subscribe to newsletters and keep up to date on ecumenical news.

10. Own your ecumenical identity

If your church at state level is a member of your state ecumenical council, check its website to see if it clearly states that your church is a member and contains a link to the ecumenical council. If this acknowledgement and the link are absent, lobby your church at state level to include them in their website. This could apply to the regional/diocesan websites of your church as well.

11. Make music

Encourage the musicians/musical directors in your churches to get to know each other. Perhaps you could organize a joint time now and then to learn a hymn from the hymnbook of a different church. Make sure someone explains the origins and intention of the hymn.

You could also do this in individual congregations – even in a regular service, with a guest (who can sing and teach the hymn) from the other denomination. Make sure you let your musician(s) know in advance!

12. Focus on prayer traditions

Share what prayer means in your different traditions. People listen to the voice of God and speak to God in many different ways. Can you organize a time of prayer in the different places of worship (with different styles of prayer), focussing (for example) on the needs of your local community or particular global needs?

13. Swap readers

A reader from one church visits another to do a reading at that church and that church reciprocates. This could be organized as a regular event, e.g. once a month.

14. Exchange pew bulletins

This may help you to pray for each other, see point 1. It could also give you ideas of how to link up.

15. Help each other out

If one local church is planning a special celebration (e.g. anniversary), can the others help out? In one instance the members of Church A took on the task of washing up at the celebration of Church B, to free up that church's members to participate in the event.

16. Share resources

Without going as far as sharing church buildings, there may be resources you can make available to each other – equipment for repairs, crockery etc. – as well as resources for prayer and worship that may be appropriate for more than one church.

17. Look at the community together

See what needs there are in the community that you might be able to meet jointly. Start small – perhaps support each other's existing initiatives before beginning something new. Remember that competition is the antithesis of unity.

18. Be present together in the community

Represent the churches together at community events (e.g. a stall), and try to establish links to your local council as the voice of churches together in your area – remembering to be inclusive and only speak for those churches which are in fact represented in your group.

19. Gain awareness together of Indigenous reality

See if you can find people in the churches of your area who with you will gather information about:

- any existing initiatives in your area involving Indigenous people and their concerns, which you may be able to support
- the involvement of your churches past and present in relations between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people
- the work of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Council (NATSIEC – www.ncca.org.au/natsiec) and the Martung Upah appeal
- ways in which to make your church property more welcoming for Indigenous people (contact NATSIEC or local Indigenous initiatives for guidance)

- protocols for non-Indigenous people when interacting with Indigenous people or holding an Acknowledgement of Country
- days/weeks of commemoration (e.g. anniversary of the Apology, Sorry Day, Reconciliation Week, NAIDOC Week) ...

... and consider whether in your area the churches together might wish to act on any of the above, e.g. by participating in Sorry Day activities in the local area, installing a plaque on church property or inviting a speaker.

Gaining awareness of these realities is a life-long journey for those non-Indigenous Australians who choose to undertake it. Be careful not to want to change the world tomorrow or change it alone – be prepared to listen respectfully and let go of fixed expectations.

20. Be curious about other faiths

Take the trouble to find out what other faiths are held by people in your area.

Remember that getting to know another faith does not mean watering down your own – on the contrary: what better way to learn to articulate what you believe (without trying to win over the other person) than by explaining it if someone asks you, someone who does not share your church language?

If you wish to meet with people of other faiths, it is always best to do so ecumenically.

Why?

- Imagine if you went to another country and were approached in friendship by different groups of the dominant faith of your area, all with different traditions. How would you not feel confused?
- Faith groups that are numerically in the minority usually find that their resources are stretched. The task of ministering to and caring for their community is very taxing for faith leaders and lay people alike. Leaders with charismatic appeal sometimes find they receive invitations from individual church congregations one after the other and have to relate to a number of different groups. We show care and respect for these people by not inviting them without coordination. The same principle applies, incidentally, to invitations extended to Indigenous people in your community.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

These ideas are an invitation to extend the list. Send your ideas, or stories of your local ecumenical activity, to your state ecumenical council.

Please also send us any comments you wish to make about any items on the above list.

On the next page, you can find some Principles of Ecumenical Sharing. We would also welcome any feedback you have on these.

Principles of Ecumenical Sharing



1. Do not be afraid. Mixing with people of other denominations will not lead you to compromise your own tradition. It may in fact help you to see the uniqueness of your own story and to articulate it more fully.
2. Respect traditions that are different from the one you are part of. Show respect to their adherents, remembering that they hold dear their traditions just as you do yours.
This might apply to praying together, for example. There is no one “right” way to pray. Nor is there a “right” way to structure liturgy. Some traditions of worship involve very little structure and are informal. Others worship in the framework of a set liturgy, with a written guide and responsive elements.
3. Live by the Lund Principle, adopted by the World Council of Churches in 1952. The Lund Principle states that “given unity in Christ” churches “should do together everything except what irreconcilable difference of sincere conviction compels us to do separately”.
What does this mean?
Habitually we plan initiatives in our denominations first and think of linking with other denominations second. The Lund Principle exhorts us to turn this around. Yet the other part of the Lund Principle is equally significant. If one member of an ecumenical alliance feels uncomfortable with plans that are made jointly (or put forward by one member for all to take part in), that member must never be forced to be part of those plans.
There must be enough space for any member to voice concerns, and others should not try to persuade that person to be part of an initiative against his/her convictions. Remember that suppressing misgivings for the sake of harmony may even damage your attempts to forge unity in the long run.
4. Listen.
5. Be humble and willing to forgive. Show perseverance despite setbacks. There will invariably be misunderstandings from time to time, simply because you are treading new ground. As far as possible, be gracious.
6. Ecumenical spaces are safe spaces. This means people enter the ecumenical space knowing they will not have to defend their positions or be attacked for holding them. It means people can be sure that nothing they say in such a context will be used in any other context without their permission.

This is particularly important when you begin to discuss those things that still divide you, such as differing understandings of communion/the eucharist. Conversations about such sensitive issues should only take place (at group level) when all are comfortable with discussing them.

7. Make sure every member of the group has equal opportunity to participate, and be careful to ensure that no one tradition dominates the group numerically all the time. Find ways of decision-making that will do justice to all members of the group.
8. Watch your language. Never assume that the terms you use will mean exactly the same to someone from a different tradition. Be prepared to ask each other how different words are understood when they are used. Try to express your thoughts in language that someone outside of your tradition would understand.
9. Be clear about why you are getting together: keep returning to the biblical passages that underpin our striving for unity. Seek ways of deepening your understanding and commitment.
10. Be careful not to become caught up in activism, doing many ecumenical things and forgetting just to be together. Sharing meals, joint retreats, telling stories, sharing a joke – all of these things are important too.
Ecumenical sharing should not be a burden added on to the many responsibilities in the life of each church. It should be a way of being church.
11. Pray for each other – not just the clergy, but whole congregations. Be there for each other as members of the body of Christ. Remember that if one suffers, all suffer. In the same way, when one rejoices, give thanks with that person or congregation. Share their joy.

Contact details for State Ecumenical Councils

NSW Ecumenical Council (also covering the ACT) (NSWEC)

(02) 9299 2215 nswec@ncca.org.au

Queensland Churches Together (QCT)

(07) 3369 6792 admin@qct.org.au

South Australian Council of Churches (SACC)

(08) 8221 6633 sacc@picknowl.com.au

Tasmanian Council of Churches (TCC)

tcctas@bigpond.net.au

Victorian Council of Churches (VCC)

(03) 9650 4511 gfawcett@vcc.org.au

Council of Churches of WA (CCWA)

(08) 9274 3888 administrator@churcheswa.com.au