

WHEN CHURCHES JOIN

Guidelines for Uniting Church congregations seeking cooperation with congregations of other churches

2. Starting Out

Levels of Co-operation

It should be noted that co-operation with other churches can occur in a variety of ways and can move from one stage to another. The South Australian Synod has identified four general stages of progression. They are:

- (a) A state of **Competition**, where a Congregation considers any Church believing or worshipping differently to be wrong; and that members of those traditions should be rescued and converted wherever possible.
- (b) A state of **Co-existence**, where a Congregation recognises that other churches can be different without being wrong; nevertheless separate development is required.
- (c) A state of **Co-operation**, where a Congregation realises that different Churches not only have much in common but also can do many things together, and benefit from doing so.
- (d) A state of **Commitment**, where a Congregation fully accepts unity as Christ's will for his Church and engages with Churches of different traditions in worship and mission together. (*S.A. Synod Standing Committee*)

Therefore, the possibilities for co-operation and commitment between the churches are many and varied, and the nature of the covenant / agreement into which a church will enter with each of the other churches will have different dimensions that express the extent of the co-operation, even commitment, that is possible at this stage of the ecumenical journey. Covenanting at the national level encourages congregations to covenant locally and to be open to 'what is possible if we go to the limits of what is permissible'. (*NCCA*)

Kinds of Co-operation (after the U.K. pattern)

A Covenant partnership – a solemn written declaration between two or more churches, pledging to work in harmony and do as much as possible together, and registered with a sponsoring body.

A Community partnership – social action projects where an agreement to work ecumenically has been signed locally and recognised by the sponsoring body.

Chaplaincy partnerships – prison, hospital, education, industry. Such partnerships which already exist need to be recognised more widely, 'regularised' [if they are not yet under formal agreements and have no sponsoring body], and celebrated.

Church partnerships – a formal, solemn agreement involving local churches in any or all of the following:

- shared building; not necessarily a church building, e.g. clergy residence, shop, drop-in centre
- shared congregation; with considerable sharing of congregational life - possibly worship, common life and witness, decision making, finance
- shared ministry; agreement for a shared sacramental ministry (perhaps alternating), authorised to minister to members of both churches.

Only one or two of these dimensions may be possible between two particular churches, whereas all of the dimensions may be possible for another two churches.

Examples of Current Co-operative Partnerships

We are looking at churches in co-operation – not a separate community church.

Coming Together:

- much local ecumenical activity already exists which is not formalised, e.g. World Day of Prayer and Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
- occasional special services or special purpose groups
- joint celebration of landmark occasions
- frequent combined opportunities for fun and fellowship
- coming together for common worship on the fifth Sunday in the month
- churches join to worship together on a monthly basis and on special occasions
- opportunities for separate denominations to worship, learn and celebrate together

Community Partnerships:

- disaster relief
- community service projects
- ecumenical conferences as evidence of an ecumenical approach to the overall concerns of rural ministry
- offering at least annually a quality course of Biblical Education drawing on the best scholars of the participating denominations - other topics may include family life, ethics, marriage, social justice issues
- co-operation and confirmation through an adjacent Catholic school which has an ecumenical approach
- Lenten study programme/ Christians in Dialogue
- Ecumenical musters – where 'out west' people discuss ecumenical issues in depth
- a group of churches working together in a newly developed housing area before the bulk of the population arrives, to provide the community with early and comprehensive human and spiritual services
- a unified approach to not only save money, but be the focus of an integrated Ecumenical Mission
- production of an ecumenical brochure
- shared activities and outreach

Shared Buildings and Resources:

- co-operative Christian bookshop
- shop-front centre
- community services e.g. emergency housing; community breakfast facility; cafe (ministry of hospitality)
- shared property, own ministers
- all denominations worship together in whichever church has a service
- one church used by all denominations
- shared building and activities
- UCA funds invested in Anglican property
- two congregations working side by side using the same building
- worship in the same building, but different congregations
- co-operating parishes
- a group of churches building together in a newly developed housing area before the bulk of the population arrives
- shared building with large worship area for large congregations and smaller area for smaller congregations, also with shared office
- shared use of resources
- incorporation of Health Services in shared church building

Remember – a church building may be used by more than one congregation but this does not guarantee personal interaction between the various congregations, or necessarily constitute a co-operative partnership!

Shared Congregation:

- people attending services of both churches held on alternate weeks
- combined Sunday schools
- all denominations worship together in whichever church has a service
- all denominations worship each Sunday in whichever church is holding a service that day (usually Anglican)
- shared activities and shared worship
- one Church Council, one pastoral care committee, one bank account
- shared worship, always Anglican priest
- association of congregations with lay pastors
- intercommunion
- alternating services of different traditions with one congregation
- formally recognised joint congregation, two or more churches

Shared Ministry:

- separate congregations resourced by Baptist minister
- co-operative parish, alternating ministers
- co-operating parish with woman priest
- UCA minister licensed by Anglicans for Eucharistic hospitality - with Anglicans feeling freer to attend Eucharist at the Uniting Church
- Churches of Christ pastor to both congregations, with Eucharistic hospitality
- joint congregations with alternating ministry authorised to minister to members from both churches
- shared Eucharist, clergy alternate
- totally integrated except members retain own denomination
- common worship, one UCA minister
- co-operating parishes constituted by agreement, with one minister inducted by both churches jointly and authorised to serve the members of both churches
- joint congregation in an Anglican parish, shared use of buildings and an Anglican priest
- intentional pastoral planning so that one minister is left in each town instead of denominations unilaterally all pulling out of one town and leaving another town with several ministers
- shared ministry and buildings, but parallel denominational membership and church councils
- joint congregation in a Uniting Church building with a Lutheran pastor

Denominations already known to be in Co-operative Partnerships in one form or another include:

Anglican
Baptist
Churches of Christ
Lutheran
Roman Catholic
Uniting Church

and in some situations:
Assemblies of God
Coptic Orthodox
Independent Christians
Presbyterian
Salvation Army

Initiating the Processes towards a Co-operative Partnership

(This section outlines the processes, consultations and permission seeking that follow the initial decision to cooperate.)

An absolute prerequisite is local initiative. The local people must first begin to explore possibilities with vision, prayer and imagination and have a genuine desire to work together. So TALK, TALK, TALK together!! Open the lines of communication within your own congregation, with the other congregation and with God. Conversations together will be an exciting, volatile and emotional time; they may be frank, angry, and confronting; but from them will arise the new thing God is going to do. *Isaiah 43:19*

So, what is it that is drawing your congregations together?

- Money – or the lack of it
- Friendship
- Christ's prayer that "they may be one"
- To best meet the needs of people in your community
- Commitment to joint action for mission
- Or?

Underlying all negotiations must be an **attitude of inventiveness and goodwill** and a solid base of **denominational self-understanding and loyalty** if there is to be effective co-operation. The special local constitution/agreement resulting from negotiations provides a framework for legal authority but much less is specified than is usual in church regulations. This allows for some freedom to explore what will work best, but it needs to be recognised that in undefined areas people from different traditions will often have quite strongly differing expectations of what is the normal way of doing something. Open discussion is important, as is advice from wider church representatives, e.g. the Presbytery Minister or Bishop who may be able to resolve problems in the light of experience elsewhere.

Local negotiation processes almost inevitably run into a mismatch of denominational structures! So it is necessary to accept the differences in the ways approvals are obtained and decisions are made, distinguishing the basics of the Faith from the ecclesiastical processes. Pray for holy patience....initial problems can often be overcome. (There are also times for holy impatience!) However it will take sensitive leadership to smooth out minor irritations and if insecurity and suspicion surface the whole project can soon be derailed.

At the same time as you are developing the local initiative, contact the Presbytery (or appropriate body/person in other traditions), giving information about what you are doing and the direction of your discussions. If there is any negativity towards proposals it is best to know early! Presbytery will help establish the approvals needed in U.C.A. Councils and the Synod Office will have resources for your assistance. Contact, and learn from, those schemes similar to the style of co-operation contemplated. *(Crawford)*

A clearly written comprehensive agreement, declaration of intent or constitution - especially regarding sacraments, authority and financial/property arrangements - **is essential.** Thoroughness in initial preparation will smooth the way ahead by eliminating potential areas of friction.

All implications need to be thought through adequately by both sides.

It is crucial that both partner churches are of the one mind. Each local project or community needs to question and work out what 'acting together' would mean for them in all those matters where it is possible. Beware that one side does not have a vision that is 'racing ahead' of the other partner's vision. As the vision of new possibilities develops over time, make sure the other partner is kept aware of these to avoid stumbling blocks and the accusation of 'secret agendas'.

Issues which must be addressed include:

- membership, members-in-association, baptism, confirmation
- recognition and development of elders, parish assistants
- agreements on ways of celebrating the Eucharist

- procedures for the appointment of ministers, and termination
- understandings on the discipline of ministers and others
- rights of access to the parish by officers of the Presbytery/Diocese etc. etc.
- separate or common purse
- separate or joint councils within the parish/congregation and other issues relating to local organisation
- membership of and attendance at regional and other councils
- complexities of arrangements when there are more than two partners
- special issues when churches with a tradition of local autonomy are involved
- relations with the wider church (this has given rise to some difficulties)
- difficulties arising when small third parties participate in discussions; their ability to exercise proper authority (e.g. at the level equivalent to Presbytery)

Difficulties encountered in the process will provide the agenda to be worked on.

Other Points to Bear in Mind:

Each partner church is **obliged to safeguard those matters of faith and order** which it regards as essential for its faithful witness. Early consultation will ensure none of these is overlooked. There will be differing doctrinal positions between partner churches in co-operation over a number of issues, for example baptism in the U.C.A. and Baptist churches. Congregations must have **mutual respect for each other's traditions** and members must be encouraged to follow their own convictions confident that they hold much more in common.

There should be great clarity on roles and authority in the congregation. Several denominations have different views on the role and authority of the Priest/Minister of the Word. This, together with the way in which pastoral care and sacraments will be provided, **must be settled from the beginning**. Similarly, the corporate decision making, e.g. church council, congregational meeting, and their relationship to the Priest/Minister, should be defined.

When issues regarding worship emerge within a co-operating partnership that require attention, it usually indicates that matters relating to worship have not been adequately addressed at the beginning. This is an inherent danger because most collaborative agreements focus on service, mission and pastoral care.

Decision making by **consensus** rather than by majority vote is recommended; by relationship-building, rather than procedural finesse. People and churches relax if they know they will be listened to and their sensitivities respected. Trust is built. Mechanical questions like how many delegates a church should have do not matter so much once you lose interest in counting votes.

A Covenant requires a constant, solid commitment. Within the one faith community - the Body of Christ - there must be mutual responsibility and solidarity with one another for the fulfilment of this commitment. Yet, a covenant is a deal, not a contract. It can be broken, and what do you do then? Is an 'escape clause' (say of three months) a good thing to build into an ecumenical agreement? On the other hand, does such a clause offer the invitation to people not to give themselves to the venture as a 'life and death' issue?

The main reasons that co-operative partnerships have experienced difficulties and/or broken down are:

- lack of communication, lack of care and ecumenical courtesies
- inadequate consultation from both sides during the formative period
- an inadequate process of discussion and mutual growth in understanding leading up to the establishment
- the co-operative partnership
- inadequate attention to aspects of liturgical training at the outset
- lack of a 'sponsoring body': a properly constituted oversight body with representation of both denominations involved at the Presbytery/Synod level and equivalents in other denominations
- an unequal commitment to and understanding of Christian Unity
- appointment of a minister with contrary views

The Initiating Processes in Summary:

Any Congregation or Other Ministry of the church which wishes to take an initiative to co-operate with another church or receives an approach from another church shall:

- (a) Assure the other church of the genuine intention of the U.C.A. to consider such a proposal; and begin to engage with them in discussion of the proposal;
- (b) Advise the Presbytery, in the case of a Congregation, and the Synod in the case of an Other Ministry, immediately such a proposal emerges;
- (c) Seek the advice and assistance of the appropriate committee within the Synod, and/or the Christian Unity Working Group of the Assembly, to ensure that wisdom and expertise derived from past and present experience can contribute to the proposal;
- (d) Explore the proposal sensitively until a suitable resolution is reached and has the support of the appropriate committees within the Presbytery and Synod

Any agreement to co-operate with another Church shall be adequately documented and approved by the Standing Committee of the Synod.

Documentation of Arrangements:

To facilitate progress from one stage to another, the following steps may be taken:

- (a) Declaration of Intent
This is a formal and solemn declaration in which congregations pledge themselves to serve God together. This **declaration** is registered with denominational authorities
- (b) A Shared Congregation
This involves sharing worship, pastoral care, education and mission and may include finances. A written **constitution** is required for this arrangement.
- (c) A Shared Ministry
This is an agreement about the provision of an ordained person to serve as minister for co-operating but separate congregations and/or Shared Congregation and requires an approved written **agreement**.
- (d) A Shared Building
This may involve separate or shared congregation/s and requires a **legal agreement**. (*S.A. Synod Standing Committee*)