

# JOURNEYING TOGETHER

Five studies on covenant in the Bible and today

Covenant Steering Committee  
(The Uniting Church in Australia)



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## JOURNEYING TOGETHER

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# Introduction

The 1988 Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia resolved 'to encourage the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress to proceed with its proposals to work for a covenant between the Aboriginal members and the wider membership of the Uniting Church...' (Minute 88.22.20)  
These five studies on covenanting form part of that process.

## Purpose of the studies

To explore the richness of the biblical term 'covenant' and to relate it to awareness of Aboriginal issues in the wider Uniting Church.

## Outline of the studies

1. David and Jonathan (covenant involving different social backgrounds)
2. Ruth and Naomi (covenant involving different cultural backgrounds)
3. Cain and Abel (covenant between people of different life-styles)
4. 'Weak but indispensable' (covenant involving different gifts and talents)
5. The marriage covenant (covenant involving commitment between males and females)

## Hints for groups

### *Effective leaders*

- \* are good listeners
- \* encourage sharing
- \* make sure meetings begin and end as people expect
- \* are co-operative and accepting
- \* keep to the subject
- \* are well prepared
- \* draw in the shy ones
- \* have a sense of humour

*People learn best when*

- \* they are comfortable
- \* times are adhered to in the way people expect
- \* everyone can see everyone else
- \* their own experience is valued
- \* nobody dominates
- \* it is not all 'head' experiences

### **Before you begin**

\* Arrange to have some visuals (banners, posters, photographs, maps) related to the theme around the room. Appropriate music will also help set the mood.

You will also need sufficient copies of the Bible and resources for devotions. These notes provide suggestions from *Uniting in Worship*. Also paper and pens.

## STUDY 1

# David and Jonathan

Since this is the first meeting, take extra time to introduce people. If your group is large and it is likely that lots of people won't know one another, name tags are essential.

### **Introduction and opening prayer**

Remind people of the background to these five meetings – the Uniting Church's 1988 Assembly decision to begin a process whereby parishes, presbyteries and synods would make covenants with members of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

Read the prayer 'For strength through the day' on page 233 of *Uniting in Worship* (People's Book). Think quietly about the words and images contained in it. Write down:

- \* words and ideas that show it was written by an Aborigine
- \* anything about the prayer that specially appeals to you.

Share these thoughts with one another.

*(ten minutes)*

### **The idea of covenant**

Brainstorm about 'covenant'. What covenants do people recall from the Bible? (Abraham, Noah, David, Samuel, Jesus) What are some significant things about God's covenants? (God always takes the initiative; God's willingness to begin all over again; God's 'condescension' in entering into covenants with the chosen people).

These are examples of covenants between God and his people. But there are other kinds of covenants in the Bible – covenants between humans themselves, for example, some of the people in our studies – David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi – and, most commonly, marriage contracts. People have always contracted with each other. The second great commandment ('You shall love your neighbour as yourself') is a call from God for us to enter into covenant. Does the group understand this broader concept of covenant? Do people accept the need to make covenants with the Aboriginal people? What would it signify? What could it achieve?

*(ten minutes)*

## David and Jonathan

David and Jonathan came from two dramatically different backgrounds. Read the following Bible passages and list how their backgrounds differed (the Bible passages imply the differences rather than state them). Look for differences in terms of wealth, education, social status, training, opportunities. Share your findings with the group.

### Jonathan

- 1 Samuel 9:1-2 (talks about the family wealth)
- 1 Samuel 10:1-2 (Saul is anointed king; Jonathan is a royal prince)
- 1 Samuel 13:1-3; 14:14-15 (describes Jonathan's courage as a soldier)

### David

- 1 Samuel 16 (David, the youngest and most insignificant of Jesse's sons; David the shepherd boy)  
(ten minutes)

## Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people

Imagine two young men today. One is Aboriginal living in the outback; the other is non-Aboriginal and lives in the city. Using the same standards as you did with David and Jonathan (wealth, education, social status, training, opportunities, etc.), list the social differences between the two young men.

(five minutes)

## David and Jonathan's covenant

Read 1 Samuel 18:1-5. What made the two young men so attracted to each other? (Same age, each brave in battle, popular with Saul's officers and soldiers, etc.) Read 1 Samuel 20:41-42 and discover the intensity of their friendship.

Can you think of a time in your own life journey when you experienced such intense feelings for someone? (If you prefer, choose examples from literature or theatre.) Share as you feel able.

(ten minutes)

## The covenant tested

Saul put pressure on his son Jonathan to stop his friendship with David. Read 1 Samuel 19:1-3 and 20:30-33. Yet Jonathan kept his part of the covenant.

If you enter into covenant with your Christian Aboriginal brothers and sisters, how will it be tested? What changes will be involved for you? Would it involve you taking stands in solidarity with

Aborigines? Could you do that? Discuss it within the group. What elements in our non-Aboriginal society would threaten this covenant? (Racism, intolerance, 'white superiority'). Make a list and share with the group.

(ten minutes)

## Covenants involve risk-taking

Jonathan and David's covenant was clearly put to the test. So would a covenant between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. But a Christian covenant has additional elements. Think about that and decide on two definite actions that you or your congregation can do to begin building a Christian covenant with Christian Aborigines.

(ten minutes)

## Concluding prayer

Read together the prayer 'For unity with all God's children' on page 239 of *Uniting in Worship* (People's Book).

## STUDY 2

# Ruth and Naomi

### Introduction and opening prayer

Welcome any new members to the group and explain briefly the purpose of the meetings.

As an opening prayer, use the 'Litany of Invocation' from page 168 of *Uniting in Worship* (People's Book). After you have prayed the litany, read it again quietly noting the phrases or words that have special meaning when considering a covenant between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Christians. Share within the group. *(ten minutes)*

### Cultural backgrounds

What cultural backgrounds are found in the group? Is everyone of British stock? What difficulties can be experienced when people of different cultural backgrounds come together? (Attitudes about authority in the home; expectations about education; religious differences, etc.) From personal experience, or from fiction, describe the tensions that can arise in a marriage between people of different cultural backgrounds. *(ten minutes)*

### The distress of Naomi

Read Ruth 1:1-5. Make a list of Naomi's experiences as recorded or hinted at in these five verses (famine, the journey from Judah to Moab with two [young?] children, the difficulty of settling in a new culture [language, finding work, housing, religious tolerance], the loss of her husband, possible disappointment when her sons marry Moabite women rather than within their own religion and culture, possible disappointment that her sons had adopted the religion and culture of the Moabites, the loss of two sons). Imagine her sorrows. Relate them to your own experiences. Share as you feel able. *(ten minutes)*

### Ruth's covenant with Naomi

Read Ruth 1:6-18. How do you think the three women were feeling when they set out for Judah? Can you suggest reasons why Orpah left Naomi but Ruth stayed with her? Imagine how Naomi felt towards Ruth when she declared that she would stay with her. Reflect that this covenant between Ruth and Naomi was costly to Ruth (leaving her own people and culture; giving up the possibility of remarriage; the 'unknowns' of what life would be like in Judah). Consider too that Naomi appreciated how costly this covenant would be. *(five minutes)*

### The cost of covenanting

If there is to be a covenant between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members of the church, consider the cost in terms of the 'unknowns' that may occur. These may include the need to examine your own attitudes to people from other cultures, to consider whether you tend to 'stereotype' such people. It may mean the need to learn about the history of Australia from a non-European perspective; to think about issues of land rights from someone else's point of view. Can you think of other possible 'costs'? Share within the group. *(ten minutes)*

### Mutual giving

Read Ruth 4:13-16. These verses near the end of the book remind us of the special and profound relationship between Naomi and Ruth. Think about their story and try to work out why they grew in love and respect. (Sharing joys and sorrows, same values, complementing one another, comforting one another, caring for one another, appreciating one another, affirming one another). Share in the group. *(five minutes)*

### Growing in acceptance

If Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Christians are to begin to have the kind of relationship we find between Naomi and Ruth, where and how do we begin? What steps can you take (individually or as a group) to find out more about the issues that separate Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Christians? What can you do to complement, comfort, appreciate and affirm one another? What changes must be made in how you think about the church? How ready are you to accept that

there may be more than one way to live out gospel values? How open are you to learning from one another? How much are you willing to risk in order to fulfil God's commandment to love your neighbour as yourself and enter into covenant?

*(fifteen minutes)*

### **Concluding prayer**

A good prayer to end with, and one that tries to catch a new vision for the church, is found in the 'Litany for the Church' on page 176 of *Uniting in Worship* (People's Book).

## **STUDY 3**

# **Cain and Abel**

### **Introduction and opening prayer**

Welcome any new members to the group and briefly explain the purpose of the meeting.

Open with prayer, for example 'A Prayer for Illumination' by John Calvin, found on page 220 of *Uniting in Worship* (People's Book). The prayer for illumination is specially important because we will be trying to understand how the story of Cain and Abel helps us understand the need for a covenant between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members of the church. In quietness, welcome the Holy Spirit into the group and into the minds of all present.

*(five minutes)*

### **Farmers and shepherds**

Read Genesis 4:1-5a. Note some of the key elements in the story.

Remember that this is the first story in the Bible that takes place after Adam and Eve have been expelled from the Garden of Eden.

According to the Bible account, Sin has entered the human condition with Adam and Eve's disobedience. Now we learn of its harsher consequences. The story of Cain and Abel assumes a division between those who till the soil (the farmers and town dwellers) and those who live in the open, deserted spaces (the shepherds, the nomads). The latter are more pleasing to God; that is why Abel's sacrifice is accepted, and Cain's rejected. Why would the authors of Genesis want to present Cain in such a bad light? What does Cain represent that would be unacceptable to the authors? On the other hand, why is Abel and all that he represents so acceptable to them? (Attitudes about dependence on God; tensions between those who live settled as opposed to nomadic life styles; the city as the place of alienation; the desert as the place where God is encountered, etc.). Share in the group.

*(ten minutes)*

### **The desert in Australia**

Most Australians live on the coastal rim of the country. European settlers and explorers were disappointed that there was no inland sea; for many non-Aboriginal Australians, the desert is alien and inhospitable. Is this the experience of the group? Are the words 'alien' and 'inhospitable' appropriate?

*(five minutes)*

### **Aborigines and the desert**

For thousands of years, Aboriginal people have been at home in the desert; for them, and for increasing numbers of non-Aboriginal people, the desert is a sacred place where God is encountered. For people of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the desert has always been significant (the Exodus, the forty years wandering, the temptations of Jesus, the work and preaching of John the Baptist, the desert Fathers, etc.) In the group, reflect on the significance of the desert and how the desert is used in God's purpose as found in the Bible.

*(five minutes)*

### **The first murderer**

Read Genesis 4:5b-9. What, for you, are the most important images or words in the passage? One powerful image is of 'sin crouching at the door; if we are to overcome it, we must rule it'. Paul teaches us that we are to be ruled by grace rather than sin. What does this mean for us in our desire to covenant between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Christians? Another lasting image from the passage is the teaching that we are to take care of one another. Has this always been true of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people? When the group reflects on the history of European Australia, and especially of how Aboriginal people have been treated, what are their feelings? Ask the group to describe a situation where they have felt a strong sense of injustice in their own lives. Is it possible to imagine the Aboriginal people's strong sense of the injustice at what has happened to them in their own land?

*(ten minutes)*

### **The blood of a brother**

Read Genesis 4:10-12. Note the significance of the land. Because the land has been spoiled by the blood of Abel, it can no longer bear fruit; it has become barren. There is an image here of the land as mother. In the group, discuss the richness of this image. Recall the significance of the land for Aboriginal people.

*(five minutes)*

### **The punishment of Cain**

Read Genesis 4:13-16. Cain considers his punishment excessive because he will be condemned to live outside the presence of God. But paradoxically, God will continue to protect Cain. The last word in the story belongs to God, not to Cain. In one sense, we could say that until Abel's spilled blood was dealt with, there would be no peace for Cain. If Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Christians are to experience peace in the light of past (and present) injustices, what must the churches in Australia do? What can people in the group do?

*(ten minutes)*

### **A land called 'wandering'**

Cain's life continued to belong to God; and God did not abandon him. God has not abandoned any of God's people. Nor does God forget the injustices done to any of them. A common attitude among non-Aboriginal people is to say that all these injustices happened a long time ago and 'have nothing to do with us'. Ask the group to consider whether this is right or wrong. Consider that a covenant between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Christians will have to deal with deep feelings of discomfort, guilt, apathy, anger and possible hatred. How are people going to face up to these realities? How will these experiences be resolved? How will our common Christianity help?

*(fifteen minutes)*

### **Concluding prayer**

Any covenant between us will be difficult if not impossible without God's help. In a spirit of hope, conclude with one of the psalms that expresses our dependence on God. Psalm 8 in *Uniting in Worship* (People's Book) page 249 would be appropriate.



## STUDY 4

# Weak but indispensable

### Introduction and opening prayer

Welcome any new members; recall why we are having these meetings. Recall what happened at the last three meetings.

Open with prayer. A good prayer that fits in with our theme can be found on page 203 of *Uniting in Worship* (People's Book). It is called 'The Great Cloud of Witnesses'. In quietness, recall that most (all?) of the people mentioned in this prayer had their moments of weakness as well as times of greatness. Yet all were called by God. Share in the group.

*(ten minutes)*

### Vessels of clay

The Bible is full of stories about people chosen by God who, from any human viewpoint, were quite inadequate for the task. Some even protested as much. Read Mark 11:35-45. One of the features of Mark's Gospel is that he often paints the twelve in a bad light. Is this one of those times? Why do you think the other ten disciples were angry with James and John? Was it because they sought the top positions themselves? Share in the group any other stories about the twelve that show they were 'poor choices' for the task of being disciples. But don't end there! Jesus chose them, and he was a good judge of people.

*(ten minutes)*

### One body with many parts

Our Bible study passage is 1 Corinthians 12:12-30. This is an important passage in the context of our covenant studies. Paul's basic message is that 'diversity in unity' is a feature of the church of God. It is suggested that you begin by reading the entire passage, then consider key elements within it, applying those parts to the need to covenant. Read the entire passage. Spend some time thinking about the key elements. Write them down and share in the group.

*(ten minutes)*

### One in Christ

Read again 1 Corinthians 12:12-13. If you look briefly at the previous verses of this chapter, you will notice that Paul is talking about the various gifts that the Spirit has given to the people. Paul is anxious to avoid any question that the distribution of gifts means some members of the church are more important than others. His basic message is this: each one of us has been baptised into Christ's body. To be 'in Christ' is to belong not only to him but to each other. We are all members of the same body. The last part of verse 13 suggests that, as one writer says, we have been 'saturated' by God's Spirit. Why is there a constant temptation in the church to consider that some members are more important than others (education, 'standing in the community', ordination)? In what way do these two verses oppose that position? One of Paul's favourite phrases is to talk about us being 'in Christ'. If we are all 'in Christ', what does that say about the idea of a covenant between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Christians? Share in the group.

*(ten minutes)*

### One body, many parts

Read verses 14-20. Paul continues his metaphor about the church as a body by referring to the unity of our own bodies and the fact that each part has its own function within the body. It would be foolish for any part of the body to despise any other part. And note the importance of verses 18-20. These things are so because that is the way God intended it from the beginning. When you think about relations between Aborigines and non-Aborigines, is 'despise' too strong a word to describe how they have occasionally felt about each other? On what is this based (education? superior culture? colonisation?) Can 'despise' ever be part of a Christian's vocabulary?

*(five minutes)*

### Parts that need one another

Read verses 21-26. There are several interesting ideas at work here. The verses teach us that the parts of the body need one another; even the less attractive parts are part of the whole and needed as such. And all this because God has made it so. There is to be no place for division in the body of Christ. Finally, the marvellous teaching that when one part of the body suffers or is honoured, the entire body is involved. For our covenant study, the teaching is clear. There is to be no division between Aborigine and non-Aborigine. What do you consider to be the strengths that Aboriginal Christians bring to the church? Are there any weaknesses? What about the strengths and

weaknesses that non-Aboriginal members bring to the church? How can we become conscious of the suffering members of Christ's body in each other's communities? How can we learn to rejoice and praise with one another?

*(ten minutes)*

### **Different ministries?**

Read verses 27-30. Paul ends this section by listing the various gifts found in the church and placed there by God. In the following section of the letter, he will be teaching the Corinthians that all these gifts are worthless unless exercised in love. As a group, reflect on the ministries we find in each other. How can you or your group minister to Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal Christians? Decide on one step that your group will do to minister to the other community. Decide on one step that your group will take to receive ministry from the other community.

*(ten minutes)*

### **Concluding prayer**

An appropriate prayer would be 'The one ministry of Christ' because it is based on the passage we have been studying. It is found on page 132 of *Uniting in Worship* (People's Book).

## **STUDY 5**

# **The marriage covenant**

### **Introduction and opening prayer**

Welcome any new members; recall the journey of the group over the past four meetings. Introduce today's theme about marriage as a covenant. Begin with prayer. 'A Litany of Thanksgiving' found on page 170 of *Uniting in Worship* (People's Book) would be appropriate for its emphasis on the universality of God's love for us. Note any sentiments or phrases that strike you about the prayer. Share in the group.

*(five minutes)*

### **Marriage in Genesis**

The earliest reference to marriage in the Bible occurs in Genesis. In the Garden of Eden, God creates Eve to be Adam's companion. Read Genesis 2:18-25. What does this passage teach us about God's plan for marriage? (companionship, equality – created from the same 'stuff' as Adam, intense love.) Think about the element of risk involved in a marriage. A person 'leaves their father and mother', representative of all that is known, secure, predictable and loving; and enters an intense relationship with another person and in a situation that is often uncertain and unpredictable. Share in the group your thoughts about equality in marriage and the element of risk.

*(ten minutes)*

### **Jesus' teaching about marriage**

This is contained notably in Matthew 19:3-9, where Jesus was asked about the legality of divorce. Read the passage and think about its key teachings. Here are some ideas that might help us to interpret the passage. Note that there is no question of a woman divorcing a man. Wives were seen in Jewish society as being very much the possessions of their husbands. Mark's version of this story does include the possibility of women divorcing men but this may reflect a Roman rather than a Jewish background. Among the Jews of Jesus' time, there was some dispute about the grounds for divorce. It depended on how you interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1, where it is stated that it is

permissible for a man to divorce his wife if she is guilty of 'some shameful conduct'. One group of teachers said the phrase had to be interpreted strictly to mean adultery; but others taught that the phrase could cover anything that displeased a husband – even to making a mess of the cooking! By questioning Jesus, the Pharisees were trying to get him to take sides. Jesus' answer surprised them. He told them that Moses did not command divorce; he simply allowed it. And in any case, God's plan was that people should not divorce at all. When people get married, it is for life. They become one flesh, a new creature that cannot be divided. In the group, take time to note exactly what happens in the passage; and exactly what Jesus is teaching.

(ten minutes)

### **Law or ideal?**

God's original intention was for marriage to be so holy that it involved two becoming one (Genesis 2:24). The couple are no longer two but one. Nothing can divide this new creation that God has made. If this is the case, why do Christian churches permit divorce? Some would argue that Jesus is stating a principle not a law. The Bible does not give us laws; it gives us principles that we must prayerfully and intelligently think about as we try to decide what is right or wrong. Take for example the statement 'You shall do no work on the Sabbath day' (Exodus 20:10). Clearly this is an impossibility if we consider it a law. Rather, it is a principle, an ideal that we interpret in the individual situation. So it is with divorce. The ideal is for life long marriage; the reality is that marriages break down. When that happens, other Christian principles become involved. In your group, do you accept this way of reasoning? What are the implications for other moral issues?

(fifteen minutes)

### **Marriage vows**

The covenant of marriage is richly expressed in the vows taken. *Uniting in Worship* (Leader's Book, pages 386-389) gives four options for the vows. One of them reads

In the presence of God,  
I take you to be my wife/husband  
All that I am I give to you  
and all that I have I share with you.  
Whatever the future holds  
I will love you and stand by you

as long as we both shall live.

This is my solemn vow.

Often at the marriage itself, there is so much going on that the profundity of all that is being exchanged can be overlooked. In the group, think about what is being said here. Analyse the vows line by line, separating the elements. Then think of the covenant being proposed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Christians. Could the marriage vows be modified to become the basis of an appropriate covenant? As a group, rewrite the vows so they could be used in such a covenant.

(fifteen minutes)

### **Working it out**

You have written your vows. Can you say them from your heart? Successful marriages have to be worked at; so will a covenant between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Christians. What steps do couples take to make their marriage covenant work? Think about the problems that will arise in the covenanted relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Christians. Write them down. After you have identified them, think about what steps you can take to prevent the covenant being broken.

(ten minutes)

### **With God's help**

It is God's will that we love one another. Covenanting between Christians of different groups is one way of living out that command. It will only work out with God's help. Resolve to pray for the success of the covenant. Build such a prayer into your regular worship services. Reflect again on the profundity of the covenant undertaking; end with a prayer for God's help to carry it out, for example St Augustine's prayer 'Abiding in God' found in *Uniting in Worship* (People's Book), page 213.