

South Australian Council of Churches

Discussion Guides

-- *An Ecumenical Resource for use between Easter - Pentecost*

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Introduction

In late 2006 the SA Council of Churches planned a period of discernment, to look anew at its core business and to further the Council's aims in a new and different context. One of the tasks it has set for this period is discussion based on the documents "Called to be the One Church" and "Australian Churches Covenanting Together". Two discussion guides have been prepared to assist with this: "Christian Fellowship: What does it mean to me?" and "Common Action: What am I doing about it?"

The aim of each discussion is to talk about the topic in an atmosphere of care and trust, speaking out of our lives and experiences, from our thoughts and feelings, in a spirit of gentleness and respect. The discussion may take up to an hour, using the following as a guide:

- **Spiritual discernment:**
about 10 minutes
- **Setting the scene:**
about 10 minutes
- **Main discussion:**
about 30 minutes
- **Final reflection:**
about 10 minutes
- **Closing prayer**

DISCUSSION ONE

CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO ME?

SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

Create hospitable space, where there is great respect for God and each other, by reading and reflecting on the Bible passage John 17:22-23 in silence.

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. NRSV.

Read this passage and savour a word, a phrase or a sentence which particularly speaks to you. Don't analyse it so much as hold it in your mind and heart and let its truth touch you and speak more deeply to you.

Note any thoughts and feelings you have about this reading. If you are in a group, you might share the word or phrase that spoke to you.

SETTING THE SCENE

Think about the following questions individually. If you are in a group, you might briefly share your thoughts with one another.

- Which Christian community/church do you belong to, or identify with?
- How did you come to relate to that community, and what do you most value about it?
- Can you name some other Christian churches or groups in your area?
- What are the main identifying marks for you as a Christian person?
(E.g., the Mass/ Eucharist/ Holy Communion, caring for the needy, being in Christ, friendships, belonging to a community.)

MAIN DISCUSSION

Recall Jesus' passionate prayer for the unity of his disciples, then and now. **Consider** what Christian fellowship or community means for you when you think about other Christian churches or groups.

Respond to these questions:

- What is your attitude to other churches or Christian groups? (E.g., do you recognise other Christians as carrying out the intentions of Christ and working in the cause of Christ?)
- Are you hoping for a particular goal in relation to other Christian churches? [E.g., do you think that churches should be aiming to be a single unified church ("organic union"), or is "oneness in diversity" the way to go? See Called to be the One Church, II, 3.]

Read the following two viewpoints about Christian unity:

The task before us is to see Christianity - the Church - as a single people, yet cherishing our diversity and discovering what is most authentic in each other.

Within Christian denominations there is a growing awareness that life together requires a willingness to welcome and appreciate the variety of gifts that each brings to the whole.

In as much as our dialogue causes us to rethink what it is that we most truly believe alerts us to the inadequacies of our believing and opens a doorway into a deeper understanding of 'the Christ' and therefore of faith itself. Reflections on Keith Rowe's Book - Living with the Neighbour who is Different, Uniting Church Press 2000.

Unity is both a divine gift and calling. Our churches have affirmed that the unity for which we pray, hope and work is "a koinonia [=fellowship] given and expressed in the common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one Eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognised and reconciled; and a common mission witnessing the

gospel of God's grace to all people and serving the whole creation' (Canberra unity statement, 2.1). Such koinonia is to be expressed in each place, and through a conciliar relationship of churches in different places.

(Called to be the One Church, I, 2.)

QUESTIONS

- What are your thoughts and feelings on these two viewpoints?
- Does one of these viewpoints better express your view of church unity?
- If you are in a group, is there a range of views in your group?
- Do you feel comfortable with the differences among Christian churches?

FINAL REFLECTION

Each person to consider these questions:

- What does Christian fellowship/koinonia/community mean to me?
- What have I learnt from this discussion?
(Name one or two things that you can act on in your life and the life of your church)

CLOSING PRAYER

Pray the Grace from 2 Corinthians 13:13.

If you are in a group - pray together, standing, with your eyes open, heads up, holding hands or linking arms, looking at each other.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen.

Preparation for the follow-up discussion guide "Common Action: What am I doing about it?"

Read [Called to be the One Church, II,7](#) and [browse through Australian Churches Together](#)

DISCUSSION TWO

COMMON ACTION:

WHAT AM I DOING ABOUT IT?

SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

Create hospitable space, by pausing in silence for a few moments to show your great respect for God and each other. Then read and reflect on the Bible passage **Ephesians 4: 4-6** in silence.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. NRSV.

Read this passage and savour a word, a phrase or a sentence which particularly speaks to you. Don't analyse it so much as hold it in your mind and heart and let its truth touch you and speak more deeply to you.

Note any thoughts and feelings you have about this reading. If you are in a group, you might share the word or phrase that spoke to you.

SETTING THE SCENE

Think about the following questions individually. If you are in a group, you might briefly share your thoughts with one another.

- Name any inter-church/ecumenical activities that have occurred in your area in the past. Do you know of any recent or current activities? (E.g., Lenten studies, sharing of resources.)
- Have you personally been involved in any of these activities? If so, describe your involvement and outline why you decided to be involved.

Read the following quotation:

(We affirm that the catholicity of the church is expressed most visibly in sharing holy communion.) Even today, when Eucharistic sharing is not always possible, divided churches express aspects of catholicity when they pray for one another, share resources, assist one another in times of need, make decisions together, work together for justice, reconciliation and peace, hold one another accountable to the discipleship inherent in baptism, and maintain dialogue in the face of differences, refusing to say "I have no need of you" (1 Corinthians 12:21). Apart from one another we are impoverished.

(Called to be the One Church, II, 7.)

- What are your thoughts and feelings about this quotation?
- Do you agree or disagree with its observations?
- Does it excite or disappoint you?

MAIN DISCUSSION

Recall the examples of ecumenical activities that you called to mind earlier. List them all.

Consider some of the following ecumenical activities (if you have not already done so), and discuss one or two in detail using information known by you or other members of the group:

- The South Australian Council of Churches Inc
- St Paul's City Ministry
- The Schools Ministry Group (SMG)
- The SA Heads of Christian Churches
- Seaford Ecumenical Mission
- Church Ecumenical Affairs Commissions
- The Adelaide College of Divinity (ACD)
- Inter-Church Councils
- Local Covenants
- Ministers Fellowships
- Christmas Bowl Appeal

Respond to these questions and statements:

How would you describe "an ecumenical attitude"? (Here is one definition used in The South Australian Council of Churches: 'Hospitality, openness to the Spirit and respect for one another in the name of Christ.')

- Once we have an ecumenical attitude based on the mutual love and communion of God in Jesus Christ, then many new possibilities of practising unity will occur in everyday situations and the life of a congregation. Practical unity occurs locally, in diverse ways.
- Can you think of any other ecumenical possibilities within your personal lives and the life of your congregation? (E.g., an Anglican congregation employed a Baptist as Children's Ministry Pastoral Worker, and has a Roman Catholic as an organist. Some congregations welcome to Holy Communion any person who receives it regularly in any Christian tradition.)

Consider your own experience of the relationships between Christian churches and groups, and the information found in *Australian Churches Covenanting Together*, then

Respond to these Questions for further discussion:

- What do you think is going well in inter-church attitudes, relations and practices?
- What do you think is not going so well? What difficulties do you see? Do you have any disappointments?
- What do you think could be happening to develop inter-church attitudes, relations and practices?

FINAL REFLECTION

Each person to consider these questions:

- How can I put into practice my ecumenical attitude and understanding of Christian fellowship?
- What have I learnt from these two discussions?
(Name one or two things that you can act on in your life and the life of your church)

CLOSING PRAYER

Give thanks and pray for ecumenical activities in Australia. Then pray together *The Lord's Prayer* (using the words each person is used to.)

Further Action

As an individual or as part of a group discussion, please list any ideas that you or the group may have for future action locally and globally, and consider forwarding your ideas to The South Australian Council of Churches.