

Australian News

Since last reporting, ecumenical events which draw Churches to closer unity have been welcomed by Interchurch Families.

The publication of a small booklet *Why the Church?* as an agreed statement between Australian Anglicans and Catholics was such an event. Written by Anglican Bishop Graeme Rutherford and Catholic Bishop David Walker, then Co-chairs of AustARC (Australian Anglican Roman Catholic Commission), part of the worldwide ARCIC dialogue, it highlights a common hope for growth of our shriveling Church communities through various means including the involvement of young people who approach their faith by enthusiasm for vibrant liturgies, longings for spiritual wisdom and a willingness to engage with the needs of those living on the margins of society.

Such good news is offset by the hemorrhaging of Church congregations. The increase in popularity of civil ceremony weddings, funerals in the form of *celebration of life*, naming ceremonies for babies reveal a drift from central Christian convictions. Hence the question: "Why the Church?"

Scandals such as sexual abuse are not shied away from, nor the bad profile presented by the disunity of the Churches, examples which are abhorrent to all who hunger for a Church able to model reconciliation and which leave us open to being labeled hypocrites.

Many issues are presented to help Australians to value Church membership. These include:-

- The Church is the *living memory of Jesus*, a place where we encounter him
- Jesus did not live as an individual but within a community
- We are the Body of Christ gathered around the Eucharist
- As the Body of Christ, the Church is called to be the presence of God in the world, through each of us
- The power of the Holy Spirit is at work, through the Church, in us
- In being sent forth into the world, we are missionary
- The Church is an essential aspect of Christian discipleship, but not the whole of it

Bishop Rutherford (Anglican) has recently and sadly resigned as the Asst. Bishop of Newcastle and was present at the ICF International Conference in Newcastle in 2005. Bishop Walker (Catholic) is Bishop of Broken Bay, which adjoins Maitland-Newcastle.

A second major ecumenical event occurred in our region in what is believed to be an Australian first – the signing of a Covenant between three Dioceses. This took place in Newcastle Anglican Christ Church Cathedral with the signatories the Anglican Bishop of Newcastle Brian Farran and the Catholic Bishops of Broken Bay, David Walker and Maitland-Newcastle, Michael Malone, whose dioceses share common territory. The event marked the culmination of many years of ecumenical co-operation in these regions and ratified some of the events built up over time.

The Cathedral was filled to overflowing with over 1000 people. The incredibly moving ceremony began with an aboriginal smoking ceremony for cleansing, water was blessed in an aboriginal bowl, before the bishops sprinkled the congregation with water, using gum leaves, as a sign of our common baptism. The bishops processed without mitre or crook, wearing surplus and cassock only. The homily was preached by a Dominican, Sr Jenny Gerathy.

Four stoles, beautifully adorned with Holy Spirit symbols, were brought forward by Catholics and Anglicans. For Kevin and myself, standing before the altar, each holding a stole to be

later placed around the neck of bishops, Anglican Kevin to Catholic Bishop Walker and Catholic me to Anglican Bishop Rutherford, while the congregation sang *Priestly People, Kingly People* to indicate our common priesthood through Baptism, was moving indeed. We felt that not only our interchurch marriage was being honored, but also the marriages of our many interchurch family friends, some of whom were in the congregation

Families with their very young children, one Catholic, the other Anglican, brought forward the gifts of bread and wine, which the bishops placed on the altar. After an appropriate interval, the four bishops turned their backs and walked away as a didgeridoo played a lament, powerfully symbolizing that we cannot officially consecrate or receive together. Again, this was powerful reminder of the situation for us as interchurch families.

Later the Covenants were signed by the three bishops, one clergy and one lay person from each diocese. Kevin was invited to sign on behalf of the Anglican diocese of Newcastle because of his active work for ecumenism as well as our example of lived Christian Unity within our marriage.

As Kevin and I left we were amazed to find many, many people who knew us through our ecumenical outreach, and who had come to join in this act of unification. Outside, the hugging and joy were amazing, priests, religious, laity. The air was buzzing.

Special guests were Cardinal Cassidy, the President and Secretary of the NSW Ecumenical Council, Members of Parliament and Civic Dignitaries. Our disunity was clearly visible but our desire to do whatever we can together was apparent.

The Covenant committed the three Dioceses to:

- * an annual episcopal dialogue between the respective Anglican and Catholic Bishops
- * an annual ecumenical service of worship
- * an annual joint clergy day for the clergy of the three diocese reflecting on pastoral, social or theological issues which we face together
- * an annual service of reconciliation to focus on the restoration and growth of relationships between Roman Catholic and Anglican Communion
- * an annual exchange of pulpits at an ecumenical service by the respective Anglican and Catholic bishops.
- * a twice yearly meeting of the Ecumenical Commissions and the Bishops of the three dioceses
- * an annual dinner to be shared by the Bishops of the three dioceses to foster their friendship and communion
- * the exploration of possibilities for the sharing of church plant
- * an annual review and re-affirmation of the covenant

A copy of the Covenant will hang in every church. My first experience of a Covenant was in 1988 in the Catholic Church at St Brelade in Jersey, the Channel Islands. It became my hope then such a document might be hung in churches here. This dream has now been fulfilled. We need to continue exploring local Covenants between parishes along the lines of the landmark Covenant signed by the seventeen Churches of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) in July 2004. We know many such exist in England and trust we may follow that lead.

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Belmont Newcastle 26.10.08

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