

# **Covenant Statement**

**and Commentaries**

**Virginia Council of Churches**

# Purpose

- Initially: To review constitution and recommend what constitutes membership
- Current: To recommend marks of unity that more fully reflect our common relationship and commitment among member communions

The Covenantal Task Force was originally established as the VCC Membership Task Force. The purpose was to explore and review the constitution and address such issues as who could become members of VCC. The issues that emerged explored covered a wide range. Some of the major questions included:

- Can individuals become members of VCC? While this might increase the flow of finances, does it take us away from our mission as Council of Churches? Does this mean that we would have to consider a name change to reflect individuals as members instead of judicatories of churches?
- What about “newer” churches who are independent and not a part of any judicatory? These churches are non-traditional and some are non-denominational? How would the constitution have to change in order to accommodate this type of church? Although to date, none have sought membership, how would/should the Council respond?
- What about our friends at the Salvation Army? What about our Mormon friends? Can they be full members? What about doctrinal issues that may separate us? What about current judicatories who feel very strongly that these friends should not become full members of VCC? What if allowing these friends to become members would cause some current judicatories to withdraw their membership and financial support from VCC?
- What about levels of membership? What are appropriate and acceptable levels of membership that would encourage others to be a part of and financially support VCC?
- And then, there is the big question about governance. Can all persons who are a “member” (however it is defined) become a part of the governance structure? Can non-judicatory, non-denominational churches become part of the governance structure? Can anyone who financially supports VCC become a part of the governance structure? If so, then, who are we, and what is our mission?

Exploring such issues only led to more questions. After a year of working trying to unpack who can be a member of VCC and what that membership should look like, the questions kept coming and the struggle was becoming somewhat overwhelming. At each turn there were yet other urgent questions that needed addressing.

To that end, the membership task force was disbanded and reconstituted as the Covenant Task Force. We have held discussions with Faith and Order, developed and received input back from a survey of perspectives on the core values of VCC, as well as received feedback from some judicatory executives. And now, through much prayer and guidance of the Holy Spirit we submit the following draft highlighting marks of unity that more fully reflect our common relationship and commitment among member communions. For, the prayer of Jesus in John 17 is to unite the believers as one as the Father and the Son are one. It is that our commonalities unite us.

# Preamble

*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.*

John 17:22-23

The Virginia Council of Churches is a community of communions which, in response to the gospel as revealed in the Scriptures, confess Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, as Savior and Lord. *Therefore*, we covenant with one another to manifest ever more fully the unity of the Church. Relying upon the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, we gather in common mission, serving in all creation to the glory of God and our neighbor's good.

We express our relationship with one another through these marks of commitment:

We learn in the 17th chapter of John's gospel that on the night before our Lord was crucified He prayed for the unity of all of us who follow Him. Jesus prayed for our unity "so that the world may believe." Ecumenism and mission should never be separated. The ecumenical imperative is that we shall be one that the world might believe. Ecumenism is not merely about Christian unity for the sake of unity but it is about unity for the sake of the Church's mission in this world.

There is a myth that sometimes we fall into believing. That myth is that there was an ideal time back in the beginning when there was Christian unity. Jesus prayed on the night before his crucifixion for Christian unity because he knew that even then his followers were not one. He had heard them arguing on the road over such matters as which of them would be greatest in the kingdom. The Gospel imperative given to us in John 17 is not for the restoration of Christian unity. The Gospel imperative is that we shall be one that the world might believe. We are to work and pray for that unity. Ecumenism is not optional if we are to be obedient to our Lord and live the Gospel.

We all know that in this broken world we have not been faithful to our Lord's imperative that we all might be one. But, we as followers of Jesus Christ are called on to work for that unity for which he prayed. Christian Unity is not an option. Our Lord prayed for it. The Kingdom requires it. A world cries out for it. We must open up our minds and hearts and let the Holy Spirit lead us to that unity we seek. In response to the call for Christian unity we offer this Covenant for the Virginia Council of Churches.

# Worship

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.*

Psalm 100:1-2

- Encourage opportunities for shared worship, prayer, learning and celebration, as appropriate to our traditions
- Invite each other to be present at or participate in annual meetings, baptisms, ordinations, the Lord's Supper and other gatherings, services and sacraments, as appropriate to our traditions
- Pray for one another, the Council, and the unity of the church, as appropriate to our traditions

Our unity, if it is to have any meaning and if it is to bring the world to belief, must be expressed through marks of commitment. Sadly our disunity, our brokenness, is most evident in our worship. Because our worship of God is so important to us and because our disunity is so great each point in the worship section of our Covenant must be tempered with a concluding phrase, "as appropriate to our traditions."

In an earlier draft of the covenant the wording of the first point of this section began, "create and encourage opportunities for combined worship, prayer, learning and celebration..." The wording was changed to: "Encourage opportunities for shared worship, prayer, learning, and celebration..." We made this change not only because some of our traditions objected to the creation of yet another liturgy that somehow combines our worship but also because we recognize the richness of our varying worship traditions. We have different gifts but one spirit. Each of us needs the gifts of the other. Nowhere is this more manifest than in the area of worship. We will be enriched if we share in the worship of other Christian traditions and experience the gifts of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Combined worship can lose these gifts while shared worship can lift them up and celebrate them.

We also had to change the original wording of the second point of this section. The sad truth is that given our disunity it is not possible for each of us to participate in the sacramental acts of another tradition. Sacramental unity is what we seek and when it is obtained it will be a sign of our full communion. In the meantime we are to work for it and in seeking it we can be present at each other's baptisms, ordinations, and celebrations of the Eucharist. Our presence can be a witness to both our unity and our desire for an even greater unity than it is possible for us to express at the present.

Each of the three points of this section conclude with, "as appropriate to our traditions." It may seem strange to some that our third point, which concerns prayer, should conclude in this manner. While it may be possible for us to pray for one another as individuals it is not possible for us to pray for one another as churches. When the eastern and western churches split, the sign of that split was the striking out of each other in the prayers of the people of the liturgy. Just as participation in each other's sacramental life must await a greater degree of communion than we presently know, so too for some must our liturgical prayers for one another.

# Dialogue

*Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

Ephesians 4: 1-3

- Respect each other and our traditions
- Celebrate our shared tenets of the Christian faith
- Engage in intentional conversation and education, seeking to understand the gifts we each bring, listening and learning together in order to discern the will of God

The three bullets indicate what it means to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The more we focus on the negatives of one another, the further apart we grow. For negatives separate us rather than unite us as the body of Christ. We must be quite intentional in respecting one another; celebrating our commonalities; and in talking and sharing with one another. Communicating with one another helps us to gain a better understanding and appreciation of the gifts that each of us can offer one another. Through intentional listening and learning to one another, we are enabled to better discern the will of God.

# Ecumenical Vision

*How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!*

Psalm 133:1

- Proclaim the vision of unity and wholeness for the church which Christ has set before us
- Promote the understanding, appreciation, value of ecumenism
- Coordinate the practice of ecumenism within and among our communities

Our vision of unity is shaped by two imperatives. There is the Gospel imperative as clearly set forth in our Lord's Prayer on the night before He was crucified. There is also an eschatological imperative. Can anyone doubt that when the kingdom is ushered in its fullness that we will live together in unity? Meantime we are to pray for the coming of that Kingdom and the unity it will make manifest. Meantime we seek through dialogue and our common life as followers of Jesus Christ a unity and wholeness that is an attribute of God's Kingdom. The ecumenical vision looks forward to that day. We commit ourselves to work toward a more visible unity by proclaiming that vision, by promoting the understanding, appreciation, and value of ecumenism and by coordinating the practice of ecumenism within and among our communities.

# Evangelism

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*

Matthew 28:19-20

- Share the Christian message and witness through word and deed with sensitivity to our mutual relationships and without proselytizing or denigrating our distinctions
- Identify, encourage and equip joint efforts in spreading the gospel and developing followers of Jesus Christ
- Maintain ongoing dialogue to clarify theological issues in order to strengthen our shared witness

Jesus understood his own ministry as one of witness as he announced, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.” (Mark 1:15) So too, the church is called to proclaim the good news that “in (Christ) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us.” (Ephesians 1:7,8) Clearly, evangelism is not optional for the community of the baptized! Jesus’ charge to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” (Matthew 28:19-20) is at the core of what we say and what we do as Christians.

What is the history of our ministry we call “Evangelism?” Though there have been many positive experiences, we do have a questionable overall track record. Unfortunately, we have used the marriage bed as a primary tool for putting people in the pews. Virtually all of us have sought out perspective members from the ranks of other denominations. Many of our faith traditions have used coercive means as methods of witnessing. At times we have even turned our backs on the call of our Lord to go and make disciples, especially in our own neighborhoods. And for these and other instances, we must confess and fall upon the grace of God.

Try to picture an evangelism scenario that might make God smile and even the most skeptical heart soften. What if the members of different churches in a particular neighborhood would walk side-by-side, praying for those who live within each home and inviting them to worship...in any congregation? It is with this spirit in mind that the three points under the heading of “Evangelism” were composed.

As the covenant declares, there is the mandate to “share the Christian message and witness through word and deed.” The call is one that we can take seriously, prepare for carefully, and share in courageously. Yet, there needs to be sensitivity in that witness and a celebration of the gifts to be discovered in our diversity and our commonality. By maintaining “ongoing dialogue to clarify” the issues, we are aided in the proclamation of the Christ who unites us and calls us all into shared witness.

# Social Mission and Witness

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

Luke 4:18-19

- Engage together in Christ's mission on a regular and intentional basis, speaking and acting together in all matters, except those in which deep differences of conviction compel us to speak and act separately
- Promote education and action that embody God's justice, peace, and love
- Live in the world but not of the world as we witness to the gospel by confronting injustice and marginalization

The Word of God calls Christians to proclaim the Good News of Christ and to live out our witness in the world. Thus, this section, originally designated Social Mission was changed to add "witness", to encompass both word and deed in ecumenical cooperation.

The first bullet recognized that ecumenical mission and witness, most often, will not occur spontaneously, but will require intentionality. Its reference to *deep differences of conviction* draws from the Lund Principle, adopted by Faith and Order, WCC, in 1952, in Lund, Sweden. The ideal is that ecumenical mission and witness become the norm, but there is recognition that not all are able to speak with one voice on all matters.

The second bullet calls attention to the need for covenantal parties to bring their respective constituencies along to appreciate concepts of justice, peace and love, not from the perspective of the world, but from God's perspective. God's preferential option for the poor and disenfranchised is a concept not automatically recognized or understood, but when understood and internalized, it should guide our actions.

We cannot be faithful to the cause of Christ by remaining silent in the face of oppression and other forms of injustice. A 2002 Membership Task Force (currently the Covenant Task Force) survey within VCC found that most respondents believe Christians should seek to impact public policy. The primary emphasis of the third bullet is, therefore, confronting injustice and marginalization. Secondarily, while the statement encourages ecumenical unity in speaking out on public policy issues, by the preface – to live in the world but not of the world – it attempts to avoid real or perceived notions of the church as just a social justice organization. In ecumenical unity, the church must be about transforming the world, rather than conforming to the world.

Commentary continued on next page



## Social Mission and Witness Commentary Continued

In the fall of 1999 the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA adopted its first policy statement on interfaith relations. The preamble to "Interfaith Relations and the Churches" stated in part:

"As disciples, we seek to testify to the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord, to embody that love in the world, and to respond to the leading of God's Holy Spirit. We seek God's grace in our common effort to understand ever more fully how to live as the body of Christ in this religiously plural and culturally diverse time and place.

We speak out of a changing experience of religious diversity in our country. Events in the United States and across the world have made us more aware of the significance of the world's religions and their influence on politics, economics, and cultures. We speak out of what we have been learning in our shared ecumenical life. At home and abroad, the work of building Christian unity and our efforts for peace and human development are increasingly intertwined with questions regarding our relations with those of religious traditions outside the historic Christian church."

In order to engage in social mission and witness we must engage in interfaith relations. Both the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA Policy Statement and the guidelines for interfaith dialogue adopted by the World Council of Churches in 1979 call for the churches to engage in interfaith dialogue ecumenically. It is imperative that when we meet in dialogue with those of another faith we endeavor to have as an inclusive a Christian presence as possible. Interfaith dialogue must become one of our primary ecumenical endeavors. We call for the Virginia Council of Churches to prepare for adoption its own policy statement with regard to interfaith relations and we call on the Council to begin a process that will lead to interfaith dialogue in Virginia.

# Covenantal Unity

*If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*

Philippians 2:1-2

- Financially support our shared ministries through the Council
- Revisit and reaffirm our faithfulness to this covenant on a regular basis
- Actively build a community that depends on and demonstrates the transcending and transforming love of God in Jesus Christ

With Philippians 2:1-2 in mind, the individual communions join together to **financially** support our collective witness through the Virginia Council of Churches.

In order to remain faithful to our bond of unity, it is most important that we revisit our covenant on a regular basis. This allows us as a community of communions to discuss and recommend any necessary changes that will keep the marks of this covenant fresh, alive and responsive to who we are as the unified body of the Virginia Council of Churches.

All of the marks found in this covenant are so stated that we might be, and continue to demonstrate, the living power and presence of God's transcending and transforming love as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, the prayer of Christ in John 17 becomes what we collectively strive to live out among each other and the world.

## Conclusion

*I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*

John 17:20-21

# Resources

- New Revised Standard Version of Bible  
© 1989 by Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches in the USA
- *Council of Churches and the Ecumenical Vision* by Diane Kessler & Michael Kinnamon, [Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000]
- Lund Principle, Faith and Order 27 August 1952, Lund, Sweden
- Preamble, NCCC Constitution
- A Call to Covenant, LARC
- Marks of Unity, CUIC

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In an effort to achieve diversity in the shaping of the draft, the working group is inclusive of task force members and others who were invited to share their particular perspective. Throughout the process, valuable input was received from Faith and Order, the Coordinating Cabinet, a widely distributed Core Values audit, and the Judicatory Executives.