

A COMMON LIFE AMONG CHURCHES IN EUROPE



The Presidents of the Conference of European Churches and the Roman Catholic Council of European Bishops' Conferences in 2001 signed **CHARTA OECUMENICA**, a declaration prepared by the Churches in Europe. The Charta declared –

“WE BELIEVE IN ONE HOLY CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH”

Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 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. (Ephesians 4:3-6)

Called Together to Unity in Faith

“We commit ourselves to

- follow the apostolic exhortation of the Letter to the Ephesians, and **persevere in seeking a common understanding of Christ's message of salvation** in the Gospel;
- in the power of the Holy Spirit, **work towards the visible unity of the Church** of Jesus Christ in the one faith, expressed in the mutual recognition of baptism and in eucharistic fellowship, as well as in common witness and service.”

In England, expressions of commitment between Churches and Church Leaders have become a feature of ecumenical life in the past two decades. In more than twenty Counties or Intermediate Bodies there are Personal Covenants between Bishops, Moderators, Chairs, Regional Ministers..., with affirmations such as these –

We **believe** that in our common pilgrimage we are being led by the Holy Spirit, and that God the Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ, is calling us to a deeper unity and to a greater sharing in our mission in his world.

We therefore **commit** ourselves

to persevere in seeking a common understanding of Christ's message of salvation in the Gospel;
in the power of the Holy Spirit, to work towards the visible unity of the Church of Jesus Christ in the one faith, expressed in common discipleship, worship, witness and service.

We **undertake**

to develop our mutual friendship and support,
to pray, study and work together for the unity and mission of the Church,
to consult together on issues affecting the common good,
to promote justice, integrity and peace,
to speak with one voice to give common witness to Jesus Christ, as far as we are able.

We **pray** God to lead us, with all our sisters and brothers in Christ, towards communion in faith, life and witness; so that, united in one body by the one Spirit, we may together witness to the perfect unity of his love.

This wording is used in the Personal Covenant between the four Presidents of Churches Together in England first made in June 2002, which is in part based upon Charta Oecumenica.

“TOWARDS THE VISIBLE FELLOWSHIP OF THE CHURCHES IN EUROPE”

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:35)

Proclaiming the Gospel together

“We commit ourselves to

- **discuss our plans for evangelisation** with other churches, entering into agreements with them and thus avoiding harmful competition and the risk of fresh divisions;
- **recognise that every person can freely choose his or her religious and church affiliation** as a matter of conscience, which means not inducing anyone to convert through moral pressure or material incentive, but also not hindering anyone from entering into conversion of his or her own free will.”

Moving towards one another

“We commit ourselves to

- **overcome the feeling of self-sufficiency within each church, to eliminate prejudices;** and to seek mutual encounters and to be available to help one another;
- **promote ecumenical openness** and co-operation in Christian education, and in theological training, continuing education and research.”

Acting together

“We commit ourselves to

- **act together at all levels of church life** wherever conditions permit and there are no reasons of faith or overriding expediency mitigating against this;
- **defend the rights of minorities** and to help reduce misunderstandings and prejudices between majority and minority churches in our countries.”

Praying together

“We commit ourselves to

- **pray for one another** and for Christian unity;
- **learn to know and appreciate one another's worship and spiritual life;**
- **move towards the goal of eucharistic fellowship.”**

Continuing in dialogue

“We commit ourselves to

- **continue in conscientious, intensive dialogue;**
- **seek dialogue and discussion together** in the event of controversies.”

Churches Together groupings and Ministers' Meetings are places where plans can be discussed, conflicts avoided, collaboration explored.

Church councils and church committees may ask themselves –

How does what we are planning relate to other local churches?

Are we competing with them?

What can we share with them?

What can we do which complements the work of the other churches?

What must we do on our own, and what would we do better if we did it together?

Can we share our endeavours to proclaim the good news, and to teach, baptise and nurture new believers?

What needs of the neighbourhood should we be addressing?

How can we respond to human need by loving service?

Are we doing all we can to ensure that mainstream churches and the new, independent, and ethnic minority churches are working together for the common good?

Are we praying for one another's churches throughout the year, making their concerns our concerns, and sharing our joys and sorrows with them?

“OUR COMMON RESPONSIBILITY IN EUROPE”

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. (Matthew 5:9)

Participating in the building of Europe

“We commit ourselves to

- **seek agreement with one another on the substance and goals of our social responsibility**, and to represent in concert, as far as possible, the concerns and visions of the churches vis-à-vis the secular European institutions;
- **defend basic values** against infringements of every kind;
- **resist the misuse of religion** and the church for ethnic or nationalist purposes.”

Reconciling peoples and cultures

“We commit ourselves to

- **counteract forms of nationalism** which lead to the oppression of other peoples and national minorities and to engage ourselves for non-violent resolutions;
- **strengthen the position and equal rights of women.”**

Safeguarding the creation

“We commit ourselves to

- **strive to adopt a lifestyle free of economic pressures** and consumerism and a quality of life informed by accountability and sustainability;
- **support church environmental organisations** and ecumenical networks in their efforts for the safeguarding of creation.”

Strengthening community with Judaism

“We commit ourselves to

- **oppose all forms of anti-Semitism** and anti-Judaism in the church and in society;
- **seek and intensify dialogue** with our Jewish sisters and brothers at all levels.”

Cultivating relations with Islam

“We commit ourselves to

- **conduct ourselves towards Muslims with respect**;
- **work with Muslims** on matters of common concern.”

Encountering other religions and world views

“We are committed to

- **recognise freedom of religion** and conscience;
- **dialogue with all persons of good will.”**

Churches in Europe monitor the work of the European institutions in Strasbourg and Brussels through CEC and COMECE (details overleaf).

The World Council of Churches has a *Programme to Overcome Violence*, which in this country is focussed by the Baptist Union of Great Britain as the theme *Following Jesus in a Violent World*.

The Women’s Co-ordinating Group for Churches Together in England has a *Women and Violence* working group – details of it, and how local churches may be involved, from Pauline.Main@cte.org.uk

Local churches and groups of churches together may ask themselves –

How are we to seek to transform unjust structures of society?

How should we strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth?

Christian Aid, CAFOD and the Christian Ecology Network can provide resources and support.

Local churches and groups of churches together may ask themselves –

How can we relate to members of other faith communities with sensitivity and respect?

In some places there are local inter faith groups, or a Council of Christians and Jews. The Inter Faith Network has guidelines for good practice, *Building Good Relations with People of Different Faiths and Beliefs*. www.interfaith.org.uk

European Church Bodies

The Conference of European Churches (CEC)

Almost all Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican, Old Catholic and independent churches in Europe belong to CEC. www.cec-kek.org. CEC's Church and Society Commission relates to the European institutions.

The Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE)

All 34 Roman Catholic Bishops Conferences in Europe belong to CCEE. www.ccee.ch.

The Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE)

COMECE is made up of bishops delegated by CCEE in order to monitor and analyse the political process of the European Union. www.comece.org

Inter-church Agreements

The Bonn Agreement 1932

The Anglican Communion is in full communion with the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht.

The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (Leuenberg Church Fellowship 1973)

The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (known until 2003 as the Leuenberg Church Fellowship) is an alliance of 103 European Lutheran, Reformed, United, Methodist, Hussite and Waldensian Churches and the Church of the Czech Brethren. Each grants the other pulpit-and-table fellowship. In England these churches belong to the Fellowship - the Church of Scotland (in England), Evangelische Synode deutscher Sprache, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church. www.leuenberg.net

The Meissen Agreement 1991

The Church of England and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) have a series of mutual acknowledgements and commitments. <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/ccu>

The Porvoo Agreement 1996

Along with the Anglican Churches in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, the Church of England is in communion involving a common sacramental life and ministry with the (Evangelical-) Lutheran Churches in Estonia, Sweden, Norway, Lithuania, Iceland and Finland. www.porvoochurches.org

The Reuilly Agreement 2001

Along with the Anglican Churches in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, the Church of England has made a series of acknowledgements and commitments with the French Lutheran and Reformed Churches.

Church twinning

- Some links, especially diocese-diocese, have developed under the Agreements mentioned above.
- Often one local congregation in England links to one on mainland Europe through personal contacts.
- On many occasions, the churches of a town link to the churches of another town, reflecting (and in some cases anticipating) civic town-twinning.
- There are many humanitarian links between English churches and communities in Eastern Europe and the Balkans.
- www.church-twinning.org

This leaflet summarises the commitments made in **Charta Oecumenica** (the definitive version of which may be found as www.cec-kek.org/English/ChartafinE.htm) and tries, through suggestions, examples and links, to direct the reader to the Charta's local application.

Prayer of the linked dioceses of Nottingham, Lincoln and Brugge

Lord Jesus Christ,
we pray You for unity
unity among all
who profess Your name
unity among people
from every nation and every colour
unity within the families,
let not the winds of alienation
extinguish their fires of love
unity within our hearts,
let us not turn
divided or rejected
enemies to ourselves,
envelop us in
Your seamless robe,
the one and whole garment of unity
in which You suffered for us.

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