

FELLOWSHIP & INDEPENDENCE IN FIEC



September 2023

Preamble

FIEC Australia is a denomination of churches that are both evangelical and independent. Each church within our fellowship governs its own life and doctrine and is primarily responsible for leading its own ministry and mission. Beyond the power to include or exclude a church or its Senior Pastor from our fellowship, FIEC has no formal authority over its member churches.

However, this commitment to independence makes it vital for our churches to guard against isolationism, tribalism or sectarianism. Independence must never be misconstrued to justify non-cooperative, solitary or lone-ranger approaches to ministry. While we value the independence of each of our churches, we celebrate the greater joys of interdependence between them.

This statement seeks to clarify the specific ways in which our churches are independent and invite every church and Senior Pastor within FIEC to embrace the preciousness of our shared fellowship.

The value of independent local churches

The church is first and foremost a spiritual reality – the heavenly assembly of all God’s people gathered around the throne of the risen Lord Jesus (Heb 12:22-24). Through our union with Christ by his Spirit, we have been exalted and are seated with him in the heavenly realms and constitute his church universal.

Nevertheless, this spiritual heavenly assembly is visibly expressed in local physical gatherings of Christians in particular places. What is true of the heavenly church is embodied in the local church (Eph 2:21-22). For this reason, the New Testament epistles are predominantly addressed to visible churches that are physically gathered and growing in particular contexts and locations (1 Cor 1:2; 11:18; Col 1:3-8). Accordingly, the primary place of belonging for every Christian is the local church to which he or she belongs, and the primary spiritual authority to which he or she submits under Christ is that of the pastors and elders of that church (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:1-4). Each church is necessarily independent with respect to the government of its life and doctrine and the leadership of its ministry and mission.

As a denomination, FIEC is a vital instrument of fellowship between independent local churches. However, it is not itself “the church” nor does it exercise an authority over any local church greater than that of its own pastors and elders. The primary location of spiritual authority is the local church – not the denomination. FIEC is a voluntary association of independent churches and while we may impose conditions of belonging for our collective health and witness, it is ultimately the decision of each church to remain in this fellowship. The necessary independence of each church means that it is encouraged and expected to govern its own life and doctrine, to take responsibility for its own health and growth, and to lead its own ministry and mission in its particular social, cultural and geographic context.

Because we value the independence of our churches as important:

- the responsibility to govern the life and doctrine of each church rests with the governing body of that church;
- each church is primarily responsible for leading its own ministry and mission in its particular context and location;
- the internal governance of each church is determined by the governing body of that church;
- the governing body of each church should be free of any external control by FIEC other than what is necessary to safeguard the fellowship's collective health and witness;
- the Senior Pastor of each church is not ordained by FIEC but the appointment, discipline and removal of all church staff - including the Senior Pastor - is the responsibility of the church's governing body; and
- each church is responsible for managing its own finances, resources and property.

The preciousness of generous productive fellowship

While we recognise the value of independence, the spiritual fellowship we enjoy with God and between churches is much more precious and expansive. All believers are united with Christ and each other by the Spirit - our fundamental unity is with all those who are gathered around Christ in the heavens; it is not restricted to the local physical gathering of believers (Jn 17:20-23; Eph 2:16-18). Our spiritual fellowship is built on the foundation of the apostles' teaching and is shared with all believers and churches who hold to the gospel of Christ (Eph 2:19-20; 4:1-6; 1 Jn 1:1-3).

Just as our spiritual heavenly assembly is embodied in the local visible church, the broader fellowship that all believers enjoy with each other in Christ is expressed in a variety of ways, including through local churches working together. The New Testament records multiple examples of churches expressing their broader spiritual fellowship through the sharing of the apostles' teaching (Acts 15:1-35; Col 4:16), financial support (Rom 15:25-27; 2 Cor 8:1-6) and co-workers in the gospel (Phil 2:19-30; 1 Thess 3:1-3). This fellowship between churches can be described as a partnership that seeks to advance the gospel together (Phil 1:3-4, 12). Meaningful fellowship between independent churches supports local ministry and fuels mission heat.

For this reason, while FIEC values the independence of every church, our posture is to cherish a culture of generous productive fellowship. We want to promote the blessings of our shared fellowship without diminishing the independence of each church. We do not value independence for its own sake but rather we seek to foster a healthy network of outward-looking partnerships that are marked by generosity, openness and charity. Instead of withdrawing from each other, we want our churches to warmly extend the right hand of fellowship and keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Within our fellowship, our churches also joyfully submit ourselves to one another through a shared commitment to particular common standard of life and doctrine for the sake of our collective health and witness. While our churches may differ with one another on matters of ministry philosophy and doctrines of secondary importance, we strive to maintain a confessional unity around our common beliefs, a public unity around our common witness, and a strategic unity around our common mission.

Because we cherish the fellowship between our churches as precious:

- all churches agree to teach and uphold the FIEC Statement of Beliefs while generously extending freedom of conscience to each other with regard to doctrines of secondary importance such as church governance, baptism and the Lord's Supper;
- all churches undertake to regularly pray for one another, encourage one another, and generously share resources and finances with one another for the sake of mission and evangelism;

- all churches commit to working together wherever possible to plant and grow churches in a spirit of cooperation and not competition, and seek to extend a generosity of spirit with regard to differing ministry philosophies and approaches;
- every Senior Pastor, while appointed by the governing body of the local church, must be assessed and approved by FIEC in order to qualify as a Representative on the General Committee;
- all churches, their Senior Pastors and Associates agree to be bound by the Code of Conduct, Complaints Policy and other policies and procedures - including safe ministry regulations - that exist to safeguard our collective health and witness;
- every Senior Pastor commits to contributing to the life of our broader fellowship including by gathering every year at the National Conference, Senior Pastors' Forum and Regional Hubs, and encouraging the other pastors and leaders of their church to attend the National Conference and the relevant Regional Hub;
- pastors of churches in our fellowship are entitled to be registered as Ministers of Religion and marriage celebrants through FIEC; and
- each church agrees to make an annual financial contribution to FIEC in order to support the FIEC Staff Team which exists to serve the health and growth of the broader fellowship.

The member churches of FIEC may be independent practically as a result of our ministry and mission, geographically as a result of our location and distance, and constitutionally as a result of our governance and leadership.

However, because of the spiritual, theological and missional unity we share in the gospel, we are a fellowship. We serve one another and we need one another because we are members of one another.

“How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity” (Psalm 133:1).