Bilateral Dialogue Statement and Recommendations

Final

We, representatives of various Christian World Communions (CWCs) and of the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches, gathered March 10-15, 2008 to share information on recent bilateral dialogues, and in particular, to reflect together on the vision of unity expressed in their ecumenical texts. We are grateful for the hospitality provided by the Christian Jensen Kolleg in Breklum, Germany, where we met, and by the representatives from local churches who generously supported us.

While the meeting was attended by representatives of CWCs who have long been engaged in bilateral dialogue, it was the first Forum on Bilateral Dialogues which included representatives from the Salvation Army, and from African Instituted Churches (AICs). The AICs have grown significantly in recent decades; after a period of separating from churches founded by Western missions, they are now interested in engaging CWCs in dialogue. We rejoiced in their presence. We also hope that more Christian World Communions will engage in bilateral dialogues and have an opportunity to come to this table.

Bilateral and Multilateral Dialogues

Most Christian World Communions participate in various dialogues with one another. The Forum on Bilateral Dialogues, facilitated by the Faith and Order Commission, provides a unique platform in the ecumenical movement for the mutual exchange of information on topics, methods, problems, solutions and aims of these different dialogues, and for evaluation of this work.

In surveying the work of the bilateral dialogues we have observed that shifting realities, such as new participants or qualitative changes in ecumenical relations, have brought new perspectives into the dialogues and have changed the terms by which we are seeking unity. When churches receive the results of dialogue and take formal action based on them, those partners make a breakthrough toward a more visible unity. Recent examples include the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999) and various regional “declarations of communion” (The Reuilly Common Statement, 1999) or of “full communion” (The Waterloo Declaration, 2001). Some other dialogues, such as the Methodist-Roman Catholic and the Anglican-Roman Catholic, are proposing concrete actions in common mission as a way of living out the agreements they have already reached, even before a formal act of reception by the churches.

There is an interplay between bilateral and multilateral dialogues at both the regional and international level. Multilateral dialogues bring together communities spanning a wide range of traditions and contexts; they harvest and develop themes addressed in bilateral conversations. The actual reestablishment of unity, however, requires decisive action by individual communions and/or churches. Bilateral dialogues help facilitate such action.

The goals of bilateral dialogues can be many. While the unity Christ wills for his Church is the ultimate goal of all of them, in some cases the proximate goal of a bilateral is more modest – such as mutual knowledge and respect, the identification of areas of agreement and disagreement, or the dealing with tensions that currently exist among the churches in various parts of the world.

An Understanding of the Ultimate Goal of Unity

Increasingly, both multilateral and bilateral dialogues understand the unity of the Body of Christ as *koinonia*, the gift of the Triune God to us, and believe that it is toward this ultimate goal that all ecumenical activity is directed. We have discerned through our study of the dialogues that there is a growing consensus that *koinonia*, as communion with the Holy Trinity, is manifested in three inter-related ways: unity in faith, unity in sacramental life, and unity in service (in all its forms, including ministry and mission).

We asked ourselves, what does *koinonia* look like? We proposed the liturgy as a dynamic paradigm. Here, one finds the people of God living in communion with God and in fellowship with Christians of all times and places. They gather with their presider, proclaim the Good News, confess their faith, pray, teach and learn, offer praise and thanksgiving, receive the Body and Blood of the Lord, and are sent out in mission.

Different Proximate Understandings of Unity

While the vision of unity described above as *koinonia* is shared by our communities, we acknowledge that there are different understandings of the stages on the road toward unity, and different ways of achieving them. We have observed that the ecumenical movement has tended to use terms for the ultimate and proximate goals of unity interchangeably, which has led to confusion. The term “communion” is a translation of the term *koinonia*, yet it is often used to denote both that ultimate goal and stages on the way.

We can distinguish two different meanings and usages of “communion”. In one understanding, churches are either “in communion” or not, while the ways in which they make this communion visible may differ considerably. In another understanding, “communion” may have different degrees, according to the elements two churches share. In this model, such relationships are variously described in terms such as “intercommunion”, “full communion” or “real but imperfect communion”. Thus, care must be taken to determine which model is being invoked.

Local Church/Church Universal

“Local church” is another theological phrase around which confusion arises in ecumenical dialogues. The Church, the Body of Christ, takes concrete expression in different ways which are manifestations of one reality. This Church is made visible in the life of a local church, but there are differences in the ways in which the term “local church” is understood by different traditions. In one broad conception, the local church is understood as a body of believers in which the Word is truly preached and the Sacraments are duly celebrated, a congregation gathered in glad thanksgiving in

the presence of the risen Christ. (There are some who affirm that their vocation does not include the rites of baptism and eucharist and that they share in the sacramental life of the Church.)

In another broad conception, the local church is understood as the community of believers gathered around their bishop, who is the primary minister of Word and Sacraments in the life of the particular church. Essentially here the local church is the diocese.

In both models, the local church is challenged to look beyond itself. “The local church is wholly church, but it is not the whole church.” (The Church: Local and Universal, JWG 1990 par. 36). Thus it needs to embrace all in each place and to discern its life in Christ in relation to the wider Church.

The church thus lives “in communion” with other churches. How we understand this relationship of being in communion, and how we live it out, will depend in part on our respective understandings of what “local church” means in its relationship to the Church universal. A significant number of recent dialogues have addressed various aspects of the unity of the church throughout the whole world, and of a ministry in service to such unity. It is important for these discussions to continue.

In 1961 the New Delhi Assembly spoke of the unity of “all in each place”. In the intervening half-century, globalization has radically changed much of the world, so that people from many geographical, cultural and confessional origins live together in one place. The ecumenical movement now needs to deepen its understanding of “local church” by examining how these people and all their varied gifts can become the people of God living together in one place in *koinonia*.

Recommendations

We have reflected upon the full range of bilateral reports that have been published in recent years and, more specifically, upon convergences toward a common vision of unity as well as the divergences, tensions and disagreements which still remain. We believe that the following suggestions could prove helpful to our respective CWCs as they continue ahead in their important efforts toward unity.

1. We believe that it would be of value for each dialogue to articulate its goal in relation to its vision of the unity that Christ wills for his Church (cf. John 17:21).

2. We believe that it would be profitable to keep in mind right from the beginning of any phase of dialogue the reception of its results. As each dialogue is in some way a “learning process,” each needs to consider how this learning process may be shared with the wider membership of the two communities involved.

Only an abiding commitment to the ecclesial reception of ecumenical texts can allow these statements of convergence or consensus to have a reconciling and transforming effect in the life of our churches.

Each dialogue report might suggest some appropriate actions which could be taken by the leaders and believers of their communities on the basis of the agreements reached. We recommend that communions find a way to mark by public signs their progress in dialogue. We recommend that those churches which have made a declaration of

communion between themselves develop structures of unity that provide for common decision-making, teaching, mission and action.

3. We would urge that the bilateral dialogues very intentionally look to what may have been said by multilateral reports concerning the topics they are considering. In particular, the recent Porto Alegre statement, "Called to Be the One Church" (2006) and the Faith and Order study *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (2005) could be points of reference for ecclesiological discussions in the bilaterals. Similarly we would encourage every multilateral dialogue to consult carefully any pertinent results from bilateral dialogues.

4. We would encourage bilateral dialogues to consider the work of other bilateral dialogues, and to include an ecumenical partner from another tradition, from a United or Uniting Church in their midst wherever appropriate, or from Faith and Order.

5. We encourage dialogue teams to look behind the terminology which each side employs to the theological frameworks within which this terminology finds its meaning. Formulations, such as that of "legitimate diversity" and the criteria for discerning such legitimacy, need to be more carefully expounded in the light of the theological frameworks of the partners in dialogue. We recommend that Faith and Order take up the challenge of helping to clarify the ways in which words relating to the goals are used in and among dialogues.

6. Our dialogues usually draw upon doctrinal sources which are authoritative for our communities. We encourage dialogue teams also to make use of spiritual and liturgical sources which express the practice of the faith.

The awareness that the ecumenical movement is inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit means that we must continually be open to the possibility of the Holy Spirit directing us in new ways. The shape of visible unity is beyond our capacity to put into words.

From this perspective we offer our analysis and these recommendations to the Christian World Communions and to the Faith and Order Commission in the hope that they might contribute to the ongoing work of each dialogue and even foster a degree of coordination among them, to the glory of God.