

**Association of German Mennonite Congregations  
(K.d.ö.R)**

**Response to the WCC Study on the  
Nature and Mission of the Church (Geneva 2005)  
November 2009**

**Introduction**

In our view the essential basis and contexts are adequately presented, and we especially appreciate the presentation of the biblical foundations. The most important questions and problems with regard to the ecumenical fellowship of the churches are clearly stated, and we note that much of what emerged from the churches' various responses to the Lima document has been taken up here. It is clear that the Lima document does not mark a final consensus but represents important convergences in the three difficult areas of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, while still leaving many questions and problems open and unresolved. We therefore see the Study on the "Nature and Mission of the Church" as an important and promising continuation of the Lima process.

For our work on the Study document we used a WCC version of the German text, dated June 2006, but have since found that a slightly altered version of the German text is available on the WCC web site. Our comments will refer to the text that we worked on from the beginning. Where we found some of the formulations unclear, we referred to the English text and note that the sense of the English original is not always accurately rendered in the German text. One example is the different renderings in German of the English word "authority". The German text uses the word "Autorität", for instance, where in our view it would be better to speak of "Vollmacht" (para. 105 f). Elsewhere the same term (in the plural) is translated as "Machthaber" in speaking of political and economic authorities (para. 115). We mention a further example in our comments below on para. 15.

Herewith our comments:

**On I. The Church of the Triune God (paragraphs 9-47)**

In general we welcome the fact that, in contrast to some earlier ecumenical documents, the close connection between faith and baptism is emphasized throughout, which in our view is absolutely essential in the light of the New Testament. The study document as a whole leaves it in no doubt that "the Church is the communion of those who, by means of their encounter with the Word, stand in a living relationship with God, who speaks to them and calls forth their trustful response" (para. 10). For us this is an essential component in our understanding of what the Church of Jesus Christ is, namely, the communion of the faithful.

In line with para. 11 we of course affirm that "the Spirit incorporates human beings into the body of Christ through faith and baptism, and enlivens and strengthens them as the body of Christ". Nor would we deny that this body of Christ is "nourished and sustained in the Lord's Supper". Yet we do regard this as a narrow interpretation which does not correspond to our understanding. We believe that the body of Christ is nourished and sustained not only by the Lord's Supper, but also by other important elements such as the proclamation of God's word in preaching, instruction and pastoral care, exchange and fellowship among church members,

through which they accept responsibility for one another, strengthen and encourage each other, give and receive help and advice and keep each other right.

The convergences and divergences summarized in the first box below para. 13, entitled “The institutional Dimension of the Church and the Work of the Holy Spirit” seem to us to be accurately described. However, we do have the impression that the differences outlined in section b) of this box are not systematically upheld later in the document (especially in the section on Ministry).

In para.15 we note a problem that especially concerns the German translation. The second last sentence of the paragraph (in German) “Eine weitere reichhaltige Quelle sind die Auslegungen der Schrift im Laufe der Jahrhunderte”<sup>\*1</sup> sounds different in the English original in our view, and poses less of a problem for us. In the English the whole section is formulated differently. The sentence in question is third last and reads as follows: “There also exists a rich resource to be explored in the interpretation of Scripture over the centuries.” We can more easily agree with the English original, as against the German translation, because the former makes it clearer that the interpretations of Scripture are subordinate to Scripture itself. Nevertheless, given the different versions of the text in the English original and the German translation, we would like to know what exactly is meant here.

The description of the divergences in the box “Church as Sacrament?” (following para. 47) is correct in our view.

## **II. The Church in History (paragraphs 48-66)**

We agree in principle with the considerations set out in paragraph 50, but in our opinion, the final sentence needs to be expanded, for while the Church is exposed to the power of sin, it is by no means bound to submit to it. We therefore suggest the following addition: “the Church is exposed to.....the power of sin; it can submit or resist.”

Overall we find the section on “the Church in via” very good. The last sentence of para. 51 in particular deserves to be highlighted. “The challenge of living our faith as believing communities in such a way that all those who belong are seriously committed Christians, and all who sincerely believe want to belong, is a challenge that we share; it crosses the lines which divide us.”

We agree with the box entitled “The Church and Sin” (following para. 56), with the exception of the new formulation proposed in last paragraph of the box, with which we cannot agree, because the Church too is guilty of sin and requires forgiveness, and there is no part of the Church that is exempt from this.

Paragraph 57, last sentence, which speaks of “the restoration of unity” represents a difficult problem for us. We see this term as questionable, in that it seems to suggest that this unity once historically existed, as it were. But, in our opinion, the New Testament sources show that the Church of Jesus Christ took very different forms even its earliest times. Unity was given in the common confession of faith in Jesus Christ – and so it is today. That being so, we would propose a new formulation here : “This is why *efforts for unity among Christians*”...etc.

We think the explanations in the box below paragraph 63, headed “Limits of Diversity”, are good, especially what is said under (d) about the mutual accountability of the churches and living together in unity and legitimate diversity.

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\* translator’s note : Literally « Another rich source is the interpretations of Scripture over the centuries ».

With regard to paragraph 65, we would like to ask what is meant by “common ministry”. Does it mean a ministry that goes beyond a particular denomination? Certainly, we too consider that there can be no church without leadership. But the way in which that leadership is set up can differ from church to church, indeed even from parish to parish. We do not think a common ministry is necessary to hold local churches in the communion of the Church. The one Gospel, the one baptism and the one Lord’s Supper are sufficient. Similarly, we do not find it helpful that, in paragraph 66, “the service of a common ministry” is set on the same footing as Scripture, Baptism and Communion.

In paragraph 66, it would be good to mention that the sentence “The goal of the search for full communion is realised when all the churches are able to recognize...” is a quotation from the Canberra Statement (cf. para. 122).

### **III. The Life of Communion in and for the World**

#### **A. Apostolic Faith (paragraphs 67-73)**

We agree with the basic assumption in this section of the Study, namely, the continuity of faith and life of the Church of Jesus Christ through the ages from the beginnings up to the present time.

In our communities’ tradition, reference to the Creeds of the Ancient Church is less important than constant direct engagement with the biblical texts, from which God speaks to us afresh in many different ways: “The standard for a life in the discipleship of Jesus Christ is the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments, as interpreted in discussion among ourselves.” (quotation from the Preamble of the Committee of Mennonite Communities in Germany, AMG).

All the same, given a very different world view from that of biblical times, and given the dramatic and dangerous changes affecting the state of planet Earth, the scope of our understanding is also different from that of biblical times.

This has to be reflected in our theological language, that is to say, in the way we as the Church of Jesus Christ speak about our faith as disciples of Christ today, and even more so, in the way in which we live out that faith.

In paragraph 73, therefore, we would particularly like to see the basically correct description of the faith of the Church as an active response to the challenges of every age and place expanded to include a much clearer statement of the following: humankind as a whole, including the Church as it exists in all its widely differing confessions, has come to be a threat to the interlocking network of life on this earth. It has been clear for decades that our human capacities have been used not only to oppress and exploit human beings but to destroy the entire world of living things. At the same time, we have to confess that, through God in Christ, the Spirit and the power to resist this destructive trend have been sent into this world, so that Christians everywhere can join in efforts to establish conditions that will sustain life and create peace and justice at all levels, large or small.

#### **B. Baptism (paragraphs 74 – 77)**

We endorse the underlying principle in this section that baptism is “a basic bond of unity” (paragraph 74).

We can largely accept the descriptions of the meaning of baptism, but would prefer the third sentence of paragraph 76 to say that “the faith of the believer is nourished by the Spirit of God in the communion of believers” rather than by “the faith of the Church”. The close link between baptism and the call to discipleship, which is a long-standing concern of our church tradition, can be found in the Study draft, if not with the clarity of the Lima convergence statements (cf. Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, 1982, esp. sections 4,8,9,16).

Nevertheless, difficulties persist between churches which baptize infants, and those which baptize professing adults, as is correctly presented in the box on Baptism. As far as we can see, problems about the mutual acceptance of baptism in other churches persist on both sides. Churches which belong to the baptist tradition have some difficulty with the baptismal practice of churches which have infant baptism, especially when the link between baptism and the call to discipleship is not made clear, in other words, when sometimes a child is baptized even when the adults accompanying the infant have little or nothing to do with the life and faith of Christ's church.

Churches in the baptist tradition will have to be more aware than they have been in the past that a confession at baptism can be understood both as a cognitive act by professing adults and as an emotional act of acceptance on receiving baptism. This was particularly brought home to us at the baptism of mentally handicapped people. We will also be careful to make it clearer that baptism is a two-fold commitment : that of God to the human person, and that of the human person to God.

Set in this context, the difficulties explained in the box on Baptism are not such that they should divide the churches. They do not stand in the way of mutual acceptance by the churches.

### **C. The Eucharist (paragraphs 78-81)**

We support this section's basic affirmation that those sharing in the Lord's Supper experience communion with Christ and hence communion with one another and with others around the world. From the statements that follow we also especially endorse what is said in paragraphs 80 and 81, where the ethical implications of the Lord's Supper are described with references to biblical sources. We note in passing that the term "Eucharist" is not used in our communities. In the box relating to this section many of the continuing problems are set out. We would like to emphasize the following additional points:

We regret that, in the past, and even today in the churches and in our own congregations, the celebration of the Lord's Supper, which creates communion in Christ, has often served to mark us off from other Christians and other people. It would be in keeping with the spirit of Christ and the celebration of His Supper if the declaration on the nature of the Church were to include a statement to the effect that : We believe our lines of demarcation are not compatible with God's all-encompassing love shown to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ himself invites us to share in the meal. But God in Christ has a larger heart than his Christian followers, such as ourselves. We give thanks for all the steps that have been taken towards a better mutual understanding and acceptance among Christians of different traditions and confessions. We remain somewhat sceptical about attempts to establish unity by means of documents, not to speak of any sort of organizational union. If we as Christian men and women could accept one another despite all the persisting differences, the unity of Christians in reconciled diversity would already be achieved. This could be shown forth in every Christian worship service with celebration of the Lord's Supper.

### **D. Ministry of All the Faithful (paragraphs 82-85)**

This section has our full agreement as our understanding of the Christian congregation is based on the priesthood of all believers.

### **E. Ministry of the Ordained in the Community of Believers (paragraphs 86-89)**

We can largely agree with the basic thinking in paragraphs 86 to 89, for we too choose and entrust people with certain ministries in the congregation as a means of ensuring order and maintaining continuity. Generally, however, we do not call this ordination but use terms like commissioning, blessing, committing, or similar words. Those entrusted with special ministries

remain on an equal footing with all other brothers and sisters. With us, the assembled congregation is responsible for taking decisions. The explanations in the box following paragraph 89 reflect the current discussion very well.

#### **F. Oversight: Personal, Communal, Collegial (paragraphs 90-98)**

These paragraphs present a very varied picture of church leaderships. But it has to be said that, for us as a congregationalist church, the problems do not arise in the same way. Nonetheless, the task of leadership exists in our congregations and we too have to be vigilant to ensure that congregations continue in the path of discipleship.

#### **G. Conciliarity and Primacy (paragraphs 99-104)**

The closing comment (box) accurately describes the divergence existing among the churches with regard to universal primacy. For some of the churches it seems to be important to reach a consensus on this matter. For us, two other questions are more important: First, how can we as churches in all our diversity still speak and act convincingly in the world and be seen to do so in ecumenical unity? Could the WCC be the voice of the churches on particularly important issues? Second, we ask ourselves how processes “at synodal level” can be tied in with the living out of the faith in local congregations?

We have problems with many of the considerations concerning keywords in paragraphs 99 to 104 (leaders, synods, primacy, papacy) as we have no notion of primacy in our understanding of the congregation. With this reservation, we find our concerns and our tradition most readily reflected in the description of the relation between authorities and local communities in paragraph 99. For us, reaching consensus on the question of universal primacy is not an essential task. However, conversations with churches which are differently constituted could be helpful for mutual understanding and for the public effectiveness of the churches.

#### **H. Authority**

In our view, paragraphs 105 and 106 offer a good description of how Jesus acted and served with authority and how, through the Holy Spirit, that authority of service and witness is given to all his disciples, including those in the ordained ministry. The fact that the explanations in section H refer especially to “the lives of Christians and the ordered Christian community”, and so not only to the ordained ministry, marks a welcome contrast to the commentaries on primacy in the preceding section.

We take a critical view of “authority” as exercised by Jesus being simply transposed into Church structures in the sense of formal authority. Furthermore, the problem of the misuse of authority is not touched upon. (In the German translation it is misleading to use the term “Autorität”, when it is the biblical term *exousia* that is meant).

#### **IV. In and for the World (paragraphs 109-118)**

We have questions about the way in which the text is structured. What is meant by III. LIFE IN COMMUNION IN AND FOR THE WORLD as opposed to IV: IN AND FOR THE WORLD? The headings should be more clearly formulated to distinguish the sections more clearly from one another.

We welcome the commentaries in paragraphs 109 to 118. They show very well how the different spheres are inter-related, i.e. God’s unconditional acceptance of us human beings and our responsibility for an active, witnessing Christian life in the world, both as individuals and as churches. Nevertheless, despite all solidarity and commitment in the tasks and challenges facing us in the world, we consider it important at the same time to maintain a critical distance from the world, as indeed is outlined in paragraph 118.

### **Comments on individual paragraphs:**

110. For us the intrinsic connection between the two ideas in this paragraph is lacking. We therefore suggest the following formulation: “Knowledge of the great value of the Church’s task of evangelization should not lead it to forget respect for the values present in other faiths.” 111 and 112. These paragraphs admirably state our biblical basis, what form the challenges in the world may take and what Christ’s command obliges and enables us to do. This challenge represented by the tasks facing us in the world is also an opportunity to go beyond the dogmatic differences between the confessions (and indeed sometimes between the religions) and act caringly together (very well put in paragraph 114, for instance). This is why we find the phrasing of the last sentence “Even now, divided Christian communities can and sometimes have carried out this discernment together...” too negative. There could be a greater emphasis here on what unites us in caring action. On the other hand, we very much welcome the nuanced statement that “...Christians must advocate peace, especially by seeking to overcome the causes of war...” (para. 112).

113. We consider it important that in the matter of ethics and justification different answers have always been possible. In the first part of this paragraph, the two aspects seem to be set side by side without any connection. We would prefer the following formulation: “On the one hand, discipleship demands moral commitment, and on the other, the Church does not rest on moral achievement but on justification by grace through faith. In the nature of things these two aspects must be kept together.” Our predecessors in the 16<sup>th</sup> century already tried to make this connection, so we welcome the efforts being made by the churches today to honour both sides, and particularly endorse the final sentence of the paragraph.

115. We find the use of the German word “Machthaber” (ruling power, powers-that-be) to translate the English word “authority” towards the end of this paragraph very unfortunate, as it gives a completely false impression in German. We suggest that in the German text, the term “Machthaber” should be replaced by the word “Verantwortliche” (responsible).

### **Conclusion (paragraphs 119-123)**

We consider the study document on “The Nature and Mission of the Church” to be a positive development of the Lima convergence texts. We particularly welcome the honest acceptance of divergences as set out in the respective boxes, which show that much positive has been achieved since “Lima”. It is also evident that many critical questions remain open. We regard both of these as “progress” (para. 120).

The Study document marks another good step along the way to mutual recognition in reconciled diversity.

In answer to the question as to how the text can help our church “to take concrete steps towards unity” (in point C. Invitation, 5<sup>th</sup> question), we simply note: We have discussed this text in detail over a long period with people in positions of responsibility in our congregations (full-time pastors and voluntary preachers and workers). The response we have prepared in this group will be further circulated and discussed in other bodies and congregations.