

08 Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania

Provincial Consistory of the
Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania

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Ref. Faith and Order Study: The Nature and Mission of the Church. A Stage on the Way to a
Common Statement

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Dear General Secretary,

Thank you for your letter of January 2006, received on 24 February 2006, asking for our response to the Faith and Order text on “The Nature and Mission of the Church”. It gives us great pleasure to respond to your request. We shall do so by examining the questions addressed to the member churches in § 8. Overall, this text is to be welcomed from the standpoint of Lutheran ecclesiology. It is the outcome of many years of conscientious work by the Commission and provides a good basis for further steps along the way to Christian unity. Here in brief is our response to the four questions posed in the Introduction:

1. We can agree with both the form and the content of this document. It is good that the church is presented as “Ecclesia Dei”, the Church of the Triune God anchored in the working of the three persons Father, Son and Holy Spirit, “creatura Verbi” and “creatura Spiritus Sancti”. The biblical and systematic theological view of the church and its mission as sign and instrument of God’s action in the world corresponds to what we believe. The same applies to the section on the church in history and the eschatological aspect of its presence in the world as a universal and, at the same time, particular or local entity. The concrete form of the church’s life in worship, witness and service, and the question of sacraments and ministry as set out in the BEM document are also developed appropriately and clearly.

We appreciate the fact that the boxes interspersed in the text present common ecclesiological understandings on certain aspects but also address the outstanding issues on which agreement has not yet been reached among the member churches. This will certainly facilitate further work on these questions and shows a genuine struggle to find the truth we seek.

2. We are very glad to note that it has been possible to produce such a comprehensive ecclesiological text in common. There is a real theological consensus on most of the issues. On some points (e.g. in the area of pneumatology, understanding of the sacraments and ministry) views have drawn closer together and a convergence has emerged which is moving towards full consensus. Admittedly, on other points, there are persistent differences which suggest that convergence on these issues is still far from being achieved. But precisely these differences challenge us to further reflection, and diversity can perhaps ultimately lead to reconciled community despite continuing differences. The nature and mission of the church require continuing dialectical work in the search for new convergences that can finally bring consensus.

3. There are some passages in the texts which we find problematic and which need to be revised:
- In §10 Mary is described as the “symbol of the church and of the individual Christian”. While we are entirely open to a Mariology in the sense of Mary as “Theotokos”, the linking of ecclesiology and Mariology is problematic.
 - In §15, the work of the Spirit which inspired the New Testament communities is directly assumed in the “living tradition of the church”. The qualitative difference between New Testament and tradition does not seem to us to be made adequately clear here.
 - §70 likewise talks in this sense of the “living tradition” of the church, and at greater length than in § 10 (15?). No mention is made of the fact that this tradition can also deviate from the biblical truth and always has to be measured against apostolic witness.
 - Towards the end of § 77, and again towards the end of § 81, the fruit of baptism is linked much too directly with ethical and social-political consequences. Important and legitimate as the social-ethical aspect is, it does not immediately belong in what is really a dogmatic text. The same applies to § 85.
 - In § 93, in connection with the ministry of episcopé within the Reformation churches, the Reformation itself is interpreted as “the alternative of either staying within the inherited church structures or remaining faithful to the apostolicity of the church”. This is not an appropriate understanding of the Reformation. This question calls for further discussion.
 - In § 102, with reference to papal primacy, canon 34 of the Apostolic Canons is quoted somewhat carelessly not as a historical document but as an authoritative text, and universal primacy is described as a “gift” rather than a “threat” to the church in the age of globalization. These comments need further clarification.
 - In § 107, “Scripture, tradition, worship, synods (councils)” are unreflectingly placed on the same level as authority coming from God, which is incorrect from the dogmatic point of view.
 - § 110 rightly speaks of “respect for the values present in other faiths”. Particularly in relation to the church’s mission, the question of the absolute nature of Christianity arises. Mission must always be more than a “dialogue” with people of other faiths (cf. also the start of §115).
 - § 112 (the whole of the middle section, as also § 77, §81 and §85) speaks of current social and political difficulties in the world today. We think it would be better to leave the social-ethical problems out of this dogmatic-ecclesiological text altogether, or else simply to refer to them in a short sentence (as is done successfully in §116).
 - § 115 speaks of promoting the “values of the Kingdom of God” in working with adherents of other religions (cf. § 110) and in the “realms of politics and economics”, and touches in particular on “the relation between Church and State”. Towards the end of the paragraph, the Kingdom of God is specifically seen in terms of cooperation with (or opposition to) “political and economic authorities”. The use of the idea of the Kingdom of God in this sense in the context of this ethical consideration seems to us questionable.

From the point of view of our church and its historical experience we may perhaps mention two aspects which have not received sufficient attention in this text and which call for further reflection:

- One of the essential “marks of the church” (*nota ecclesiae*) is suffering, life under the cross. This needs to be discussed at greater length.
- In our church we have developed a special practice regarding reconciliation, in the form of a concrete act of reconciliation, especially in connection with the Eucharist and confession. The church’s reconciling action at the different levels of the church’s life

(personal, parish, ecumenical, up to and including joint declarations (cf. para.113!) has been shown more clearly.

4. The document on the “Nature and Mission of the Church” will undoubtedly be very helpful in future ecumenical work. This text will certainly be important in the context of ongoing Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue in which our church is involved both bilaterally (Evangelical Church in Germany – Romanian Orthodox Church) and internationally (Lutheran World Federation – Orthodox Churches worldwide) and its influence will be felt in future talks.

Hermannstadt, 12 April 2007

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Provisional translation from German