

## 09 Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland

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Statement from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland  
To the Faith and Order Commission on the Document  
*The Nature and Mission of the Church*  
(Faith and Order Paper Nr. 198. WCC: Geneva 2005)  
Approved by the Church Council for the International Relations, March 19th, 2007

### Introductory Remarks

The booklet *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (NMC) continues the line of ecclesiological reflection in the ecumenical movement, in particular Faith and Order Commission and the World Council of Churches. One starting-point of this line was the document *Church and World* (1990), and it was continued in the several volumes dealing with *Ecclesiology and Ethics* during the 1990s. The immediate predecessor of the current text was *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (1998). It is not the task of our statement to compare these texts with one another, but we note with appreciation that the WCC as well as Faith and Order have been able to tackle with the difficult ecclesiological issues which not only divide the churches but are also debated within them.

We are aware that any ecclesiological reflection within the WCC must travel along the narrow path of not interfering with the binding ecclesiologies of the member churches. The Toronto declaration of 1950, which has gained new actuality in the last years, does not provide the WCC with a mandate to define the final nature of the one Church. But the WCC can nevertheless serve as an instrument for unity, and the theological work relating to controversial issues organically belongs to this service. The Finnish Lutheran delegation at the Porto Alegre assembly of the WCC was able to adopt the “text on ecclesiology” *Called to Be the One Church*. As the NMC text in its way “assists” the process launched in Porto Alegre (so *Called to Be*, footnote 2), our church has a positive relationship towards the new ecclesiological work within the WCC.

### Biblical Insights into Ecclesiology

We appreciate that ecumenical documents are anchored in the Bible. The Holy Scriptures provides all churches a common basis for any fruitful dialogue. The Scriptures should be used as one of the starting points for drafting a theological document and not as a resource for verses to be used as a decoration attached to the text afterwards in order to increase its credibility or to enhance its reception by the churches.

The document makes wide use of Biblical texts. However, some references to the Scriptures appear only loosely connected to the topic at stake (cf. § 81, the social and economic dimensions of the eucharist). At some places, the Biblical verses are taken into use of other than the original intentions of the text (cf. § 10, St. Mary is presented as a symbol of a Christian and yet, in the referred Mt 5:46-50 Jesus actually denounces his Mother; the box on page 33 speaks about the church and sin, but all Bible references point to individuals as sinners).

It is fairly easy to call the Scriptures normative (§ 15) and the witness of the Bible a “totality”, but a closer look reveals the complexity of these claims. Churches and Christians might interpret the normativity of the Scriptures very differently. On the other hand, the totality of the Bible

contains central as well as peripheral material. Consequently, it is appropriate that the document acknowledges the diversity of the Scriptures and appreciates its richness.

### Questions posed to the Churches in the Document

The NMC text (§ 8) invites the churches to respond to four questions, namely:

- (1) - does this study document correctly identify our common ecclesiological convictions, as well as the issues which continue to divide us?
- (2) - does this study document reflect an emerging convergence on the nature and mission of the Church?
- (3) - are there significant matters in which the concerns of your church are not adequately addressed?
- (4) - insofar as this study document provides a helpful framework for further ecclesiological discussions among the churches:
  - how can this study document help your church, together with others, take concrete steps towards unity?
  - what suggestions would you make for the future development of this text?

In the following, we aim at responding to these four questions. Let us note, however, that the Lutheran tradition has never developed an ecclesiology which would be both comprehensive and uniform. We have not regarded church order and ethics as parts of ecclesiology in the strict sense. The relationship of other theological topics to ecclesiology, such as those of mission and the doctrine of ministry, has remained pluriform. This has not hindered the existing unity and communion among Lutheran churches. If we look at the present communion of the Lutheran World Federation, we can see that some of its churches are rather strongly episcopal, whereas others stress presbyteral and synodical structures. The views on normative ethics and church order also vary considerably. In this sense, a variety of rather different “ecclesiologies” can thus be found within the communion of Lutheran churches.

This does not mean that ecclesiology would be unimportant or necessarily pluriform. Lutherans teach that the church is “the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel” (the *Augsburg Confession* VII, German text). The church is defined in terms of word and sacrament. However, Lutheran ecclesiology should not be deemed “minimalistic”, since many other “marks of the church” also witness to the purity and rectitude of this core. But relatively few core items suffice to provide a relatively solid ecclesiology. Ecclesiology is not the same as “dogmatics” or “ecumenism” in general. Lutheran ecclesiology is narrow in its theological scope. It seems that many other churches ascribe a much broader meaning to the word “ecclesiology” so that it includes church order and ethics together with the whole sacramental theology.

On the other hand, the above quoted Article in the *Augsburg Confession* also articulates the firm conviction that “one holy church is to continue forever”. Lutheran ecclesiology emphasizes unity and continuity, which do involve also other than strictly doctrinal dimensions. As a matter of fact, the article does not seek to define a full-fledged ecclesiology, but rather to map the conditions for church unity in a situation where questions of order are threatening it.

*First question: Does this study document correctly identify our common ecclesiological convictions, as well as the issues which continue to divide us?*

NMC identifies the following divisive issues (as highlighted in the grey pages): 1) institutional church – work of the Spirit, 2) church as “sacrament”, 3) church and sin, 4) limits of diversity, 5) local church, 6) baptism, 7) eucharist, 8) ordained ministry, 9) bishops, 10) conciliarity and primacy. This is a solid list which aptly reflects the outcome of many ecumenical dialogues of the last decades. In a general and abstract sense one can say, “yes”, these theological issues are normally discussed in the doctrinal dialogues.

There is no clear reason why points 1-5 should divide a Lutheran church from other traditions. Lutherans hold some opinions with regard to these, for instance that the church is not a sacrament or that the sin continues in the church or that the congregation can represent the local church etc. But there is hardly sufficient ground to claim that other opinions would be clearly wrong.

As to points 6-10, they are ecumenical issues of highest importance and it is right to say that these are really divisive issues among the churches. Lutheran theology would only add that all these should not be dealt with under the general label “ecclesiology”. They are ecclesologically relevant issues, but, at least points 6-7 are considered to be “churchconstituting” elements and thus theologically prior to any subsequent ecclesiology. If the fruitful discussion begun in the text *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* is now simply subsumed under ecclesiology, we may result in the theological problems of an ecclesio-centric theology in which the central Christian truths would be reduced to various subspecies of ecclesiology.

Concerning the individual grey boxes, we want to make the following observations:

*Institutional church - work of the Holy Spirit, pp. 15-16*

The alternatives of this grey box are too sharp for a Lutheran church. Our tradition is not “either – or” but “both – and” with regard to these issues. We do consider word and sacraments to be means of the activity of the Spirit, but we also emphasize the freedom of the Spirit. We have distinct ordained ministry and historical episcopacy, but we do not consider it to be a “guarantee” of the presence of the truth. We appreciate the institutional continuity, but also remain open for new beginnings. In this and some later boxes the necessary dialectic of doctrine is split so that constrained opposition pairs emerge.

*Church as "sacrament", pp. 29-30*

This is a new idea which we have only encountered since Vatican II. The Lutheran tradition does not call church a sacrament. As the L-RC document *Church and Justification* (CJ 128) points out, Lutherans in principle could call Jesus Christ the single sacrament, because salvation takes place in Christ. This view offers a bridge to the idea of the church as sacrament, but the idea in itself remains ambivalent in Lutheranism. As we argue above and below in more detail, it is more fruitful to consider baptism and eucharist as church-constituting sacraments. With a view of this, the church might only be called sacrament “a posteriori” or as “res normata”, not as “res normans”.

*Church and sin, pp. 33-34*

Although this issue is today much debated, it may not be a traditional point of division. Lutherans have always confessed that the church is “holy”. Lutherans have always realised that there are defects in the church, although this realisation is not part of our confession. The idea of *corpus permixtum* is common to all churches. As CJ 156 points out, Lutherans and Catholics

agree in these basic views. Lutherans think that although the church can err, it cannot remain in error forever (CJ 158). Here also the doctrinal dialectic is necessary; an artificial split into two extremes is to be avoided.

*Limits of diversity, pp. 37-39*

This is a very big, very abstract and very important matter which is difficult to comment. Churches that are organised very differently can have a communion in the Lutheran World Federation. We also have different ideals of church order and the goals of ecumenism, but can nevertheless live in communion. We also recognise the need for limits of diversity. The grey box remains descriptive and given in many ways an adequate description.

*Local church, p. 41*

This is a traditional matter of controversy that stems from the Reformation. The Lutheran position has recently been outlined in CJ 84-90. While Lutherans continue to appreciate the primacy of local congregation, the necessity of more comprehensive structures of *una sancta* has been recognized. In practice, all Lutherans affirm local and universal church; thus no constrained ecclesiological opposition need be assumed.

*Baptism, p. 45-46*

As Lutherans regard sacraments as church-constituting realities, the issues discussed here are of crucial importance. We regard the convergence expressed in BEM as adequate and consider that the differences listed here more or less constitute the challenges that remain. The list is very obscurantist with a view of the fact that the most pressing problem in Western Europe is the widespread indifference with regard to (infant) baptism. We need not discuss curiosities but should spell out how the constitutive meaning of baptism for Christian existence can be affirmed in a secularised world in which parents do not want to manipulate their children in any way.

*Eucharist, pp. 47-49*

As Lutherans regard sacraments as church-constituting realities, the issues discussed here are of crucial importance. Given their extensive treatment in many dialogues as well as in BEM, the brief list here remains superficial. Lutherans stress both real presence and thanksgiving; they are no either-or alternatives. It is not clear whether we disagree in the mode of presence. Following the criticism of “transubstantiation”, Lutherans tend to deny that any such “mode” could be defined and thus we often say that the presence is real and ineffable. As most Lutherans are in fact in communion with many other Protestants and Anglicans, and as our dialogue with Catholics and Orthodox regarding the eucharistic mystery has yielded deep theological results, the very negative picture given here is misleading.

*Ordained Ministry, p. 52*

The Lutheran communion does not require a uniform doctrine of ministry, although Lutherans consider ordained ministry as necessary. The list of differences given here is adequate. The Lutheran World Federation currently aims at adopting a theological paper of ministry, in particular episcopal ministry.

*Bishops, p. 54*

The Lutheran tradition has different attitudes towards episcopacy. For our church, the historic continuation of episcopal sees has been ecumenically beneficial, both with regard to the Anglicans and to the Catholics and the Orthodox. It may be exaggerated, however, to say that the episcopacy belongs to “the most difficult issues” – the one saying so sounds very episcopalian. It can also be asked how traditional the idea of succession actually is. The idea of emphasizing the ministry of episkopé is fruitful. See the LWF matter mentioned in previous paragraph.

*Conciliarity, p. 60*

This grey box does not make any factual claims. Thus it cannot be evaluated.

Concluding remarks to the first question:

1. As to the first part of the first question, the various lists of commonalities follow the general lines of earlier ecumenical texts which Lutherans have appreciated. For instance, the threefold names “people of God”, “body of Christ” and “temple of the Holy Spirit” correspond to many other ecumenical documents and are thus familiar ecclesiological and biblical descriptions in modern Lutheranism, as also koinonia / communion. Historically, it may be that Lutherans have not had as many common convictions as NMC lays out, but ecumenically involved churches should by now have received them. In this sense we can respond “yes” to the first part of the first question.

2. It is somewhat puzzling that whereas “word” prominently belongs to the “nature” of the church, baptism and the eucharist are dealt with in the section “life of communion”. On a closer look, the reader sees that baptism and Lord’s Supper are also often mentioned in the chapter on “nature”. There should be no ambivalence in presenting baptism and the eucharist as church-constituting elements of the “nature”.

*Second question: does this study document reflect an emerging convergence on the nature and mission of the Church?*

As a whole, the document gives a truthful and honest picture of the existing ecclesiological convictions. The points 1-10 discussed above make it very difficult to answer affirmatively to the second question. The grey boxes in particular do not state convergences but rather present an agenda of major and minor differences. It may even be the case that the intensive study and confessional awareness has resulted in an increasing number of doctrinal differences pertaining to ecclesiology. For instance, 30 years ago points 1, 3 and 4 were not generally regarded as important problems, but now they already begin to be that.

Another comment pertains to the relationship between nature and mission. The emphasis of the NMC is on the “nature”, whereas mission is only thematically treated in §§ 34-42. Maybe also §§ 109-118 contain material which belongs to the “mission”. In these two chapters, various social ethical topics are briefly mentioned, in 34-42 with a dogmatic and doxological language, in 109-118 with more worldly phrases. Thus they contain materials which were treated in more detail in the earlier documents *Church and World* and *Ecclesiology and Ethics*. But the impression remains that 34-42 and, in particular, 109-118 do not organically belong together with the rest of the document. 34-42 attempts to use a language similar to the rest of the NMC, but two problems remain apparent: 1) these paragraphs employ “Christ’s Lordship” on the one hand and Trinitarian approach on the other; 2) the language is very solemn and abstract which does not serve the practical purpose of underlining the necessary activism.

Because of this relative weakness of the “mission” part, it is not proper to say that some new convergence has been found with regard to the old problem of bridge-building between doctrinal understanding and practical applications.

*Third question: are there significant matters in which the concerns of your church are not adequately addressed?*

It may be problematic from a Lutheran viewpoint to subsume word and sacraments under a general discussion on ecclesiology. It is essential to preserve the theological primacy of word and sacraments and to see the church as *creatura verbi*. To be sure, this concern is aptly met for instance in §§ 9-13. This remark for the most part serves as a reminder that the relative importance of ecclesiology should constantly be kept in mind. The Good News is not about the nature of the church, but about more primary news which the church is called to serve, to proclaim and to safeguard.

Our church struggles with many ethical issues which threaten to become church-dividing (economic justice, sexual ethics, radical human rights issues). Since the Lutheran tradition has not regarded ethics as a mark of the church, our theological ability to cope with these issues has remained limited. Here we may learn from other traditions. While we appreciate the emphasis on traditional doctrinal issues of ecclesiology, we would have liked to see more development in ethical issues. The chapter “communion in diversity” (60-63) offers something, together with “limits of diversity” box, but we would need more. While the earlier project *Ecclesiology and Ethics* did not lead into great insights either, it did address many acutely important issues.

As our discussion of grey boxes 1-10 shows, the normative doctrine should often be dialectical in the sense that it appreciates both institution and freedom, small and big communities, holiness and vulnerability etc. Too often NMC aims at polarizing the dialectic pairs so that unnecessary divisions emerge.

*Fourth question: insofar as this study document provides a helpful framework for further ecclesiological discussions among the churches:*

- *How can this study document help your church, together with others, take concrete steps towards unity?*
- *What suggestions would you make for the future development of this text?*

Especially in our discussions with Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican traditions, NMC can be helpful. The doctrinal points of the text strongly represent the theology of these three traditions. These churches have a more elaborated ecclesiology than the Lutheran tradition, and we can assume that NMC in a fruitful manner presents the common essence of these three church families. We have reached unity with the European Anglican tradition, and the document can provide help in negotiating worldwide agreements.

**On the basis of above-mentioned comments, four suggestions are made:**

- The precise meaning, theological extension and relative importance of “ecclesiology” in the ecumenical activity of various church families should be discussed in more detail
- The role of ethical issues in ecclesiology should be reflected in more detail, paying attention to the differences among churches

- The “mission” parts of the NMC text should be elaborated in a manner which is more concrete and straightforward
- What we above called the “dialectic of doctrine” should be taken into account.