

- DRAFT 021209 -

**RESPONSE FROM CHURCH OF NORWAY**

To the Faith and Order Document no. 198, Geneva, WCC 2005

**THE NATURE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH**

By the Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations

**Introductory remarks**

On behalf of Church of Norway, the Council on Ecumenical and International Relations would like to extend our sincere thanks for the Faith and Order document no. 198, and the invitation to give our response to the document. We understand the document mainly as an expression of a stage within an on-going ecclesiological, ecumenical process, as the title indicates, particularly following the Faith and Order document 111, Geneva, WCC, 1982 on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. We also understand our task to be to offer a response to the questions formulated in the introduction to the document, paragraph 8. However, due to the results of our deliberations we find it relevant to present how the document has been dealt with in Church of Norway and the Norwegian Council of Churches.

**The Process in Church of Norway and the Norwegian Council of Churches**

The Theological Commission to the Council on Ecumenical and International relations of Church of Norway has discussed document no. 198 during several meetings. In 2006 the content of the document was discussed in one meeting, and the following meeting decided on a process within the church.

Meanwhile, the Norwegian Theological Dialogue Forum (NTSF) to the Norwegian Christian Council (NCC) started its own process of responding to the document and has finalised its response. As member of the NCC, Church of Norway was represented in this process. The NTSF decided on working out a Norwegian ecumenical paper based on its dialogue around the Faith and Order paper no. 198. By using this document as a starting point, it aimed at making the Faith and Order paper more known within Norway. At the same time the NTSF document reflects an adaption to Norwegian church reality. It is acknowledged that due to time limits not all parts of the document has been treated in depth, and not all changes that have been done are due to theological reasoning. However, the process gathered representatives of 13 churches (11 denominations) in 8 working sessions through a period of 18 months. The broad representation is significant for the process. It represents a major ecumenical undertaking and therefore a unique treatment of the document. It is expected that the result of NTSF's work will through its method and results contribute to the continued ecumenical dialogue within Norway.

Church of Norway has also taken part in two Nordic Baltic Faith and Order network meetings where the document has been discussed.

Because Church of Norway participated in the ecumenical process of the NCC, the Theological Commission decided to put its main focus on an ecclesiological process within the Church of Norway. This has led the Commission to look at the Evangelical Lutheran heritage and the current self-understanding of the church from an ecumenical perspective. The work has resulted in a consultation and a major process within the Commission, aiming at presenting a publication to the Church of Norway Synod in 2010.

## 1. General comments to the document

### Introduction

The introductory questions are regarded as useful (Paragraph 8). It might have been helpful to develop the document more in line with the questions, thus providing methodological help in responding to the document. As it is, we have found it necessary to bring in some general comments on the document as a whole, as well as comments to each chapter before answering the questions.

### Style and structure

The introduction is historical in its approach and leads us into questions of what divides the churches historically and what is possible consensus. This may be an understandable and pragmatic choice of methodology, in order to raise difficult issues while at the same time keep focus on what the churches have in common. Thus, the style of the document presents the content in a normative way, where main common points are implicitly built into the text.

However, this means that the different views of the churches, as expressed through the grey boxes, are individualised in a general way and appear to be fragmented (e.g. box on Limits of Diversity, following Paragraph 63). It becomes difficult for a church to recognise its self-understanding as a church in the grey box, and at the same time to discern the main findings in the main text on what it has in common with other churches. As such, this may be of more general use for an ecumenical organisation rather than for the individual church. The document therefore gives an impression of being written within an internal ecumenical structure, for internal use.

We recognise that there are different interests connected to the two different types of texts; the main convergence text and the grey boxes. We would therefore not require specific Lutheran opinions to be expressed in the main text. We would, however, expect them to be more clearly expressed and explained in the grey boxes, particularly when diverging from what is already expressed in the main text and what is listed in the grey box. When this is not the case it becomes difficult to respond to the document's two types of text.

### Purpose of the document

We understand the purpose of the document to initiate steps towards a broad ecumenical 'convergence' text on the nature and mission of the Church (Paragraph 5). In an attempt to achieve a convergence text and "be alert to a diversity of contexts" (Paragraph 4) we understand that the perspective is intended to be general. But because of the generalising style of the document it represents a challenge when it comes to the purpose of the document. By whom, for whom and to whom is it written?

The standing Commission gave more concrete reasons for finding it timely to call for the study. If it indeed is written for the churches, the individual church may find it hard to recognise its own nature and mission, simply because the document is not rooted in a historical context. The document becomes *too* general. A church would therefore have to pick and choose among the alternative understandings presented in the document. The study may in our opinion gain a clearer purpose by highlighting the concrete realities the churches are living in, and relate to these. It is within a historical reality the Church has its mission, and to which the nature and purpose of the Church must be related.

## Chapter I

### The Nature of the Church and Koinonia

The paragraphs on Koinonia (Paragraphs 21 – 24) are in general regarded as helpful and instructive. There are different opinions as to whether *koinonia* does mean 'participation' in the sense of active partaking on behalf of human beings. In both the case that koinonia points to human partaking and sharing in communion purely on God's initiative and invitation, and in the case of koinonia as a mutually active initiative, the Grace of God remains instrumental. In which way God's Grace is instrumental for koinonia could have been further explored, perhaps already in the opening paragraphs under The Nature of the Church.<sup>1</sup>

But in doing so, one would have to reconsider the use of the term "communion of the faithful" as a constitutive term for the Church (Paragraph 10).<sup>2</sup> "Faithful" in this context may be understood as the ability of being loyal. For one, this does not correspond well to the Lutheran notion of *Congregatio sanctorum*, and *Sola gratia, Sola fide*. However, the expression is not only problematic from a Lutheran point of view. It does represent a general difficulty by presenting a view of the church as a communion with distinctive abilities. Such a presentation of the church may not only lead to a polarised discussion on abilities, but does also present a theological difficulty by understanding specific human abilities as a sign of the church. We do recognise that this may be a problem deriving from a certain understanding of "faithful" coming from a non-English speaking church. In our opinion it would be a better option to use the concept "Communion of Believers" in describing what constitutes the Church. This is later used in Paragraph 49, under "Church in Via"<sup>3</sup> and would correspond well to Paragraph 10.

### The context of the document

The reality in which we are called to be Church contains a number of challenges: Globalisation and fragmenting of cultures are reflected in all contexts, although in different ways, and represent challenges ecumenically and on all church levels. In a global context changing due to migration, affecting lives of many Christians and Christian communities worldwide, what is the role of the churches? How do we relate to an intercultural society and the theology of religions? What place do denominational church traditions have in a changing context? When dealing with challenges of today; how do the churches relate to their historical self-understanding?

We appreciate that the document presents historical contexts of the churches. We also recognise that the document highlights challenges for the Church's mission to the world. But the document does not enter fully into an analysis of how the churches, based in specific historical contexts relate to concrete, current challenges. The contextuality of ecclesiology is in our opinion not taken sufficiently into account in the document.

### The Mission of the Church

We appreciate that the document has added focus on the Mission of the Church, compared to the previous document no. 181. We appreciate that it is clearly expressed that the Mission of the Church is rooted in the very being of the Church (Paragraph 35).

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<sup>1</sup> In Paragraph 9 it says: "It belongs to God, is God's gift and cannot exist by and for itself."

<sup>2</sup> In Paragraph 10 it is said that the church is "communion of those who, by means of their encounter with the Word, stand in a living relationship with God..."

<sup>3</sup> Paragraph 49's use of "communion of believers" also refers to *Creaturi Verbi* and *Creaturi Spiritus*, and corresponds better to the opening paragraph's notion of God's Grace.

A clear reference to baptism and Mt. 28:18-20 should be added in Paragraph 37<sup>4</sup>. The role of baptism in mission seems to be left out almost entirely. This means that the question of non-baptised persons too is left out. The sacramental dimension of baptism must be dealt with, including its relation to the Eucharist.

Paragraph 40 is an important paragraph, rich in content and giving concrete examples of expressions of the Mission of the Church. Although there is a clear line of thought in the previous paragraphs leading up to these concrete expressions of mission, there still seems to be a discrepancy between this paragraph, the former paragraphs and the final paragraphs. Concrete expressions of Mission seems to be treated as practical demands (As in Paragraph 35) rather than integrated expressions of being church. The purpose of mission with regards to eschatological motives becomes unclear.

Although relating well to the many expressions of the Mission of the Church, the document does not enter into a discussion on some of the major missional challenges of today. Insofar as they represent a challenge to the very nature of the Church, it would be recommended to deal with at least a few concrete examples. To look into the emerging of new churches, as a result of fresh expressions of church, or as churches established as a result of migration, would be concrete examples of current missiological and ecclesiological challenges affecting most churches. The whole understanding of mission as crossing borders, culturally and geographically, seems to be missing in the document.

## Chapter II

### Human sin and the Failure of the Church

The grey box following Paragraph 56 on 'The Church and Sin' is an important box, but would need further reflection. How does the notion of sin relate to the notion of failure when it comes to the Church? Has the Church failed throughout history, can the Church fail? The churches differ in their view on the Church's relation to sin, which to some extent is expressed in the box. However, this needs to be reflected and further developed in the convergence text's treatment of the holiness of the Church (Paragraph 54). The grey box proposes that sin and holiness in the Church is not a relationship of two equal realities. It does, however, suggest that sin disfigures the witness of the Church. But it is not clear in what way. How does the question on the relationship between sin, failure and holiness relate to the notion of *koinonia* – expressed as "communion of faithful" or as "communion of the holy"?<sup>5</sup> How do these questions relate to the role and meaning of the sacraments?

Paragraph 55 brings catholicity into this very difficult discussion around sin, or the inadequacy of the communion. The language of the last part of the paragraph; giving to the Church "the Spirit of the Lordship of Christ over all creation and all times" is therefore in striking contrast to the language of communion. Using colonial empire language in a time of human made climate change is a bad choice. A closer reflection on the doctrine of creation and its relevance for ecclesiology should be included.

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<sup>4</sup> Mt. 28:18-20 is only referred to in Paragraph 110, and relates to proclamation through evangelisation, while baptism is not mentioned.

<sup>5</sup> Which further explains the suggestion to replace the "communion of faithful" with "communion of believers" (See the paragraphs on "The Nature of the Church and Koinonia")

### Reconciled diversity and differentiated consensus

The use of stronger expressions for unity and convergence would strengthen the position of the document in the framework of an ecumenical process following the Lima-document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. This may however prove to be difficult, since the document aims at dealing with a large portion of ecclesiology in a very comprised form.

## **Chapter III**

The paragraphs on Baptism and Eucharist are closely following the Lima document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, although there seems to be an attempt to say more than this about what baptism concretely means for solidarity of Christians with the suffering, the excluded and the poor. The role of baptism for ministry is later reflected in paragraph 85, and could as well have been reflected in the previous paragraphs on the Mission of the Church.

The chapter as a whole was dealt thoroughly with in the ecumenical dialogue forum (NTSF). One basic finding in this process, though, was the need to restructure and add grey boxes to each of the sub-chapters on Apostolic Faith, Baptism and Eucharist. This may be a result of the chosen selection of grey boxes in the original text, where it seems like some matters of dispute have been left out.

The notion of the Church as the “Communion of the Faithful” has already been discussed. This seems to be reflecting a certain ecclesiological understanding, which does not take into account the role of the sacraments in creating the community.

## **Chapter IV**

The final chapter is fairly short and is therefore in danger of leaving out some important eschatological aspects. The chapter points to the Reign of God as the final destination of the universe. The role of Christians as actively taking part in bringing about the Reign of God has been addressed, highlighting moral and ethical values leading to concrete action. It is however not treated on a broader thematic basis. The role of Christians is being dealt with only as a collective human service for the better of the world, while the place and the purpose of the Church in broader eschatological terms remain unclear.

Furthermore, the link between the Reign of God and creation could be further explored. This would bring up the question of the relation between human beings and nature as part of creation. What is the destination of nature?

### **3. To the questions of the document:**

Finally, we would like to respond to the initial questions of the Faith and Order document no. 198, The Nature and Mission of the Church, through summarising some of our main findings:

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

We appreciate the attempt to express our common ecclesiological convictions in a document such as *The Nature and Mission of the Church*. A danger with ecclesiological texts is that one may stress the place and role of the Church to an extent which leaves out the wider perspective of God's action outside the Church. This may have influenced the choice of themes dealt with in the document.

We also understand the methodology of treating common convictions and disparities in a parallel set-up through the convergence text and grey boxes. We are, however, not convinced that this always helps the clarity of the document.

### **Does this study document reflect an emerging convergence on the nature and mission of the Church?**

The document does provide an advanced common ecclesiological language, which is of great help to the churches as they strive to express areas of convergence in ecumenical dialogue. As such the document also represents a positive challenge to take up ecumenical dialogue on the understanding of the Church which can lead to greater clarity in our understanding of other churches as well as ourselves.

Whether the document itself actually reflects an emerging convergence on the nature and mission of the Church is, however, difficult to answer. The attempt to express convergence on such a vast subject in a limited document means that a number of issues are not dealt with in-depth. It is therefore not clear whether a common language actually expresses convergence.

### **Are there significant matters in which the concerns of your church are not adequately addressed?**

As expressed in our comments to each chapter there are certain matters we would like to see clarified, further explored or treated more in-depth:

- We miss theological reflections around Creation and Communion. The Theology of Creation seems to be treated mostly in relation to the role of human beings in creation. Creation as God's will, and the perspective of the whole of nature as part of Creation is not adequately addressed. A reflection on what it means that the church belongs to God the Creator should also be included in an ecclesiological text.
- We miss a clearer understanding that God's calling to the church is not only carried out in the acts of the institutional church, but also by the baptized members of the church in their daily lives. A Lutheran "theology of vocation" offers in our opinion an important contribution to a better understanding of the relation between ecclesiology and the doctrine of creation.
- The relation between Church and Society is sometimes expressed in problematic terms. One should avoid language which gives the impression that the world is something the Church should take over and change. There is a need to avoid language which can be understood as expressions of "Christian sharia". This kind of imperialistic language can be detected in the treatment of the Church's relation to creation, and the church's role in transforming the world. In our opinion the Lutheran understanding of "the two kingdoms" may offer a valuable contribution in this area.
- The definition of the Church as "the Community of the Faithful" is problematic, as discussed under Chapter I.

- The concept of the Reign of God as it relates to the purpose of Creation and to the eschatological understanding of the place and role of the Church should be further developed.

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

- o **How can this study document help your church, together with others, take concrete steps towards unity?**

The document has provided an important opportunity for Church of Norway to enter into ecumenical dialogue with a number of churches in Norway on our understandings of the Church. The treatment of The Nature and Mission of the Church within the Norwegian Theological Dialogue Forum has been a unique and helpful experience. It is not so much concrete steps towards unity which have come out of the process, as the concrete experience of living together in diversity. This experience has been challenging when it comes to the process of clarifying areas of divergence. However, the experience of having to clarify one's own understanding and find an appropriate language for this in a broad ecumenical context was not only a challenge, but a very positive and helpful exercise.

- o **What suggestions would you make for the future development of this text?**

It is not quite clear how the Faith and Order Commission wants to proceed with the document; whether it will be revised at the end of this process, or whether the process would take a new direction. Our first response would be to ask whether it is this type of text we need?

The Lima document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry provided an in-depth treatment of central theological subjects, which led to concrete bilateral dialogues. As these proceed, it is a question whether a document dealing with a much vaster theological subject in less space can provide the same helpful platform for further dialogue.

A possible way forward may be to combine the document with the responses from the churches, as an expression of their ecclesiological views. Another way forward could be to simplify the convergence text, e.g. more in line with the WCC 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly text "Called to be the one Church". This may help to present a shorter, but clearer convergence text. It would also open the possibility of narrowing down the study process into more specific areas to be studied more in-depth.

With gratitude for all the work put down in the process, giving churches an opportunity and an ecumenical platform for further ecclesiological study, we express our sincere thanks to the Faith and Order Commission.

Your sincerely,

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