

Response of the Church of Sweden to *The Nature and Mission of the Church*

Introduction

The Church of Sweden has gratefully received Faith and Order Paper 198: *The Nature and Mission of the Church. A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*. We greatly appreciate that the Standing Commission of Faith and Order has worked on ecclesiological questions since 1993, and the present text is a help in reflecting on one's own identity and understanding oneself in relation to other churches.

The church belongs to God, is God's gift and creation, and cannot exist by and for itself. As such the church is given unity and holiness by God despite its shortcomings. By addressing and dealing with the Church in word and sacrament, God continually renews it so that it can in every age confess God as creator, redeemer and life-giver, express its confession in deed and serve the world. The church is thereby a fellowship of people who wish to encounter God and answer God's call. In that fellowship they meet Jesus Christ. The church is sent to the world to proclaim God's kingdom, but that kingdom is realised in an eschatological perspective, so that the relationship between the church in its imperfection and the fullness of the kingdom remains hidden.

Through history the Church of Sweden, which is a part of the holy, catholic church, has taken its own specific form. In its church ordinance (chapter 1 §1) it is described as evangelical Lutheran. Wherever the word is proclaimed and the sacraments administered, the church is formed as the communion of saints (Confessio Augustana 7). On the basis of the evangelical Lutheran confession the Church of Sweden has developed into an open and democratic national church that embraces people who in different ways interpret life in the light of the Word. The foundation of the church is God's grace, clearly expressed in baptism. Consequently, the door of the church should always stand open so that no one needs to be excluded from the fellowship.

This response to the document *The Nature and Mission of the Church* should be understood against the background of this ecclesiology, thus briefly described. It is possible for the Church of Sweden to see and acknowledge other Christian communities as churches, even if they formulate and live their faith in other ways than we do. Our Eucharistic table is open for all the baptised. The visible unity we seek by participating in ecumenical dialogue is neither more nor less than a mutual acknowledgement of each other as churches – because we can recognise how the Gospel is proclaimed and how people are united with Christ through the sacraments despite our different expressions – and that we as a sign of our mutual respect can share each other's Eucharistic table. The document under consideration, however, includes more in its understanding of what visible unity involves. The openness we maintain, and our willingness to accept differences, can seem problematic for others, but this does not mean that we neglect the question of the identity of the church.

This response has been prepared by a working group at the National Church Offices of the Church of Sweden. It has been discussed by the Theological Committee of the Church of Sweden. It has also taken account of points of view from the Standing Committee of the Governing Board and from the Bishops' Conference.

Comments on various sections of *The Nature and Mission of the Church*

In this part of the response the purpose is to comment on the document on the basis of §§ 9-13, by critically discussing those points which we find especially interesting or which could indicate other possible approaches. More general comments which, whilst taking their starting point in the document, aim more explicitly to develop the discussion, will be given in the third section.

I. THE CHURCH OF THE TRIUNE GOD

We suggest that structure of Part I could be made clearer by changing the title of section A from *The Nature of the Church to The Church as a Gift of God*, and consequently that §§ 9-13 were called *Creation of the Word and the Holy Spirit*.

And important reason for this is for us that the term “nature” does not fully capture how we would speak of the church, even though this word has a long history in ecclesiological texts. The concept of nature can here imply ontological suppositions that originate in a philosophical context that not everyone may share. This risks creating more confusion than clarity in ecumenical conversations. Could not the concept of identity, which can be considered more open if not used statically, be a more fruitful way for the churches to reflect on a possible common self-understanding?

In principle the contents of the section on the nature of the church can be accepted. It is however apparent that the text expresses something of a “high ecclesiology”, which is also strengthened by the structure of the texts in the grey boxes where “low ecclesiology” alternatives can be found towards the end and can therefore seem to be “problematic”. Could the structure of the text not also have an unconscious psychological effect on readers? That both approaches – at times in even more pointed form than these attempts at mutually acceptable formulations – are historically and in principle starting points in ecclesiological debates is self-evident, and the structure is therefore, in its context, natural. Their relative weight in ecumenical texts like the present one can however be problematic.

A further consideration of a more general kind is that the document continually uses terms that in the text seem to be unequivocal, but that after further examination probably could point in several different directions. The problem with this is that one can be led to accept things where the differences are greater than the text of the document indicates. Two examples: §10 *creatura verbi* (creation of the word) and §12 *succession in apostolic truth*.

With reference to future development of the document, it is suggested that Faith and Order should work with the problems listed in the boxes rather than develop the contents of the main text.

The section on what the Bible teaches is important as it points out the great diversity of biblical images. However, it does not do this consistently. Despite indicating the diversity in the Bible and the early church, certain images (people of God, body of Christ, temple of the Holy Spirit, *koinonia*) that are used in later theological traditions, are allowed to be synthetically determinative of the picture of the church. (In §§ 25-26 *koinonia* is linked to God’s relationship with humanity and the whole of creation, and the idea of the order of creation is used here: self-critically from a Lutheran perspective there is reason to warn of the negative consequences of an all too static understanding of this idea, ie. when political systems or culturally determined forms of sociological phenomena are justified with theological arguments.) A more open approach to the

great diversity in the biblical writings and the praxis of the early church would be valuable in further ecumenical work.

The section on the mission of the church, in which the essential relationship between evangelisation and service is in focus, is very important. The church is not an end in itself, but as Christ was sent to the world, so the church is sent to serve the whole of creation. § 40 has a key position by speaking of the vocation of the church in a broken and bleeding world. §§ 3442 as well as Part IV point to something about the church which is so central that it could have been given a more developed and prominent role in the document. What would have happened if the whole document had started with Part IV, that is with the praxis of the church, something which will be discussed in the concluding part of this response?

The last section of Part I deals with the question of the church as a sign and instrument of God's purpose and plan for the world. It is positive that the church is seen as having a role both in proclaiming and praising God's salvation, and that the plan of salvation is said to have significance not just for individuals, but for the world and the whole of creation. Here we refer once again to what was said above about it not always being clear that we mean the same thing with terms and expressions, that is, the text can hide important lines of difference. Examples we would give here are the terms "sign" and "instrument", since there are different theological understandings of human instrumentality, both individual and ecclesial, in the process of salvation. Is the grey box *The church as "sacrament"* under the wrong heading (*The church in history*), and should instead be included in this section?

II THE CHURCH IN HISTORY

This part is constructive and significant. The historicity of the church is a fruitful starting point for understanding the identity of the church. It is through its various historically conditioned forms rather than by theologically predetermining what the church ought to be that one can discover the identity of the church. Through history this changing church is held together by the overflowing grace of God. The history of the church teaches us in other words that changeability is an expression of the church's identity, an insight which we maintain could be both a significant and fruitful opening in ecumenical conversations.

In the section *The Church in via* the positive and negative aspects of changeability are discussed. This is an important point and we share the view that all change is not good. At the same time the presentation is formulated in such a way that historical change can be interpreted as something negative in itself (§53). Continuity in the identity of the church can be found in the Gospel and God's gifts through which Christ becomes present in the church. Changeability is an expression of the fact that the church lives in and is sent to the world. The positive aspect of historical development and its opportunities for finding new paths for the Gospel in new situations could have been emphasised more.

In the grey box *The Church and Sin* a question is put at the end about whether the description of the relationship between sin and holiness as one between incommensurable realities can be accepted. Holiness would refer to the essence of the church and God's purposes for it, and would come to expression in certain aspects of the church that are not affected by the weakness and faults of humans, whilst sin would be the direct opposite of this and be solely found in individual members. This description is not congenial for us, since this distinction between different dimensions of the church cannot be drawn so clearly in a Lutheran theological tradition.

In the section on *Communion and Diversity* it is good that the theological description of how what eventually comes to be seen as problematic arises includes amongst other things social, cultural and linguistic influences on the forms of the church. The formulations in the grey box on *Limits of diversity* which describe the problems with diversity are acceptable. At the same time there is a risk in ecumenism that one acquiesces in the situation by acknowledging that there are different ways (described in the text) of understanding one's own distinctive ecclesial character and judging the ecclesial character of other communities on the basis of this. There is the possibility that one thereby confirms an experience of either superiority or inferiority which eventually can generate serious problems. It would instead be good to see the possibilities in diversity, that diversity could even be said to be God's will. This could be compared to the fruitful encounters in the liturgical movement between different traditions and how this has now developed into constructive mutual learning.

It is theologically apposite and ecumenically constructive to start from the local churches as the basic expression of Christ's church. The unity of the church is realised in the fellowship between them. In the grey box on *Local Churches* it is pointed out that there are different ways of using this concept in different traditions due to overarching ecclesiologies. There can also be a conflict between theological definitions of the concept and how the faithful look upon what the local church is. The major problem is however, in our view, the lack of mutual recognition of each other as churches, despite there existing a basic unity in all churches' relationship to God and dependence on God's word and spirit, as the document itself says in §12.

III THE LIFE OF COMMUNION IN AND FOR THE WORLD

Everyone can probably in principle endorse the description of the significance of the apostolic faith, but here just as in other sections it can be questioned whether everyone endorses the same thing. In a future development of the document it would be desirable to clarify this problematic.

The sections on baptism and the Eucharist contain much that is common to various theologies or that has become shared ecumenical positions. Our understanding of the sacraments, and therefore of baptism, is that they are God's gifts that the church does not have exclusively at its disposal. Consequently, expressions that imply that the work of the Spirit is reserved to the church should be avoided, for instance talk of the privilege of the baptised to receive the Spirit (§77). One perspective that is consistently missing, and which we will discuss even more in the third part of the response, is the question of the place of women. One example is here the question of injustices that participation in the Eucharist should challenge us to oppose – whilst it is positive that what is mentioned is included, sexism is missing. The Eucharist as the meal of love, fellowship and reconciliation which transcends boundaries should make people question all forms of exclusion based on race, class or gender. There is also here a shift in meaning in the terms used: various traditional terms for the meal, "Lord's Supper", "Eucharist", "Mass", are mixed without indication that they represent different Eucharistic theologies. The description in the grey box on *Eucharist* of problems that remain is of course correct, but the official restrictive line on intercommunion can be seen to be problematic in the light of unofficial praxis and even certain official exceptions, which witness to the ecumenically significant longing of many people. The question is whether such a boundary transcending practice could lead to new openings for a deeper theological reflection. We put this also as question to the praxis of our own church.

Ecumenical openings are created by the ministry of all the faithful being discussed first in §§ 82-85 before that of the ordained in §§ 86-89, where the historical approach in understanding the growth of the forms of ordained ministries is brought out in a constructive way in § 87. In a similar way the historical presentation in §§ 92-93 of the development of structures of authority

and oversight (*episkopé*) is positive. One could have pointed more clearly to ecumenically successful solutions to how differing views of the relationship between the function of oversight and the historical episcopate can be overcome, for instance the Porvoo Agreement, which in turn is based on BEM. This could have been put into the main text instead of the significance being hinted at in the box on *Episkopé, Bishops and Apostolic Succession*. Dealing with the ecumenical reworking of the whole complex indirectly in the box on problems gives the impression that it is still just a problematic issue. The description of personal, communal and collegial oversight makes it clear in a positive way that this task should be located in the whole people of God, but it can be questioned whether this is realistic – an ideal without real structures in many places? The negative effects of division on the possibility of giving collegial witness to society are discussed. Does not this question however have greater significance than the text indicates?

The same criticism for idealising and dubious connection with the reality of the churches can be levelled against the presentation of conciliarity. What is in fact meant by this being an essential dimension of the life of the church which concerns all the baptised? And how is this expressed on all levels of the church – in any real church? The fact that there are openings in the issue of papal primacy is positive, but does the content of the box on *Conciliarity and Universal Primacy* really deal with the real problem? Primacy is not only about spiritual and moral leadership, but equally about power and law, as the historical exposé actually mentions (§§ 102-103). This is still today an essential part of the question and not just an historical explanation of how varying phenomena have developed and disunity and division arisen. Primacy, just as any form of authority in the church, must be subordinate to the Gospel. The churches disagree of course about what this entails. Moreover, this issue cannot be divorced from that of papal infallibility. This should at least have been mentioned in the box.

The section on *Authority* is too short and idealising. The text does not indicate the complexity. Spiritual authority, even if it comes from God and comes to expression in service and sanctity, is wielded by concrete people and in particular structures which are influenced both by different ecclesiologies, varying contexts and various social systems. All the churches are not even agreed on the source of authority (bible, tradition, reason and experience or different combinations of these), or its subject (a supreme magisterium, ordained ministers as a group, elected representatives of the members of the church, or the whole people of God, or a combination), or its area of competence (only matters of belief, or doctrine and morals, or in addition other areas of life and knowledge that indirectly touch on faith). Why is there no box about this? Important dimensions that must be taken into account today are missing: power, interpretative privilege, the perspective from below, gender, democracy, politics, economics and culture as factors that influence authority both in the church and in the relationship between church and society. Approval by the congregation of the ordination of individuals to ministries in the church as an example of the communal aspect of authority in § 108 is at worst ideology, since this ceremony at ordinations has in almost all churches merely symbolic character without there being any real influence by the people on the selection of those to be ordained.

IV IN AND FOR THE WORLD

This part of the document is, as we have already hinted above, important for a complete understanding of the church. However, could not this perspective have been given greater systematic relevance for the its interpretation of both the identity and the vocation (nature and mission) of the church?

The approach we advocate could on the basis of § 109 be considered to be in line with the intentions of the document. The two last sentences in the paragraph are essential and give

expression to a perspective that could be a counterbalance to the ontological tendency in ecclesiology and the idealising picture of the church we have mentioned. It states:

“One of the convictions which governs our reflections in this text is that the church was intended by God, not for its own sake, but as an instrument, in God’s hands, for the transformation of the world. Thus service (diakonia) belongs to the very being of the Church.”

It is good that the document goes on to exemplify the breadth of the service of the church to the world – from evangelisation to work with global problems like HIV/AIDS – whilst at the same time underlining that this involvement is motivated by the relationship to God in Christ and by his example, and receives its power from the Spirit.

The ecclesiological significance of justification by grace through faith for the life and ministry of the church is pointed out. However, how does this come to concrete expression in the life, structures and orders of the church? A criticism directed at the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (from the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity) is that the convergence remains purely theoretical – its real substance can even be questioned – as long as it does not affect ecclesiology both in principle and in practice. In what ways does the growing convergence that this Faith and Order Document witnesses to and is intended to promote show that the criticism is unjustified?

The political implications in and of the mission of the church are rightly pointed out. It is said that the relationship between the church and society/the state can be given different forms due to various factors, and it is claimed that this can be seen as an expression of the church’s catholicity. We would agree with this view. At the same time there are complications and risks involved that could have been mentioned. That the historical tendency of churches to collude with power in ways that do not accord with the Gospel is not discussed or questioned contributes once again to an idealising impression in the presentation.

It is a healthy sign that the document sees the problematic of ethical disagreement as a challenge to the mission of the church. How can fellowship between churches and believers be realised so that the witness to Jesus Christ is credible, if we come to differing conclusions in controversial ethical questions? There is an exhortation to continued dialogue when such situations arise, so that problems can be overcome. It does not seem to be presupposed that all disagreement in this respect necessarily would threaten the striving of the church/churches to reach unity. Such an attitude is indeed necessary in ecumenism today. This problematic involves many complicated issues, but it can also be interpreted as giving rise to a constructive theological task as regards the possibility of the church to encounter people in the contemporary pluralistic world, and not just as an unfortunate problem to be overcome. Both within one and the same church and between different churches ethical disagreement previously in history has also been dealt without this always leading to disunity. The cause of disunity has mostly been focussed in disagreement on dogmatic issues. When greater consensus has now been reached in the latter questions, focus has perhaps moved to ethics. Can we learn something from history about the possibilities and limits of diversity in this respect?

The Conclusion of the document mentions that a growing convergence in many important theological questions can be shown in important results of dialogues, whilst at the same time these ecumenical successes do not always affect the life of the church (reception), and new anti-ecumenical forms of confessional identity develop. Against this background we agree with the concluding claim of the significance of convergence in the understanding of the church and its

mission for a future reconciliation between Christians. Therefore, it is important that there is an open and critical discussion of what that convergence really is, and how it can be formulated. This document can serve as a contribution to this, if the process is allowed to continue.

General Comments on the Approach of the Document

In this third part of the response some comments of a more general nature are given.

Firstly, it is problematic that the document takes its starting point in the nature of the church. It could be interpreted as implying that the church as an ontological reality could be captured and its character determined in human words. It has already been proposed that the title should rather be “The Identity and Vocation of the Church”, which might be more modest and reasonable in ecumenical negotiations.

Could a more fruitful point of departure be found than the question of the nature of the church? What would be the consequence for example if the document started with an understanding of the task of the church rather than its nature?

Another alternative could be that a continuation of this dialogue would take as its starting- point the historical churches’ actual practices, as these witness to their different interpretations of their task. Descriptions and interpretations of these practices could form the basis for a mutual give and take in relation to the ecclesiological riches of the forms of various traditions. This could be considered as a possibility which could give new impetus to ecumenical processes which otherwise risk coming to a dead-end in attempts to find a lowest common denominator.

Such an approach would also solve a second general problem in the document, which has to do with its linguistic unevenness. The search for common formulations of agreement and disagreement has its time and place. However, when the different ecclesial language traditions are adapted to formulations that everyone can accept, much of the depth and riches in different traditions risk being lost in the ecumenical movement. The language risks becoming a diluted remnant of the fullness that can be found in the specific manner in which the various traditions approach the reality of Christ. The document’s own witness to the fact that Christian faith always takes form in locally and historically conditioned ways needs to have consequences for the manner of communication. The path to visible unity that *The Nature and Mission of the Church* is an expression of, could be complemented with methods which aim at mutual exchange, through the churches sharing the profoundness in their own descriptions of how the common gift in Christ is realised in the tradition of each one.

Two types of challenge that indicate the need for alternative approaches and methods could further the dialogue. These challenges can be seen as a development of the comments in §§ 3-4 in the document with respect to the motivation for the work on the nature and purpose of the church since 1993.

Since the process behind the document was initiated, there have been great changes in the ecclesial traditions and in world politics, as well as through the growth of new and quickly increasing Christian groups in different parts of the world. These changes emphasise the importance of continued common ecclesial self-reflection, but perhaps with partly new methods and starting points which can be more effective in the current situation.

The decades around the turn of the second millennium have been characterised by an increase in global interaction in a manner without precedent in history. It is a question of the development

of communications technology, of new possibilities of travel around the world, but also of global movements of both capital and people. These changes face the churches with both common questions and problems, which call for answers from the ecumenical movement.

Global migration makes the presence of the world religions in new places an increasingly concrete reality. This involves new challenges for the type of question about the task of the church in mission and evangelisation which is dealt with in § 110.

Europe is also changing as regards the decreasing influence on society of the historical majority churches. Decades of secularisation appear to be partially stopped by a growing spiritual searching and interest, which however to a large extent bypass the institutional churches. New forms of religion interact with a global media culture and a market-and experience-orientation even in the area of spirituality. How do these common challenges affect our churches' identity and self-understanding? Can a shared ecclesiological reflection strengthen the churches to meet the challenges together?

Ecumenical conversations are usually conducted by academically trained theologians from different traditions. Also in the academic arena new and common challenges are encountered, for example the realisation that all sciences are dependent on language and interpretation in their understanding of reality, as well as insight into the significance of social constructions for all forms of social organising and development, even in the religious field. Continued ecumenical dialogues on the self-understanding of the churches must relate to and be in critical dialogue with this development. References to revelation and authority based on the creative word of God must be translated in our time in new contexts in order to be able to continue dialogue with philosophy, the traditional interlocutor of theology, as well as with newer forms of the humanities, and the natural and social sciences. Historically given revelation acts historically in new times. (See above the comments on Part III, §§ 105-108.)

In summary, these are questions put by society to the churches in common. A joint ecclesiological reflection in dialogue with these challenges could be essential for the continued work towards the visible unity of the churches.

The same applies to dialogue with a number of movements within the churches, which can be seen as signs of the work of the Spirit in new forms of the life of faith, but which sometimes also provoke common questions and even controversies which transcend confessional boundaries. In what follows three such movements are identified which can probably bring new impetus to the ecumenical dialogue. The first has many decades behind it, but is still lively, namely the liturgical movement with its ecumenical developments. The second has also been in existence for a long time and has to do with women becoming more clearly theological subjects and exercising spiritual leadership. The third has to do with the spread of Christian faith in the global South, as well as the growing theological claims of the churches in these countries in relation to the churches in the Northern hemisphere. The increasing significance of the charismatic type of faith in these contexts must be taken into account.

Liturgical Theology

Liturgical theology developed during the 20th century in an intimate interaction between the ecumenical and the liturgical movements. A central idea in liturgical theology is that the church comes into being through its liturgy and that the liturgy therefore should have a central place in the continuing theological reflection of the churches. There is the need of a clarification of the ecclesiological consequences of the ecumenical developments that have taken place in this area in recent decades. Today it is often emphasised in liturgical research how the liturgical life of the

churches expresses a common basic pattern, an *ordo*, that has biblical character and is recognisable in the ecclesial traditions. These ideas have been the subject of ongoing ecclesiological reflection in different contexts. A similar ecumenical reflection could give important impulses from the living ecclesiological witnesses that can be found in the ongoing life of worship of the churches.

Women as Theological Subjects and Spiritual Leaders

The 20th century was affected by the coming of age of women and their increasingly active role in churches and society, not least in the ecumenical movement. The World Council of Churches expressed its insight into the significance of this amongst other things through its *Decade in Solidarity with Women* 1988-1998. The decade made it clear that women were subjects, and revealed their increasing responsibility in different ecclesial traditions for theological development and reflection, as well as for spiritual leadership in different forms. As a result of these processes church traditions that have subordinated women have been questioned, while other traditions that have acknowledged equal relations between men and women have been brought to the fore and found new forms. The ecumenical decade of women was in itself an example of the new forms of ecumenical cooperation and dialogue that developed from this. The decade also ended with initiatives for reflection on the ecclesiological consequences of these processes. A continued ecclesiological reflection with the aim of reaching visible unity could in a clearer way use the resources that have come out of the processes that have been mentioned here and that to a high degree are kept going by the women of the churches.

Churches in the Global South

While other religions spread in regions with an earlier Christian dominance, the number of Christians is growing in large parts of the post-colonial world in the South. To a large extent this is happening outside the church communities that traditionally have taken part in ecumenical conversations. What consequences could this have on the self-understanding of the historical churches? How can these Christians be involved in a future ecclesiological reflection and thus share in the riches of world Christianity? The document *The Nature and Mission of the Church* is strongly influenced by the questions that historically have been the focus of ecumenical dialogue between churches in the North. The growing churches of Africa, Asia and Latin America have still not to the same extent had the opportunity to set the agenda in ecumenical dialogue. It is very important that that dialogue is complemented by new perspectives, if essential insights about being Christ's church in different parts of the world are not to be lost to the ecumenical conversation.

Conclusion

As to the further development of the document there are a number of possibilities. If it is to be revised within its present structure and content, a simplification rather than a further working out is to be recommended. The value of texts of theological expertise is not to be minimised, but in view of the democratic processes that the Church of Sweden tries to encourage within itself, it is important that an ecumenical document on the identity, vocation and task of the church can be used in the work of the congregations themselves with their self-understanding.

However, we would propose here a more thoroughgoing reworking of the ecclesiological work of *Faith and Order* so that the starting-point for reflection on the church be the churches' understanding of their task and the praxis that has been developed in the different traditions. In this way the practices of the various church traditions could enrich the common understanding of the mission. Such an inductive method in approaching a common understanding of the identity of the church has the possibility of contributing something essential to the work for the

visible unity of the church, both as a complement and in certain respects as an alternative to those aspects that are in focus in the to large extent ontologically predetermined, deductive method that has now been used.