

***The Nature and Mission of the Church:  
A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement***

Response of the Evangelical Methodist Church of Argentina to the text produced by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches

It is with great pleasure that we send these reflections on the text *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, which we see as a further step on the way to unity and encounter between the Christian churches. We wish to reply concisely to the questions in the Introduction under (C) and then comment on some of the paragraphs that have merited our particular attention.

**I Response to the questions in the Introduction, section (C)**

- a) The text in general does identify our understanding of the Church and clearly expresses the issues on which agreement has not yet been reached.
- b) It is a convergence text in that it includes different theological perspectives and reduces differences as far as possible to a minimum. It helps to clarify on what we are effectively in agreement and to what extent there are still different positions.
- c) We note below some points that we consider require to be made more specific and improved.
- d) We regard this document as a basic tool for future dialogues on ecclesiology. It marks the point at which we have arrived after much journeying together and a new departure point from which we can deepen unity and theological agreements.

**II Comments on particular points**

The figures in brackets indicate the paragraph referred to.

**(9) The nature of the Church**

- a) The statement that ‘the Church is called into being by the Father’ is correct. However, the quotation from John 3: 16 does not apply to the Church but to Christ, and can confuse readers. As it is written, what is attributed to Christ seems to be attributed to the Church, and that is precisely a risk to be avoided. A different quotation should be found, or it should be omitted.
- b) It indicates [in Spanish] that it ‘is a creation of the Father’, but we consider that it would be preferable for it to say ‘is a creation of God’, since ‘the Father’ refers to one aspect of the Trinity, and can obscure the intended meaning, which is to state that the Church did not create itself but is a gift from the Lord.
- c) The Church is a creation of God in that *all creation is that*. Also, ‘It belongs to God’ is a correct statement because *everything belongs to God*. However, neither being a creation of God nor belonging to God confers any distinctive character on the Church, beyond its dependence on the Word. To be a creation of God and to belong to God indicates that it is under God’s authority and will be judged by God’s justice. In paragraphs 9-13, there is no mention of the judgement of

the Church that God exercises permanently, in the manner of the prophets with the people of Israel in the Old Testament.

d) Paragraph 10 states correctly that the Church 'is' the communion of those... who stand in a living relationship with God. However, those who form the Church are sinners, a theme treated with great clarity in paragraphs 26 (see below) and 50. However, as we see it, this condition of being distorted by sin is part of the life of the Church, and not accidental, and thus should be taken very seriously. We thus think that in paragraphs 9-13 mention should be made of this condition of a community in which sin and human limitations are also present in it.

### **(10) Mary as a symbol of the Church**

In this paragraph, it is mentioned that 'often' Mary is 'a symbol of the Church and of the individual Christian.' That is not the case in our Methodist tradition, and the text quoted (Matt. 12: 50) is an example of Jesus distancing himself from Mary and his blood brothers in order to emphasize that his bonds are spiritual and are formed with those who do 'the will of the Father'. As a result, this biblical quotation does not support what the text is attempting to state. This symbol is not used by Jesus to refer to the community that he shepherds, but he does use other symbols, such as 'flock', 'vine', 'bride', 'workers', etc. We consider that the text would be improved by removing this allusion to a symbol on which there is no consensus between the churches.

### **(12) Catholicity of the Church**

Our Methodist Church does recognize itself as having the mark of catholicity, but we do not think that the phrase [in the Spanish] 'The Church is catholic because it is life in abundance' is appropriate. We consider that the attributes that make the Church universal are different, such as those expressed in paragraph 16, where it is said, 'Diversity appears not as accidental... but as an aspect of its catholicity.' The presence of Christ through his Spirit in all times and places expresses the diversity of the Church, and it is that which makes the Church universal. In accord with our vision, in this paragraph 12 the emphasis should be placed on the presence of the Holy Spirit – who is everywhere at all times, and can be praised in thousands of human languages. It is that presence which makes the Church catholic, a situation that makes all believers brothers and sisters with believers of all times and places. At the same time we note with pleasure that in paragraph 62 it is indicated that the unity of the Church does not consist of 'uniformity' in practice and customs. On the contrary, doctrinal, theological or liturgical uniformity is the opposite of catholicity.

### **(13) Box 'The institutional dimension...' point (c); and 68-73). Apostolic succession**

We realize that the interpretation of apostolic succession is still a matter for discussion. It is customarily said of some churches – and sometimes they themselves say it – that 'they do not have apostolic succession.' However, it is necessary to revise this expression, since it is usually used to refer to succession understood as a chain of persons, whereas what should be of interest to the churches is whether succession in the apostolic *faith* is being ensured. In our Methodist tradition, it is common to state that we do have apostolic succession, and that we recognize it in other churches, because the way in which we understand it is as a succession in apostolic *faith and truth*, transmitted by the proclamation of the Word and by the gift of the Holy Spirit, independently of the persons involved. We thus agree with what is expressed in paragraphs 68-73 on the apostolic faith, and we consider that the box in paragraph 93 'Episkopé...' clearly expresses the present situation of the various churches.

## **(20) The Church as the body of Christ**

The paragraph on the Church as the body of Christ is correct. But it is not made clear that, at the same time as it expresses an intimate close relationship with the Lord, it also expresses a distinction. To be the body means that it does not fully resemble Christ, but indicates that the Church is *under* his authority, because he is its head. This image of the body can in no way be understood as resembling Christ himself or his attributes. The wisdom of the gospels comes to our aid when we find in Matt. 18: 20 ‘... where two or three come together in my name, there *am I* with them.’ That text in no way implies that Christ *is* the gathered individuals (the Church), but that he declares himself as a presence, distinct from them, which is added to the presence of those gathered in his name. The statement that the Church is the body of which Christ is the head refers to the responsibility of the community towards the master and ruler of the body. We believe that it could help to clarify some aspects of the life of the Church if there were an indication of this tension between being his body but at the same time being distinct from him.

## **(26) Sin also distorts the ministry of the Church**

It would be appropriate to consider how the distortion resulting from sin evident in creation also finds expression in the life of the Church. In our ecclesial tradition the Church is regarded as holy but also as sinning. That is a result of the fact that the Lord calls sinners to be engaged in his work, and thus as members of his people we are not free from error and rebelliousness. In the box ‘The Church and sin’ (56) we are asked whether there would be agreement on the wording in the final paragraph. As we understand it, work still needs to be done on this statement, in particular where it says [in Spanish] ‘Holiness denotes the Church’s nature and God’s will *through* it.’ We think that it ought to say ‘... God’s will *for* it,’ in the same way as it is God’s will for every human being to be righteous and not a sinner. The way in which it is worded seems to confer upon the Church a monopoly of God’s holiness.

## **(42) Trinitarian doctrine**

Our Methodist tradition is trinitarian, but in the doctrinal and not ontological sense. Hence the expression ‘God’s Triune Being’ does not express the meaning that we give to it. We understand the Trinity as the doctrinal corpus that enables us to understand the various ways in which God has presented God’s self in the biblical witness (as Creator, as Son, as Spirit accompanying the Church and the world), but we do not consider it to be an essential attribute of God. We consider that this mention should be omitted in order to widen the spectrum of the theological basis of the text.

## **(45) Visible structures of the Church**

In speaking of the transcendent nature of the Church, it is said, ‘... the visible organizational structures of the Church must always be seen and judged... in the light of God’s gifts of salvation in Christ, celebrated in the Liturgy.’ We share the meaning of this statement, but we understand that, as it is worded, it applies only to the inner life of the churches, and not to when the Church is assessed by its surrounding society. Seen from outside the Church, it is only the visible structures that are of interest, and we consider that not to be a defect but something which God desires and seeks for the Church. To be judged as a Church by our visible reality is none other than an application of the words of Jesus when he says, in Matt. 7: 16 ‘By their fruit you will recognize them.’ We propose that this dimension should also be included in the idea of *mysterion* expressed in this paragraph.

### **(99-104) Conciliarity and primacy**

We regard these paragraphs as very prudent in that they well express the present situation regarding this delicate question. In our understanding, catholicity and unity are manifested in the diversity of the gifts given to the Church by God and in its capacity to proclaim the Word in any human language. Once the moment comes for the Church to manage that diversity, we believe that it would be better implemented in a conciliar or synodal structure than in concentrating it in one person, who would inevitably be a representative of one ideological tendency, would give a privileged position to one theology over others, would reflect one gender, and would be perceived as belonging to one particular cultural expression. The unity of the Church is better represented in a collegial organization, where the diversity of gifts to the Church would be visible in its structure in a real and effective way and in all its dimensions, in such a space where decisions should be made by consensus.

### **(105-107) The authority of Christ and the authority of the Church**

We agree with what is said on the authority exercised by Jesus as being done in the service of human beings. But we consider that it omits to mention that the authority which Christ confers on the Church does not have the same character as the authority which he exercised in his life and person. Christ has his own authority, and, on giving the Church a mandate, he confers on it authority *to proclaim the Gospel*. It is without doubt a conditional authority given for the purpose of mission, and, if it is used for other ends, it becomes counter to the Gospel itself. The Church does have authority and power, but that power does not always come from God. In its history there have been moments when it has not been faithful to the responsibility to exercise authority in fulfilment of its missionary mandate, humbly and in the service of others. On no few occasions the Church has used its authority and power against individuals and peoples. For these reasons, we consider that it would be necessary to include a paragraph indicating that the authority conferred on the Church is conditional upon its being exercised in fulfilment of its mission, and, at the same time, to indicate that, when sin distorts this missionary purpose, the authority and power being exercised by the Church have ceased to be an expression of God's will.

### **(109-118) In and for the world**

We wish to express our full agreement with the content of these paragraphs, which include aspects of ethics, inter-faith relationships, evangelism and due respect for other religious expressions. It seems to us excellent that it is emphasized that certain ethical issues challenge the integrity of the Church (116). Our experience in Latin America – but we understand also elsewhere in the world – shows that this is a problem daily confronting the churches as they are led to state their position on human rights violations, to respond to situations of extreme structural poverty, or to fight the evil effects of transnational corporations that are damaging the environment and extracting wealth from our countries without leaving behind reasonable resources for the benefit of the peoples affected. Ethical decisions and the appropriate actions taken by the churches in response are not always understood by all the members of the Church and that occasionally leads to acrimonious debate.

Reading and studying a text such as this will, we hope, contribute to a better understanding of the missionary challenges and the challenge to unity that the Spirit is placing before us today.