

**The Nature and Mission of the Church
A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement
Faith and Order Paper 198, World Council of Churches 2005**

Response of Methodist Church of New Zealand

Background

This World Council of Churches (WCC) Faith and Order Commission document seeks to affirm what the churches can say together about the Church, and to identify and clarify issues over which the churches continue to differ. The WCC hopes that this text will play an important part in serving the call “to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship.” In the light of responses from the churches the text will be revised and developed. It is hoped the process will make a significant contribution to the churches’ growing understanding of being church, and to the resolution of divisive issues. Churches have been asked to respond to the text by the end of January 2010.

The Mission and Ecumenical Committee, the Faith and Order Committee, and Te Taha Maori of the Methodist Church of New Zealand (MCNZ) have worked together in developing a response to the text of this WCC Faith and Order paper. Those involved in the process have been: Hugh Dyson (Mission and Ecumenical), Lana Lazarus (Te Taha Maori), TeRito Peyroux (Youth), Siosifa Pole (Faith and Order), John Roberts (Mission and Ecumenical), Diana Tana (Te Taha Maori), Terry Wall (Faith and Order). We met on four occasions in 2008, each time considering a different section of the text.

Overall we felt that the Faith and Order Commission has produced a significant and helpful text, and that it is serving the churches and the cause of ecumenism well.

Introduction

The MCNZ expresses its gratitude that the WCC Faith and Order Commission is developing what we hope will become a significant text in the life of the churches. We appreciate the work of all those members of the commission who have been contributing to the development of the text. There is much in the text that we can readily affirm, and some areas where we raise questions or express concerns. We commend the commission for bringing together in one text, both the nature of the church and the mission of the church, because so often, in theology and the life of the churches, these are dealt with separately. We affirm the purpose of the text in seeking to give expression to what the churches can now say together about the nature and mission of the church, and within that agreement, to explore the extent to which the remaining church-dividing issues may be overcome. We appreciate the overall emphasis the text places on the centrality of worship.

We note that the numbered paragraphs in the main text set out what are seen to be common perspectives across the churches, while the boxed sections identify areas where differences remain both within and between churches.

Section I The Church of the Triune God

A The nature of the Church

We affirm subsection (I) The Church as Gift of God.

Regarding the boxed section **The Institutional Dimension of the Church and the Work of the Holy Spirit** we hold that:

- The power of the Word and Spirit of God in the Church is not confined to ordained ministry but is embodied in the whole community of faith by virtue of the baptism of its members. The ministry of the laity is as important as the ministry of the ordained.
- God's work is not confined to the institutional structures of the Church. God can work outside those structures in order to challenge them.
- The Church can exercise episcopate without being episcopal i.e. having bishops. We affirm subsection (II) Biblical Insights. However we have a concern regarding paragraph 18 which relates to the church being seen as the "Israel of God." Does the Church supersede Israel? We find any suggestion of a supersessionist theology to be unhelpful in the context of Christian-Jewish relations.

B The mission of the Church

While we affirm much of this section we have a concern. We are uneasy with the note of Christian triumphalism that appears: as in para 34 gathering all creation under the lordship of Christ; para 36 reconciling all things to God through Christ; para 37 salvation of the whole world; para 41 proclaiming Christ with everyone throughout the entire world. In an increasingly religiously plural world where we are called to respect the diversity of religions, such references leave us feeling uncomfortable. We ask that attention be paid to this concern in further development of the text. We are not calling for the abandonment of these important New Testament themes, but rather their reformulation.

C The Church as Sign and Instrument of God's Intention and Plan for the World

Again we affirm much of this section but express a similar concern to that raised regarding the previous section of the text, the note of Christian triumphalism that is apparent as in: para 43, the Church as sign and instrument of God's intention and plan for the whole world; para 44 the Church rendering praise and thanks on behalf of all peoples. Our question is this: Is this claiming too much for the Church? Again we ask that attention be paid to this concern in further development of the text.

Section II The Church in History

A The Church *in via*

We affirm this section of the text. Regarding the boxed section **The Church as 'Sacrament'**, the Methodist Church of New Zealand would not normally use the language of Church as sacrament, seeing a distinction between the Church and the sacraments for both reasons cited in the text. We would hold to the view that the church is an instrument for God's purpose in the world.

Regarding the boxed section "The Church and Sin" we note that some deep and complex questions are raised here. While the sin of a member or leader may not tarnish the holiness of the Church, when sin becomes systemic it does tarnish the holiness of the Church. Maybe there is a question of scale at work in this way of thinking. We would affirm that while the Church is a holy instrument of God, it does in reality sin, and that sin can become systemic in the institutional life of the church. We can affirm the proposed statement on the relationship between sin and holiness.

B In Christ — But Not Yet in Full Communion We

affirm this section of the text.

C Communion and Diversity

We affirm this section of the text. The boxed section **Limits to Diversity** deals with ecclesial identity and how one church regards the ecclesial status of other churches. It clearly sets out the various positions and the challenge to the ecumenical movement at this time. The very real and difficult issues are clearly identified. The pressing ecumenical question identified in the final sentence is a very real challenge to the ecumenical movement in the 21st century — Whether and how churches can live in mutual accountability so that they can sustain one another in unity and legitimate diversity, and can prevent new issues from becoming causes of division within and between churches.

D The Church as Communion of Local Churches

We affirm paragraphs 64 and 65. Regarding para 66 on apostolicity and catholicity as sustaining the communion of local churches, we strongly identify with the goal relating to the search for full communion. However we have some questions about the statement that the Church of Jesus Christ is to be the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Can the Church not change through time as new insights and wisdoms emerge? Can the Church be seen as alive and dynamic and able to adapt to rapidly changing contexts?

Regarding the boxed section **Local Church** our church affirms that each local church, however defined, is united to every other in the universal Church and contains within it the fullness of what it is to be the Church. We acknowledge that the discrepancy identified in the final sentence, between theological descriptions of local church and how the local church is experienced by the faithful, can be very real for people.

Section III The Life of Communion in and for the World

A Apostolic Faith

We affirm this section of the text

B Baptism

We affirm this section of the text Regarding the boxed section. **Baptism** our church recognises the unresolved issues. As a church we baptise both infants and those of an age to make profession of faith; we recognise other churches' baptism and do not rebaptise; we recognise baptism as a sacrament; we recognise baptism as both effecting and reflecting the new life in Christ; we baptise with water using the Trinitarian formula.

C Eucharist

We affirm this section of the text

Regarding the boxed section **Eucharist** our church recognises the significant differences identified and sees these as an expression of legitimate diversity. For our church the Eucharist is primarily a service of thanksgiving which acknowledges the sacrifice of Christ. We affirm a real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit throughout the celebration. We practise open hospitality i.e. all who know and love Jesus Christ are welcome at the Eucharistic table.

D Ministry of All the Faithful

While we affirm much of this section of the text, we feel that it fails to fully recognise the importance of the role of the laity in the life of our churches. Whereas the ecumenical movement once attached considerable significance to the role of the laity (having a department

on the role of the laity), it now seems to have fallen off the agenda. This section needs strengthening to recognise the crucial role the laity have in the life of the Church. We note that the word laity is not used in the text. Has there been a conscious move away from using that term, and if so why?

E Ministry of the Ordained

We affirm this section of the text. Regarding the boxed section **Ordained Ministry** we acknowledge that there are areas still needing exploration. Our church would put more emphasis on the ministry of the ordained being with and amongst the people of God rather than over them. For us the norm is that the ordained administer the sacraments and preside at the Eucharist, however in exceptional circumstances a lay person may be authorised to do so. Ordination is open to both men and women. We see ourselves as being in apostolic continuity if not in episcopal succession as other churches understand that term.

F Oversight: Personal, Communal, Collegial

We affirm this section of the text. Regarding the boxed section **Episcopal, Bishops and Apostolic succession**, we believe it correctly sets out the positions of the churches. At this time ours is a non-episcopal church that values its own form of the exercise of episcopate through its annual conference; the appointment of a president on an annual basis to preside over the national church; the regional synods and the appointment of synod superintendents to take oversight of the church in the regions. In the 1970s there was a willingness on the part of our church to accept an episcopal form of church government in a church that would have united five separate denominations. However the union did not happen. We would not rule out acceptance of an episcopal form of church government for our church in the future.

G Conciliarity and Primacy

We affirm the nature of conciliarity (para 99); the origins of ‘ecumenical councils’ (para 100), and the historical statement (para 102). However we have some questions. Can there be a joint presiding involving more than one person? (para 101). The claim that “In recent years, both ecumenical rapprochement and globalisation have created a new climate in which a universal primacy can be seen as a gift rather than a threat to other churches” (para 103) needs to be tested. Our church has not considered the matter of a universal primacy at this time. Discussion on a universal primacy (para 104) needs to be ongoing. However we suspect there would be little enthusiasm for discussing a ministry of universal primacy in our church.

Regarding the boxed section **Conciliarity and Universal Primacy** we believe this correctly sets out the situation of divergence on this matter. The word ‘today’ could be added to the last sentence of the second paragraph.

H Authority

Authority is not a word our church makes much use of. We prefer to talk about responsibility and accountability. Authority is open to abuse, which is why we consider responsibility and accountability must be essential parts of the exercise of authority.

Section IV In and for the World

We affirm this section of the text, while raising questions about the wording of paragraphs 110 and 111.

Para 110 raises concerns in the area of interreligious relations. “Proclaiming to every creature” suggests a Christian triumphalism that may well be offensive to people of other religions. The

final sentence, “There is no contradiction between evangelisation and respect for the values present in other faiths” needs some clarification if it is to remain. While it may be true in a technical sense, there are too many instances where this has not been the case in practice. Evangelisation is a term that can mean different things to different people. The text needs to take account of this.

In paragraph 111 we feel the reference to Acts 5:29 needs a little more elaboration. Is there a sharp disjunction between God’s truth and human truth? How do we receive God’s truth if not through human agency? Yet we can be mistaken even in our best convictions.

Conclusion

We affirm this concluding section of the report.