

The Church of Scotland

Response to the WCC Text

“The Nature and Mission of the Church - a stage on the Way to a Common Statement”

1. This response of the Church of Scotland has been drawn up by a Working Group of representatives from a number of the Councils of its General Assembly. This gave a voice to those with expertise in doctrine, education, evangelism, ministries and a recent ‘think tank’ - the “Panel on Review & Reform”.
2. The Group [“we”] found itself appreciative of the revisions that had been done since *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*. There was little which aroused major critical comment. We are grateful for honesty in delineating points of division within the boxes and affirm the need for dialogue to continue.
3. *Does this study document correctly identify our common ecclesiological convictions, as well as the issues that continue to divide us?*

We felt that on the whole it did. Indeed, as we discussed the different sections, it became apparent that there is within our own denomination a spectrum of understanding that crosses the divisions set out in some of the boxes. The fact that this is so would lead us to suggest that many of these issues should not necessarily be seen as church-dividing issues. For example, this was true in relation to the boxes: *The Institutional Dimension of the Church and the Work of the Holy Spirit* (p 15), *Church as “Sacrament”* (pp 29-30) and *The Church and Sin* (pp 33-34) and in relation to our understandings of the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. In the case of *The Church and Sin* the Church of Scotland would find itself drawing on all the options laid out in the box. It would not tend to say, ‘the Church sins’, since this would imply that there is a Church apart from Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, but it would not want to hold back from ascribing sin not only to members and groups within the Church but also on occasion to church assemblies; indeed sin in a particular Church may become systemic so as to almost draw away its nature as Church. In twentieth century history there are recent examples, certainly in the Reformed tradition.

We appreciated the section on diversity and communion (60-63) and also the extended box material which follows. The Church of Scotland takes seriously the question posed in section (c), noting that at the end of this section the traditional position of Reformed Churches has been explicated.

There is much appreciation in the growing agreement on Baptism in recent years and in our own Scottish context we rejoice that it is now possible at least to explore the possibility of a joint baptismal liturgy or a liturgy for the renewal of baptismal vows with the Roman Catholic Church. The remaining areas outlined in the extended box remain issues for further discussion within as well as between churches.

The Church of Scotland’s orders of Holy Communion as set out in ‘Common Order’ accord with the description and expression of the Eucharist in the document. However, local practice will vary widely and there are different theological positions to be found within the one denomination. We noted with appreciation the fact that several terms are used to refer to the

Sacrament, rather than *BEM*'s sole use of 'Eucharist'. The box accurately sets out the issues that still divide.

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

It was thought important that the question asks about 'an' emerging convergence. We are aware of the development of understandings in relation to ecclesiology since the days of *BEM*. Within our own context of the Church of Scotland, there is a feeling that the different ecclesiologies are able to inform and enrich each other. It seems to us that the Christian Church has in many instances lost the ability to hold opposite views in creative tension. This was the case, for example, in discerning whether the sacraments are effective or reflective with regard to salvation. Much thought within the Church of Scotland would tend towards a reflective understanding of the sacraments, yet would not want to say that nothing real takes place in the gift of God. A Working Party on Holy Communion in the Church of Scotland recognises that we live with a large degree of blurring around what we believe, yet there is a core of teaching which is articulated. It is not the case the Church will bless any and all opinions! That said we appreciated the fact that the document did not try to blur the edges between the different definitions of the word 'church' in the New Testament, preferring rather to affirm the common ground between them. We welcomed the fact that diversity is seen as intentional (16) and the complete absence of any claim that one form of order or of government has overwhelming rightness about it.

We welcomed the section on the Mission of the Church which demonstrates a growing convergence and marks the document as a document for today.

We readily acknowledge the common challenge in the area of believing/belonging in para. 51 and are grateful for the sensitive dealing with the marks of the church in the paragraphs that follow (52-56).

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

In welcoming the inclusion of Section 4, we also recognise that this is an area which has only recently begun to be developed in the bilateral dialogues. There was a feeling that work certainly remains to be done for fleshing it out a bit more, in order to encourage the churches to think theologically about issues related to evangelism and ethics.

We are grateful to see the inclusion of full reference to the place of the preaching of the Word, a recognisable contribution from the Reformed tradition which had been conspicuously absent in the previous text.

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

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

The document was a helpful way of showing what the churches can do and say together. It would be a useful tool to take into bilateral and multilateral dialogues with other churches. It could also usefully be used within the Church of Scotland itself as an aid to its own reflection on the nature, mission, sacraments and ministry of the Church.

The Group recognised much that the Church of Scotland's General Assembly has already approved, e.g. in the section on the Apostolic Faith (68-73). However, the Group regretted that for many in our Church these issues remain buried in reports and are not articulated in pulpits, Kirk Sessions and congregational study groups. People remain absorbed in their parochial situation with little reflection on their place within the whole Church of God. There is therefore a question about how this document could be a useful tool for us to use in broadening and deepening the parameters of our own people's understanding of the faith.

There was one other area in which the Group felt that the document could be used to good effect to challenge the Church of Scotland, viz. the section on Conciliarity and Universal Primacy (99-104). An over-insistence on all being equal in the sight of God has blinded the Church of Scotland to where some people's views carry more weight than others within its own structures. There is still unfinished business for us in the challenge in the final section of *BEM*. Were we to be more honest about the 'hidden' methods of primacy that are exercised within our structures, there could be a more open discussion about how primacy could be exercised in a more accountable way.

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

As was said above, there could be further development of the final section, teasing out the sentence 'Evangelisation is thus the foremost task of the church in obedience to the command of Jesus.' At present, the text which follows this (paras. 110-111) is not in our opinion as rich and precise as it could be.

Ongoing work on a christological understanding of other faiths will assist in the development of the reference to other faiths, not least in relation to the first sentence of par 34 "It is God's design to gather all creation under the Lordship of Christ (cf. Eph 1:10) and to bring humanity and all creation into communion." How, in future, will the church understand the last part of that sentence?

There seemed to be an unexplored distinction in the text between the Church and the people so that it was possible for people to sin and not the Church. We would welcome this being attended to very carefully, acknowledging the view expressed by the Reformers that the Church is the Church only when the Holy Spirit is active in the community; that when Christ is with us we participate in a divine reality.

We also noticed slippage in language beginning in para. 48. Better distinctions could be helpful here. To start with, there is an undesirable ambiguity in the notion of "full visible realisation of the Kingdom" and the Church on earth not yet being that. For Reformed Christians the term "invisible" Church would more normally be used in this eschatological perspective! However, perhaps eschatology is not what is precisely being referred to here, despite the fine preceding sentence - "The Church is an eschatological reality, already anticipating the Kingdom". The problem occurs again in paragraph 57 where the term "full communion" is used. Here the term seems to be reduced to the sorting out of inter-church divisions, which is not nearly as rich an understanding of communion/koinonia as is regularly under consideration elsewhere. We hope that this will be revisited, including the title of section B. It is not good that "fullness of communion" (in para. 59) is used in the same sense as "perfect communion" (as in para. 26), and then there is talk of "the search for full communion" (66). Why is this language so dominant? (Of course, we suspect we know the answer, but are not persuaded by its force.) We would contend the language has been slipped in, despite in contrast the preferred language of the Canberra Statement being, in this respect, "visible unity" - which, we note, is also the consistent term used

in the introductory paragraphs 1-8 of *N & M*. Of course, “communion” does not always have a precise meaning. Nevertheless, given the rather lovely elaborations of its meaning with reference to God’s purposes (cf. para. 58, for example), it would be much more helpful to associate communion with notions of growth and transformation and participation, and to keep words like “search” and “forms” allied with the distinguishable goal of “visible unity”.

On a different matter, we felt that para. 66 might underplay the tensions and worse which have arisen historically over matters of church government. We would like to suggest that the final box in the chapter, ‘Local Church’, might spell this out more. The question would be: how has competition and competitiveness between churches in the same locale marred our experience of communion?

In conclusion, this work continues to be necessary and urgent, and we applaud the commitment of the Faith and Order Commission in pursuing it for us and with us. How will the church be church? And what are the horizons of the mission in which we share? Such questions are daily on our agenda in Scotland.