

15 Reformed Church of France

REFORMED CHURCH OF FRANCE

National Council

The President

Paris, 30 January 2008

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The Reformed Church of France (*Église réformée de France*, or ERF) has been following the work of the Faith and Order Commission with interest. Please find attached the contribution of the ERF National Council to the consultation on the Faith and Order paper *The Nature and Mission of the Church – A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*.

As in 2003, for the previous consultation on the paper *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, the National Council sent this paper to a network of theologians and asked them for their opinions. Their contributions were collected and summarized by Prof. Jean-François Zorn, member of the National Council and holder of the Chair of Contemporary Christian History (specializing in missiology and ecumenism) at the Protestant Institute of Theology in Montpellier. The National Council held an initial discussion on the summary report in December. Prof. Zorn then drew up a draft reply, which was adopted by the National Council at its 26-27 October session.

The Reformed Church of France is one of the partners in the Lutheran-Reformed Protestant Communion in France (*Communion protestante luthéro-réformée en France* or CPLR), whose mission, *inter alia*, is to help the churches to live out their ecumenical commitments together. This is why it too, along with a number of other partners, was sent the text, in the hope that a joint response from the whole CPLR, informed by work from each of its member churches, will provide an extra and original contribution to the work of Faith and Order.

Along with this text, we send our thanks to you, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, for your hard work in demonstrating the unity of the Church in Christ, and our loving greetings,

Marcel Manoël

Reformed Church of France (*Eglise réformée de France*, or ERF)
National Council, 24-25 January 2008
Theology group

**Opinion of the National Council of the Reformed Church of France
on the paper of the Faith and Order Commission
of the World Council of Churches**
The Nature and Mission of the Church – A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement

1 – Preliminary remarks

1-1: Acknowledgement

The National Council of the ERF wishes to express its gratitude to the WCC for consulting its member churches on such an important paper and for giving the Council adequate time for that consultation. The Council notes that the paper is a guidance paper, and hopes that the final wording will retain the momentum seen in its subtitle, *A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*. The texts the ERF wants to see are those in which steps forward are suggested, a path ahead is shown and vision is strengthened, without, however, shackling the Church with standards and obligations that are hard to reconcile with the freedom and responsibility to which we are called in the Gospel.

1-2: From one version of the paper to another...

This is the second time that the Council has been sent this document – the previous version having been titled *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*.¹ At its 28-29 June 2003 session, the Council studied this first paper and sent its observations to the Faith and Order Commission.² The Council is interested to note the paper's new title, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*,³ and the sensitive changes that have been made to its wording. These encourage us to believe that the observations made by the churches concerning the previous document have been incorporated into the new version. Although the new document essentially says more or less the same thing as the previous one, the Council is pleased to note a number of alterations. It nevertheless has concerns, as a church in the Reformed communion, regarding the retention and even strengthening of certain positions. However, the ERF is well aware that it is a minority player in the worldwide church community, and that the French context is hardly the norm. Nonetheless, we hope that these "unique" viewpoints will help to strengthen unity within the diversity of the WCC.

1-3: A matter of method

The ERF had already begun its discussion on the new Faith and Order paper when the WCC proposed including in this discussion the paper adopted at the WCC's Ninth Assembly in Porto Alegre, *Called to be the One Church*, and invited the churches to submit formal responses to that document as well. Although the two documents are part of similar processes of assessing the level of fellowship between the WCC's member churches and finding out what still divides them, the Council has decided not to postpone replying to the Faith and Order paper⁴ for four reasons:

¹ Faith and Order Paper no. 181, November 1998

² National Council, Reformed Church of France, "Observations on the paper *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, WCC Faith and Order", 28-29 June 2003

³ Faith and Order Paper no. 198, December 2005 (34 pages)

⁴ Hereafter, "the paper".

(1) the Faith and Order paper and the Porto Alegre document are different in both structure and nature and it would have been difficult to create one unified response; (2) it is important for the Council to ensure continuity in its thinking with respect to the two Faith and Order papers; (3) the ERF wants to be a part of the process initiated by the creation of the new WCC programme Unity, Mission, Evangelism and Spirituality, which now coordinates WCC activities regarding unity and mission; and (4) the ERF wishes to keep to the international ecumenical calendar, which means that studying the Faith and Order paper is a priority in preparation for the centenary in 2010 of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910.

2 – Overall assessment of the issues arising from the paper

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

2-1: The linguistic problem with WCC texts and their translation

In 2003, the ERF expressed the opinion that, while the presentation and wording of the paper *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* were better than in previous documents, they nevertheless threw up certain oddities of translation and cumbersome expressions. These have been repeated in the new document. Because “only the original English is authoritative” in WCC documents,⁵ a number of sensitive passages in *The Nature and Mission of the Church* retain English constructions that simply cannot be rendered into French. Either English speakers at the WCC need to be asked to stop throwing their sentences together with this kind of syntax or the translators should be asked to have their translations checked by native French speakers so that the texts can be understood better at “grass roots” level. The ERF requests that the WCC take a stand on this matter.

One example of this concern has to do with the new translation of paragraph 12 on the nature of the church (“one, holy, catholic and apostolic”). The new paper clarifies this, saying that the point of the church’s holiness is “to call human beings to become merciful like [Christ’s] Father”. This lessens the gap between the church and humanity that can be created by the idea of holiness by emphasizing how close the two really are – a position that pleases the ERF. However, with respect to apostolicity, the previous document introduced the already ambiguous concept of the “succession of the apostolic truth”, in which the communion of the faithful had lived since the days of the Apostles, while also adding, [in the French translation], that this communion bore “responsibility for passing it down through the ages”. [Translator’s note: this is a somewhat loose translation of the original English text, which read “...making the communion of the faithful a community that lives in, and is responsible for, the succession of the apostolic truth throughout the ages”.] In [the French version of] the new document, this responsibility has been changed into responsibility “for [that] succession” itself. [Translator’s note: the new French translation thus stays much closer to the English original.] How are we to interpret this stress on the succession itself rather than on its transmission through time? Does this put greater responsibility upon the community itself, implying its direct involvement in the ministry of passing the truth on, or is it that this transmission is devolved to a ministry of apostolic succession? For, ecclesologically speaking, the two mean vastly different things. Or does the problem in fact lie with the translation? [Translator’s note: not this time, no.] Whichever it is, on such a sensitive point of ecclesiology, the ERF requests that the WCC’s theologians and translators give all their joint attention to the problem.

2-2: Thoughts on the title of the paper

The alteration of the expression “*Purpose of the Church*” to “*Mission of the Church*” in the new title is hardly a cosmetic change. Not only does it give expression to the collaboration by the two great WCC Commissions, Faith and Order and Mission and Evangelism, the emphasis on the mission

⁵ Note on the electronic version of the French document.

of the church rather than its purpose gives the paper a less speculative and more dynamic edge. However the order of the factors (nature, then mission) is unchanged. Yet Protestants have often taken the opposite approach, starting from the church's mission or activity and working from there towards its nature or essence, defining the church more by its existence than by its essence. What is more, in this day and age, the notion of "the nature of the church" poses a number of conceptual problems, and would seem to afford the church a kind of ontological solidity that is in contradiction to the more fundamental assertion that the church exists only to serve.

The ERF therefore welcomes the change to the paper's title. It would go so far as to say that, in the new document, we might helpfully replace the coordinating conjunction "and" with the verb "to be": a truer title for the new document would therefore be *The Nature of the Church Is Mission*. For the text is animated by the doctrine of *Missio Dei*, though which "[i]n the power of the Holy Spirit the church testifies to the divine mission in which the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world" (paragraph 36). So mission is not a practical application (or work) of a separately determined theoretical definition of the church, but rather the work of God himself, who, in Christ and in the communion of the Spirit, makes himself known through the church: "as a reflection of the communion in the Triune God, the church is God's instrument in fulfilling" his "design to gather all creation under the Lordship of Christ (cf. Eph 1:10), and to bring humanity and all creation into communion" (paragraph 34). As we can see, this understanding of the church's mission in no way weakens its instrumental or diaconal character, but it does require a lofty theological definition of what the church is. This is why the paper recalls the four attributes of the church – unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity, the "four attributes [that] relate both to the nature of God's own being and to the practical demands of authentic mission. If, in the life of the church, any of them is impaired, the church's mission is compromised" (paragraph 35).

The ERF is thus happy with the fundamentals of this ecclesiological position. However, it finds that the paper leaves a rather contradictory impression on account of the constant balancing act between the indicative and the imperative. On the one hand, it is repeatedly recalled that unity is a gift from God and the church is a creation of the Word of God, while, on the other, this unity is just as strongly presented as a goal to aspire to. While it appreciates this paradox, the ERF suggests we should lay more stress on the concept of gift (and thus on that of grace). This could change the way that ecumenism is seen, making it less of a destination to strive for and more of a journey to be freely experienced together. It might make us less likely to try to achieve "God's work" of reconciliation through a call to human effort: we might rediscover it as a reality, instead of something we hoped for in the future! In short, we must resist the human (and religious) temptation to "do the works of God", and allow him to do them himself.

2–3: Progress on issues apparent in the boxes

The ERF is pleased to see in the paper an increased use of boxed text. The boxes have an obvious educational usefulness in that they highlight the points of both agreement and disagreement and are no longer shy about emphasizing the latter. They provide a fine example of what we would hope for from an ecumenical document. Indeed, the document does a good job overall of setting out the "points of ecumenical consensus and fundamental differences"⁶ (to pluralize the well-known title of the work of the Catholic-Protestant Joint Committee in France). At the same time, though, the document does not relinquish the aim of an agreement between the churches to "a convergence statement on the church", which "would further significantly the process of mutual recognition on the way to reconciliation and visible unity" (paragraph 123).

⁶ Comité mixte catholique-protestant en France, *Consensus œcuménique et différence fondamentale*, Paris, Le Centurion, 1987

3 – Agreements and differences between the paper *The Nature and Mission of the Church* and the texts and positions of the Reformed Church in France

3-1: Concerning its concept of the church

Like all other churches, the ERF has questions to ask itself in synod as to the compatibility of the paper with its own governing texts. Thus, chapter 1, paragraph 1, article 1 of the *Discipline* of the ERF states:

The Reformed Church of France professes that no individual church may claim to define the borders of the church of Jesus Christ, for only God knows those who belong to him. It exists to proclaim the Gospel to the world. It is therefore open to all people, and calls them all to believe in Jesus Christ, to deepen their faith by reading the Bible and hearing preaching, to receive baptism if they have not already done so and to partake in Holy Communion.

Is this statement compatible with the paper, particularly with its distinctly confessional-sounding paragraph 10,⁷ when ERF texts tend to give room to a greater range of views? Paragraph 11,⁸ meanwhile, includes faith among the factors that nourish and sustain the Church but excludes preaching (likewise in paragraphs 21, 31 and 32), whereas the ERF sees the role of preaching as primary. Furthermore, the ERF is anxious to maintain its refusal to define the boundaries of the Church because it cannot say where they lie, and because Christ sought to break down the walls surrounding the religious community. Out of faithfulness to him, the ERF refuses to (re)build walls around the Church: that is why it is reticent to put a definition on the nature of the Church.

3-2: Concerning its concept of the sacraments

The paper places a great deal of importance on the administration of the sacraments (baptism and the Eucharist) for sealing membership of the church community – so much so that it leaves out their relationship to the preaching of the word. This sounds strange to Reformed ears. As regards baptism, paragraphs 75-77 describe it as more of a rite of incorporation than a step towards a fuller understanding of the gift of grace. Indeed, paragraph 96 affirms that “[t]he communal life of the Church is grounded in baptism”. This concept of baptism is characterized by an idea of the believer’s sanctification as something static, and does not leave enough room to make the connection between this sanctification and the justification of the believer to which baptism in fact testifies.

The ERF’s position is that baptism is “a gift given to us by God, which we receive”. It is not that baptism has no practical consequences in the life of the believer; merely, it does not necessarily signify the beginning of the life of faith but can represent a stage within that life.⁹ As for the Lord’s Supper, which is inseparable from baptism, nowhere does the paper present it as an open invitation to those who “discern the signs of the presence of Christ in the shared bread and wine”.¹⁰ The ERF believes that this invitation can be extended to a child or adult who is still being catechized, even if that individual has not been baptized. This position, known as “Eucharistic hospitality”, is said in the “Eucharist” box on page 20 to be “the antithesis of the commitment to full visible unity” according to some churches. The paper **could** stress the fact

⁷ Paragraph 10: “The church is centred and grounded in the Word of God [...]. The church is the communion of those who, by means of their encounter with the Word, stand in a living relationship with God, who speaks to them and calls forth their trustful response; it is the communion of the faithful [...].”

⁸ Paragraph 11: “The Spirit incorporates human beings into the Body of Christ through faith and baptism, enlivens and strengthens them as the Body of Christ nourished and sustained in the Lord’s Supper, and leads them to the full accomplishment of their vocation.”

⁹ Cf. Synode national de l’ERF de Soissons, 2002, decision no. 22: “*Les sacrements*”.

¹⁰ *Discipline de l’ERF*, article 7, paragraph 3.

that “the Eucharist [...] obliges us [*sic*] to participate actively in the ongoing restoration of the world’s situation and the human condition” (paragraph 81) rather than **representing it as the simple act of welcome in church** that it is.

3–3: Concerning its concept of church membership

Before it considered the sacraments, the ERF had been reflecting upon the idea of church membership.¹¹ It made some substantial changes to its *Discipline* and its liturgy, which also had consequences for its conceptions of the sacraments discussed above. The ERF’s previously mentioned refusal to “define the borders of the church of Jesus Christ, for only God knows those who belong to him,” led it to put propose that “the local church welcome as members, at their request, all who acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord”. This “open” definition of church membership is now part of the *Discipline*,¹² accompanied by a more “limited” definition for membership of the cultural association.

It is as an outworking of these new definitions of church membership that the ERF is led to observe that the paper shows a lack of openness towards those who have not been catechized and towards believers in other faiths. From this point of view, the claim, right enough in itself, that “[t]he church is the communion of those who [...] stand in a living relationship with God” (paragraph 10), risks becoming an exclusivist statement, giving the impression that God is only interested in Christians and the church that they make up. The churches may have a claim on Christ, for they are his body, but they cannot monopolize the claim on God himself. God has more than one home, and we have no right to reserve relationship with him to Christians alone. The church does not have the exclusive, definitive franchise on God. This perspective leaves room for the interreligious dialogue that the ERF considers so important.

3–4: Concerning its concept of its relationship to society

Speaking still more generally, there are various points in the paper (paragraphs 18 and 19) where it idealizes the church and burdens it with mandates that cannot be justified Biblically, such as the claim that the church is “a herald of, and an instrument for, [the] general transformation of the whole cosmos [...], the new heavens and the new earth” (paragraph 22). The ERF thinks that this position results from a vision of the church as somehow above the rest of humanity, “advocat[ing] and car[ing] for the poor, the needy and the marginalized” and doing “works of compassion and mercy”, (paragraph 40), as if the church itself were not poor, and needy, and made up of poor and needy people. This is not to deny the social, political and fundamentally ethical role that the church has to play in the world; simply to say that this role should be born of Christian freedom, not a result of some programme derived from the nature of the church. The ERF knows full well that it no longer lives in a Christian society, and encourages those who still do to think hard about the economic nature of their situation in light of the Biblical vision of a church that is in the world, but not of the world.

3–5: Concerning its idea of the Scriptures

Both the new document and the previous one apply the Scriptures in a questionably prescriptive way, using the *analogia fidei*, whereby Biblical passages are explained by means of other Biblical passages. Despite this, they fairly consistently load the term “church” with a theological meaning inherited from pre-Reformation tradition that sees it as being a participation in the “Trinity [who] is the source and focus of all communion” (paragraph 13). As a church born of the Reformation, the ERF is committed to the New Testament vision whereby the church is the community of the faithful living in and testifying to the grace they have received. However, the new paragraphs 15, 16 and 17 draw attention to the fact that, while “[m]any insights pertinent to the nature and

¹¹ Cf. Synode national de l’ERF de Paris, 1995, decision no. 35 “*Le membre d’Eglise*”.

¹² Chapter 1 – De l’Eglise locale et de l’association culturelle; article 1 – Des membres; paragraph 1, subparagraph 3.

mission of the church are present in Scripture [...] it does not offer a systematic ecclesiology”. This clarification will help to reassure Reformed Christians, for whom the church is a secondary sign and instrument of the mission of God but not a mystery or sacrament in itself.

3–6: Concerning its concept of ordained ministry

As regards the issue of ordained ministry (paragraphs 86-89), with all the historical and theological dimensions – individual, community and collegial – that this includes, grouped together as these are under their purposes of “oversight” and of “conciliarity” and “primacy” (paragraphs 99-104), the ERF thinks that the whole question of universal ministry only arises because too much and too favourable attention is being paid to one particular tradition. The ERF has had long experience with the damaging effects of this tradition and would be loath to see it return. It does not consider “globalization” (paragraph 103) an adequate criterion on which to base any theological claims in this area, and one has to read the New Testament accounts of Peter and Paul through a very pro-centralization lens to think they refer in any way to a global ordained ministry.

The ERF is not afraid of seeing the emergence of an Episcopal-style ministry, as long as such a ministry is both collegial and personal and invested with synodal – not hierarchical and certainly not monarchical – authority. However, it wishes to approach this question in terms of the diversity of ministries, and its contribution can be made by simply recalling one article of its *Discipline*:

The Reformed Church of France participates in the mission with which the Lord entrusted the universal Church – to proclaim, serve and live out the Gospel among all people. Through their baptism, all members of the church are called to play their part in this mission. To train and strengthen them for this purpose and to contribute towards the proclamation of the Gospel, the Reformed Church of France discerns and acknowledges the various ministries and ministers that the Lord gives it in each local church and in the whole union of churches.¹³

4 – Summary answers of the ERF National Council to the four questions in the document

On page 3 of the document are four questions for churches to answer. While the ERF believes it has answered these questions over the course of this letter, it would briefly summarize those answers as follows:

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

The ERF sees no fundamental incompatibility between the theological convictions expressed in the WCC paper and those by which it is governed. However, it feels that the ecclesiological issues raised in paragraph 3 may set it apart from other churches as regards the way in which its convictions are worked out in the real world: the ERF still believes that the church is a human organization living before God, sinful yet forgiven in Christ, united and diverse in the Spirit. This means that the church does not think of itself as having been clothed with a divine nature, but understands itself in terms of the mission to serve entrusted to it by the God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

2. Does this study document reflect an emerging convergence on the nature and mission of the church?

¹³ Chapter III – “Des ministères, des ministres et des postes”; article 11 – “Des ministères et des ministres”; paragraph 1.

The ERF believes that the churches have lacked an adequate ecclesiological framework on which to base and build their communion ever since the formation of the WCC. This paper is therefore a “good start”, and could flesh out the minimum basis adopted at New Delhi in 1961.¹⁴

3. Are there significant matters in which the concerns of your church are not fully addressed?

The paper’s main shortcoming has to do with the context into which it is written. Since it makes no reference to the context in which the ERF lives – a secularized world with a minority church – the suspicion arises that the paper’s implicit frame of reference is a world in which the church enjoys a recognized or even dominant position. Rereading and modifying the paper in a context more like that of the ERF could usefully rub off its triumphalist edges.

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

- *How can this study document help your church, together with others, take concrete steps towards unity?*
- *What suggestions would you make for the future development of this text?*

A paper such as this from an international body such as the WCC can only be taken forward if we make sure it is accepted at local level. The ERF recalls that particular attention should be paid to ensuring the idiomatic translation of the final text into target languages other than English; this is the first condition for ensuring that the churches receive the text well at grass-roots level. The second is either to simplify the text or to create a version “for dummies”: the paper as it stands is pitched at the level the theological expert. Of course, the work to ensure acceptance must be done by each individual church. Nevertheless, the writers themselves need to make it clear what sort of audience they are intending to reach.

Provisional translation of a working from the French

Please return to language service for further revision if this is to be published.

¹⁴ “The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”