

**The Nature and Mission of the Church  
A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement  
Faith and Order Paper No. 198**

***A Response from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
through its General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical Relations  
September 2009***

The Faith and Order Commission has invited churches and others to reflect on the text, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, a revised version of the previous text, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*. It is a privilege to participate in these conversations, to feel welcomed to the table, and to be able to add perspectives from both our historical and lived experiences.

To begin, we thank the commission not only for its work on this and previous drafts, but for the many improvements in *The Nature and Mission of the Church*. We appreciate the expanded and deepened exegesis of the biblical metaphors of the Church (“People of God,” “Body of Christ,” “Temple of the Holy Spirit,” and “*Koinonia* / Communion,” ¶18 - 33) and to a lesser extent the concept of *martyria* (¶37ff). We especially affirm the addition of and focus on the mission of the Church, particularly in the last sections of the document. As before, the gray boxes that set apart points of continuing disagreement are a helpful resource and, overall, represent well the sticky divergences still among us.

We note that in the introduction to “Nature and Mission,” the Faith and Order Commission has encouraged local church communities to engage in reflection based on actual stories of Christian life and witness in different parts of the world, so that both the particular and universal features of the Church can be more clearly understood. Correspondingly, this response to *The Nature and Mission of the Church* will offer not only concrete feedback on content and style, but some snapshots of our lived experience of the church as Presbyterians in the United States to illustrate. To do so, we will address four overarching issues that, for us, still remain unsettled or problematic, and then offer some suggestions – both broad and specific – that we believe would strengthen the document and move us further toward a point of convergence.

**1. The Church as Sacrament, Instrument, and Holy**

Grouping the sacramentality, instrumentality and holiness of the Church together under one theme should not imply that we conflate these three elements of the nature of the Church. However, from a Reformed and Presbyterian perspective, the treatment of each in *The Nature and Mission of the Church* points to similar and ongoing questions about the Church and sin.

In our reading of the document, we notice ongoing reference to the “instrumentality” of the Church, that is, that the Church is the agent or “instrument” of God in salvation and/or in accomplishing God’s purposes in the world (e.g. ¶9, final sentence; ¶12, third and fifth sentences; ¶33, third sentence; and especially the second half of ¶40). While we affirm that the Church is called to be an instrument of God’s reconciliation and to serve God’s mission, we harbor some discomfort with its portrayal in the document. On the one hand, there is a potential to assume too much of the Church (that the Church is the only agent through which God works in the world, or that Christ is present only in the Church, rather than the Church following Christ into the world), while on the other hand there is a tendency to insufficiently deal with the persistence of sin not only in the individual but in our corporate and institutional realities. Similar tensions exist with language of Church as “sacrament,” and with the understanding of the nature of the

“holiness” of the Church. The churches’ ongoing disputes over these aspects of ecclesiology are dealt with aptly in the boxes “Church as ‘Sacrament?’” (after ¶48) and “The Church and Sin” (after ¶56), but the text itself continues to be weighted toward what seems an idealistic vision.

For the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), as well as other Reformed Christian bodies, the reality of sin in the life of the Church calls us to avoid the danger of idealistic construals of the Church’s being, such as “Already participating in the love and life of God, the Church is a prophetic sign which points beyond itself to the purpose of all creation, the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God” in ¶43. In addition, our ecclesiology does not understand the Church as having two natures – divine and human – that are divided and separated so that the “divine” remains untouched by the human (such as in ¶49 and 50).

At our 2004 General Assembly, the meeting of our highest governing body, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) confronted the painful and wounding issues of sexual abuse within our denomination. In this situation, we recognized that we as a *body* had failed in obedience to God. The committee responding to the abuse included in their comments a lengthy apology for the ways in which the *church* – not simply the individuals involved – had failed in ministry and mission in the situation:

“We apologize that we as a church did not take adequate steps to prevent the specific incidences...that our church did not understand the significance of, or believe, the earliest reports of incidents of sexual abuse when survivors turned to people in positions of authority and responsibility, that our church did not do more at the time of their reporting to intervene and stop the perpetrators of sexual abuse, and that our church did not do more after discovering the truth of the victims’ allegations to reach out to others who might have been victimized” (from the Report of the Committee on Church Polity, 216th General Assembly of the PCUSA, 2004).

On a global scale, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches as a body quite literally revisited the sins of its past during its 2004 General Council in Accra, Ghana. Together, Reformed Christians from around the world made a pilgrimage to the castles on the Ghanaian coast where Africans were loaded into ships as chattel bound for a life of slavery in the new world. For more than two centuries, our Reformed forebears – who had built a new chapel rather than utilize the Catholic one left behind in the castle by the Portuguese – conducted Christian worship directly above the slave dungeons. A “Letter from Accra” on behalf of the General Council lamented:

“Some of us are descended from those slave traders and slave owners, and others of us are descendants of those who were enslaved. We shared responses of tears, silence, anger, and lamentation. Those who are Reformed Christians have always declared God’s sovereignty over all life and all the earth. So how could these forebears of Reformed faith deny so blatantly what they believed so clearly?” (From “A Letter from Accra,” 31 August 2004, [http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/side.jsp?news\\_id=157&navi=1](http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/side.jsp?news_id=157&navi=1))

The Church does point beyond itself to the glory of God, but that is not the same as being without sin. Further, when the Church confesses its sin as a body, we not only enter corporately into the suffering of victims who have been hurt or damaged by our sin, we extend as a body the healing and reconciliation God has first offered us, reminding ourselves that it is not we who offer grace, but God within us even in and through our failures.

In short, we as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) do not precisely disagree with the way language of the instrumentality, sacramentality or holiness of the Church is used in the *Nature and Mission*

text. But we continue to harbor hesitations when language that idealizes these elements becomes the normative way of expressing the nature of the Church as we experience it in our broken world. Further expression of God's work through the Church *in spite* of our sin and brokenness would be welcomed.

## 2. The Mission of the Church

As previously noted, we deeply appreciate the addition of the sections related to the mission of the Church. Thus our comments on mission generally respond to the overall balance and emphasis of the document.

Our constitutional document, the *Book of Order*, states that the great ends of the Church are “the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world” (G - 1.0200).<sup>1</sup> While we don't expect a convergence document on the nature and mission of the Church to align precisely with our understanding of the great ends of the Church, we are pleased to note that this Faith and Order document is largely in agreement with our polity.

There is some divergence, however, in our understandings of how the document gives importance and prominence to particular understandings of “mission.” Section III, *Life of Communion in and for the World* (§67 - 108), seems to relate to only a portion of what we see as communion “in and for the world,” and focuses primarily on what happens inside church structures, particularly in relation to sacraments, tradition and authority.

By contrast, our understanding of apostolic faith, for example, centers around “sent-ness”: being sent in to the world as witnesses to God's work in Jesus Christ. Our understanding of worship stresses the importance of the gathered community in praise and prayer, as well as our renewal through the sacraments. God's gift of reconciliation within and among us in worship and fellowship strengthens us for mission and service to the world. Additionally, gospel proclamation happens with our very lives, in and through our relationships of communion and *koinonia*, not only in the worship experience itself. The organization of Section III, with its heavy explication of church structure and authority, stifles these other important aspects of the Church's life of communion in and for the world.

Section IV, which then follows, seems vague and thin by comparison. Its title, “In and for the World,” is an odd choice on the heels of Section III, “*Life of Communion in and for the World.*” Assuming what is meant by this title is something like, “How the Church stands in relationship to the world, or seeks to engage the world,” further explication of the relationship between the Church and the world might be in order. Much is said in the document regarding the nature of the Church, but what does the Church believe to be the nature of the world, and how does that inform the Church's mission in the world? What is the relationship between the Church and the world, and what does God will it to be? How is the Church to be involved in promoting social righteousness or exhibiting the kingdom of heaven to the world?

Section IV would also benefit from another gray box, one that would highlight how the Church has not come to agreement about the ways we engage the global issues. It could specifically reference issues about which Christians have divergent opinions, for example the witness of the historic peace churches versus Christian just war theory, or controversy surrounding abortion, euthanasia, sexuality or capital punishment. Perhaps even more useful would be a discussion of

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<sup>1</sup> Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II: Book of Order, 2009 - 2011*. Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2009.

the varied perspectives related to Christian involvement in politics and economics, or in the relationship between the church and the state. For generations the Church and the churches have struggled with questions of integrity and compromise when dealing with worldly concerns, and some reflection on that process is appropriate here.

Finally, paragraph 110 includes two statements of specific concern. First, “Evangelization is thus the foremost task of the church in obedience to the command of Jesus,” is perhaps an overstatement for a convergence document. While many Christians would agree that evangelism is paramount, this is not a universal perspective and would likely be questioned by, for example, many liberation, feminist and womanist theologians. Further, the means, methods and objectives of evangelism and mission have long been points of contention within and among our congregations and communions, a point that deserves notice. One of our denominational leaders recently shared a story of a Presbyterian church in the Midwestern United States that had organized a weekly free meal to meet some of the needs caused by the local depressed economy. A family who had come to the meal to receive food later joined the worshipping congregation and the family members were baptized. Such community outreach may not, at first glance, appear to be “evangelization” in a classic sense, but serves to demonstrate varied ways our churches share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Second, the statement in ¶110 that follows, that “There is no contradiction between evangelization and respect for the values present in other faiths,” is problematic, glossing over the many thorny, delicate and complicated issues within the sphere of interfaith relations. This whole paragraph requires a more nuanced approach that more fully reflects the diverse views of and approaches to evangelism taken by the churches, and the challenges the churches face in dealing with evangelism and religious pluralism in their lived experience.

### **3. Ordained ministry and episcopate**

The issues of ordained ministry and *episcopate* are among the most divisive ecumenical concerns. It is unnecessary to restate our positions on these points, as such discussions have already taken place and the unresolved issues are more than familiar to Faith and Order. Here, instead, we will highlight particular suggestions to strengthen the text.

The emphasis in Section III on authority and ordained ministry seem to overshadow the work of the full membership of Christ’s body. The chapter affords just four paragraphs to the crucial role of the ministry of all the faithful (¶82 - 85), a section which should be further deepened and developed. The text’s sections on ordained ministry and authority still do not fully reflect our understanding or practice of three - fold ministry (minister of Word and Sacrament, elder, and deacon, all of whom are ordained to their offices). The office and role of the deacon – a ministry of service to people in need within and beyond the community of faith – seems particularly eclipsed. In addition, paragraphs 87 and 88 would benefit from the inclusion of scriptural references for the offices named, as well as for the duties related to each office.

Further, language in this section seems to elevate the role of the community over the role of the Holy Spirit in the calling to ministry. For example, in ¶86, the sentence “...from the earliest times there were those chosen by the community under the guidance of the Spirit,” implies that the community – rather than the Holy Spirit – is the source of calling to ministry. Rather, the *Holy Spirit* is the initiator of call, and the community affirms, confirms and supports that call.

We are disappointed to note the relegation of the issue of the ordination of women to a single bullet point in the gray box entitled “Ordained Ministry.” For the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the ordination of women is not simply an issue of practice or even justice, but of confession. Our

*Brief Statement of Faith*, a confessional document, declares that the Holy Spirit calls women and men to all ministries of the Church (10.4, line 64).<sup>2</sup> This reflects our conviction that as God's grace is given freely to all, so too is God's call extended to all. Our denomination would be deeply impoverished without the gifts of women ministers, elders and deacons. At our General Assembly in 2006, as we together celebrated with joy the anniversaries of the ordination of women to the offices of deacon, elder, and minister of Word and Sacrament, we also noted with sadness the work still to be done for our church to fully respect and honor women's gifts and participation in the leadership of the church.

Finally, a clarification on ¶88, which begins: "The chief responsibility of the ordained ministry is to assemble and build up the Body of Christ by proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, by celebrating Baptism and the Eucharist and by guiding the life of the community in its worship, its mission and its service." We see here an allusion the Reformation benchmarks of proclamation, sacraments, and discipline (where discipline is the life of faithfulness). But in the Reformed tradition, the notes are the signs of the "True *Kirk*," not the to-do list of the minister.

#### **4. Obedience and Discipleship, Grace and Gratitude**

The Nature and Mission document rightly demonstrates the call to faithful discipleship and obedience and service to God in Jesus Christ as central to the mission of the Church, for example: "The Church exists for the glory and praise of God, to serve the reconciliation of humankind, in obedience to the command of Christ" (¶ 33); "The mission of the Church is to serve the purpose of God as a gift given to the world in order that all may believe (cf. Jn 17:21)" (¶34); "The Church is called at all times and in all places to serve God after the example of the Lord who came to serve rather than to be served" (¶82).

Our Reformed tradition and its confessions do not disagree with the above examples, but we note in the text the seeming absence of a key concept: that obedience emanates from *gratitude* for God's grace. In fact, only one brief reference to gratitude (other than that which is included in the discussion of the Eucharistic table) occurs in the entire document, in ¶44. The importance of gratitude and thanksgiving seems particularly lacking in passages such as: "The source of their passion for the transformation of the world lies in their communion with God in Jesus Christ. They believe that God, who is absolute love, mercy and justice, is working through them by the Holy Spirit" (¶111).

Gratitude to God is intrinsic to the Reformed understanding of both the nature and mission of the Church. We are continually reminded in our confessions that receiving and being transformed by God's grace evokes our gratitude, and it is from that grace-filled gratitude we are moved to obedience and discipleship. Our denominational newsletters and magazines are chockfull of stories of members touched by God's grace and prompted by gratitude to serve: organizing volunteer groups to help rebuild homes destroyed by Hurricane Katrina; knitting blankets, hats and gloves for people in need; lobbying our government officials on behalf of peace and justice; donating time, energy and resources to support mission work around the world.

It is through our renewal and transformation by God's grace that we are able to respond to God's call to obedience at all, and in gratitude for what God has done for us we are then moved to serve God and all of God's creation. Thus we declare in our *Brief Statement of Faith*, "In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live

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<sup>2</sup> Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I: Book of Confessions*. Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1999.

holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God’s new heaven and new earth, praying, ‘Come, Lord Jesus!’” (10.4, lines 72 - 76).<sup>3</sup>

### **General notes**

**Language:** Much of the text uses theologically - and ecclesiological - loaded words, but frequently neglects to clarify their meaning; for example, the use of “transfiguration” in ¶36, “evangelization” (as distinct from evangelism?) in ¶110, and “Gospel” in ¶10, 12, 15, 35, etc. In addition, “ethics” and “morals,” are sometimes used interchangeably. Some attention to defining and/or clarifying language would be helpful.

On several occasions, “Christians” are referred to in the third person, with “they” or “their.” It seems appropriate that we use the first person, “we,” in describing Christian activity (see, for example, “They are called to live its values and to be a foretaste of that reign in the world” ¶35, and “They believe that God, who is absolute love, mercy and justice, is working through them by the Holy Spirit,” ¶111).

**Overall style:** The Nature and Mission of the Church document offers an incredible opportunity for the churches together to describe with vivid color and detail the nature of what it means to be part of the people of God, *koinonia*, the body of Christ, Temple of the Holy Spirit – not merely in technical theological and ecclesiological jargon, but in pictures and images and experiences of the transformation wrought by the fiery grace of God in our lives. Take, for example, paragraph 32: “Visible and tangible signs of the new life of communion are expressed in receiving and sharing the faith of the apostles; breaking and sharing the Eucharistic bread; praying with and for one another and for the needs of the world; serving one another in love; participating in each other’s joys and sorrows; giving material aid; proclaiming and witnessing to the good news in mission and working together for justice and peace.”

Imagine if each of these signs of new life were accompanied by an illustration, an image or story of what it means to be the Church together: of Christians sharing the Eucharist through the border fence that separates the United States and Mexico; of Christians praying together across enemy lines in a war zone; of Christians sacrificing material comfort to serve in refugee camps in the Sudan — all for the glory of God.

While Faith and Order Commission documents have always held a high standard of academic integrity, the inclusion of story and image to punctuate and give life to a sometimes dense and esoteric text would create not only a more reader - friendly document but would allow a broader spectrum of the members of our churches to see themselves and their experiences within it.

**“Gray Box” Index:** Finally, we would be pleased to have included in the final draft a listing of the topics covered in the gray boxes, along with page and/or paragraph numbers, for easy reference.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.