

The Nature and Mission of the Church

Faith and Order Paper 198

**Response by the Committee on Ecumenism of the
Evangelical Church of the River Plate**

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Introduction

The introduction to the document is short in length and concise in contents. As the title indicates, its aim is to present the material of the study, to introduce the contents to its readers, and to guide them in their reading. It also gives in a quite complete way the history of ecumenical ecclesiology, beginning with the First World Conference on Faith and Order in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1927, continuing through the 1948 Amsterdam Assembly, when the World Council of Churches was constituted, down to the most recent documents produced by the WCC Canberra Assembly in 1991, and also the theme of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order 'Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness', and the various important documents published by Faith and Order.

An ecclesiological understanding is essential for building up the ecumenical movement.

Thus, according to our ecclesiological understanding, we maintain that there is no ecclesiology that is not, in a strict sense, fully ecumenical. Because of that, and in order to be more precise over against the ecclesiological self-understanding of fundamentalists and/or neo-conservative groups, we consider that it is relevant to be clear, when we speak of ecclesiology, on which way of being church we are referring to.

A. This study

The necessity for this study results from the Faith and Order World Conference at Santiago de Compostela, Spain, in 1993. In this regard the Introduction identifies three aspects worth mentioning:

- growth in fellowship is being experienced between Christians at local, national and world levels, not least of all in the experience of united and uniting churches

- the situation of the world demands and deserves a credible witness to unity in diversity which is God's gift for the whole of humanity.

We consider that this aspect of **gift** is very important, since in many ecclesiological definitions and in many efforts to define the church in recent years, this aspect of the church has been relegated to second place. Increasing emphasis has been placed on the church as a human construct rather than as a 'gift, or present, from God' to humankind. How can the balance between these two aspects be restored?

- Political changes and challenges in recent years are significantly altering the context in which many churches exist and therefore how they seek to understand themselves.

Here it ought to be noted that this paragraph has been written from the viewpoint of the northern hemisphere, for nothing is said about the changes and challenges arising from the neoliberal globalized economy and its reduction of life to the two elements of money and power. For us, it is of vital importance to ask how to avoid the church falling into and being held in this double captivity. One example: in many places, diaconal institutions have the habit of adopting the language of multi-national organizations.

Paragraph 4 is highly stimulating where it says: "The Commission especially encourages reflection based on actual stories of Christian life and witness in different parts of the world so that both the particular and the universal features of the Church can be more clearly understood. This is important above all from the perspective of mission, which is one of the guiding themes of this study. Mission is not an abstraction but is lived in response to the grace of God as God sends his Church in faithful witness in the actual situations of each society."

We consider that paragraph important because it impels us to present our comments as contributions coming out of our own situation.

B. Purpose and Method

The aim of this study is to bring into dialogue those experiences in the service of mission from throughout the world in order to see what we can and should already be saying together as churches in dialogue and cooperation internally within the ecumenical movement. Arising out of its experience with BEM (Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry), Faith and Order hopes to arrive at a 'convergence' text. To that end, the book highlights the issues on which progress has been made and those where there still remain obstacles to be overcome.

Thus the **main text** highlights the common perspectives and the **material inside the boxes** refers to issues on which there are still divergences both **within** the churches and also **between** the churches.

It is good to note that it was to a very wide audience that Faith and Order addressed its invitation to work on the text *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*. The text before us now is thus the result of a revision of that text in the light of the contributions, recommendations, observations and criticisms received.

C. The Invitation

Having clarified aspects relating to the history of the theme of unity and the role played by the Faith and Order movement in that task, the text proceeds to a specific invitation as regards its

expectations on what will come out of the present process of reflection. It thus begins with a definition of the Church: 'In God's providence the Church exists, not for itself alone, but to serve in God's work of reconciliation and for the praise and glory of God.' To which it adds: 'The self-understanding of the Church is essential for its proper response to its vocation.'

Finally, it gives the questions to which it hopes to receive responses in order to continue the task that has begun.

I. The Church of the Triune God

A. The Nature of the Church

10. The text says, 'This is the common vocation of every Christian and is exemplified by the faithful responsiveness of Mary to the angel of the annunciation...'

It is our understanding that this statement is valid for some, but not for 'every Christian.' If what is being attempted here is a text representing women, then we consider that John 11: 27 is more comprehensive: 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.'

In the following statement we read, '...Mary has often been seen as a symbol of the Church and of the individual Christian, called to be Jesus' "brother and sister and mother" in doing the will of his Father in heaven (cf. Matt. 12: 50).' It seems to us that here a subtle attempt is being made to introduce an essential element of Catholic Mariology.

The interpretation of the text quoted indicates a meaning contrary to that given in paragraph 10. It is not possible to state that this text regards Mary as a symbol of the Church. On the contrary, when his mother wishes to speak to him, Jesus declares that the disciples are 'my brother and sister and mother.' In v. 50, it is said even more emphatically 'whoever'.

12. '[The Church] is apostolic because the Word of God, sent by the Father, creates and sustains the Church. This word of God is made known to us through the Gospel primarily and normatively borne witness to by the apostles (cf. Eph. 2: 20; Rev. 21: 14), making the communion of the faithful a community that lives in, and is responsible for, the succession of the apostolic truth expressed in faith and life throughout the ages.'

The above paragraph contains a doctrinal definition of the primacy of the apostles.

The primacy of the apostles is truly a problem in the text under consideration and concerns the understanding that we have of it within our Protestant tradition. The biblical basis quoted in the text is flimsy, but it is there. What is not explained is why the prophetic tradition is omitted, which, in the text quoted, is given an equal place to that of the apostles.

Through examining the text in Ephesians that declares, 'You are... built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone' (Eph 2: 19-20), we are encouraged to say that those who are united to Jesus Christ through baptism are, at the same time, apostles and prophets.

The text from Revelation quoted has little meaning in relation to the statement that the Gospel is 'primarily' transmitted by the apostles, since, if we refer back to the two previous verses, there is a radical change in perspective.

Revelation 21: 12-14: 'It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.'

It would never have occurred to Jews to state that the faith of their people in the One God was based on the message transmitted by the twelve tribes. The testimony of the apostles is the testimony of the Christian community as a whole.

What is 'normative' is Scripture in itself, and not its transmission by the apostles. We do not understand why the Pauline text in 1 Cor. 12: 28-30 is not used, where the ministry of the apostles is given a hierarchically first place, when it says, 'And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?'

In Paul's approach the stress is always laid on God's activity, not on the activity of humans, who are saved sinners. If there are gifts and ministries, that is because there is a Spirit who places them at the service of the community (1 Cor. 12: 1-4, 11).

As regards the attributes of the Church as 'One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic', we venture to quote from Thomas Wipf, President of the Council of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, who in his text 'Where the Word is, there is the Church: a Reformed word in the ecumenical context' (Reforma 2007), is much clearer in his explanation of those attributes:

- The *unity* of the Church consists in its head and foundation, Jesus Christ.
- The *holiness* of the Church consists in that God, who overcomes all divisions in the world, is holy.
- The *catholicity* of the Church consists in that God's saving purpose avails for all human beings and for all peoples.
- And the *apostolicity* of the Church is to be tested by its faithfulness to the Gospel and the answer to the question whether in its preaching it is constantly pointing away from itself to Christ. On Reformation Sunday we deliberately sing 'A mighty fortress is our God' and not 'A mighty fortress is our Church'.
- Unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity are the essential characteristic features of the Church accepted by faith. We can never discern those characteristic features in it in their totality. We can only see evidence of them in our proclamation of the Gospel and our attempts to conform to them in our own witness and service. That makes it clear that for us the Church is not only an object of faith, i.e. something that is ultimately invisible. In faith, in the living out of faith and in the fellowship of believers, the Church is present as living reality.

On the basis of our Protestant understanding, we uphold that the Church is apostolic in that **all** baptized Christians are sent out into the world to proclaim the Gospel, and it is inspired by the Holy Spirit and believes in Jesus Christ: 'For there is one God and one mediator between God and humankind, the man Christ Jesus' (1 Tim. 2: 5). The apostolicity of **all** Christians does not give a 'normative' position in the life of the Church only to those who are considered to stand in the 'apostolic succession', which appears to be an issue that has been included because it is of interest to those who compiled this document. That becomes very evident in paragraph 89, where it is appropriate to ask what happens in churches in various historical situations where the

‘succession’ has been broken, as, for example, in the churches of the Soviet Union, North Korea, China, etc.

The Institutional Dimension of the Church and the Work of the Holy Spirit (box)

- a) We consider the first position as that closest to our theology
- b) We consider closest to our theology the statement that ‘the power and reliability of God’s truth [is] grounded in the sovereignty of his Word and Spirit which works through – but if necessary also counter to – the given institutional structures of the Church.’
- c) We consider closest to our theology the statement that ‘continuity in apostolic faith is, under certain circumstances, being kept in spite of – and even through – the break of institutional continuity.’

That latter point (c) is very important: if the Church is *creatura Verbi* and *creatura Spiritus*, then its existence does not necessarily depend on ‘continuity in episcopacy’. It is our understanding that these are real disagreements and not merely differences in emphasis. These disagreements and differences are mutually irreconcilable.

(II) Biblical Insights

16. It is important to highlight the following sentence in this paragraph as positive: ‘Diversity appears not as accidental in the life of the Christian community, but as an aspect of its catholicity, a quality that reflects the fact that it is part of the Father’s design that the story of salvation in Christ be incarnational.’

a) The Church as People of God

18. We only note here linguistic aspects that we believe should be reformulated in a future text: ‘God fashioned one from among the nations as servant for the salvation of all (cf. Isa. 49: 1-6). We would prefer to speak of ‘peoples’ rather than ‘nations’, since, as well as avoiding the modern semantic connotations of the word ‘nation’, it enables us [in the Spanish version] to change ‘female servant’ to ‘male servant’, which brings it closer to the text from Isaiah quoted.

In the sentences, ‘There is a genuine newness in the covenant initiated by Christ. Nevertheless, as “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6: 16), the Church remains related, in a mysterious way, to the Jewish people, even as a branch is grafted onto the rich root of an olive tree (cf. Rom 11: 11-36),’ it is distance rather than continuity that seems to stand out. The link with Israel is not ‘mysterious’ in any way. Jesus was Jewish, and the first community was Jewish. Paul preached in synagogues, etc.. We consider that it is relevant to speak of a link showing a continuity between Israel and the Church, between the promises to the former and the latter. The following paragraph supports our observation, and we thus think that there would be no problem in deleting ‘in a mysterious way’.

On the other hand, we note that up to this point every time that the image of the Church is feminine, then terms such as [in the Spanish version] ‘female servant’, etc., are used.

19. This is a basically positive paragraph, but its language in part seems to us somewhat strange, especially when it says towards the end, ‘As a prophetic and royal people, Christians seek to witness to the will of God and to influence the course of events in the world.’

In the first place, we think it important to add after ‘...to witness to the will of God’ the words ‘through the preaching of the Gospel and individual and corporate witness.’

Secondly, the phrase ‘to influence the course of events in the world’ inevitably raises the question as to what would be the most appropriate forum from which it is possible to exert any sort of influence at world level. If the authors of the document were thinking here of the WCC, they are without a doubt being too idealistic.

The mission of the Church is not only to influence world events, but also, and fundamentally, to preach clearly and plainly the Word of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Preaching Christ crucified and risen is a veritable scandal and madness for today’s world, as it was for the world two millennia ago. ‘Influence’ also implies the idea of a certain power centre from which such influence could be exerted. The Church, rather, is called to be a prophetic and royal people, speaking up for those in misery and poverty, the excluded, the suffering, the weak members of the body of society. Its influence in all that it does and promotes is exerted precisely on the basis of that hermeneutical insight and on none other.

b) The Church as the Body of Christ

20 This is an obscure paragraph containing tautologies and it is not clear what its aim is. The choice of biblical texts is arbitrary. If the theme is reconciliation, then why not quote 2 Corinthians 5: 18-19 or Colossians 1: 18-20? If the theme is the body of Christ, it would have to explain what are the ‘two dimensions’ being referred to.

21. Once again we raise the question of gender language in [in the Spanish version] ‘its vocation to be the female servant of the Lord.’ Is there no masculine form of the word ‘servant’?

The rest consists of traditional doctrinal statements on the body of Christ. There is no reference to the incarnation of the Church in suffering and poverty according to Christ. The body of Christ described here is metaphysical and eschatological. For example, there is no mention of the cross and resurrection making clear that the Church is the body of Christ when it undertakes in the midst of history and through its members to take up its cross and live out its witness to him in word and deed (martyrium) in the conflicts of the world.

We wish to add the following remarks.

There is much discussion on the formulation ‘body of Christ’ as to whether it should be taken metaphorically or literally. If it is literal, the Church would then be a prolongation of the incarnation of God in Christ. If it is a metaphor, Paul’s wish is to teach the members of the Church that its existence and unity depend on Christ and that each member has the ability to promote or endanger that unity. It would perhaps be better not to have to decide between these two possibilities but to opt for both. The basic idea of the image of the body is that each member shares in the unity of the whole, in which all members are dependant on one another. That same idea is reflected in the image of growing into ‘a holy temple in the Lord’.

In Romans 12: 4-8 the formulation ‘body of Christ’ serves to reinforce the necessity for the different members comprising precisely one body to share the gifts they possess. The gifts mentioned by Paul are: ‘prophecy, service, teaching, encouragement, contributing to others’ needs, leadership and mercy.’ The Greek word used by Paul to speak of these gifts is ‘charisma’, and this is a good opportunity to recall that this word describes very much more than that which

the so-called charismatic churches take it to describe, such as lively singing, clapping, jumping, dancing, praying aloud, praying in tongues, healing, and falling in a faint.

In the biblical sense the charisms, or gifts, include wisdom, knowledge, faith, service, teaching, sharing, gifts of healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, building up the community, tongues and their interpretation, leadership and, above all, love. The reduction of the charisms to phenomena that are often simply emotional and even a mere passing fashion is plainly an abandonment of a large part of the richness of the Bible and a distortion of the idea of charism.

In 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31 Paul uses the same image of the body to insist on unity and the sharing of gifts. One of his most profound sayings is in v. 26: 'If one part suffers, every part suffers with it.'

The WCC document fails to relate the body of the Church to the wider body of society, a body that is fragmented, broken, suffering, wounded, etc. Similarly, there is no mention of the task of restoring that body beginning with the restoration effected by Christ in his body and which he desires to extend or expand into the whole body of society.

To speak of a body and to live and act as a body means to be restored together with others and with the whole body of society, and to grow with them and form a unity through active participation in the body.

c) The Church as Temple of the Holy Spirit

22 and **23**. These paragraphs give the impression that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a relationship within the inner life of the Church. There is no mention of the relationship of that indwelling with the biblical idea of the Holy Spirit as sustaining creation and the whole of humankind. What is being described is a church turned in on itself where the 'household' is itself and not the oikoumene, not the common household of all. There is no mention of the biblical text John 3: 8, which has particular importance for an understanding of the wider oikoumene.

d) The Church as Koinonia/Communion

32. 'The communion of the Church consists... of persons in community, all of whom contribute to its flourishing.' [Translator's note: 'flourishing' in the English is translated as 'prosperidad' in the Spanish.] If this referring to support of the Church through offerings, prayers and praises, this statement presents the difficulty that the Church is not an end in itself but exists in order to perform the mission entrusted to it by God. With this ending the paragraph loses the force it had and the following paragraph becomes a mere wish list.

B. The Mission of the Church

34. The phrase '... and to bring humanity to its purpose...' is inadequate, since the Church cannot claim to have such a task. To avoid misunderstandings (since God guides the Church as well), we suggest that it be deleted.

36. We see a problem with the word 'participate'. Participation in 'the mission of Christ' and 'the reality of the Kingdom of God' is presented as an established fact. We consider that it more correct to place this participation within the grace and work of the Holy Spirit.

In the light of present history, it would be difficult for us to affirm with the document that ‘The Church, embodying in its own life the mystery of salvation and the transfiguration of humanity, participates in the mission of Christ...’. It is only in its own ambiguity and humanity that the Church participates in mission, and it does that, not by virtue of itself, but by the grace and work of the Holy Spirit.

37. We view with concern the expression in the paragraph saying ‘... the Church cannot be true to itself without giving witness (martyria) to God’s will for the salvation and transformation of the world.’ It is possible to ask the document in general who it is that decides, and how, when it is that the Church cannot be true to itself. The response given by the sentence itself does not refer us to the concrete life of the particular churches, but to abstractions which the document itself has undertaken to enumerate: apostolicity understood as continuity, universality understood as uniformity, etc. In order to state that a church cannot be part of the Church there must be adduced concrete historical situations where the mission of the Church (and that is what this chapter in the document is speaking about) is being compromised by choices contrary to its call to be part of the body of Christ. For example, from our situation we view with concern that certain churches compromise the Christian witness when they ban theologians from writing and teaching; when other Christians are branded as ‘communists’ because they are committed to life; and when the main focus of preaching ceases to be the cross and becomes mammon by idolizing prosperity. Even then, when we confront these challenges, we refrain from stating that those churches cannot be Church (using the formulation in the Spanish version). Cf. Psalm 75: 6-8; Matt. 7: 1-5.

We thus propose that the following statement be taken into account throughout the document:

The Church is incarnated as an historical concrete reality in the form of a local community sharing in human ambiguity. The more we attempt to define the Church ontologically, the less will it be possible to have a viable ecumenical understanding of it.

Sooner or later, the ideal of the Church will be a factor for division, for reciprocal judgement and a lack of love (as said by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life in Community*).

38. Here again we find ourselves up against the same problem: the starting point is an abstraction: ‘This [mission] the Church understands as an essential dimension of its identity. The Church in this way signifies, participates in, and anticipates the new humanity God wants, and also serves to proclaim God’s grace in human situations and needs until Christ comes in glory (cf. Matt 25: 31).’ It is possible here to ask who is the subject of the Church. We are not told. Is it the ecumenical movement, or the confessions, or the major historical traditions? Since no explanation is given of the basis on which this ecclesiology is being constructed, it falls into abstractions that again deny the sovereignty and grace of God. The lack of humility in this text is evidenced in the words of the final sentence: ‘in human situations and needs’ [Translator’s note: the Spanish reads ‘in all human situations and needs’]. It would seem that the Church shares in the divine omnipotence and never has to chose, never opt for a particular situation and leave others aside.

40. With the formulation ‘The Church is called and empowered to share the suffering of all by advocacy and care for the poor...’ we are confronted with the same problem as in the previous paragraph. [Translator’s note: ‘and empowered’ in the Spanish reads ‘and has the capacity to do it’] Using the same terminology, the One who has the capacity to do it is Christ, who uses the Church (as his body) and history to achieve his mission. The Church shares the suffering of all as the crucified body of Christ, but in history it is always compelled to make choices. Its resources

are limited and its gifts are not concentrated all in one place. We do consider it positive that in this paragraph the use of the words 'is called' stands out. 'The Church is called... to share the suffering of all', but it does not have the capacity to do it, since the gifts of Christ have been distributed according to his grace and in the particular historical moment and context in which the Church finds itself.

This also applies to para. 41. What is to be understood by 'to proclaim faithfully the **whole** teaching of Christ'?

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

43. This is a statement of faith that we can go along with in that it says nothing.

44. Again we come up against the fact that the document does not explain who are the Church nor where it is to be found. When it says 'Aware of God's saving presence in the world, the Church already praises and glorifies...', who is it that is aware of the saving presence, and from where does this praise and glorifying arise?

45. This paragraph is highly problematic. First, it uses Roman language to define the Church. Secondly, it uses biblical texts that contradict the sentence that they are intended to support. Thirdly, it still shows no understanding of what the statements in these five paragraphs have to do with being a sign and instrument of God in the world.

To take these points one by one. In his latest document on the Church, Pope John Paul II used the idea of mystery as a central element. Everything is mystery. Constant appeal is made to the same text as here. Exegetically, Paul's idea is the exact opposite. Ephesians 1: 9-10 says 'And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.'

If our God and Father (the subject of the sentence) has made known to us the mystery of his will, then in strict logic the mystery has ceased to be a mystery. God has revealed God's self in the person of Jesus the Christ and thus God has ceased to be a mystery. If we look at Christ, we shall know the will of God. Thus, to state, as the document does, that 'To acknowledge the nature of the Church as "mysterion" ... indicates the transcendent character of its God-given reality as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. The Church can never be fully and unequivocally grasped only in its visible appearance', demonstrates that behind this theological style there is a question of power. Mystery is the preferred device to defend any ecclesiological theme from a position of power. To give only one example, the mass can only be celebrated by men for 'mysterious' reasons.

The second sentence in this paragraph is as problematic as the first. We ask: who is it that sees and judges? How can anyone see and judge anything that is by nature a mystery?

II. The Church in History

A. The Church *in via*

We consider this chapter of the document to be of fundamental importance since both God and the Church are only realized in history. God, as guide and creator, leads the whole creation to its destiny and complete realization. The Church is the human institution that endeavours, attempts,

claims, seeks and yearns in its fragility and humanity to be the object of divine mercy and grace (Eph. 1: 3-10).

We insist here on what we consider to be the greatest weakness of the whole document: it fails to develop a Christology that would be the foundation for the statements on the Church. Out of an incarnational Christology it is possible to construct an historical ecclesiology. As a statement for consensus paragraph 48 can be accepted, but only on the basis of what is expressed in the following box 'Church as "Sacrament"?' where it says: '(1) the need for a clear distinction between the Church and Sacraments: the Sacraments are the means of salvation through which Christ sustains the Church, and not actions by which the Church realizes or actualizes itself...'

49. It is possible to accept this paragraph with the proviso that the Church is the eschatological community by virtue of the grace and mercy of God, and not by our own works.

50. The points marked by bullets are weak in meaning, ambiguous and reflect individual viewpoints. For example, why not mention politics and economics as conditions affecting the Church? What does being exposed to 'the power of sin' mean? Once again we have an abstraction that says nothing. If we are speaking of the Church in history, we should be making reference to the historical manifestations of sin present in the Church itself. The following paragraphs show the position from where the present document is being produced and to where it is going.

51. What is described in this paragraph has been a constant feature in the life of the Church and contains no surprises. When did all those who believed belong, and all those who belonged believe? Ananias and Sapphira are an example that the first community already had that problem. What it does not mention is that, in our contemporary world, in the history of the 20th century, wars, destruction and over-exploitation of creation, injustice, colonialism, and various other -isms, have been in large part the responsibility of Christians, who do believe and who, moreover, belong to the Church. That truly is a scandal!

52. This provides the theological basis for the following paragraphs.

53. Oneness: this can be considered as one of the best paragraphs in the whole document.

54. This paragraph contains a discrepancy between 'essential holiness' and historic holiness. We would propose a wording such as this:

Holiness is inherent in the nature of God (not of the Church as an historic entity). The Church has been reconciled to God on the cross. Thus, when the Church takes up its cross in history, it is sanctified by God in Christ, the Risen One.

55. What is catholic is the Gospel, not the way in which it is lived and preached. God desires diversity, and it has always been so. What scandalizes and destroys the essential catholicity of the Church is the sin of pride (hybris), of thinking and believing that there is only one way of living and preaching the Gospel. The 'store of meaning' in the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit, so that it can be preached in different ages and cultures.

56. Again, the document attributes a characteristic to the Church, in this case apostolicity, which should be regarded as an attribute of God. It says: 'The Church is called to return continuously to the apostolic truth.' We propose: 'The Church is called continuously to return to God, to be converted again and again...'

The Church and Sin (box)

Thesis: If the Church does not sin, it does not exist.

We consider that in our tradition the second position is the one we could take up.

The final statement is unsustainable. It begins with a dualism that is unnecessary. It is platitudinous to say that holiness and sin are different things. The holiness of the Church is the work of God. There is nothing or nobody that can do what God does. To say that by nature the Church is holy is to deny the need for the Church to be redeemed. If the Church is holy per se, then the redemptive work of Christ is unnecessary. Only what has been redeemed by Jesus Christ, called by God and sanctified by God's Holy Spirit can be holy.

B. In Christ – But Not Yet in Full Communion

In paragraphs 57-59 there are too many unexplained presuppositions. It is not clear what is understood by koinonia or communion. No explanation is given of what the 'scandal of division' (para. 57) consists of. We do not understand the term 'restoration' in this context. What ecclesiastical model is an attempt being made to restore under the pretext of unity? The eschatology of paragraph 58 is incomprehensible. What is the connection between the fulfilment of the eschatological promises and the growth in communion 'between our churches'? Is it a sign, an instrument, is it a feature of the Church in history, in via? In the following paragraph, the power of the eschatological imagery is diluted by the (too late) acknowledgment that the body of Christ is divided by sin.

C. Communion and Diversity

60-63 Our only observation is that it uses the concept of culture, and it would be more appropriate to use the term 'theology'. No culture has the obligation to preach the Gospel. That task belongs exclusively to the Church.

Limits of Diversity (box)

In these discussion points there is one question that has not been answered, at least formally: why set limits to diversity? By whom and by what body are they to be set?

- a) Without diversity 'the fullness of the Gospel message' is obscured, because diversity is an instrument which God uses so that salvation reaches all.
- b) The problem is not the weight placed on ecclesial and confessional identity. That is subjective. The problem arises when this ecclesial and confessional identity becomes exclusive and denies to other identities and confessions the rights that it claims for itself. Therefore, the model of reconciled diversity should be kept and be further developed as a path to travel on the way to greater visible unity.
- c) The third type of ecclesiology is the one that best represents ours.
- d) We do not clearly understand to what this paragraph is referring.

D. The Church as Communion of Local Churches

64-66. Again the relationship is reversed. According to these paragraphs, the local church exists by virtue of the prior existence of the apostolic, etc., Church. We consider that it is important to emphasize that the relationship is the other way round. In the first place, the local church exists, and, in that there are local churches, the Church exists with all its attributes in various parts of the oikoumene.

We uphold the thesis that the Church does not exist without the local church. Similarly, without the diversity of local churches, it is not possible to speak of the oneness of the Church; that without a multiplicity of theologies produced by the local churches, the catholicity of the Church is not possible (since each local situational theology is reflection by the local church on its challenges in expressing its faith and carrying out its mission in its particular context). Similarly, without the local church, there is no apostolicity of the Church, in that it is through the local church that the Spirit calls, assembles and sends out apostles, bishops, ministers and deacons. This also entails that, without a diversity of ministries there is no apostolicity of the Church. To sum up, the nature and mission of the Church can only be realized as it arises from existing local churches. This statement amounts to a reversal of the logic of the whole document.

It is the life of the local churches, with the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments and their witness in history that ‘sustains’ (para. 66) the communion of the whole Church.

Local Church (box)

The first definition is that closest to ours. It says: ‘The local church is the congregation of believers gathered in one place to hear the Word and celebrate the Sacraments.’

The last sentence in the highlighted paragraph is interesting. The discrepancy indicated is often due to the slight, or even absent, ‘incarnation’ of theologians in the concrete life of the local church or community, with its bright and dark moments, its ups and downs, its difficulties and hopes.

III. The Life of Communion in and for the World

67. This is a sort of summary of the section. The theme of the God-given gifts necessary for the life and mission of the Church is central and unobjectionable.

And yet, there is subtly introduced here an element that is difficult for our Protestant tradition to digest. In the Spanish version, on which we have been working, the [in English, second] sentence is constructed in such a way that it remains totally ambiguous, since it contains a strange redundancy (grace – grace). Perhaps that is a way of claiming consensus. We see the main theological difficulty in the statement ‘God bestows on [the Church] the grace of the apostolic faith, baptism and eucharist as means of grace to create and sustain the koinonia.’ The apostolic faith is not a means of grace. It ought to state simply that God bestows on the Church the grace of faith, baptism and the eucharist.

A further point to be examined with some caution is the words ‘other means’ alongside those mentioned. What would these ‘other means’ be?

A. Apostolic Faith

In general this section has no major questionable points, or at least any that merit lengthy detailed examination. We do, however, make the following points.

68. In the first place, the apostolic faith as an abstraction does not exist. It does exist in that it lives in the community of faith. The quotations given in the text of the document are truly amazing. We are concerned to see the mutilation of the basic text in Acts 2: 42, which [in full] reads: 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.'

The document does not mention a faith that prays, a communal faith that shares, an eucharistic faith. Moreover, it should be noted that the biblical text does not speak of the apostolic faith, but of the apostles' teaching (didache). This eclectic use of biblical texts on the one hand, and subtle changes to them on the other, is not what we understand by good exegesis and hermeneutics.

Jude 3 [in full] reads: 'Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.'

That text from Jude is striking, since it is frequently used to justify a privileged position for the hierarchy in biblical interpretation, a sort of 'power of the keys' in interpretation.

Finally, we should ask seriously whether 'the faith of the Church' even exists at all. People, the body of Christ, the community of believers, individuals can have faith. To speak of 'the faith of the Church' is to make an abstraction of the Church, and an abstract entity cannot have faith.

69. Again here we are confronted with an insoluble problem because of the general character of the document. This is pure scholasticism. It begins with a definition and from there begins to draw out consequences and statements.

It should be asked to what the strange omission of the Apostles' Creed is due. Since the document speaks so much of the apostolic faith, why omit the first formal expression of that faith in this creed? The churches of the WCC who make reference to creeds always include the Apostles' Creed. In the course of worship, in our congregations, if the historic creeds are used, it is customary basically for the Apostles' Creed to be the one used.

It is of great importance to reject the following statement in this paragraph: 'While the apostolic faith has to be interpreted in the context of changing times and places, it must be in continuity with the original witness of the apostolic community and with the faithful explication of that witness throughout the ages.'

Who decides what is continuity and fidelity? Who decides, for example, if that quotation from Jude in the preceding paragraph is applicable or not? Who defines what is permanent throughout the ages? Is it a church hierarchy? Is it a defined magisterium, established once and for all? In an ecumenical context, both the statement in the document and the thought of an authoritative magisterium are unsustainable. If we are speaking of unity in diversity, the claim being made here is inadequate.

70. It is clear that an attempt is being made here to counterbalance the previous paragraph. We fully agree with this historical approach, and we propose that the whole of paragraph 69 be

removed and only paragraph 70 be left. It is positive that the document acknowledges that the faith is ‘also testified to in other forms’.

71. We agree with the definition of ‘the apostolic tradition’ but not so much with the formulation ‘Church of the apostles’. The criterion of apostolicity, which the Christian communities in early days applied to the writings that began to circulate was not linked to a particular apostle (the supposed author of the text), but to the consistency of the contents of the writing with the first proclamation they had received. A writing was considered ‘apostolic’ and was then received by the Church, not if it bore the name of Peter, Paul, John, or whoever, but if it declared the Gospel and its consequences as the first missionaries had done. That is how writings were received as trustworthy, authentic and inspired, and then declared canonical from the most varied authors and even anonymous (the four gospels, Acts, Hebrews); while a great number of supposedly authentic writings from Peter, Paul, John, Thomas, Mary Magdalene, Jude, Philip, James, etc., were discarded (the present apocryphal books of the New Testament). In short, to speak of ‘the Church of the apostles’ is limiting. Historically and theologically, it is more correct to speak of ‘the Church of the apostolic age’.

72. Once again, the Apostles’ Creed is absent. And why is the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed pre-eminent? The sentence ‘Nevertheless, the existence of such differences suggests that churches need to be attentive to the tolerable limits to diversity in confessing one faith’ is problematic, since it presupposes that someone, some body, a magisterium, a synod, etc. defines the ‘tolerable limits’. Who decides what is tolerable?

B. Baptism

74 to 77. The section states that baptism is the basic bond of unity, with which we agree. At the same time, we observe that in our setting many of our congregations are quite regularly confronted with the existence of churches that emphasize adult baptism and reject infant baptism, and thus require rebaptism. Similarly, there are believers who request rebaptism, because they do not recognize the baptism already administered.

As for the rest, it all corresponds to BEM, and we make no observation, except to refer to the first sentence in paragraph **74**, which seems superfluous. It says, ‘In the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed Christians confess “one baptism for the remission of sins”.’

We consider important what is said in paragraph **76** on the relation between baptism and worship, witness, teaching and life. [Translator’s note: ‘life’ here seems to refer to ‘life-long growth into Christ’.]

We agree that the outstanding points are those in the highlighted box, and they are the same points as those raised in the BEM document of 1982. We note that since then little or no progress has been made on the disagreements on which no agreement has yet been reached.

Baptism (box)

- a) We refer here to what is said in our regulations on baptism, which is genuinely reflected in article 3 of the statement ‘Mutual Recognition of the Sacrament of Baptism’.
- b) We thus maintain a very firm ‘no’ to rebaptism.
- e) The trinitarian formula is the one that we consider most appropriate.

C. Eucharist

We note that the word ‘Eucharist’ is in itself strange to many of our congregations, who certainly identify more with the words ‘Holy Supper’ or ‘Communion’. Paragraph 79, which speaks of receiving ‘the body and blood of Christ’, raises an important issue for our churches, and historically takes us back to the discussions on transubstantiation, consubstantiation, memorial and representation. Our more Reformed liturgy has included the terms of anamnesis and epiklesis only as a result of ecumenical contacts. How do our churches describe the communal celebration of the Holy Supper? Is it receiving the body and blood of Christ, a thanksgiving, an act of remembrance?

We wonder in how many of our congregations, liturgies of the Holy Supper are shaped in a less structured and more contextual way. In which case, are they following the points indicated in the document?

It is also appropriate to discuss the issue of whether the table should be open, half-open or closed. Who are entitled to participate? In some of our own congregations, this is still a crucial issue.

78-81. Here there is silence on receiving communion in both kinds (a fundamental issue at the Reformation), consubstantiation, renewed forgiveness of sins (an essential element to understand the Lord’s Supper) and the person responsible for the celebration. If we consider that there is no church without the eucharist, there are too many fundamental issues not mentioned. It is not advisable to leave all these issues pending for future discussion. The ecumenical movement must make it clear where it stands in this regard, even though it may take time to achieve this. Treatment of these issues needs to be made binding.

81. In this paragraph the term ‘mass’ is used for the only time in the whole document. Why? It is not a word that is used in the Reformed tradition. It is occasionally used in some Lutheran churches. The word is usually associated with the idea of the re-enactment of Christ’s sacrifice on the altar. If this is an issue for future discussion, why use the concept of ‘mass’ here? ‘... the Mass demands reconciliation and sharing among all those regarded as brothers and sisters in the one family of God...’ Once again the essential Christological centrality is replaced by an idea floating in the air. In this case it is the idea of the mass. Christ does not require the Church, the mass, nothing. *Christus solus!* At the end of the paragraph, the same idea is repeated: ‘The Eucharist, therefore, obliges, us...’ We consider that linking that sort of exhortatory or imperative language with the eucharist is not appropriate in this paragraph, nor anywhere else. As the document itself says in the following box, no agreement has yet been reached on the meaning of the eucharist, but here it says that it ‘obliges’. That sounds artificial and studied, if not peremptory.

Eucharist (box)

We realize that this whole section on contentious issues for future debate or still without consensus is a summary of difficult and long-standing – not to say millenarian – debates. It is a long list, precisely because there are unresolved issues. However, we do consider it important to state our opinion and position on some of them. The major problem in this section is that it uses theological terminology without explaining what is meant by it, and there are in this section terms that remain highly ambiguous.

We understand that in the understanding of our Evangelical Church of the River Plate, the eucharist is at the same time a thanksgiving and a supper. In a united church of Lutherans and Reformed, having two catechisms (Luther's Shorter Catechism and the Heidelberg Catechism) and different approaches to the understanding of the presence of Christ in the supper, and also as a signatory church of the Leuenberg Agreement, we leave it to the conscience and understanding of communicants how they understand the meaning of the real presence of Jesus Christ in the bread and wine.

In our understanding, the centrality of the words of institution at the eucharist is linked to the Lord himself and the faith of the communicants, and not to the condition of the celebrant (Male, priest, etc.).

The last paragraph but one, which gives the different attitudes as to who may share in the eucharist, again evades the question of authority. Who decides what and how? That omission of the question of authority is particularly forceful when the document states 'Among still other churches eucharistic communion is understood as the ultimate expression of agreement in faith and of a communion in life.'

We consider that unity in the faith is different from unanimity. As it is the document lays itself open to misunderstanding. This difference should be clarified.

D. Ministry of All the Faithful

82-85. Except for the problem of repetition [in the Spanish version] of '... and of responsibility' at the beginning of paragraph 83, we do not see any observations to be made on this issue. We suggest [in the Spanish version]: 'These gifts are given for the common good (cf. 1 Cor. 12: 7), and place the obligation of mutual responsibility (and of co-responsibility) on every individual and local community, and indeed on the Church as a whole at every level of its life.'

85. Rather than discussing the issue of the priesthood of all believers, this is a good place to affirm it in the actual life of our congregations.

E. Ministry of the Ordained

We understand that a crucial theme in Faith and Order is that of the threefold ministry of bishops, presbyters and deacons. In fact, even within the Reformed churches, there is a variety of positions. In almost all churches in the Reformed tradition, episcopacy is not an option, and similarly, there is no uniformity with regard to the place of deacons. Some churches do not have them in any form. Others have them as ordained permanent positions. Others have them as timed appointments, either paid or voluntary. In some churches, presbyters are ordained for life, while others induct them for a particular period. We see that there are many ways of approaching these arrangements.

We note that the document, having spoken of the ministry of all believers, does not avoid being somewhat minister-centred in this section.

86-89. We consider that here there is a great omission: the prophetic aspect of the ordained ministry. It seems that the biblical basis is not a strong point in this document. Reference can be made to: Eph. 2: 20; 3: 5; 4: 11; 1 Cor. 12: 28-29; 14: 29; Luke 6: 23; etc.

This omission is important because it reveals the authors' attitude to tasks of the Church that are reckoned as essential elsewhere: exposure of wrongdoing, campaigning for peace and justice, martyrdom, etc. On the basis of this omission it would seem that those responsibilities do not belong to the ordained ministry, but in any case to others within the Church. To whom? It is not at all clear.

We note that the issue of the ordained ministry of women is absent from the text. We wish to contribute the following biblical basis for it: Rom. 16; Acts 16:40; John 4:39 and 11:27; Phil. 4:3. If we believe that God calls both men and women to faith, then it is also necessary to admit women to the ordained ministry.

We would add that both men and women have been martyrs in the cause of Jesus Christ.

We have a feeling that the document's formulation (para. 89) 'The ministry of the ordained is to serve in a specific way the apostolic continuity of the Church as a whole... Succession in ministry is a means of serving the apostolic continuity of the Church' infers much more than we would be disposed to concede.

We note that again the box listing differences indicates that there are many issues still to be explored. Given that the document claims to be a consensus, that list indicates that this is an aim difficult to achieve. The differences listed are very real and point to an underlying issue: our understanding of what it is to be Church.

It must be taken into account that the Roman Catholic Church is a member of Faith and Order and that that church has a very restricted definition of what it is to be Church. That results in our status as Church being called in question.

The Orthodox churches also question the role of women in the Church and their relation with the sacraments. How can all this be reconciled? As we see it, apart from listing difficulties, it is at present not possible to make much further progress.

F. Oversight: Personal, Communal, Collegial

90. The first sentence 'The Church, as the body of Christ and the eschatological people of God, is built up by the Holy Spirit through a diversity of gifts or ministries' is correct and merits all our support, always provided that there be added '... ministries given to both men and women.'

However, we do question what follows. This type of scholastic argument – and not only the terminology – is out of place in a document that claims to be ecumenical. Where does the statement come from that 'This diversity calls for a ministry of coordination, so that these gifts may enrich the whole Church...'? Do gifts have to be coordinated so that they can enrich the Church? If the gifts have been given by the Holy Spirit, then they can certainly enrich the life of the Church with or without coordination.

The document speaks of episkopé, using the Greek word, which it expounds in terms of a ministry of coordination carried out with the collaboration and assent of the whole community. That language leaves open the identification of the ministry of coordination as episkopé with the ministry of leadership as collaboration with the community. However, that does not necessarily imply that it is speaking of a collegial episkopé. The assent of the community still does clarify the way in which authority has to be allocated nor which individual, or individuals, are charged with the function of serving as coordinators of the gifts given by the Spirit of God to the community.

Paul states in 1 Corinthians 12:8 and 14:31-33 that God distributes gifts (charismata) as God wills and desires. But it is love that enables them to be overseen in the community (1 Cor. 13:2). The community will be able to dispose of them to serve building communion in the body of Christ.

This attempt to legitimize the exercise of authority on the basis of the lack of order in the gifts provided by God to the community has no biblical basis. The exercise of power follows cultural patterns and the apostle declares that they are in conflict with God's plan when they attempt to make the body of Christ subject to their sovereignty. The term 'oversight' [in Spanish 'supervisión'] means literally 'viewed by an authority from a distance'. This lack of an historical critical approach by the authors leads to dogmatic statements that are biblically and historically unfounded, if not inconsistent.

We consider that it must be firmly stated that oversight and episcopacy are not synonyms, as they are used at this point in the document. Oversight is only one of the roles, perhaps the least important role, of a bishop. The etymology of the word oversight [supervisión] is highly interesting and it cannot be ignored if we are going to use language responsibly, i.e. if we say what we think using the right words.

91. Episkopé takes on a restricted administrative nature linked with safeguarding apostolic truth in the local communities. This statement, not placed as it should be in the particular communal context mentioned in the previous paragraph, lends itself to legitimizing exercise of power from ecclesiastical centres governing the life of the whole Church, centres founded on a divine authority conferred by God's call.

92. Here bishops are regarded as the guarantors of apostolic continuity. Protestantism, by contrast, sees apostolic truth proclaimed in the preaching of the Word of God.

93. In this paragraph we see a description of the way in which Protestant episkopé was organized, presented as the dilemma between fidelity to ecclesiastical structures and remaining faithful to the apostolicity of the Church. That statement is incorrect, in that the Reformation insisted primarily on fidelity to the Word of God as above all other authority, whether ecclesiastical or secular.

Episkopé, Bishops and Apostolic Succession (box)

The description that follows on the lack of consensus on the nature of episcopacy clearly shows that the authors intend to include in the theological debate whether the legitimizing of the exercise of episcopacy (in the sense of apostolic succession) in a church is essential for it to be a constituent part of the Church. The communion of saints and the priesthood of all believers are absent from the points raised.

94. This paragraph is an attempt to regard as natural the inequality of power relations within the koinonia as pre-established relations already given by God as informal arrangements.

95. This paragraph justifies the call of God to exercise episkopé as a ministry in terms of an authority granted by God to the person called to this function in the Church. This function basically involves watching over the four conditions basic to the Church; unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity (cf. paras 33-38). According to this exposition, episkopé guarantees the continuity of the Church! That would be difficult to accept for those of us who consider that only God, according to God's Word, is the guarantor and Lord of the Church and its mission.

96. The functions of communal episkopé appear curiously in terms of involvement, commitment and assent, with only as a proviso the possibility of creating a structure that could perform this collective exercise of episkopé. Clearly, the functions of communal episkopé are subordinated to another organ, which administers its gifts in advance in a personal way. It is clear that this communal organ does not have the charisms nor the authority that would permit it to oversee those who are called by God to exercise a personal ministry of episkopé.

We do not understand what is meant by ‘discernment of the mind.’

97. Collegial episkopé speaks again of collegial leadership of the whole Church through discernment of the Spirit of Christ and reflecting the diversity in unity of the whole Church. This collegiality draws its inspiration from Scripture in the same way as it does from other sources that are placed on an equal footing with the sole source of the revelation of God’s will in the Christian Church: Holy Scripture.

98. Here a relation is established between what is called common witness before society and episkopé. This is the one reference to society in the whole section on episkopé. It is not clear what is the episcopal function that the statement legitimizes, but it leaves no room to doubt that it is referring to an episkopé exercised by church leaders, and it even appeals to the WCC as an instrument for coordination and stimulus [Translator’s note: the English does not mention WCC, only ‘ecumenical movement’]. This understanding of episkopé is located within the institutional structure of the Church with no social or historical vision or responsibility.

G. Conciliarity and Primacy

What follows until the next section is a subject for debate and reflection mainly in the churches of the northern hemisphere.

99. Conciliarity is exercised in love and truth in the local eucharistic community with their presiding minister. The language of the document does not provide for women in ministry. For its part, it attempts to guarantee truth through the authority of the ordained person. The reference to love in this context is striking, since it presupposes acceptance of patterns pre-established by the Church.

100. This paragraph is contrary to the Protestant tradition, which understands by synod a place and level of representation much more catholic (in the sense of universal) than a gathering of episkopoi from the most diverse geographical locations from around the world. It becomes even less acceptable when this episcopal gathering lays down that its decrees must be accepted by the whole Church.

See particularly our comments on paragraphs 64-66.

Moreover, the authors have not taken into account the historical setting of the ancient ecumenical synods. After that stage of the early centuries, no further synods have taken place that can be regarded as ecumenical.

There is, thus, a high level of idealism in this paragraph.

101. This paragraph is an attempt to soften earlier statements. However, despite the presumed participation of different levels of the Church in episkopé, still appeal is being made to the

necessity to have an individual to exercise coordination as a president who respects the integrity of the various participating communities.

102. There now appears in plain language the proposal for a primate (although it is obscured by the use of the word ‘primacy’, which is somewhat euphemistic).to exercise sovereign oversight over a wide geographical area, actually appealing to the patriarchate, which is presented as the highest level of communal and collegial service to unity.

We strongly question this concept of the Church, which apparently requires a vertical authoritarian structure, legitimized in terms of a divine call.

The document also seems to ignore the economic and power factors that influenced the development and establishment of the ancient centres of episkopé (Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem and Constantinople), and then the formation of the very papacy itself.

103. The papacy appears as the great response to the first reference in the text to the global context: globalization. It is the understanding of the authors that globalization now enables us to understand the papacy as a gift rather than a threat. At this point in the debate, obviously, Protestantism has been left behind, in order to create a dialogue simply between Catholics and Orthodox.

We state our total opposition to what is presented in this paragraph, for biblical, theological, ecclesiological, historical and pastoral reasons.

What is stated on ‘... a climate in which a universal primacy can be seen as a gift rather than a threat to other churches and the distinctive features of their witness’ is completely mistaken because globalization (the authors’ euphemism for neoliberal globalization) has been the cause of the destruction of the bonds of solidarity between persons, groups, peoples, nations and hemispheres, making yet more threatening any power centre, particularly if it is located in the northern hemisphere.

The document remains silent about the fact that the Roman primacy was developed in continuation of the power structure of the Roman Empire, which it inherited as its power declined, and that it represents a patriarchal, pyramidal, lordly, vertical and verticalist organization. Similarly, it remains silent on the fact that Protestant ecclesiology, which is democratic, horizontal, communal, arising out of faith communities and based solely and exclusively on the Word of God and on no other authority, developed in opposition to the Roman structure, with the result that Protestantism has been shaped by a different stage in history. Neither structure can be reduced to the other. While certain lines within Protestantism (e.g. Anglicans and some Lutherans) would be able to accept some of the statements in this paragraph, others (Reformed, other Lutherans, United, to name only mainstream traditions and not to mention Anabaptists and Pentecostals) will not ever accept a universal primacy, neither as a gift nor as anything else.

104. This paragraph is a contribution on the way to seeking unity, despite the fact that it does not fail to express some doubts as to what sort of diversity can be tolerated under such oversight. It refers to the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, which exhorts leaders and theologians ‘to enter into patient and fraternal dialogue’. It is clearly looking to ordained ministries as requisite for dialogue, leaving communities at the periphery of this quest, or at least considering their contributions irrelevant.

There are unintelligible elements in this paragraph. What does ‘the essence of the primacy’ refer to? Among whom is there consensus on ‘a universal ministry in support of mission and unity of the Church’?

We do not understand what is put forward at the end of this section in a document that claims to be a consensus. To reflect on present concrete forms of organization of the churches introduces elements that lead to unnecessary polemics. At times the language being used is so grandiloquent that it verges on the absurd. What is ‘a universal ministry’?

Conciliarity and Universal Primacy (box)

The discussion points here show clearly that the editorial drift of the document is towards the necessity of primacy and conciliarity as conditions for the Church to achieve Christian ecclesial status.

We fail to understand the reference to St Peter and St Paul. The apostle Peter disappears from the scene after his intervention at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:7 and the mention of him in Galatians 2. In the salutation in 1 and 2 Peter there is no particular support for the idea of a ‘ministry serving the wider unity of the Church.’ Paul preaches the kingdom of God and teaches concerning the Lord Jesus Christ openly and unhindered, to the end of Acts, and we do not understand how he can be adduced as evidence in this paragraph. What interested him in the various conflicts he had to deal with was always faithfulness to the Gospel, and not to any scheme of church unity and even less to any sort of ‘primacy’.

We do not understand from where the authors get the idea of ‘God’s intention for some form of universal ministry in the service of the unity and mission of the Church.’ At least, we find no scriptural foundation for it.

Moreover, and more seriously: what is the biblical basis for ‘primacy’?

H. Authority

105-108. This section is flagrantly opposed to sections F and G, which clearly demonstrates the illegitimate nature of the attempt to justify in divine terms the unequal power relationship within the community in terms of what is necessary or a condition to be the Church of Christ. The placing of authority on an equal footing with service, its definition as ‘relational and interdependent’ clearly points to a horizontal and communal concept of power, consistent with the Christian faith and with which we fully agree.

Sadly, however, the document identifies the episkopoi with the figure of Jesus and his apostles, while it separates from them the local churches as (people of) the world, who have to be taught and baptized by God’s command. The reference to ordination again demonstrates the distance between the Church that receives the authority and the faithful, whose assent is a necessary element in constituting a communal space, but without any inclusion of a definition of ordination, since its authority comes from God alone. The community does not have any authority, although it can gain access to it through works by a life of holiness. The Holy Spirit as the source of authority is promised only to the disciples and is granted for the exercise of the ministry of the Word and sacraments, i.e. it is reserved to ordained ministers.

Protestant theology shares this interpretation, but by ‘disciples’ it understands the whole faith community.

In the Evangelical Church of the River Plate we acknowledge that the Holy Scriptures alone have authority, as is established and laid down in Article 2 of our Statutes and Paragraph 1 of our church regulations.

We not recognize tradition, liturgical forms, etc., as having authority

We ask here the following questions:

- Who oversees the overseeing authority? In what way does sin affect the exercise of oversight in the Church in its different levels of relationship with God, our neighbours and our whole social setting? To what body does episcopé have recourse to for confession, absolution and communion?
- What is the nature of the function of oversight? Is it coordination, service or ministry? What function does authority have in the exercise of oversight, who confers it, who administers it, and with what criteria?
- What is the relation between the Church, the community and the local church? What is the document referring to by 'collegiality'? Is it conciliarity, unity or primacy? What is the relationship between universality, diversity, ecumenism and unity?
- Are there pre-set conditions for ecumenical dialogue, such as being ordained ministers, or being leaders of local churches (both male)?
- What has social witness, to which the document aspires, to do with institutional or organizational unity under a universal (world) leadership over all the Church?

IV. In and for the World

Before beginning, we wish to state that it would have been highly interesting for the document to begin with this theme, since it is evident that the mission of the Church has been agreed, fostered and in some cases strongly determined, in all ages, by the different historical situations of humankind. The mission of the Church is incarnated in history, and receives its expression, not from outside nor from above, but out of the world's secular historic problems and contents.

In that regard, the title of this section itself expresses a particular option and vision: a Church **in** and **for** and not a Church **outside** and **against** (the evil of) the world.

We understand that in general terms this section of the document is an attempt at contextualization, but it does not come up with a clear and adequate definition. Perhaps that is because in the introduction it is emphasized that each context should complement the document with its own experiences and content. But, in general terms, it is not acceptable that in this critical world situation in which humanity finds itself there is no clear word of condemnation of this situation and no deep concern for the healing, saving, liberating and transforming role that falls to the Church as part of its inescapable mission.

Thus we consider that the paradigm of the love of God for the world (John 3:16) is limited, since it can be interpreted in a manner that is not equal to the seriousness of the situation of structural and systemic sin.

We note also that in the document there is no reading of 'the signs of the times', and world problems are presented as difficulties and opportunities for change, but with no sense of scandal or of the extreme dangers they represent. The problem of gender violence, for example, is not mentioned.

109. The paradigm of the love of God for the world: does it perhaps mean that God was not against the world in which Jesus Christ lived? Is God's love for it deeper than its rebelliousness, or perhaps it is understood as a blind, undemanding and condescending love?

112. This paragraph shows sad short-sightedness in assessing the situation of humankind. Not only are there quite significant omissions, but also erroneous and unacceptable statements. What the document calls 'prosperity' has to be regarded, from the viewpoint of the weak members of society, as scandalous accumulation. What for the strong means progress is, for the weak and the poor, and for the world of nature, accompanied by exploitation and destruction of the environment.

It is obvious that the authors display a tendency to take wealth accumulation and oppression as exceptional abnormalities and not as a normal feature of world capitalism, which is shameful in its attitude and now in inevitable breakdown. The diffuse language on 'a more just social order' is part of the vision of a well placed middle class, which looks upon the poor and excluded with a measure of concern, but is not able to speak plainly about the need for a new order in all senses and at all levels.

How far does the theme of justice, so fundamental in the biblical message, take us? It is not enough to speak of 'easing the suffering of the poor'. The document displays the typical simplistic language of certain politicians who believe in 'controlling' what they see as the 'excesses' of the globalized system, and the possibility of 'humanizing' it and of 'reducing its harmful effects', but who cannot and will not understand that it is not a matter of 'excesses' but of a whole system, whose sole ultimate aim is wealth accumulation in the hands of those who already have much and not fostering the life of the whole of humankind. The irreparable harm done by this system shows that it is intrinsically perverse and that it is impossible to 'improve' it with cosmetic arrangements and adjustments. It can thus only be rejected.

Similarly the statement 'Each context has its own characteristics' [the Spanish translation of 'Each context will provide its own clues'] is a further example of ignorance of its globalized and precisely systemic character.

After more than twenty years of implementation of the globalized neo-liberal system and its known consequences throughout the world, it is inexcusable ingenuousness to continue thinking solely in terms of merely local problems.

113. Would there not be room here for greater precision in defining grace and the cost of grace (Bonhoeffer) to draw attention to the problem of 'cheap grace'?

114. The sentence "Thus Christian discipleship requires believers to give serious consideration to the complex ethical questions..." shows a detached and, one suspects, uninvolved neutrality.

It would be appropriate to include here some reflection on how God is active in the world outside the Church, including the aspects of forgiveness and grace in action in the world. A relevant biblical passage would be Matthew 25:31-46.

115. This paragraph develops the relations of Christians and the Church with society and the state. It omits the great problem that the churches in Europe, including the Orthodox churches, have. They are so linked to the state and the various areas of power (composed mainly of baptized but not practicing Christians) that, to say the least, they have some difficulty in

exercising a prophetic ministry in criticizing the systems, in clearly condemning wrongdoing, and in proclaiming the Good News to the oppressed, etc.

To say it in terms a little over critical, in a context of the accommodation of the Church to the functions of the state and to those holding political and economic power, the salt is trodden underfoot, the light is placed under a bowl, and the leaven does not make the dough rise.

We find somewhat strange the sentence '[Jesus]... invites Christians to collaborate with political and economic authorities...'. As no biblical text is quoted in this regard, we do not know from where the editors extracted that statement. We cannot imagine that anyone would think here of the issue of 'paying tribute to Caesar'.

There is appreciation of Christian work with other sectors, but there is no explicit mention of the poor and weak of society, which is the yardstick and pattern for a critical assessment of all systems and projects. Jesus' perspective was not one of 'pity from above' to those who are 'low down' on the social, economic, cultural and religious scale. The perspective that he had, practiced and taught was that of the excluded.

In general, the paragraph is defective because of its ingenuousness, lack of clarity and absence of historic awareness of the seriousness of the problem of the Constantinian establishment of the Church, which caused it to lose a significant dimension of what it is to be Church.

116. There may be here a veiled reference to the conflicts surrounding sexual ethics. If that is so (as we suspect), it does not have the courage to require that dialogue take place with the presupposition that any form of discrimination, marginalization and stigmatization is outside the express will of Jesus Christ.

The text shows a dangerous tension between making compromises and being afraid of division in Christianity, when the issue here is how to respond faithfully to Christ. Or, perhaps, ethical questions should be examined and measured according to convenience or particular pressures.

118. There is a certain vagueness in the formulation of the paradigm based on John 3:17. What does it mean concretely not to condemn the world but to save it? This lack of clarity needs to be rectified by reflection on John's concept of the world.

This concluding paragraph has a strongly eschatological and largely unhistorical tone. It does nothing more than hold faithfully to the concept of the nature of the Church that has already been set out in the many preceding paragraphs.

Final considerations of the group

Our perception is that this document is a classic example of the historic documents coming out of WCC's Faith and Order. The need to arrive at agreements accepted by the greatest possible number of churches results in their being very general documents, which indicate the difficulties in marginal tables. Agreement is requested on what is general, and it is decided that work will continue on the differences in the future, which by definition has no timetable or closing date, and the differences continue to be differences. That is particularly clear in the section on sacraments. In short, it is difficult to disagree with generalizations, because of the general nature of the subject matter.

We often feel that this sort of document tends more towards Orthodox theology than to the theologies of the Protestant Reformation, whether Lutheran or Reformed, and that a balance is very difficult to achieve.

We consider that in general this document does not represent an advance on what has already been approved by Faith and Order more than twenty years ago, both in general and in particular.

The last sentence in paragraph 1 of the Introduction states that 'the common calling of the churches [is] the search for visible unity.' We have our reservations on a search for unity that claims that there is only one way leading to unity. Our understanding is that fidelity to the Good News of life in its fullness for all should be the basis, and that on the basis of that fidelity we have to seek the greatest visible unity possible. The opinion of our group was that it is not believed that unity with all churches should be the aim. We know that there are churches that do not wish to be united with what we represent, and we wonder whether what we represent as an ecclesiastical option desires, or rather is able, to be united with the proclamation of those churches.

As for the concept of 'nature' in the actual title, in what sense is it being used? Philosophical, ontological, theological, popular, etc? Is it a reference to the being, the esse (timeless, spiritual, etc.) of the Church, or is it a reference to what the Church actually does (contemporary, practical, daily, etc.)?

Out of Latin American Protestant theology it is decisive to stress the second aspect, which, sadly, is almost absent from the document. The continuum of the Church in time and space is a work of God and not of the Church. That is not part of its nature nor of its essence. It is always particular, local, and it is divided by sin. The Church as being, as esse, does not exist. The universality, holiness, etc. of the Church is the participation of the local ecclesial community in the being of God.

We regard as very negative the degree of abstraction and generalization that in some aspects obscures rather than helps forward the debate on ecclesiology.

The vision of the Church presented in the first part of the document is idealist, since it does not take into account that the Church is not only the creation and gift of God, but also a human institution, certainly very human. The document gives the impression that it divides history into 'sacred history', which is church history, and secular history, which is everything else. This approach has already been superseded by church historians.

An adequate treatment of ecclesiology should take into consideration the fruitful, and, at the same time, dramatic tension between the Church as a creation and gift of God and as a human institution.

This insight has just found its way into paragraph 48.

In general terms, the vision of the nature of the Church in the document is that of a divine entity, which, because it is 'of God' (a God who is always up there and not down here) descends and sanctifies humankind. Although it does have some Calvinist and Lutheran elements, the vision is not in accord with the vision of a church shaped by the weak and marginalized, a Samaritan church and not so sacerdotal, a prophetic church, living a life of service.

Of course, beginning with that idealist vision, it cannot be expected that there will be an understanding of the Church as a place where the marginalized and the poor have a special place and a foremost role.

Then also in the various biblical ideas taken to define the nature of the Church, in the idea of the 'body', there is no reference to the parts that are 'less honourable' and 'unpresentable', which in biblical thinking ultimately are given greater honour (1 Cor. 12:24). Nor is there any emphasis on the people of 'the way', a concept very clear to the early Church that is expressed in various passages in Acts of the Apostles.

It is our understanding that the document seems to have been formulated to conciliate Catholicism and the Orthodox, while including some classic elements from the theology of the Reformation. But it totally excludes the Latin American vision, or that of the people not included in the party, or the parts of the body that are unseemly or unpresentable. The result is that we do not feel that we are included with what we feel and are, a church coming out of the Reformation, driven out of Europe, having taken refuge in the underdeveloped and exploited world, almost a minority among the minorities (and although not poor, definitely having a commitment and a clear awareness of the place that Christ, being himself poor, gave to the poor).

In our understanding, the issue of the apostolic succession is not an important part of the nature of the Church, but rather part of the serious problem of power struggles and sin in the Church. The issue of succession still seems to us a too supernatural idea, dangerously skating over the problem of injustice, ending up by justifying it, and providing an ideological cover, supposedly bearing salvation, but lacking in commitment, and not incarnated in the mire of sin and human misery.

As regards the very strong emphasis on the apostolicity of the Church, we realize that the issue is highly important for those traditions that worship hierarchy and justify it by appealing to apostolic tradition. Biblically, there is nothing to justify the pre-eminence of the apostles over the rest of the baptized. Paul was an apostle without having received laying on of hands from the other apostles, and that means that there was no 'apostolic succession' as it is understood by present-day Roman Catholicism.

Sadly, the danger in the quest for consensus in so wide a teleological field as ecclesiology is that inevitably difficulties are glossed over and unevennesses smoothed down. It is much easier to reach agreement on a church practice, the reasons for it and its biblical and theological justification (as, for example, baptism) than on the 'nature' of the body performing those rites. Perhaps the WCC has to be asked whether, acknowledging the value of the efforts made, it would not be wiser to discuss the conditions under which 'unity in diversity' could be made a reality, a task which would give a witness to a world similarly divided by sin.

The biblical and theological reflection in the document is poor. There are no significant mentions of the history of salvation – the exodus, the patriarchs, the prophets and the exile, etc. In various paragraphs there is a blatant lack of interest in providing an adequate biblical basis.

The Church 'appears' in history as if it had come down from heaven, with no antecedents, not rooted in the synagogue, with no prefiguring in the prophets. That makes the document much weaker, although it does make consensus easier.

Perhaps the following questions have to be posed concerning this document: Consensus between whom? Consensus for what? Is consensus on apostolicity essential for us to act together

in the conflict in Zimbabwe? Would the work and witness of the WCC be made more effective and better understood if we reached a common understanding on the nature of the Church?

We note with concern that in its Spanish version the document does not use inclusive language. That may be the fault of the translation. The document is masculine and hierarchical, and excludes differently abled persons by not mentioning them anywhere as part of the nature of the body of Christ.

The theological starting point of the document and its almost scholastic style are particularly difficult to accept.

We suggest two particular contributions that we could make, in addition to this present response in its entirety. We could:

- provide elements for an ecclesiology based on the local church in the context of the Latin American situation, and
- provide elements for a Latin American biblical hermeneutics, focussed on the perspective of the weak, poor, excluded and marginalized, which is precisely the perspective of the Bible itself and the perspective of the ministry of Jesus himself, whose cross gives meaning and relevance to the Church itself.

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Provisional translation from the Spanish, Language Service, World Council of Churches
