

### COMMENTS FROM THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH IN HESSEN AND NASSAU

#### ON THE STUDY OF THE WCC COMMISSION ON FAITH AND ORDER

##### “THE NATURE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH. A STAGE ON THE WAY TO A COMMON STATEMENT”

The Evangelical Church in Hessen and Nassau (EKHN) welcomes the response of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) to the Study on “The Nature and Mission of the Church” and endorses its content. The EKHN also wishes to make the following response to the critical questions raised by the EKD.

With reference to the EKD’s overall analysis of the WCC study paper:

With regard to the Study as such, the fact that the churches are working together on ecclesiological issues is very much to be welcomed. In Section I.A “The Church as *Creatura Verbi* and *Creatura Spiritus*”, for example, the Study expresses fundamental convictions about the Church, to which we adhere.

As in the ecclesiological document from the WCC assembly in Porto Alegre, however, the use of the expression “visible unity” to describe the ecumenical goal does not help to create clarity because those involved in the process all mean something completely different by it. The Study fails to address this problem in the Introduction and clearly assumes in Section A that the concept of “visible unity” requires no explanation.

It would be more appropriate if the Study referred specifically to the unclarity surrounding this concept, in a sentence that might say, for instance, “There is at present no greater obstacle to the (full, visible) unity of the Church than the very diverse and sometimes opposing conceptions of unity that exist among the churches.” In an ecumenical study paper on ecclesiology, these fundamental differences need to be clearly noted and carefully described, to provide a basis for further work to build on.

#### **Nos. 9-13**

We agree with what is said by the EKD, especially regarding the earlier text “The Nature and Purpose of the Church” which is often clearer and more precise. The explication of ecclesiology in the context of God’s Trinitarian action, the definition of the Church as “*creatura verbi et creatura spiritus*” is ecumenically helpful; however, the relationship of Word and Spirit remains to be clarified.

In addition to what is said in the EKD analysis, the sentence “For this reason Mary has often been seen as the symbol of the Church and of the individual Christian” (no. 10) is still difficult even although it is phrased in purely descriptive terms. The Protestant churches also accept that, in Mary, God’s justifying grace shows itself in a clear and unique way. The persisting disagreement concerning the doctrine of justification lies in the fact that, in the Protestant view, justification is granted to the individual Christian through faith by God (and it is only at this point that the “Church in the spiritual sense” comes into being) whereas, in the Roman Catholic view, justification is essentially understood as grace dispensed in the sacraments by the church. Any close linking of ecclesiology and Mariology is therefore problematic and not without theological consequences: The phrase “Mary...as symbol of the Church” (our Catholic and Orthodox brothers and sisters will always also hear this as “*mater ecclesiae*”!) could become the source of conflicting interpretations of this passage. For, in the reception of the text, the

qualifying word “often” will no doubt disappear and the remaining sentence claim to be an ecumenically valid and binding factual statement about the mother of Jesus, accepted by everyone.

Yet underlying this statement is an ecclesiology based on the understanding of Mary as “Assumpta” that understands the Church as the “mystical Body of Christ” extending to before the throne of God; in this way the Church becomes the sacramental representation of the real presence of Christ. Christ is identified with the church, his mother becomes “mater ecclesiae” and Mariology thus becomes an integral part of ecclesiology and part of the theology in its own right. This is why subjects like justification, ecclesiology or the eucharist are so often treated by reference to Mariology in Roman Catholic documents, in a way that Protestants find disconcerting. From the Protestant point of view, by contrast, statements about Mary are to be understood in a strictly Christological sense.

### **Nos. 14-33**

With regard to the statement in No. 15 “...that Scripture is normative and therefore provides a uniquely privileged source for understanding the nature and mission of the Church...”, the question raised by the EKD needs to be put still more incisively as this sentence is open to conflicting interpretations. To be precise, the question that needs to be asked is this: In what sense is Scripture “normative”? As *norma normans non normata*? Or is it a norm in the same sense, say, as “church tradition”? What proves that it is “a unique source” when other church sources of evidence are likewise “unique” in their own way?

What is said in No. 16 on the relationship of the unity of the Church and the diversity of local churches needs to be strengthened and spelled out concretely with a view to establishing a basic dialectical differentiation of unity and diversity. For diversity is not the expression of “post-modern randomness”, as is sometimes maintained with regard to Protestant theology, but is biblically well-founded. It is therefore important and ultimately more fruitful to address and insist on this connection: We Protestants want unity, but not on other people’s terms, in other words, to reduce unity to a single possible model, is effectively to render it impossible.

Nos. 21 and 22 should include a short reflection on how the relationship of Christ and the Church is determined in the ecumenical view, maybe in the form of a dialectic of identity and difference. The Nature and Mission Study does not even raise the subject of this highly important relationship which is often quite differently defined in the oikumene. Yet this is precisely the root, for instance, of the arguments which see the Church of Jesus Christ as being quasi-identical with one’s own church, one of the biggest challenges and problems facing the ecumenical fellowship today.

The section on “Koinonia”(nos. 24-33) is to be welcomed. However, the consequences of communion with regard to responsibility in the world and its social- ethical implications need to be spelled out more specifically; the same applies to the question of where the difficulties lie at present when it comes to living out this *koinonia*, for example, with regard to the concept of “ministry”, which does not appear at all in the whole section.

### **Nos. 43 - 47**

So long as the churches continue to differ in how they determine the relationship between the Church as believed in faith and the church in its various social forms, and in their theological assessment of it, the statements made in No. 43 ff. will be differently understood and interpreted. This is true, for example, of the term “*mysterion*” in No. 45. Some churches can speak of the Church as “sacrament” or “*mysterion*” because they assume that the “Church as believed in faith” is largely analogous with its “visible structure”.

This theological difference should be made clear in the text to avoid giving the impression that, with para. 45, the Protestant churches have recognized the church as sacrament.

Although, as the EKD response rightly notes, the different theological positions on the question

“Church as ‘Sacrament?’” are accurately set out in the box under No. 47, the matter is discussed only from the point of view of the term used, in other words, at the level of language - whereas para. No. 45 of the Study speaks clearly of “the *nature* of the Church as ‘*mysterion*’”! Likewise in No. 45, the Church is (mis)understood as the sacramental representation of the real presence of Christ; the two are in effect seen as identical with one another. Therefore, either the disagreement on the question of a sacramental understanding of the Church has to be presented theologically, and not just linguistically, in the text of the study document, or the misleading word “*mysterion*” has to be removed from paragraph No. 45.

#### **Nos. 48 - 56**

The different positions on the question “church of sinners or sinful church”? are properly described and set out in relation to the attributes of the Church. Two comments on this:

1. It would be ecumenically useful to show how certain theological directions set in one place make themselves felt in other areas. The answers to the above question on the church and sin essentially depend on how the relationship of Christ and the Church has been defined, or in other words, that of the Church of belief to the actual social structure of a particular church.
2. The proposition made at the end of the box (below No. 56) is welcome in itself. As to whether it offers “a possibility of bringing greater openness to the contrasting positions”, we remain sceptical. The question to be asked would be this: Do sin and holiness really not exist on the same level (“*simul iustus et peccator*”? What does it mean to state that sinfulness is “contrary to” the nature of the Church and God’s will for it? On the face of it this says very little and is open to conflicting interpretations.

The dialectic of sin and holiness can only adequately be discussed if the above-mentioned dialectical differences (Christ/Church and believed/actual church) are also included. Otherwise one is forced to argue that “sin” in relation to the Church is “un-natural” and not part of its nature. The text would need to be developed along the suggested lines.

#### **Nos. 57 - 66**

The use of the term “visible communion” (in the box following No. 63, under b.) brings in another concept (the fourth one) to define the ecumenical goal. This does not necessarily help to clarify matters, but this concept does seem more promising than the others in that it focuses more on the living experience of ecumenical reality and less on theoretical considerations on the nature of the church and its ministry.

#### **General remarks on the content of Section III**

The EKHN unreservedly shares the main criticism of Section III expressed in the EKD’s response, namely the absence of a section on “Apostolic Proclamation”. Unless the systematics of Section III is changed - on the basis of Paul’s words that faith comes from what is heard (Rom 10:17) - the Study document on the one hand contradicts its own presentation of the place and purpose of the Church in Section I A. And, on the other,

#### **in Nos. 67 - 73**

(Section III A), faith and the sacraments can then only be defined and described in the framework of and assuming the prior existence the Church, as a *depositum* inherent in it. This culminates in the sentence (also incriminated by the EKD) in No. 70 (“The faith transmitted through the living tradition of the Church...”) This is completely incompatible with a Protestant understanding of the Church. The Church is always *creatura verbi*, only coming into being (in the spiritual sense) and being constantly renewed wherever the Holy Spirit awakens faith through the proclaimed word (CA 4, 5 and 7). From the EKHN’s point of view, the sentence criticized here should simply be struck out.

#### **Nos. 82 - 89**

The discussion of the theme of “The Ministry of all the Faithful” (Section III.D., Nos. 82-85) and “The Ministry of the Ordained” (Section III.E., Nos. 86-89) in two separate sub-sections - despite the reference to the community of the faithful in the title of III.E. - tacitly assumes the Roman-Catholic, Orthodox and also Anglican understanding of the ordained ministry as a “special” (cf. the title of III. E. in German) ministry which is essentially, i.e. ontologically different from the general ministry (priesthood) of all believers. This has serious consequences for the **underlying systematic theology** of the rest of the Study document (cf. nos 99-104) and should be firmly rejected as a betrayal of the Protestant understanding of ministry.

To this extent the phrasing of the EKD’s response suggesting that the two chapters should be combined (cf. 9 below) seems much too weak. The two chapters *must* be combined. But what is needed above all is a description of the theological disagreements underlying the very question of separate or combined chapters. The Study document regrettably makes no reference at all to the fact that deep-seated disagreements exist within the ecumenical movement over the definition of the relationship between “general priesthood of all believers” and “ordained ministry”. Indeed with regard to the central issue, the understanding of ministry, the document seems here to be suggesting a consensus that does not exist, which is ultimately harmful for the future of ecumenical conversations.

If the systematic framework given in Section III D. and E. is accepted (and, with its above-mentioned suggestion, even the EKD seems to go along with this, albeit reluctantly), then the whole discussion of the question of ministry will from the outset be set in a framework of interpretation that places Protestant theology on the defensive. This is exactly what happens in the following paragraphs.

#### **Nos. 90 - 98**

This line of thinking is continued in Section III.F on “*episkope*”. Here again a much stronger refusal is called for than that contained in the EKD response.

This applies to the very first sentence in No. 90. From the Protestant point of view, the Church is certainly not “built up...through a diversity of gifts or ministries”, but by Word and Sacrament, which gifts and ministries are there to serve. This should either be noted in the text, or else the disagreement existing on the subject should be properly described.

In Nos. 90-92 a biblical-theological foundation of “*episkope*” is lacking, yet this needs to be clearly set out, especially in the context of common ecumenical reflection. The document (rightly) points out the different responsibilities, forms and structures of “*episkope*”, but neither here nor anywhere else is there any reflection on what, if anything, this diversity means for us today. This avoids the crux of the problem which lies precisely in the fact that there is fundamental disagreement on the matter: Is there *de iure divino* (only) one definitive form for “*episkope*” (i.e. the historical episcopate), or can it take many different social forms that develop and change, as can readily be seen in the New Testament?

A paragraph along these lines expressing the self-understanding of the Reformation churches with regard to the multiple forms of “*episkope*” should be inserted into the Study document: “They (the Reformation churches) have *episkope* in obvious forms, but most do not have it in the form of unbroken succession in the episcopal office. This does not prevent them from recognizing churches that do have such succession, nor from maintaining or seeking communion with those churches.” (EKD Response p.11, para. 4, sentences 2 and 3)

A further set of problems connected with the understanding of “*episkope*” emerges in Nos. 95-98. Under the headings, “personal”, “collegial”, “communal”, the main functions and responsibilities as traditionally exercised by the bishop are described. However the problem is that

- In the Roman Catholic and Orthodox understanding “*episkope*” is (only) exercised by one specific person (in each local church), i.e. the bishop.

- In the Protestant understanding, on the other hand, “leadership and oversight” of the church is always the responsibility of many people, not only a bishop or the ordained ministers. Christian men and women who are not ordained also share in the exercise of “*episkope*”, for example, as members of synods or church boards.

To think of “collegial” only in terms of the “*collegium*” of bishops represents an unacceptable narrowing of the concept. This is a concrete example of the consequences of the division criticized above (in Nos. 82-89). This central difference in the understanding of “*episkope*” is not explained. *Episkope* is reflected on purely in terms of Roman Catholic/Orthodox thinking and structures. It is imperative that the content of the text be completed and corrected this point.

#### **Nos. 99 - 104**

The narrow view of “*episkope*”, restricting it to one person as described above with regard to the episcopate, continues in this section. Paragraph No. 100 takes “synod” in the (narrow) sense of episcopal council and limits its place to “crucial situations”. In the understanding of the Reformation churches, however, synods are gatherings of all those who share in the (general) priesthood of all believers and - as the EKD rightly notes - they are a regular element in “*episkope*”, and do not meet only in unusual circumstances.

As a consequence of this narrow view, paras. No. 101 ff then seek to clarify the question of who is to summon and preside over synods (as understood above), and for this the term “primacy” is brought in to service. Let it simply be noted in passing that logically in defining the concepts of “*episkope*” and “primacy” in this way, the church’s conciliarity has been narrowed and personalized and hence effectively removed.

The narrowing of the concepts brings us inevitably (in No. 103) to the papacy. On this it has to be said that the question of a universal primacy is not a question of “climate” or the merit of individual personalities in the See of Rome. Reference to the phenomenon of “globalization” as a model justifying the papacy is positively ludicrous. The statement that such a “universal primacy can be seen as a gift rather than a threat” is to be strenuously rejected. Either this statement has to be eliminated or else it must be accompanied by an addendum noting that many churches emphatically do not share this view. The EKD response does indicate its rejection of this point, but does not expressly demand its removal and is therefore too restrained on this important issue.

#### **Nos. 105 - 108**

In this sub-section H under the heading of “Authority” the problems mentioned above are obvious. The assessment given by the EKD in its response should be made more explicit in the following way:

- The fact that the document can make such a direct link between the authority of Christ, or God, and the authority of the Church is the result of the “quasi-identification” of Christ and the Church already criticized at the start of this paper.
- “Authority”, which from the Protestant point of view belongs above all to the “Word of God”, can at this point in the document only refer to the church authorities - this too is reductionist.

*Provisional translation from the German for study purposes not for publication.*