

UNITED PROTESTANT CHURCH IN BELGIUM

SYNOD OFFICE

Brussels, 3 January 2007

Dear brothers and sisters,

Please find below our position on Faith and Order Paper no. 198, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*.

This document is of no little interest in terms of its relation to previous thinking in the WCC. It puts forward a number of innovations and improvements, although some of these are outlined only rather briefly.

Before answering the four questions on page 3 as requested by the WCC, we wish to set out the main strengths and weakness of this document:

Strengths:

1. This paper clearly takes seriously the recent crisis of confidence in the WCC on the part of the Orthodox Churches.

It therefore makes a constructive effort to draw out new perspectives that are acceptable to both Protestant and Orthodox Christians.

This is at least part of the explanation for the evolution of thought with regard to “The Church and Sin” (p. 14) – a question that has caused problems with Orthodox Christians since the Faith and Order Commission was established – and that concerning apostolic succession (p. 25).

2. As concerns ordained ministry, (p. 23-24), this text introduces some additional elements that are of interest in terms of how they relate to the classic definitions received from Reformation and Barthian theology.

In particular, more than ever, it recognizes that those in ministry need the support of their community (p. 23), and stresses that pastors must care for their community in return.

3. The paper seems to express some reservations with regard to the current rage for interreligious dialogue. Indeed, recalling the importance of evangelism, it states that the Church is not merely a partner in dialogue; her true mandate, which needs to be reemphasized, is missionary and evangelistic.

## Problematic points

1. In doctrinal terms, the text uses a purely “deductive” approach.

That is to say, it takes a fully fledged Trinitarian theology as its starting point, and works its way back from there to deal with real-world problems.

Some pastors and theologians, however, prefer the exact opposite approach (to start with concrete issues and then work upwards to a confession of the faith, if possible – this approach is known as “inductive”).

The question [as to which is preferable] remains unanswered.

2. The text is sometimes not specific enough.

This is particularly the case in the “boxes”, where it gives no more detail than, “some believe that...”, “they” etc.

The text in the boxes is always too coy to refer to the opposing traditions by name; this could give rise to some misleading assumptions.

3. The text includes some elements from academic theological history that presuppose a degree of technical familiarity.

This is particularly true with regard to the paper’s pronouncements on “Koinonia” (pp. 8 *et seq*) and “anamnesis” (pp. 21-22).

The usefulness of these concepts can only really be understood if one already has a certain level of prior knowledge.

On the basis of the above, I can give the following answers to the questions on page 3:

Question 1: This paper does correctly identify our common ecclesiological convictions, but sometimes does so in a manner that is too allusive.

Question 2: The perspectives it introduces on apostolic succession, the question of “episkopé” and the theology of the [ordained] ministries may represent an emerging convergence on the nature and mission of the Church.

Question 4(a):<sup>1</sup> In terms of concrete steps towards unity, the text encourages Protestants to be more attentive to the quality of their relationships with other WCC member churches locally, including the Orthodox, and to ensure that they and these other local churches gain greater awareness about each other. Secondly, it urges WCC member churches to unite around joint missionary projects at a local level, while making it clear that a large part of “mission” has to do with serving the poor and the excluded.

Question 4(b): The greatest priority for improvement in this paper is the depth of the information provided in the boxes.

Firstly, they should be made more explicit, and, secondly, they should go beyond a basic “inventory” of the problems and properly explain each of the challenges faced.

Yours sincerely,

Guy Liagre

President, Synodal Council

*Provisional translation from the French of a working document, please return to language service for further editing if all or part is to be published.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Translator’s note: numbering “4(a)” and “4(b)” in translation is appropriate to questions on p. 3; source text reads “3(a)” and “3(b)”, which is misleading.