

23 United Church of Christ (USA)

SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

The United Church of Christ in the United States is a church of the united/uniting family, with strong roots in the Reformed traditions of the Christian family. The history of our church – formed in 1957 as a merger of mergers – attests to the ongoing commitment to the ecumenical vocation of the church and to the deep desire to live with ever-more visible manifestations of its unity, a gift given by God. One of our seminary professors stated it well for our church when he writes “While the church gathered for worship and Word, and from there scattered to the world, is the basic unit of our mission and life, we cannot conceive of that church local apart from its union with the larger Body covenantal, denominational and ecumenical, its regional, national and global horizons, and its historic linkages. We are a Church organic as well as a church basic.”

We are deeply appreciative of the opportunity to respond in a preliminary way to this questions posed by the Commission as it seeks to create a further draft for eventual study within and among the churches. We are conscious that what we offer is grounded in and therefore strongly influenced by our very specific context as a united and uniting church, with strong strains in the Reformed tradition, located in the United States; but even within the context of our particularity we hope that these reflections may be useful as the Commission reviews the draft.

Because the churches have been asked to respond to the four specific questions rather than offer a line-by-line response to the text, we do not here purport to present a comprehensive evaluation of the text or its themes, but instead highlight those issues which emerge from the questions.

We assume that a later draft of a text will ask of us, as churches, a similar response to those requested for the BEM text, and, as we did at that time.

SECTION II: RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS

Questions 1 and 3: Are common ecclesiological convictions and differences correctly identified? Are there significant matters in which the concerns of your church are not adequately addressed?

We have chosen to respond to Questions 1 and 3 together because we believe they are closely enough related that they cannot usefully be separated.

Responders from a wide variety of United Church of Christ settings affirm that the convictions and differences which are named in the NMC are indeed important ones, and believe they are essential for study throughout the life of the church. We do not detect issues which we feel are irrelevant or passé, either confessionally or ecumenically.

Below we suggest five topics which we believe are either insufficiently addressed or missing, from which we believe further work a future draft might benefit.

The Church

We see, in the document’s foundational description of the church as the creation of God’s own Word and Spirit, a healthy antidote to more Pelagian ecclesiologies. This assertion rightly grounds the church in God’s initiative, and accentuates its character as God’s gift to humanity. Equally important is the document’s rooting of the church’s oneness and holiness in Christ. Both motifs

aply place the divine indicative before the divine imperative and remind us that the church is not humanity's own accomplishment. As suggested on p.34 of the text, this affirmation of the church's ontological reality in Christ prior to human effort could help resolve the problem of the distinguishing the church's "holiness" from the church's "sinfulness." As a gift given by God, the church is "holy;" as a gift imperfectly received by fallible human beings, the church is "sinful."

However, throughout the discussion of the nature of the church, the theme of the church as God's "task force" in the world seems to overshadow the motif of the church as the gift of God's loving presence. We are, of course, deeply appreciative of the emphasis on the missional nature of the church. However, the church at times seems to be defined in terms of "doing" at the expense of "being" in many respects, and we are similarly puzzled at the absence of "Missio Dei" language which would, we think, correct some of this imbalance. Ecclesial responsibilities become the foundation of the church's identity. Consequently, the church as the enactment of human "faithful responsiveness" gets highlighted to the detriment of the church as a site where God's faithful love is encountered. Even as a denomination profoundly committed to the responsibility of us as the baptized faithful to be God's hands in the world, we feel that the church's vocation seems in this text to eclipse the church's location for the celebration of God's unconditional love. The document tends to focus more than we would have hoped on the church as an instrument in the transformation of the world, and to diminish a focus on the church as a comfort to anxious, guilty, and alienated individuals. We do not wish to eliminate this emphasis, of course, but simply to suggest that the balance is not quite right.

Likewise, as a united and uniting church with a strong strain of the Reformed tradition in our heritage, we would want to emphasize that in the conversation about the nature of the church, the church is never defined by *our* faith, *our* faith's strength or weakness, *our* actions or inactions, *our* practices of liturgical expression, etc.

The limits of diversity

We applaud the sustained attention to the legitimate confessional diversity in the Christian community seen in the text. (Most reflectors in the United Church of Christ believe that the "branch" theory best nurtures what we believe to be legitimate expression of theological and liturgical diversity.)

However, this is an aspect of the document which we feel needs more sophisticated attention. We do so fully recognizing that we offer these perspectives from a very particular setting which may not have relevance in other places.

We struggle with confessionalism as the sole or even predominant construct for evaluating the legitimate diversity – or even the legitimacy *of* diversity – in the church. Though the United Church of Christ is substantially comprised of streams on the Reformed tradition, we are also a united church which now encompasses a greater breadth of traditions than those of our founding in 1957. We are, as well, a church in the United States where members tend to move freely between traditions. We therefore have members and pastors, as do most Protestant churches in the United States, whose backgrounds are widely divergent and who both consciously and unconsciously bring their past traditions with them.

Though our denomination exhibits Reformed confessional theology and liturgical practice, the reality of very fluid movement of both members and pastors into and out of our congregations – and those of nearly every church in the United States – makes us feel that this discussion of diversity is too simplistic. Adhering in the text to a construct of "confessional identity" in discussing diversity, either in order to make the conversation easier or because some believe that

it should be that way, is not, we believe, in fact actually or adequately descriptive of the reality with which some of us live, and therefore does in fact not address the real questions.

Therefore, in this area, we applaud the focus on the question, and appreciate the gifts to the church universal offered by confessional particularity, both our own and that of others. We do not, however, believe that the way the question is framed in the NMC is nuanced enough to reflect lived reality. We believe that these questions are focused with insufficient attention to this complex reality to be able to address adequately the experience in the life of many churches, at least in the US.

To summarize, therefore, we feel it is far more helpful (as seen in some parts of the text) to talk about confessional and other particularity in the context of the common heritage of the *apostolic faith*, and ask what we are called to by that witness, rather than to speak of “limits of diversity” only in the construct of “confessional tradition” as if such a thing existed in a pure way in any given place. While the text doesn’t claim this explicitly, we believe it can be inferred in the absence of any deeper analysis.

We also, therefore, very much appreciate the language of conciliarity in paragraphs 64ff, and find the discussion of locality, particularity, universality and fullness to be very helpful constructs for the conversation about diversity.

The use of the creeds

As a church which views the historic creeds as profound testimonies of faith but not as tests of fellowship, we note with appreciation that in Paragraph 72 the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is lifted up as a sign of the apostolic witness, with an accompanying acknowledgment that those churches which do not use the Creed liturgically or catechetically in ways that others do are not to be interpreted as having departed from the faith. We believe that the affirmation of the Creed as a preeminent expression of the apostolic faith, and the ecumenical ability to recognize that how it is used is not to be unilaterally interpreted, are both signs of our deepening understanding of each other and our ecumenical progress.

However, we would want to note in this same section a very ambiguous (and easily misinterpreted) adjective: “Nevertheless, the existence of such differences suggest that churches need to be attentive to the *tolerable* [emphasis added] limits to diversity in confessing one faith.” We believe that the language of “tolerable” is far too prone to parochial interpretation and therefore not useful in a document of this sort. What is “tolerable” to one tradition may not be to another, and the implied criteria with the use of this sort of language does not advance the ecumenical discussion at all.

Episcope

Not surprisingly, we believe that issues of ministry require far more attention, as we believed they did when we responded to similar questions in BEM. For our church, identification of episcopal succession as a necessary condition for apostolicity is contrary to our instincts and historic tradition. Most in our church would say that succession can be an important enabling condition for apostolicity, perhaps even part of the *bene esse* of the church, but not the *esse* of the church. Most within our church would, with others in the Reformed tradition, argue that faithfulness to the apostolic tradition has been maintained through elements other than the witness of the historic succession of bishops, and that while this may be a sign for some, we do not believe it is of the essence of the church.

In the United States as well as elsewhere, this topic has remained one of the significant stumbling blocks to the shared celebration of the Eucharist, and for that reason we consider it to be a subject of very high importance. We are also aware that this conversation cannot happen apart from very significant discussions about basic ecclesiological perspectives, and call the ecumenical movement to these discussions, difficult as they are.

Interfaith Relations

A significant segment of those from our church who reflected on the text responded that the question of the role of the mission of church *vis a vis* relationships with people of other faith traditions has not yet been addressed adequately. We recognize that this perspective comes from the context of the United States, and from a church which has been eager to engage in interfaith dialogue and relationship, and thus we speak from a very “particular particularity” on this question. Nonetheless, we believe that it is a topic which cannot be avoided in the context of a text on the “mission” of the church, and hope that the open questions from the 1989 meeting in San Antonio can be, in some way, reprised.

For us, this will remain a critically important set of questions, in part because we are aware of how very differently we experience them from brothers and sisters whose jurisdictional contexts bring them into other relationships and therefore different perspectives. Interfaith dialogue and cooperation are areas of increasing activity in the life of our own denomination, and theological consideration about these relationships as we consider the mission of the church – with its good and bad history – is critical. It is also a topic which can (and does) divide Christians. Therefore, it is an area, we believe, where there is much ecumenical territory to explore and much understanding to gain, especially as we speak of the mission of God’s church.

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

We feel that it is not possible to respond to this question until we have seen initial reactions from others. In some sense whether the document does that or not is entirely dependent on the result of the reading from other churches. Likewise we feel we cannot even respond to whether it reflects convergence on the *important* questions – we can only respond for ourselves, and it will be in reading responses from others that we can see whether the document has moved toward any convergence either in the understanding of the nature and mission or even of the questions that matter.

As we have asked this question, however, we find ourselves with a related comment. It is not clear to us who the primary audience for the text is or should be; and not clear to what use our reflections will be put. That clarification would be appreciated as the Commission does further work.

Question 3: How can this study document help your church, together with others, take concrete steps toward unity?

Adiaphora

We would like to suggest that some of the differences which remain – particularly in the areas of baptism, but even in the area of the Eucharist – might be helped by placing slightly more emphasis on the notion of adiaphora rather than on establishing most of the differences as “church-dividing.” For example, one of our professors summarizes the response from participants well when he writes “Perhaps the impasse between viewing baptism as *effecting* new life in Christ or as *reflecting* it could be alleviated if both factions recognized some value in the

position of the other. One party could recognize that baptism is not the only way that new life is *effected*, for God's grace is free to work in extraordinary ways. The other party could recognize that even the *reflecting* of new life in Christ effects its intensification. While this would not constitute a convergence, at least it could establish enough common ground to begin a conversation." In the context of our Lutheran-Reformed full communion agreement "*A Formula of Agreement*," we have spoken of this approach in terms of "complementarity," recognizing that we cannot do without the witness of the other, even if we do not adopt it fully as our own.

We believe that this sort of approach might provide for a more generous spirit as we encounter what may at first appear to be irreconcilable differences. It will not eliminate all of them, of course, but we feel may address certain historic difficulties in ways that open doors rather than prescribe immediate limits.

Eucharist

We would like to note one significant concern about the description of the ongoing issues related to the Eucharist, continuing, of course, from reflections on BEM. We recognize that there are still very significant and as yet seemingly intractable differences when it comes to questions of the Eucharist, including the now perhaps dated language about whether the Lord's Supper is a means toward or a sign of unity. We recognize that we must have patience with each other as we work out the difficult sacramental and ecclesiological issues embedded in these differing perspectives and positions.

However, even while acknowledging that we must practice patience and recognize the very deep nature of our differences in this area, in the box on page 48 we note what feels to be a very weak statement that "It is a matter of continuing concern that not all Christians share the communion." It is, we believe, *far* greater than "a matter of continuing concern." It is a scandal that testifies to our alienation from each other, and something about which we should never feel complacent. Unless we feel the severity of the division, we (or others) won't be helped to make concrete steps toward unity.

Confessionalism and our measure of ecumenical progress

In addition to the questions raised above about the role of the focus on confessionalism as it relates to how we measure adherence to the historic faith of the church, we also believe that it is not always helpful for *ecumenical efforts* to be judged solely by the criteria of confessional particularity. While it is impossible and even undesirable to abandon our own lenses as we view steps toward unity, we fear that in some ways the text drives readers toward an approach where confessionalism is seen as the preeminent – or perhaps even ultimate – lens through which to view those steps of ecumenical progress. This, we believe, encourages an unfortunate parochialism which discourages what we believe should be our openness to the witness of the entirety of the apostolic tradition and the gifts of others.

Therefore we believe that what would facilitate concrete steps toward unity is not to abandon our particularity – this is of course impossible – but to ask questions about the unity of the church which are measured by *more* than just our confessional standards. We believe we should focus on how we have given witness to the *fullness* of the testimony of the gospel, rather than how we or others adhere faithfully to our particular expression of it.

"Best practices"

We wonder, perhaps in dialogue with *Called to Be One Church* and its hope for ongoing dialogue, if the Faith and Order Commission might over time compile examples of how churches are

engaging in dialogue about these important issues, thereby providing “best practices” examples for each other to be replicated where possible. This may help with concrete steps toward unity.

SECTION III: TEXTUAL STYLE

Question 4: What suggestions would you make for the future development of this text?

We would like to offer brief commentary as well on the *style* of the document, and the possible impact of this style on the efficacy of the text as a study and teaching document. We begin with an appreciation of the methodology which allows for both for statements of convergence as well as elucidation of those points where the churches do not agree. That format has been used to good effect through much of the last century to clarify with visual simplicity the complicated theological issues which have confronted the faithful through centuries of discipleship.

We are strongly appreciative of the desire to put before the churches issues which are theological and ecclesiological in nature. We affirm the need for serious, theologically sophisticated and substantive discernment on matters related to the nature and the mission of the Church.

However, we would like to raise a significant concern about the limitations of this format. If the audience for such a teaching and study document is the seminary, or those who have had already had theological training such as pastors and teachers, we believe the language and format is useful.

However, if the audience is intended to be broader, we would like to suggest that the text is overly filled with terminology in which is embedded layers of meaning which would not be accessible to those without theological training or a setting in which to be taught it. In addition, we question the accessibility of the text format to those who are not accustomed to both the style and the content of the material. Is it possible, we might want to suggest, that this structure, which has served us well in the past, may need to be reconsidered for audiences of today? We wonder if study groups in many settings of our church beyond traditional educational institutions would find themselves engaged by the format of the text, and would therefore might choose to avoid encounter with the important concepts in it.

Many responders from our various constituencies expressed much appreciation for the material in the gray “boxes” which text felt, in the words of one, “very direct, clear and unencumbered.” This was seen in contrast to the other portions of the text.

The exception testifies to the rule. We noted that in the gray box titled “Limits of Diversity?” (following Paragraph 63) in the section describing the “third type,” the language was so convoluted as to be nearly incomprehensible. Our ecumenical documents must, we believe, be written in *far* clearer language if they are to be of interest to those who are not paid professionals in the field.

The streams of Christian tradition which comprise the United Church of Christ are firmly rooted in the many facets of the “priesthood of all believers.” We therefore feel it critically important that theological texts be adapted to a wide variety of audiences, not because those audiences are incapable of understanding them – they are fully able to do so – but because only a few audiences make use of the sort of format in which this text is created.

Finally, we wonder, as important as these questions are, and as committed as we are to continuing dialogue about them, if there are also other questions about the nature and mission of

the church, and the divisions we continue to experience, which are asked by those who are not ecclesiastical professionals. We feel that a reading of the text through this sort of lens may unearth new and important questions not to supplant the ones found here but to add to them.

22 October 2009