

**THE UNITED METHODIST RESPONSE TO THE TEXT  
THE NATURE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH: A STAGE ON THE WAY TO A  
COMMON STATEMENT.**

1. The United Methodist Church has received an invitation from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches to reflect on and react to the study document above referred. The United Methodist Church, through its Council of Bishops, takes this opportunity to join the other member churches of the World Council of Churches and all those who are committed to the ecumenical movement to offer its comments on this timely study document. The Council of Bishops has examined this response during its 2007 Fall meeting which was held at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, in the United States of America, and decided to send it to the Faith and Order Secretariat in Geneva, Switzerland.

2. The Nature and Mission of the Church comes to the attention of the churches as a result of recommendations, suggestions and wishes expressed by the churches and ecumenical bodies in previous study documents submitted to them by the Faith and Order Commission. We have received with appreciation in their times the convergent main study documents such as: Baptism Eucharist and Ministry (BEM); Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed(381); Church and World: the Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community. They helped churches become more aware of the progress made in ecumenical dialogues during the last century. At the same time, these studies also helped churches to discern and work on remaining differences on their long way to the full communion. This new study is the first major achievement in the ecumenical movement at this dawn of the twenty first century. It is a text built on the precedent achievements of multilateral dialogues. This study document has the merit of revealing to the member churches of the ecumenical movement what they can now claim together about the nature and purpose of the Church at this point in the history.

On the other hand, the document draws once again the attention of the churches to the differences which are still dividing them on their way to the visible unity. Our comments refer particularly to the four specific questions as indicated at the end of the introduction of the study document:

*3. Does this study document correctly identify our common ecclesiological convictions, as well as the issues which continue to divide us?*

The Church, as congregations of the faithful, is fundamentally the creature of the Gospel, God's World by the power of the Holy Spirit. In their Confession of Faith, the United Methodists follow the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. They recognize the Church of God as being "one, holy, catholic and apostolic." In addition to these four historic notes of the Church, the United Methodist Church includes in its understanding of the Church the following elements: faith, preaching, sacraments and discipline or accountability. The mission is the main purpose of the Church for its existence in the world. In fact, the nature of the Church is inseparable from its mission. This understanding of the Church is central for the people called United Methodists. We find the same central place for the mission in this study document. Furthermore, the purpose of the mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world that God so loved. Indeed, there are still many ecclesiological, theological and ethical issues which divide the churches today, both within themselves and among themselves. However, we commend the Faith and Order Commission for the clear description both of what unites us and what still divides us. It is our hope that these issues identified as divisive in the text will continue to appear

on the agenda of churches bilateral and multilateral dialogues. We also believe that it is important for the churches to continue deepening their fellowship in the old areas where differences and disagreements have been already overcome.

*4. Does this study document reflect an emerging convergence on the nature and mission of the church?*

As far as the results of the dialogues of the United Methodist Church and the other Christian traditions are concerned, the study document has provided us with clear indications that there are considerable convergent views on the nature of the Church. However, we have noted that a lot of work still needs to be done in the area of ministry and mission, particularly: the limits of diversity, the one baptism, ordained ministry, oversight ministry, Eucharist hospitality, authority and accountability in the exercise of Church ministries and mission, to mention but a few. In addition, the document identifies the growing convergence, but it does not analyze why there is no growing cooperation in mission. Such an analysis, including non-theological factors can be considered in the future development of the text.

*5. Are there significant matters in which the concerns of your church are not adequately addressed?*

Given the central place of mission in our understanding of the Church in the United Methodist Church as well as what we have identified in this Faith and Order study document, we wish that reflection be deepened in our common understanding of the Church both as movement and institution, with reference to Church witness in our troubled world and to ministry to the faithful. The text should also make more explicit what is meant by authentic mission.

*6. Insofar as this study document provides a helpful framework for further ecclesiological discussions among the churches:*

*a. How can this study document help your church, together with others, take concrete steps toward unity?*

This study document has helped us identify what the churches may claim together today about the nature and mission of the Church. In fact, it's being used, together with the other ecumenical and United Methodist resources in group discussions and individual studies as important materials for discussions on our way towards the visible unity of the Church and the renewal of our communities.

*b. What suggestions would you make for the future development of this text?*

We would like to encourage Faith and Order to keep the present format of this text in its future development: short, concise and simplified theological language for a diverse ecumenical audience. In addition to the format, the same method should continue in the future, the method of keeping common perspectives in the main text and then areas of difficulties, differences and even disagreements in the boxes. Some issues we have raised and suggestions we have made can be found in paragraphs 3, 4, and 5 of this response.

Lake Junaluska, November....., 2007

The United Methodist Church/ The United Methodist Council of Bishops?