

25C United Reformed Church

The United Reformed Church receives the document *The Nature and Mission of the Church* with gratitude and recognises that it addresses important questions for inter-church dialogue. In the context of our ecumenical relations, the following issues are particularly significant: the theological importance of institutional continuity, particularly continuity in episcopacy (p.16); the limits to diversity (pp.37-9); the interpretation of local church (p.41); Baptism (p.45).

We would like to convey appreciation for the ways in which the document affirms the ministry of all the faithful, describes the special responsibility of ministers of Word and Sacrament, and reflects on the importance of the collegial, the communal and the personal for the ministry of oversight. In our own church, we have been able to embrace more positively, in recent times, the potential of personal episcopate as a gift to the Church, when held within this threefold understanding.

If the magnitude of what appears in the grey boxes suggests that convergence is quite a long way off, convergence is nonetheless represented because we can all identify with that to which the grey boxes refer.

We accept that the questions our brothers and sisters ask have to become our own questions, even if they can seem irrelevant or arcane to us, but we wish to affirm that such a process must be reciprocal. Therefore, in the spirit of seeking greater understanding, we share our own continuing concerns and questions.

- We find the document stronger on its discussion of the Nature of the Church than on its discussion of the Mission of the Church.
- We do note some imbalance of length in the shorter Mission section.
- We would have liked to have seen more about the relationship of the Church with other faiths in the Mission section.
- In general, we would have liked to have seen many more concrete examples fleshing out the text.
- The Church is prior to its historical manifestation, originating in God's gift to us, but has to become incarnate in our lives. The action of the Holy Spirit working through us makes it historical. In our efforts to hold the tension between contextuality and catholicity, and between the visible and the invisible Church, we are left with two questions – how we discern the Church as God's gift and how we discern where God is outside the Church. We believe God is incarnate in the struggle for fullness of life and would have liked to have seen more of this in the text.
- We are concerned at the absence of recognition that for many Christians in the Global South the questions this document asks are not the main questions they face. In particular we lament the absence of the question of global economic justice.
- We had hoped that this document might be the means of bringing together the classical ecumenical questions with the experience of post-colonial churches, but sadly this has not taken place.
- Noting that the question of the sinlessness of the Church is an acutely painful one, we do not find this document helps us engage with those whose historical experience has been of the Church as a corrupt, colonial institution, and we are concerned what some of our brothers and sisters who bear such a history will make of it.
- Overall we discern a need to ask ourselves how far what we treasure as the essence of Church is always and everywhere important or how dependent it is on a particular culture and context.

- By comparison with *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, which had a practical outcome, we find *The Nature and Mission of the Church* de-historicised. We would affirm that mission is not the mission of the Church but God's mission and, by extension, God's mission expressed through the Church. The Church is an incarnational reality where disciples meet God in concrete historical situations as they sit under the Word and practise it.
- We recognise the challenge that the grey box on *Limits of Diversity* (pages 37 to 39), with its focus on ecclesial and confessional identity, poses for United and Uniting Churches, but we would equally respectfully suggest that there is something in the witness of our willing sacrifice for the sake of a Gospel imperative with which others need to engage.
- We affirm the section on pages 27 and 28 on *The Church as Sign and Instrument of God's Intention and Plan for the World* but in addition we believe that God is also to be found ahead of us in the world beyond the Church, beckoning us to participate in what the Spirit has already begun to make all things new, and we would have liked to have seen consideration of the question of how the Church can discern where such presence is truly to be found.
- In more detail, we find the grey box on pages 45 and 46 does not take sufficient account of recent discussions about the place of baptism within the whole process of Christian initiation.
- Whilst we are grateful for all that is said in paragraph 93, we would have liked to have seen a reference to discipline as one of the marks of the Church. Discipline needs to be taken seriously and linked to what is said about membership. We would request a strengthening of paragraph 51 on page 31.
- Finally, mention needs to be made of the change in societal consciousness in the West, and of how this is not predicated on a sense of being in Christ. We believe there is a danger of the document buying into the North / South divide.