

26 Joint Anglican Lutheran Commission of the Anglican Church of Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

A Response to
***The Nature and Mission of the Church:
A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement***
Faith and Order Paper 198, World Council of Churches, Geneva
By the Joint Anglican Lutheran Commission of the
Anglican Church of Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

The Nature and Mission of the Church (NMC) is a constructive document that will be of broad service to the church catholic. This ecumenical project strives to identify points of convergence, divergence and challenges in ecclesial identity in such a way as to advance the ecumenical conversation for the sake of Christian mission in the world. NMC invites churches to respond to four central questions. The following represents certain insights regarding NMC that have emerged from the work of Joint Anglican Lutheran Commission of the Anglican Church of Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (JALC).

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

NMC clearly identifies points of convergence and divergences in the lives of the churches. In a succinct manner it helpfully sketches out the state of affairs in ecumenical conversations about the nature of the church. NMC is to be commended for the use of “boxes” to outline points of continuing differences. The main text clarifies that there is much that the churches share in common to the end that “the hope is that the churches will be helped to recognize in one another the Church of Jesus Christ and be encouraged to take steps on the way towards visible unity.” (NMC, p. 3). It is noted that this way of framing the task diverges slightly from the statement in the By-Laws of the Faith and Order Commission, which outlines the Commission’s aim: “to proclaim the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ and to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, in order that the world may believe.” (NMC, p. 1). The key distinction is the introduction of the theme of recognition and the omission of proclaimed oneness.

NMC hereby articulates a path whereby the goal of visible unity (no longer “full”) is achieved. NMC advances a method in which the document serves as a guide that gives member churches markers by which to recognize the church catholic in other member churches. The impression given is that by having at hand a description of what constitutes church, and then being able to see these markers in others, churches can affirm the other as churches *per se*.

It is to be noted that in so doing NMC seems to move beyond its earlier stated goal and the ecclesiological convictions of certain member churches, for whom it is not enough to ground visible unity in the ability of one church to recognize in another the Church of Jesus Christ. While recognition of the Church in the ecclesial life of another church is not inconsequential it is argued by some that the condition for the possibility of this recognition is the conviction that the Church *is* one. In sum, the unity *confessed* in the creeds grounds both ecumenism and the mission of the Church, and thereby inseparably binds the two. NMC does not deny such a starting point, but neither does it underscore it.

The document might better serve its end by highlighting the movement from confession of the unity of the church to recognition of marks of the church catholic in other churches in order to advance the mission of the church. Further to this, the statement that mission has “as its

ultimate goal the *koinonia* of all” (NMC, p. 14) deserves further nuance especially since the document then goes on to identify division as a scandal for effective mission. Does the *koinonia* of all point to the goal of evangelism or the goal of ecumenism? While ecclesial *koinonia* is certainly strained because of sin, its foundational character precludes its identity as a goal *per se*. *Koinonia* as an ecumenical reality is not the goal of mission but the condition for its possibility.

It should be underscored that NMC’s focus on the unity of ecumenism and mission is most helpful and provides the document with a solid point of departure from which common ecclesiological convictions are expressed.

Does this study document reflect an emerging convergence on the nature and mission of the Church?

NMC helpfully identifies the four major biblical images and insights of the church, which are increasingly identified in theological treatises on ecclesiology (NMC, p. 6). It is noted that the theme of *koinonia* “has become central in the quest of a common understanding of the nature of the Church and its visible unity.” (NMC, p. 8). This too is significant and of utility for ecumenical discussions. For this reason this description of the Church might best be listed first among the four primary descriptions. Moreover, it would be helpful to clarify that the images of the church as people, body and temple admit a tropological/metaphorical quality that is not predicated of *koinonia*.

Koinonia is not a picture of the church, but a description of what it is and what it wounds on account of sin. Moreover, the three core images of the church intersect insofar as they illustrate particular aspects of the *koinonia* that they share. People, body, and temple are various ways to image how *koinonia* exist; each pointing to various aspects of the Church in mission. The Church as *the people of God* reminds us of the manner in which the Church is elect to share in the vocation of the children of Israel: to bless all the nations of the earth. The Church as *the body of Christ* reminds us of the manner in which the Church bears witness to God’s way of gifting the human community in a diversity that works in harmony. The Church as *the temple of the Spirit* reminds us that we share in the prophetic nature of our forebears in faith. *Koinonia* is the ground of these three images and is for that reason over-arching in ecclesiology. In using this insight as the primary way whereby the Church can understand itself, NMC has provided a helpful point of departure. For this reason, framers of the document might consider underscoring this foundational nature of the theme of *koinonia*: the church as the location of God’s action of drawing together for the sake of mission.

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

NMC very clearly articulates the common priesthood of Christians in paragraphs 82–85. Here we see how the Church habituates its members in a posture of service. Each is encouraged to use their gifts for the good of the Church and the world. This model of service is identified as a participation in the self-giving of Christ. NMC helpfully names this as the baptismal mission of each Christian. Certain traditions refer to this as the vocation of the Christian. It would be helpful for the document to explore further this ministry of all—in concert with the ministry of the ordained (paragraphs 86–89)—as the ministry of the Church proper. Or, to phrase it differently, it would be useful for the document to underscore that the Church too has a vocation. This vocation is two-fold in character; the Church simultaneously has a unique voice and a voice like others. The Church bears witness to the unique event of God’s justifying act in Jesus Christ, raised from the dead. But beyond this, churches are citizens in their community

with a voice that joins in other equally important voices in support of the common weal of the body politic. The Church in mission is to be mindful of this duplex character as it engages the world in response to the love of God in Christ.

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

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

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

The document provides opportunity to discuss further points of convergence and divergence in the lives of churches together. Seminaries, parishes and ecumenical study groups will all be well served by the clarity with which this document is written, as well as by the study questions written into the boxes and elsewhere throughout NMC. The event of talking together, first within the churches and then among the churches, will be most concrete step taken in moving towards a clearer unity in our common mission together.

In considering further development of the text, more might be made of the relationship between diversity and unity. NMC helpfully articulates that diversity in the mode of sin is division and unity in the mode of sin is uniformity (NMC, pp. 16-18). Framers of the document might consider further exploring the consequences of an affirmation of diversity in unity.

In the first instance, diversity is a gift of creation. Further, we know from the trope of the church as the body of Christ that diversity is a significant gift for the church. But the next step has not been advanced. How are the churches to understand diversity in their locations? Diversity is variously experienced as an ecumenical reality, a multi-faith reality, a sociological reality, etc.

Are there resources in the Christian tradition for seeing how the church can faithfully embrace diversity in unity precisely toward the end of the *missio Dei*? The document explores “Limits of Diversity” on page 16 with an eye toward its expression in ecclesial life, yet we also know that the Church experiences diversity in its common life with creation and other religious expressions. How are we to understand further the gifts and limits of diversity in unity?

In sum, is it possible in the 21st century to have an ecclesiology that does not locate the Church in its diversity/unity with creation and the religions? Moreover, in discussing the Abrahamic promise, the document suggests that in “Christ this promise is fulfilled when, on the cross, the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile is broken down” (NMC, p. 7). While this statement can be affirmed at a fundamental level, it must also be asserted that the Abrahamic promise’s unconditional character affirms that the children of Israel as the children of Israel also bear the fulfillment of this promise. Here we have diversity in unity. Perhaps this might be a starting point for NMC to explore how the mission of the Church as shaped by a broader *missio Dei* helps us to make better sense of the diversity of the churches in the Church.