

32 Group 06 Report to Faith and Order Plenary Commission

ECCLESIOLOGY: the discussion in Group Six

During our Group time, the discussion centred largely around two matters – namely, the scope and feel of *The Nature and Mission of the Church* [TNMC] in its current form; and the question of what should be done in the future with this ecclesiology project. As the following shows, a number of opinions were voiced. These are offered in the spirit of constructive criticism; to keep length down, the many ways in which the achievement to date is to be commended are not elaborated here. Also, there were a very few specific comments offered for the reframing of the precise text of TNMC, but these also have been omitted, since churches separately will express themselves.

General assessments of TNMC

A comment which a number voiced was the sense that TNMC gave a somewhat static impression of the Church. This was unfortunate since the Church is a dynamic reality, with an eschatology is fundamental. The paper by Fr. Scampini was commented on favourably, with its emphasis on the transformational aspects of faith. So can the sense of the Church as a relational body, not an abstract reality merely to be described, be better conveyed? Can the Church's commitment to action and cleansing and renewal sustain not only section IV but the whole of the text? Perhaps more referencing of the Gospels as sources for ecclesiology might help, given the strong orientation towards the Kingdom to be found there.

Perhaps a related area of comment which was offered was that TNMC feels a little like being words upon words. It is a long read and does not emerge altogether well from that. For all the complexity of the various church traditions, what absolutely has to be said? And yet, if the harvesting task of ecumenical dialogue is key to the substance being offered, are there not some important dimensions of the Church's nature and mission still needing to be underlined?

Aware of the rooting of the text, nevertheless the group felt that the language deployed was not altogether satisfactory. Might there be an initial setting out of terms and their meaning? There was a feeling that the ecumenical language which had been chosen was too often liable to misunderstanding – in official church circles, let alone more widely.

All voices certainly appreciated points which had emerged so clearly in the morning plenaries, namely the importance of explicitly referencing the voices of the South and the contribution of women within the Church. The comment already made, about the possibly greater use which could be made of the Gospels, was thought again to be relevant here.

The future of the ecclesiology project

Does TNMC need further work in its current form? The spirit of the Group was to support this work – continuing the process of refining the text, appreciative of the achievement so far. Deep consideration of how to be attentive to the perspectives of the South, for example, mattered for its own sake as well as for what it might contribute to the convergence text.

There was desire that the churches having been asked to make comments should not feel that their contributions went unheard. That was not to say that TNMC should necessarily incorporate all that was fed back, but it needed to be made explicit in some form or other how the referral process was taken seriously.

Would TNMC still grow in length? This was possible, in the opinion of some; for others, the task in hand seemed more likely to allow refinement and perhaps tightening up in terms of range and scope. One suggestion made (in line with our first general comment) was that perhaps some kind of summary vision of the Church being a dynamic reality could be a good way to start the text. A different thought was that perhaps the body of the text could be the shorter element, and the material left for explication through boxes, or whatever other means, the longer part. This was not to say that divisive issues were larger in scope, but might convergence simply be stated more concisely?

There was an agreed sense that patience in this field was rather important. While there are outstanding issues to be examined, and voices to be heard and acknowledged, there should not be necessarily any early conclusion even to refining TNMC. At the same time, the Group acknowledged that it was not yet clear how precisely the issues of the South, for example, or of any particular global context, might definitively shape the text. One suggestion was that the implication of the morning's plenary papers should be to encourage improving liaison between Faith and Order and CWME. The process was important as well as the proximate outcomes.

Behind the discussion of the Commission's methodology, we were urged to remember that the issue in hand was the situation of church dividedness and how we might be on the move to greater unity. The church has to be defined in its mission. The question ever recurring is what is the gain of this work.

There was some discussion of the advantages of a much shorter consensus text, in light of what was offered to the Porto Alegre General Assembly. The conclusion was that, at this stage, there is a definite process under way there, within WCC space so to speak. Faith and Order no doubt would continue to take an interest in this, but it could not be seen as the only plank of our ecclesiological process. Though already there are crossovers, few were convinced that it was wise or timely to foreclose around "Called to be the One Church".

In addition, rather, there was a perception that in the fullness of time that the study being conducted through the series of TNMC texts / consultations / reporting of responses might come to a climax around (again) a shorter distillation of the church's unity in mission – in language widely accessible and therefore likely to produce delight and encouragement and challenge, whatever controversies might remain. There would obviously need to be clarity at that stage of the likely addressees. With an eye to the Cretan context of our present meeting, and remembering the stopover in Crete borne witness to in Scripture, this would be a safe haven to be looked for, even if not the end of the journey.

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