

**Reflections by Group 7
Session 14
The Nature and Mission of the Church**

Question Area 1

What are the reactions of the group to the various discussions about *The Nature and Mission of the Church* during the Plenary Commission meetings?

Our first read of the paper was that it was generally a good attempt to construct a statement regarding the nature and the mission of the Church. In light of the plenary presentations, however, we agreed that much more could and should be done to make the document both accessible and living. At the moment, our sense is that it is somewhat static. It is clearly at a “stage on the way” to something else. Thus, it cannot yet be labeled a convergence text that is complete.

We have spoken much about the winds of Crete and the wind of the Holy Spirit. We would like to see some dynamism, some movement, some vitality both in the methodology and the subsequent text. As we reflected upon the presentations of Monday, October 12, we felt that Paul Collins’ paper held particular relevance for us. He offered an important clarification for methodology.

What were new insights for you?

We agreed that there is much in this document on which all of us would readily agree. One of the unasked questions, however, is whether or not in the end it is really our understanding of ecclesiology that currently divides us or whether it is the more or less unacknowledged issue of power that contributes to our current state of division. Why are we really divided? We thought that it has less to do with ecclesiology than it does with culture, especially if the issue of power is present. Does something need to be said about this from the beginning? How have our definitions of culture, our experiences of discrimination and marginalization (e.g. the Dalit experience), or the experience of women fit into this?

What issues raise further questions for reflection and clarification?

We have questions about the audience of this text. It needs to be made clear to whom we are writing. Is it to the academy, to church leaders, to laity, or to a combination of these? It is clear that we need to reach the leaders of the Church. But it should be passed along to the people by the leaders in a pastoral way. Anything that will make this clear would be of considerable help.

It was our strong sense, that while the paper may be an excellent academic treatment of the doctrine of the Church, it tends to present the Church as a static reality. It offers the “essence” of what the Church is, with little clear connection to the lived reality of the Church. It has the makings of a classic convergence statement like BEM, but the Church and the world have moved since that time. We need to recognize and state clearly *how* the Church has changed. This requires a descriptive element about how people think of the Church. Doctrine is not merely some abstract concept that you put on the shelf. It is also a way of life. We believe that by

leaving this document in its present state, we do not help with its reception, especially in the global South. Paragraph 4 seems to be too general and requires some expansion.

We would like to see a vision of the Church's place in the world made clear. As it stands, it seems to be difficult to translate into different cultures. The current paper appears to be very much a product of the western academy. It is highly philosophical in nature. We wonder whether it would be understood equally well in Europe and in Africa, for instance. Our sense is that if it were to begin from another position, we might arrive at other conclusions. What would the nature and the mission of the Church look like if it began with an African perspective rather than a European one?

In a similar way, the relationship between the Church and culture needs to be further clarified. The nature of the Church as being both Divine and human is unclear. From the outset, we need some kind of statement that speaks to the Incarnational character of the Church. What are our cultural blind spots? The eschatological character of the Church as something of the "Already, but Not Yet" should be highlighted as part of this. The Church is more than merely sign and instrument. *It is* a manifestation of reconciliation. *It is* a reality. This needs to be said more strongly. At the same time, *it is* the Church on the way to becoming something else.

In a similar way, we think something should be said about the relationship between the Church and the Jews and between the Church and other religions.

We also wonder how we are to understand the relationship between doctrine and experience as we think about our understanding of the Church. Paul Collins' paper lifted up the historic quadrilateral of Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. We think that the current paper deals with the first three aspects of this quadrilateral fairly well, but that it needs some help on the experiential side. While we recognized that not all experiences are of equal value and some experiences may be irrelevant to this process, we did agree on the importance of including experience and ethos in this study.

We would encourage, therefore, that some thought be given to both the experiential and the sociological realities that impinge upon our understandings of ecclesiology. The Church is not only a theological reality but an experienced and a sociological one. This may be related to the incarnational understanding of the Church from the start. We need to hear about the experience of the church in various areas. One example may be to include the experience of smaller congregations. When they think about the nature of the Church, they think first of their experience as a local congregation. They should be encouraged to tell their story of being Church in light of this text.

We hope that our faith and order work can have integrity with our dreams of social justice, our moral discernment, and the needs of the world, that is, that our theological conversations will have resonance with our experience of working to be the Body of Christ in the midst of a world in need.

To what extent do your reactions reflect the attitude of your church?

Everyone within this group tried very hard not to reflect merely personal opinion, but rather, to reflect from within the parameters of the churches from which they came.

Question Area 2

What advice does your group give to Faith and Order regarding the ongoing process? For example, is *The Nature and Mission of the Church* sufficiently mature as a text to be commended as a convergence statement?

Once again, while we found the paper to be quite good, we do not yet believe that it is the convergence document that it might become if certain changes/additions were to be made to it.

Is a further revision of the text based on the responses the best direction towards a convergence statement? Or, ought a new kind of convergence statement to be imagined, based on the present text of *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, the responses received, and the accessibility of Called to be the One Church?

We think that it will benefit from further thought and input. Don't give up on it, but continue to work on it.

What recommendations can your group make regarding the next stages to a common statement?

We think that the process can be moved forward if those who work on it deal with certain methodological questions rather than engage in a major rewrite of the document. We would encourage the ecclesiology study group to find a way to include narrative responses from the churches. Some might be included to show the ways in which current divisions exist. Others might be included to show ways in which they have been overcome within specific contexts. What does it mean to be the one Church in our diverse contexts? By including such narratives, we believe that we can find a way to engage the churches in an ongoing partnership of reflection on ecclesiology with Faith and order. In the process we could celebrate the Church as it stands (Is not God doing marvelous things?) and at the same time confess or commit ourselves to stand together. In a sense, we have heard that the ecumenical boat is becalmed, needing wind in its sails. We would encourage the use of a metaphor such as the wind of the Spirit filling our sails as God drives us into the future.

Question Area 3

How can you encourage the churches to become more committed to ecclesiological work of Faith and Order?

The response to this question lies in the responses we have given to the previous ones.