

*The Nature & Mission of the Church*

Report of Plenary Commission Working Group 8, OAC, 12-13 October 2009

**General responses:**

- the common call of all four papers in Session 13 yesterday, for an incarnational ‘ecclesiology from below’, and the clear (if diverse) missional priorities of the churches represented, was striking and persuasive for us
- the group agreed with comments from the Panel and the floor of Plenary that the text, as it stands, represents an insufficient range of voices and ecclesiologies. How to better integrate the so-called ‘classical’ and ‘contextual’ agendas is, of course, is a wider and ongoing question for Faith & Order and the WCC
  
- we reflected on this in terms of the diachronic and synchronic approaches to ecclesiology, and how they could converge in the study
  
- is any further iteration of *NMC* to be an exercise in constructive theology (starting afresh) or re-constructive theology (addressing historical sources of division)?
- both are necessary, because historical divisions are experienced as contemporary ones, as we were reminded – very sensitively – at the Divine Liturgy on Sunday
- the distinction between issues that are ‘church-dividing’ and those that are ‘division-maintaining’ may be helpful here
  
- overall, *NMC* reads as being too ‘cognitive-propositional’ in its discourse; complementary discourses, of whatever kind, might be brought closer to the surface of the text, and named as such. What, for example, does it mean to speak of the Church as *koinonia* in a casteist society?
- that said, *NMC* remains an impressive attempt to offer a theory of the Church: a meta-narrative of sorts; a necessary, if problematic exercise
- given that we can’t simply add layers and layers of specific context to the document, we need to elucidate why context is important, and how contextual ecclesiology might be done in a mutually recognisable way
- how might the current studies on Moral Discernment and Tradition and traditions inform the methodology of *NMC* on this point?
  
- with respect to Question area 3, we acknowledged that multi-lateral work on ecclesiology is very difficult to promote; the energy of the churches is with bi- and tri-laterals
- any tools we can offer those dialogues through this study, especially ones that allow our ecclesial identities to be appropriately challenged, is likely to generate greater awareness of Faith & Order’s work

**Specific recommendations**

- Is *NMC* sufficiently mature to be commended as a convergence text?
  - not yet

- it needs more work in light of all we have heard here on ecclesiology, including the five papers on Friday, and needs to draw, and draw on, more responses from the churches
- Further revision?
  - with respect to content:
    - the text needs more explicit attention to the dynamism inherent in institutional expressions of the Church's nature and mission, precisely as a creation of the Holy Spirit
    - more reflection on the indices of mutual (ecumenical) accountability in diversity is needed if it is to promote visible unity
    - there need not necessarily be direct continuity between 'Called to be the One Church' and *NMC*, although greater coherence between the two would be ideal (e.g. with respect to Baptismal practice)
    - above all *NMC* needs a single, and clearly articulated methodology
  - in terms of style/format:
    - a convergence text might need to be shorter, less comprehensive in terms of areas of convergence and divergence, but doing the over-arching theological work more sharply, providing a 'grammar' for the ecumenical conversation on ecclesiology
  - in short, the group prefers and recommends the second option put forward in Herman Shastri's paper: a further iteration of the text as a way of honouring the churches' and other responses, including those of this Plenary; this would seem to preserve the integrity of the study process over more than a decade thus far, whilst allowing it to be blown in new directions

## Session 14

### **Question area 1:**

*Reactions of the group to the various discussions about NMC during the Plenary Commission meeting; new insights; issues for further reflection; attitudes of our churches*

- some members of the group were directly involved in drafting the response of their churches, others were aware of and had read such responses, others were responding more individually from within their tradition and context
- an observation: there was not actually much discussion in Plenary; more a range of presentations with questions from the floor and some interaction between panellists
- that said, responses to the presentations themselves, and indeed the text of *NMC* were mostly appreciative
- it was especially good to hear voices from the global South in Session 13
- some would have liked more papers to address the actual text more directly (as opposed to talking about what it might have said), whilst acknowledging that the presentations were a product of reading *NMC* in a variety of local settings
- there was also a concern that the possible directions for future work (indicated on page 6 of Herman Shastri's paper) suggest an unmanageable proliferation of themes

- more substantially, the unanimity of all four papers in Session 13, in terms of advocating an ‘ecclesiology from below’, and the clear (if diverse) missional priorities of these churches, was striking and persuasive
- the group agreed with comments from the Panel and the floor of Plenary that the text as it stands represents an insufficient range of voices and ecclesiologies, but how might a more contextual starting point be engaged and honoured without generating a myriad of case studies? This, of course, is a wider and ongoing question for Faith & Order and the WCC: how to integrate the so-called ‘classical’ and ‘contextual’ agendas
- we were prompted by the Plenary sessions to reflect on two related trajectories, or ways of approaching ecclesiology:
  - diachronic: the narrative of living traditions as they develop through history
  - synchronic: specific challenges issuing in different priorities for churches, influencing the way tradition is appropriated and shaped in a given moment
- somehow these two aspects need to converge in the study’s (cruciform) methodology
- the perceived ‘bias’ of the text towards Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican traditions (see Shastri, p.5) was affirmed: Reformed churches, for example, would not assume the ‘four notes’ of the Church as a starting point (§12)
- more generally, it reads as being too ‘cognitive-propositional’ (as per Lindbeck’s typology cited in Paul Collins’ paper), in language felt to be too complex, dense, and academic for many in the churches
- so, is *NMC* to be an exercise in constructive theology (starting afresh) or re-constructive theology (addressing historical sources of division)?
- the Uniting Church of Australia’s distinction (in its response to *NMC*) between ‘church-dividing’ and ‘division-maintaining’ may be helpful here
- both are necessary, because historical divisions are experienced as contemporary ones, as we were reminded – very sensitively – at the Divine Liturgy on Sunday
- but how can we encourage greater hermeneutical sensitivity to different settings within the ecclesiological study? What, for example, does it mean to think of the Church as *koinonia* in a casteist society?
- as an example of ‘meta-theology’ – always difficult to achieve! – *NMC* is a solid attempt to speak globally about the theory of the Church: a necessary exercise post Canberra
- given that we can’t simply add layers and layers of specific context to the document, we need to elucidate why context is important, and how contextual ecclesiology might be done in a mutually recognisable way
- how might the current studies on Moral Discernment and Tradition and traditions inform the methodology of *NMC* on this point?
- Paul Collins’ plea (if not necessarily his model) for the intentional use and acknowledgement of complementary discourses may also be helpful

### **Question area 2:**

*What advice would your group give regarding ongoing study process?*

- Is *NMC* sufficiently mature to be commended as a convergence text?
  - no, not yet; it needs more work in light of what we have heard here, and needs to draw more responses from the churches, including Orthodox
  - should we even be trying (at this stage) to write a convergence text? If so, perhaps we need to set and work towards a realistic goal (in time, e.g. 2020)

- Further revision?
  - regarding the title, a suggestion was made: ‘The Missionary/Missional Nature of the Church’; dropping the ‘and’, however, may diminish the nice parallel that currently exists with the ‘person and work’ of Christ, highlighting the relationship between being and doing
  - with respect to content:
    - the text needs a more explicit articulation of the dynamism inherent in the expression of the Church’s nature and mission precisely as a creation of the Holy Spirit (see box starting after §13)
    - more reflection on the indices of mutual (ecumenical) accountability is needed if it is to promote *visible* unity
    - there need not necessarily be direct *continuity* between ‘Called to be the One Church’ and *NMC*, although *coherence* would be nice! (e.g. on Baptismal practice, cf. Plenary comment from Janet Scott, Society of Friends). Possibly include ecclesiological statements from General Assemblies (New Delhi, Canberra, Porto Alegre, others?) as appendices
    - *NMC* needs a single, clear, and articulated methodological and hermeneutical approach, so that the text is as coherent as possible
  - in terms of style/format:
    - a convergence text might need to be shorter, simpler, less comprehensive in terms of areas of convergence and divergence, but doing the ‘meta-theological’ work more sharply
    - would something akin to the *BEM* format work better, and look more familiar to the churches?
    - the ‘honesty’ of Sunday’s (eucharistic) experience was appreciated: how can this be replicated in the text?
    - greater consistency about how the boxes are used would be helpful, including brief explanations of *why* different traditions hold to particular views on points of divergence
  - in short, the group prefers and recommends the second option put forward in Herman Shastri’s paper – i.e. a further iteration of the text, perhaps indicated as such by using *NMC II* as a working title, as a way of honouring the churches’ and other responses, including those of this Plenary; this would seem to preserve the integrity of the process over more than a decade to date
  - the five responses we heard to ‘Called to be the One Church’ on Friday, also seem to bear directly on the task of further revision

## Session 17

### **Question area 3:**

*How can we encourage the churches to become more committed to ecclesiological work of Faith & Order?*

- F&O Commissioners need to try harder with respect to their own churches!
- does visible unity imply ‘institutional’ unity? To be ‘visible’, unity must surely be expressed and experienced in our institutional lives, without reverting to a neo-Christendom with all of its socio-political baggage
- how ‘broaden’ (soften?) understandings of the churches’ institutional lives
- would a ‘theology of institution’ assist the churches? Is an ecclesiology study a place for such reflection?

- See summary Plenary report for other observations on this question area

*NB. Much of this session was spent reviewing & revisiting the previous day's group conversation, and identifying key areas for (Plenary) reporting*

*Richard Treloar on behalf of Group 8*