

35 Group 09 Report to Faith and Order Plenary Commission

Ecclesiology: NMC

Report from Group 9

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The group appreciates the long work of many in FO to produce NMC document before us.

In discussion of what we heard in plenary papers and responses from member churches represented in our groups we noted particularly the following:

It is important to listen to contributions from diverse parts of the world; different members of our group were especially moved by different ones of the plenary presentations. We suggest below a way that such materials might be gathered to move the process forward.

Among responses from our communions we noted particularly the following phrases: “a significant degree of consensus” (RC); the need for a “living document” (Anglican Church of Canada); request for accompanying “illustrations of new life together” (PCUSA). Again, these phrases guide our response and suggestions below.

It is the view of Group 9 that FO should continue to work on this document in the light of the responses received thus far and in view of the significant need for further responses from the churches. (It is not yet ready to be identified as a convergence document).

Concerning soliciting further responses, we recognize that FO does not have resources for continued and repeated follow-up. Plenary participants should be encouraged once again to learn whether their communions have responded, and to follow up with appropriate church officers if a response has not yet been developed.

In addition to seeking responses to the questions listed in “The Invitation” (Introduction, Part C), more interest in the document might be generated by requesting submission of stories that could be used to give the text a “more human face.” FO could ask communions and local groups of various sorts to share stories about the pain of disunity that illustrate a particular sentence or paragraph in the document. Gathering and sharing these stories could help to make the document more lively and meaningful for readers less experienced in classical theological language and categories. Stories of hope should also be shared, but with the caution that such stories might foster complacent satisfaction with the status quo rather than encouragement toward greater visible unity.

We note also that the NMC document is a result of a process in which people from different traditions engaged its issues face to face over time, a process in which they grew in their experience of seeing Christ in the face of the other. For those who did not participate in the process, the document often seems very theoretical. There is a need for getting people into a similar process of conversation and discernment in local ecumenical contexts, such as local ecumenical councils or clergy groups. This replication of experience would help to facilitate the appreciation of the document, and of the work of FO generally toward visible unity. Perhaps some of the stories (see above) could come out of such gatherings.

We particularly encourage the drafters to include a section on the nature of visible unity.

The group noted that by comparison to BEM the practical implications for church life coming from NMC seem very nebulous. Perhaps this is why NMC is receiving less interest than BEM.

Also in the new situation 30 years post BEM, churches are in a different place, with less interest overall in FO topics. This need not be unduly discouraging. The strategies suggested above might help to revive interest. And even deepened mutual understanding and respect would be progress. We would hope that a revised text could eventually be sent to the churches with some form of the questions that accompanied BEM: “can you recognize in this text the faith of the church throughout the ages? Can you recognize the faith of other churches through this text? And if so, what are the possible consequences for your life?” We expect, however, that such a revised text may not be able to be produced by the next Assembly in 2013.

In the event that FO is eventually able to move to a convergence text for NMC, we hope that the responses to that document could be published, as they were for BEM, because the availability of those responses has been so helpful to the churches.

Respectfully submitted,
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