

### Faith and Order Plenary Commission Meeting, Crete, Greece Working Group 11

Session 14, Monday, 12 October 2009  
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 meeting? What were new insights for you? What issues raise further questions for reflection and clarification? To what extent do your reactions reflect the attitude of your church?*

Everyone in Working Group 11 felt grateful that such thoughtful and thorough work had been done on the statement as it stands today, and appreciated that NMC stands in the tradition of BEM. All members felt that their traditions were reflected in it in some way; many commended its balance and the method of using “boxes” to express areas of continuing divergence. Others were appreciative that it has been translated and widely disseminated, and appreciate the opportunity that some churches have had to consider previous versions on a regional basis. There was a high degree of consensus in the group that the work done so far was helpful and the document as it stands is useful as a tool for ongoing dialogue.

Reservations about the document fell in two general areas: first, whether the statement’s methodology and content are sufficiently wide-ranging, inclusive and contextual to be an authentic and complete picture of how the church is understood and experienced by Christians, particularly in the global South; and second, whether the statement’s formal method is too heavily focused on a deductive, dogmatic, theoretical model of the church and perhaps does not adequately present the ecclesiology of the churches of the Reformation and the free churches.

Most members of the group saw their churches’ ecclesiologies reflected in the document; none believed the document presented only their own point of view. Several believed the voice of their tradition could be more clearly present than it is now. In particular, the idea that the authentic church, as a manifestation of Christ’s holy presence within a fallen humanity and striving to live ever more fully into that presence, must always be self-critical and continually self-reforming.

The group understands that not every position, context, and voice will be clearly heard in every statement, but did find the absence of contextual theology, including the voices of feminist theologians, the experience of ecclesial change and pluralism in the global South, the experience of the marginalized or dispossessed, the relative lack of reflection on the church’s contribution to systems of oppression to be a serious deficit. These are, in some cases, not just additional points to be considered, but also lenses through which the work already done can and should be reviewed and critiqued. Race, class, gender, and geographical and economic factors also determine our experiences of church and shape our ecclesiology.

*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 text to be commended as a convergence document? 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? What recommendations can your group make regarding the next stages to a common document?*

Acknowledging the value of the work done so far, the consensus in the working group was that NMC is not sufficiently mature as a text to be commended as a convergence document. Too much has not been considered or not sufficiently considered. The effort to understand and express the idea of the church, both in classical theological language and in the experience of global Christianity, is a necessary and worthy goal, and NMC is a step on the path, but it is part of the process and not yet the destination. There is simply too much still missing; the responses from the global church are not extensive or representative enough,

A second area of concern lies in the relationship of NMC to Called to Be the One Church. What is the relative status of the two statements? Clearly the General Assembly document does not derive from the Faith and Order document. As a shorter, more accessible statement, CBOC has much to commend it, but should the two not be more clearly connected? Or should the conversation instead turn to reconciling or balancing a variety of statements including the church body responses to both NMC and CBOC and global contextual reflections, all gathered up as a broad pool of reflection? Perhaps all the work done so far, and the work that remains to do, could be gathered under a single umbrella introductory statement without revisiting or substantially revising NMC, but setting it in a broader context? We are not yet at the point of having a BEM-like statement that can stand alone as the starting point for all.

That said, this is an important process of reflection on ecclesiology, and the discussion should be continued. The next phase of the process should involve more church responses, representative regional consultations, other WCC commissions, and responses from confessional alliances.

It will also be very important that the process from this point out be a more inclusive and varied one, and that it focus more on listening than on teaching. There is much collective experience, wisdom and faith present in the “lived church” than is reflected in NMC so far. There is also powerful dynamism present in the lived reality of the church, as well as the mystery inherent in our faith, that needs to be expressed in our articulation of ecclesiology. It is our hope that all voices might be better heard, and that a genuinely converging understanding be more inclusively expressed.

*Question area 3: How can you encourage the churches to become more committed to the ecclesiological work of Faith and Order?*

Our working group had a wide variety of responses; many expressed concern that the process that links the development of statements to their reception by the churches lacked the concrete personal points of connection to the churches that a wider inclusion of churches would create.

Our churches have rich opportunities for reflection: theological education providers like colleges, universities, and seminaries; they have governing assemblies and other deliberative bodies; they have programs for youth, for women, and other groups and interests, including work at the local level. Each of these provides a chance for communal reflection on these statements not only but among local communities. We acknowledge the difficulty of engaging local communities in ecumenical dialogue, and encourage the development of resources and study processes to facilitate this.

But aside from the challenge of focusing interest on these statements, a deeper question arises: what is the purpose of wide engagement on them? To help people appreciate their own traditions better? To help in ecumenical service efforts and to lower suspicion of others? It is important to be clear as to the goals.

Some of our churches have well established bilateral relationships. Perhaps these could also provide a framework for engagement on ecclesiological questions. In general, however, our group placed its greatest emphasis on the human connections and networking necessary to secure broad consideration and careful listening.

*Participants in this conversation:*

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