

40 Christian Council of Norway

Christian Council of Norway
Norwegian Theological Dialogue Forum
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A Norwegian Ecumenical Response to *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (Faith and Order Paper 198) from The Norwegian Theological Dialogue Forum, The Christian Council of Norway:

Introduction:

The members of The Norwegian Theological Dialogue Forum would like to begin by thanking the international Faith and Order Commission for the work that has been done on ecclesiological questions in recent years. We see this demanding work as dealing with the most fundamental conditions underlying of the ecumenical quest for Christian unity in our time.

Since its founding in 1983, The Norwegian Theological Dialogue Forum (Norsk teologisk samtaleforum, NTSF) has been an ecumenical forum for the discussion of theological questions in Norway. Since 2000, NTSF has, in dialogue with The Christian Council of Norway (founded in 1992), been defined as the permanent Norwegian ecumenical “Faith and Order group”, with the goal of contributing draft responses and statements to documents from the international ecumenical milieu, on behalf of the board of The Christian Council of Norway. This definition of the activity of NTSF is in accord with the work the forum has done ever since its inception, discussing various international ecumenical documents. These include the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*¹ and *Confessing one Faith. Towards an Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as expressed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)*.² The work of NTSF on the Nicene Creed, carried out between 1988 and 2000, was summed up in the paper *Trosbekjennelsen i vår tid. En økumenisk kommentar til Den nikenske trosbekjennelse (The Creed in Our Time. An Ecumenical Commentary on the Nicene Creed)*.³ In addition to responses to Faith and Order internationally, NTSF has also had the goal of making known among Christians in Norway theological reflection on ecumenical questions, through publications of this kind. In 2006, the dialogue statement *Israel og Palestina – En økumenisk utfordring (Israel and Palestine – An Ecumenical Challenge)* was published.⁴

From December 2007 to May 2009, NTSF has, in eight meetings, discussed Faith and Order Paper 198: *The Nature and Mission of the Church*. In addition to giving an ecumenical response to Faith and Order internationally, we also wanted to take this opportunity to create a Norwegian dialogue document on ecclesiology, and this has been the focus of our meetings. From the very

¹ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Faith and Order Paper no. 111, cf. the Norwegian translation by Anne Berger Jørgensen: *Dåp, nattverd og embete. Limadokumentet med forord av Ivar Asheim*, Verbum Forlag 1983.

² *Confessing one Faith. Towards an Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as expressed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)*. Faith and Order Paper no. 153, cf. the Norwegian translation by Vidar L. Haanes, Verbum Forlag 1994.

³ Norges kristne råds skriftserie – nr. 4, Norges kristne råd 2001.

⁴ Norges kristne råds skriftserie – nr. 14, Norges kristne råd 2006.

beginning, it was clear that we would exceed our own deadlines if we were to attempt to create an ecclesiological document from scratch. At the same time, we wanted to do more than simply translate *The Nature and Mission of the Church* into Norwegian, or translate into Norwegian our English response to this document. We chose therefore to create what we have called a “Norwegian ecumenical dialogue document that takes its starting point in the international Faith and Order Paper 198”.

The working procedure at our meetings, which have lasted five to six hours each time, has been to discuss parts of Faith and Order Paper 198 based on written responses from one or two of the participants in NTSF. The secretary of NTSF wrote a draft of a Norwegian text based on the discussions, the written responses and the English text, and this draft was then discussed at the subsequent meeting. At the two final meetings, we then discussed a draft of a final Norwegian statement. The solution we arrived at, creating a Norwegian dialogue document based on Faith and Order Paper 198, implies both challenges and opportunities: By closely following the English text, important aspects of the international ecumenical dialogue are presented to a broad Norwegian readership. At the same time, the fact that the document is reworked means that the dialogue that took place in NTSF is also reflected in the Norwegian version, and thus it is better adapted to a Norwegian setting and the Norwegian ecumenical dialogue. The challenge has been that the revision of such a comprehensive document is a very demanding process. We have therefore not been able to discuss in depth all aspects of the document, and we have also not always had theological reasons for the changes we have made. Some of the changes are simply due to the desire to create a simpler and shorter text.

Response:

In the following, the most important changes to and viewpoints concerning *The Nature and Mission of the Church* that have been brought to light in the dialogue in NTSF are summarized. Even though we have not translated our entire document into English, we believe that the references to changes we have made in the Norwegian text can be useful for the Faith and Order commission in the process of further revising the document. The entire Norwegian document is attached. See also Attachment A: “Translation of passages that are new or have been substantially changed in the Norwegian version”; and Attachment B: “Translation of the table of contents of the Norwegian dialogue document”. In the following, our comments and suggested changes are presented:

1. The structure of the document should be simplified. Fewer heading levels and more paragraph divisions will make the document easier to read. In particular, we have simplified the structure of chapter I, but also sub-chapter III F has fewer heading levels. The box *Church as “Sacrament”*? has been moved from chapter II to the end of chapter I because we found that it better fits the context there. The box *Episkopé, Bishops and Apostolic Succession* has been moved to the end of the paragraph on oversight (III F), such that each box functions as a commentary at the end of each sub-chapter. In the Norwegian text, the division of paragraphs and the numbering of paragraphs is different than in the English text. We have removed certain paragraphs and divided others. The Norwegian text is therefore slightly shorter than the English text, but it has approximately the same number of paragraphs.
2. The language should be simplified. We have simplified the language to a certain degree, but we have retained certain technical terms and have used several alternative terms for topics that can be referred to in different ways in different churches (*universal* is used as a supplement to *catholic*, *Lord’s Supper* is used as a supplement to *Eucharist*, *communion* is used for both *fellowship* and *Lord’s Supper*, *consecration for ministry* is used as a supplement to

ordination, etc). Even though certain of these terms can seem foreign to some readers, one of the important goals of NTSF is to expand our common Norwegian ecumenical-theological vocabulary.

3. In our Norwegian document, we have often used other words than “Church” where the English text uses “Church”. We have primarily attempted to distinguish between the theological concept of “Church” and the more descriptive concept of “denomination” (*kirkesamfunn* in Norwegian). In this way we can accommodate various ecclesiological positions in a more nuanced way (cf. the boxes *Limits of Diversity?* and *Local Church*) than if we had only used the theological concept of “Church”.
4. In our dialogue in NTSF, we have found that the boxes where remaining ecumenical problem areas are discussed have been important. In the further revision of the document, we recommend that Faith and Order discusses the role of these boxes in the document as a whole. Sometimes there is a tendency to press the primary text too far, with the result that the boxes partially contradict the agreement presented in the primary text. We have tried to avoid this in our primary text and boxes, and have thus nuanced both the primary texts and the boxes in numerous places. We also find that it would be useful to number the boxes and put the headings of the boxes in the table of contents (cf. the translation of the Norwegian table of contents).
5. In the following, some of the remaining theological viewpoints concerning the document that have come to light in the dialogue in NTSF, and that have been recorded in our Norwegian dialogue document are presented:
 - a. The origin of the Church in the historical work of Jesus should be made clearer (salvation-historical and Christocentric ecclesiological grounding, cf. § 2 in the Norwegian text). In our document, this is brought out in chapter I A, instead of the theological discussion of the work of the Word and Spirit as found in the English text.
 - b. The relation between the Church and the Kingdom of God should be brought up earlier in the document.
 - c. Opinions vary within NTSF as to the usefulness of biblical bridal mysticism with reference to the Church today. In order to create a common text and a text that is simpler, we have removed the reference to the Church as bride in connection with the discussion of the Church as the body of Christ (I B b).
 - d. The action of God in the Church should be discussed in such a way as to bring out more clearly that God also acts in the world outside the fellowship of the Church (cf. especially I B and C in the English text, I B in the Norwegian text).
 - e. We recommend a clearer eschatological focus at the end of the document (chapter IV), but this must not weaken the focus on our responsibility for the welfare of all of creation and service in love of our neighbours. The focus in the English text on salvation as *transformation* is found to be too one-sidedly focused on life here and now.
 - f. We found it necessary to create a new box which brought up the relation between *apostolic faith* and *apostolic tradition* (Box 6, Norwegian text). In our dialogue, this has

been an underlying area of disagreement that is veiled if it is not specifically dealt with in the text.

- g. We have chosen to speak in a different way of the pastoral challenges concerning the divergence between the number of members and the number of regular participants in the life of the church, not adopting the pairs of sociological concepts used in the English text (cf. § 51 English text and § 38 Norwegian text).
- h. It is challenging to gather various understandings of baptism in a common text, and we have worked toward a more inclusive treatment of baptism/Christian initiation. In the box we have combined points f) and g) from the English text (concerning those who do not use water in baptism) in point f) of the Norwegian text, and we have added the question of sprinkling vs. full immersion as point g). We have also added a point b) concerning what must be demanded of Christian practice in order for the baptism of infants to be a legitimate practice.
- i. We have worked toward finding a common text concerning the Lord's Supper which works for all participants. In the box on the Lord's Supper, we have used other categories than the English text, and we have included the fact that certain denominations do not celebrate the Lord's Supper with bread and wine. We have also added the fact that there is disagreement concerning the day on which the Lord's Supper should be celebrated, as well as concerning the content of the main weekly service.
- j. We have attempted to find a way to speak of the ministry that better takes into account the various understandings and practices of ordination and consecration for service. We have for example used "consecration for service" as a supplement to "ordination".
- k. We call for a more sober treatment of the approach to questions concerning leadership at the regional and global level, but we find it positive that such topics are discussed in a context where various denominations participate in the dialogue.
- l. We call for a more balanced treatment of the relationship between State and Church. We find the English text to be too one-sidedly harmonizing in an area which has given rise to major challenges for the identity of the Church (cf. § 115 in the English text and § 108 in the Norwegian text).

In our work with Faith and Order Paper 198 and our Norwegian ecumenical dialogue document, members from the following churches have participated in one or more meetings: The Anglican Church, The Baptist Union of Norway, The Catholic Church -Diocese of Oslo, The Church of Norway, The Evangelical Lutheran Free Church, The German-speaking Evangelical Congregation in Norway, The Mission Covenant Church of Norway, The Salvation Army, The United Methodist Church, The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Norway, The Orthodox Church in Norway -Holy Nikolai Church, The Pentecostal Movement in Norway and The Seventh-day Adventist Church.

At the close of our work on *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, we would like to underline that The Norwegian Theological Dialogue Forum is a dialogue forum and not an inter-ecclesiastical doctrinal organ. Our dialogue document, like the international Faith and Order Paper, is "a stage

on the way to a common statement”, not a final and binding common statement. This implies that those who have participated in the process do not necessarily agree on all points in the document. This means that neither the text nor the response to Faith and Order are ratified by the various churches. As members of 13 different churches, however, we have together formulated a response to Faith and Order and a dialogue document: *Kirkens vesen og oppdrag – et steg på veien mot en fellesuttalelse (The Nature and Mission of the Church -A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement)*. We would like to emphasize the importance of having discussed this topic in such a broad ecumenical forum. We who have participated in the process have learned much from each other and have had our understanding expanded. We hope and believe that the document we now present can contribute constructively to the continuing ecumenical dialogue between Christians in Norway concerning what the Church is and how we who are “in Christ” are called to sibling fellowship in Christ’s one Church. Our comments will hopefully also be useful for the international Faith and Order Commission. We pray for God’s blessing over the continuing ecumenical work on ecclesiology!

Oslo, June 2009

For The Norwegian Theological Dialogue Forum
Roar G. Fotland (leader) and Sigurd Hareide (secretary)

For The Christian Council of Norway
Ørnulf Steen (general secretary)

Two attachments follow (A third attachment – the full text of the Norwegian ecumenical dialogue document – comes as a separate document):

Attachment A: Translation of passages that are new or have been substantially changed in the Norwegian version

§ 2 in the Norwegian text:

Temporally and historically, the origin of the Church is tied to the advent of Jesus Christ, who in word and deed brought the Kingdom of God near (Mark 1:15), who gathered around himself a fellowship of disciples and founded the Church as the universal people of God. Ever since the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost, the members of the Church have been sent out as witnesses of Christ “to the ends of the Earth” (Acts 1:8). The Church is therefore missional in its very nature – called to and sent out to serve, as a “tool” for Christ and the Holy Spirit and as a sign of the Kingdom of God. Brought into being by Christ and the Spirit, the Church belongs to God. It is God’s gift and cannot exist by and for itself.

Norwegian version of § 51 of the English text: ”belong without believing” and ”believe without belonging”:

The fact that there is often a discrepancy between the number of church members and the number who regularly participate in the services of the Church is also a challenge for the Christian fellowship. In both this and other areas, the Church lives with a tension between ideal and reality. In face of such pastoral challenges, it is of utmost importance that the practice of the Church continues to be renewed, in faithfulness to the theological vision of the Church

Addition to the box on “Local Church” – final sentence:

Local Church

...

Behind the various ecclesiological models presented in BOX 4 (*Limits of Diversity?*) lie alternative views concerning what is required for a local church to be a ”valid Church”.

New Box on “Apostolic Faith and Apostolic Succession”

Apostolic Faith and Apostolic Succession (Box 6)...

Even though the participants in NTSF agree that the Scripture occupies a special position as source of the apostolic faith, and that the Church is called to transmit this apostolic faith through the ages, there is still some disagreement between the various denominations in this area:

(a) concerning the precise relation between Scripture and the transmission of the apostolic faith in the Church: Are Scripture and tradition different ways in which the apostolic faith has been transmitted in the Church, at the same time being closely and indissolubly connected to one another, or is “Scripture alone” the only criterion the Church has for what is apostolic faith?

(b) concerning the authority which the transmission of the faith in the Church (tradition) has for the life of the Church today;

(c) concerning who has the authority to interpret the apostolic tradition today: Has Christ

consecrated a ministry with responsibility to interpret the apostolic faith in an authentic way, or is “Scripture alone” the only criterion? In that case, who has the authority to interpret Scripture in a binding manner for the Christian fellowship, and how can one discern the Spirit’s guidance of the Church?

(d) concerning how one should respond when the confessions of various churches and denominations contradict or even condemn one another.

Partially changed box on “Baptism” – only those points that have been changed are repeated here:

Baptism and Ecclesiology (BOX 7)

(b) various views among and within the churches that baptise infants concerning what is required of Christian practice in order that the baptism of infants in Christian families can be a legitimate practice (cf. BEM § 21B);

(f) the difference between churches which employ water as the instrument of baptism, and those which believe that Christian baptism does not require any such material instrument, emphasizing that one can participate in the spiritual experience of new life in Christ even without baptism by water;

(g) the difference between churches in which baptism by sprinkling is accepted as valid baptism and those which require full immersion in order for the baptism to be valid.

Partially changed box on “Eucharist” – the entire box is repeated here:

Eucharist and Communion (Box 8)

Although BEM and the responses to it from the churches/denominations registered a degree of agreement about the Eucharist, significant differences remain:

(a) As regards the understanding and practice of the Eucharist there remains the question whether it is primarily a meal, or primarily a service of thanksgiving.

(b) Among the churches for whom the Eucharist is primarily a service of thanksgiving, there is growing convergence concerning its sacrificial character. Remaining disagreement centres principally on the questions of how the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on Calvary is made present in the eucharistic act. The biblical term anamnesis (memory/remembrance) has been used to unite various approaches. However, some maintain that the concept has been made to bear more weight in theological and ecumenical texts than it is capable of bearing.

(c) Churches continue to disagree about the nature and mode of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. This is also true of the role of the Holy Spirit in the whole eucharistic celebration.

(d) There is disagreement concerning both the day on which the weekly service is to take place and also whether the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is an integrated part of this weekly service

or not: For some churches, the gathering of the church with the preaching of the Word and celebration of the Lord's Supper on the day of the resurrection is of normative significance. For others, questions concerning both the day and the content of the service are of a more practical nature – for example, whether one should celebrate the Lord's Supper every Sunday, or on which day the church should gather. Some churches emphasize the holiness of the Sabbath, the seventh day.

(e) Certain churches do not celebrate the Eucharist with bread and wine, emphasizing rather the wordless communion of the faithful in the meeting for worship and the fact that every common meal can be a sacramental, holy communion when Jesus is received and honoured.

(f) There is disagreement concerning who can receive the Eucharist/communion. Some churches invite all who believe in Jesus Christ to receive communion, whether they are baptised or not, while others invite only those who believe in Jesus Christ and are baptised and in a "state of grace". Others unconditionally invite all who are baptised.

(g) All Christians do not yet share the communion. Some churches believe that eucharistic sharing is both a means of building communion between divided churches as well as the goal of ecumenical work. Others find that eucharistic sharing is not a means to Christian unity but is only a goal for ecumenical work. They therefore offer communion to members of other churches or allow their own members to participate in the communion of other churches only on exception. Behind the variety of practices connected to the celebration and sharing of the Lord's Supper lie serious theological problems between the churches that are at present unresolved. There is a continuing need for dialogue and growth in understanding concerning the actual faith and practice of the divided churches.

Norwegian version of § 115, on the relationship between Church and State

Christians are called to promote the values of the Kingdom of God by working together with all people of good will and by actively participating in the political and economic life of society. The relationship between State and Church has been a particularly challenging domain for Christians through the ages. This relation has been understood in various ways at different times and places, both in theory and in practice. In those circumstances where Christianity has been the dominant religion in society and the preferred religion of the governing powers, it has been especially challenging to maintain the Church's calling as salt of the earth and light of the world (Mt 5:13-16). At the same time, Christian values have often been promoted in society through the close cooperation between the State and various churches—even though this cooperation has not been without its mistakes and shortcomings. The efforts of Christians in the political life of a society may bring them into conflict with political solutions which contradict the values of the Gospel, but in such cases Christians stand in the tradition of the prophets who proclaimed God's judgement on all injustice.

Attachment B: Translation of the table of contents of the Norwegian dialogue document:

Preface

I The Church of God

A. The Origin and Nature of the Church – Gift and Work of God

- BOX 1: The Institutional Dimension of the Church and the Work of the Holy Spirit*
- B. The Church and the Persons of the Trinity – Four Biblical Models
 - (a) The Church as People of God
 - (b) The Church as the Body of Christ
 - (c) The Church as Temple of the Holy Spirit
 - (d) The Church as Fellowship – koinonia/communio
 - C. The Mission of the Church – Sign and Instrument of God's Intention for the World
 - BOX 2: Church as “Sacrament/Mystery”?*

II The Church in History

- A. The Church in via
 - BOX 3: The Church and Sin*
- B. In Christ – But Not Yet in Full Communion
 - BOX 4: Limits of Diversity?*
- C. The Church as Communion of Local Churches
 - BOX 5: Local Church*

III The Life of Communion in and for the World

- A. The Apostolic Faith of the Church
 - BOX 6: Apostolic Faith and Apostolic Tradition*
- B. Baptism and the Church
 - BOX 7: Baptism and Ecclesiology*
- C. Lord's Supper/Eucharist and the Church
 - BOX 8: Eucharist and Communion in the Church*
- D. The Church and the Ministry of All the Faithful
- E. A Special Ministry for the Fellowship/Communion
 - BOX 9: Ordained Ministry and the Church*
- F. Oversight: Personal, Communal, Collegial
 - BOX 10: Episkopé and the Apostolic Succession*
- G. Regional and Global Leadership
 - BOX 11: Conciliarity and Universal Primacy*
- H. Authority

IV Serving Until Christ Returns

Conclusion