

Southern California Ecumenical Council
Faith & Order Commission
Summary and Report of Discussion of *The Nature and Mission of the Church*
June 2007

Background

The Faith & Order Commission began its study of *The Nature and Mission of the Church* as an outgrowth of a series of sessions focusing on the reports and papers presented to the WCC Faith & Order Plenary Commission in Kuala Lumpur in 2004. We began with the biblical and theological theme papers and those on the baptism sub-theme and then reviewed the presentations on the ecclesiology sub-theme. Upon finishing those, we postponed study of the remaining Kuala Lumpur presentations to give our attention to *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, committing to monthly meetings during the 2006-2007 academic year. We completed the document at our meeting in May, 2007.

Denominational affiliations of the twelve group members included Lutheran (ELCA and Missouri Synod), Wesleyan, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Four persons were seminary faculty, two were laypersons, and six were ordained pastors.

General Observations/Reactions

The “invitation” in the introduction to the text posed four questions as a framework for responses to the document. What follows responds to those questions, first in general, and then more specifically.

In general the study group found *The Nature and Mission of the Church* a useful document for reflection on ecclesiological issues. Its specific sections provided adequate material for discussion (backed up by references to other F&O documents) and provoked a useful and enlightening exchange among our varied group members.

Does this study document correctly identify, our common ecclesiological convictions, as well as the issues which continue to divide us?

In our estimation, the document is optimistic in describing *common* convictions. Its range and scope includes a wide array of views, but it seems an over-reaching to say that the views are commonly held. They are held in various parts of the church, but not uniformly across the spectrum. Consequently, the boxes noting dividing issues could be more plentiful.

Does this study document reflect an emerging convergence on the nature and mission of the Church?

We agree that the text represents a step forward, but have some trouble with the language of “emerging convergence.” Obviously the notion of church-as-koinonia is a well-developed WCC/Faith & Order notion. And there is a near-unanimous agreement that the church is Christ’s agent in the world. The text seems to us to mark more advanced agreements between among several large families of Christians (e.g. catholics, orthodox, and traditional protestants), and more initial agreements among other families (evangelicals, pentecostals). We would be more tentative, suggesting “pre-emergent,” perhaps. (See below.)

Are there significant matters in which the concerns of your church are not adequately addressed?

The short answer is Yes. There were two primary areas identified in our group: 1) the centrality of evangelization to the mission of the church – understood as a proclamation of the Gospel to persons who do not have a relationship to Jesus Christ; and 2) the absence in the discussions of sacraments or acknowledgments of those (e.g. Quakers, Pentecostals) who interpret baptism in spiritual or non-material ways. Beyond those, we would like to have seen more attention given to the issue of authority:

Insofar as this study document provides a helpful framework for further ecclesiological discussions among the churches:

– How can this study document help your church, together with others, take concrete steps towards unity?

As a result of our study, we are convinced that similar studies in groups of congregations could lead to more mutual accountability among the churches, as well as, perhaps, new common initiatives in evangelization and social action. A widening circle of discussion is a prerequisite, with particular attention to listening to one another.

– What suggestions would you make for the future development of this text?

A study guide, with suggested discussion questions and/or process would be useful. Attention needs to be given to ways of helping readers reflect on the text from their particular social location. It needs to be something more corporate than “how does that sound to you?”: a way of moving to “how our church looks at this...” That being said, our experience with the text as it stands suggests that it requires a long and disciplined study. Even after nine 2-hour sessions, there is much we do not know about one another. That may suggest that the text is too extensive, and needs to be shortened or abbreviated. Or perhaps broken up into more specific segments..

A more disciplined biblical hermeneutic would be immensely helpful, especially in the biblical subsection of part I and in part II subsection A. As it stands, the text treats scripture as an anthology while it honors post-canonical historical development and insists on contextualization of the gospel. It would be more helpful for it to embrace the fruits of the 150+ years of historical biblical criticism and use, at a minimum, the scholarly consensus about the composition of scripture. This would prevent the leveling of the text and provide a means for discerning developments of ecclesiology within the canon. The latter furnishes a critical mechanism for separating subsequent theology from the earlier witness and testimony of the apostles – a necessary tool for accomplishing an informed contextualization of the gospel in the present time.

Finally, a somewhat more modest way of describing the church might be a useful beginning point. The text approaches the subject from what could be called a “top-down” point of view. An alternative would be to begin with some “bottom-up” social-science descriptions of how humans devise social organizations – clans, tribes,and churches. Having acknowledged that thinking about the nature and mission of the church represents [perhaps inspired] thinking about what God expects of us, one would be in a position to press the envelope about what is yet to emerge. One also would be relieved of the pressure on the church to pretend that it is more than it is.

Specific Comments and/or Suggestions

[these follow the outline and paragraph numbering of the document]

Introduction

A. This Study

4. The paragraph suggests that mission is defined by context; there is a bifurcation between “spiritual” and “material want” (or “human need”) with a bias toward social action. How do we decide the focus of mission? (Note: “evangelization” is not mentioned.)

B. Purpose and Method 6. The alternation of “main text” and boxed text is helpful, but not always consistent. Some differences/challenges are embedded in the main text.

C. The Invitation

8. The general definition of the church’s purpose is quite brief and general, but hints at the mission of the church [in the world]; the remainder of the document is largely intramural – about the internal, institutional nature of the church.

The questions are quite appropriate for the purposes of the document I. The Church of the Triune God

A. The Nature of the Church

(I) The Church as a Gift of God...

The Latin phrases describing the church as creature of word and spirit strike a peculiar accent at the beginning of the section. If this is technical language from a dialogue (see footnote 8), it should be footnoted at its first use. Does this language represent a particular tradition?

9-10. Linking the church to Word and Spirit seems an over-reach to give authority to the church. As par. 10 shows, it takes some doing to develop the concept of the church as creature of the Word. Johannine theology very much in evidence, overwriting the synoptics. The introduction of Mary as a symbol of “faithful responsiveness” is linked to this theology, but must be explained. And the passage cited (Mt 12:50) has exactly the opposite point!

The notion of the continuing voice of God/the Gospel in the church needs to be complemented by a similar affirmation of the continuing voice of God in the world.

11. The notion of the church as creature of the Spirit could be strengthened by clearly naming the Spirit as Christ’s spirit, as the NT does. Consider, for example, a re-writing of a portion of this paragraph: “...so also in the life of the Church Christ’s spirit forms believers in faithful discipleship.” Or, “by his Spirit, Christ incorporates human beings into his body...” This accent has been muted by subsequent fears of theological modalism.

12. The traditional four marks of the church are linked to a potpourri of biblical texts, all of which are intended to root the marks in the character of God, shared with the church. As several of our members noted, it would be nice to add a fifth – or even a sixth or seventh – mark: “evangelical,” “pentecostal,” and “reformed/reforming.”

The use of Lk 6:36 in connection with holiness is confusing: Mt’s version of the Q saying (“be perfect”) would be closer than Luke’s “be merciful.”

The argument for apostolicity falls back on the Word-theology, and is the weakest of the four in that it relies primarily on the activity of the first believers for its definition. One might suggest substituting “evangelical” for this mark, since God initiates the believers’ redemption and embodies it in a “gospel” (as the argument notes).

13. The phrase “who as Trinity” seems to belong to a different theological agenda.

[box] Use of the boxes should be consistent: in all sections (see section 4) or maybe only in section 2 (history). And material should correspond to the section in which the box is placed: the introduction and section (a) might better go with the first box in part II (church as sacrament).

The Lutheran members of our group suggested the wording, “unity and reconciled diversity” might be useful at the end of the box.

(II) Biblical Insights

14. The trinitarian basis of ecclesiology provides the themes for this section. Perhaps the force of the organization would be clearer if paragraphs 17ff came right after 14.

15-16. It is interesting that after a “sermonic” section sprinkled with scripture references, the text turns to “biblical insights,” and addresses the question of hermeneutic. The notice of diversity within scripture is laudable, as is the reference to the usefulness of the history of interpretation. Unfortunately, even though “the proper co-ordination” of the gifts attested to in scripture is urged, the method chosen ignores the incarnational/historical character of the biblical witness, defaulting instead to a thematic approach.

17. Is it appropriate for a theological tenet (the trinitarian schema) to organize the study of scripture? This paragraph suggests so, despite the admission that a wider and more thorough study of scripture is vital. The concluding statement about relating “to Scripture as a whole” and honoring “the totality of the Biblical witness” suggests that historical criticism does neither.

(a) The Church as People of God

18-19. The tension between the notions of a particularly chosen people and a world-wide salvific interest forms the core of these two paragraphs. The text struggles to embrace the church’s claim to a “genuine newness” in Christ’s covenant while linking it to Israel’s self-understanding as a covenanted people. One might suggest that recognizing both claims as essentially “tribal” self-understandings might afford a more honest and less complicated path to Jewish-Christian relations.

The focus on “priesthood” (based on 1 Pet 2:9-10) is a subsidiary discussion that apparently must be balanced by reference to the church’s prophetic (and royal) character. We wondered how churches with strong patterns of hierarchy, apostolic succession, and ecclesial oversight would read the notion of the “priesthood of the whole Church.”

The omission of the Pauline Adam/Christ typology impoverishes this discussion of “people.” (b.) *The Church as the Body of Christ*

20-21. It was gratifying to see the attention given to the metaphor of “body of Christ.” Rooted in the largest single NT corpus, the Pauline tradition, it is perhaps the primary metaphor for the

church. One would hardly know it from the two short paragraphs in the text. The absence of a reference to Colossians is intriguing, given the particular mention of Ephesians. The series of simple one-sentence “givens” in paragraph 21 stands striking contrast to more labored parts of the text.

(c) The Church as Temple of the Holy Spirit

22-23. The text points to “the constitutive relationship between Church and Holy Spirit” in “the whole New Testament witness,” and then confesses that there is “no explicit image” for it. After noting the Pentecost account in Acts as an example, the text settles on “temple” or “house” as an approximate equivalent. We wonder why 1 Cor 3:16-17 and 2 Cor 6:16-18 were not cited. It was noted that some evangelical or holiness traditions would not particularly share the interest in “the general transformation of the whole cosmos.”

(d) The Church as Koinonia/Communion

24. This paragraph provides the justification offering *koinonia* as a key to the nature and mission of the church: its currency in ecumenical discussions. Consequently, it is a bit disingenuous to present it in a section on “biblical insights.”

25. Given other ways in which this text relies on trinitarian theology, we were surprised that this discussion of *koinonia* did not begin with something about the *koinonia* within the Trinity. Was that deliberately avoided?

25-33. The extent of this section is perhaps unintended testimony to the inappropriateness of this category for the text’s purposes. While the previous three descriptors are specific metaphors, *koinonia* is a more general and encompassing social category, an equivalent of “relationship” itself. The text admits as much by listing a bevy of images in paragraph 27.

27. Other images: army, athletics (race)

28. We suggest this paragraph be combined with paragraph 24. 33. We note this repeats paragraph 8.

B. The Mission of the Church

35. We thought the notion of apostolicity as a going-out could be more explicitly stated. Otherwise the text could be understood to mean in-place proclamation in word and deed. The element of outreach seemed muted.

37. We missed any acknowledgement of the emergence of the church in an apocalyptic framework. Surely resurrection was understood as end-time, and gave urgency to the preaching and witness-bearing. The “delay of the parousia” remains a theological problem for the church’s mission.

40. The third “call” (to care for creation) is not supported by any scripture reference, as are the first two.

41. We appreciated the attempt to relate the spiritual gifts (charisms) to mission. Several of the traditions represented in our group (holiness and pentecostal) do more with this than others of us.

C. The Church as Sign and Instrument of God's Intention and Plan for the World

43-47. The discussion of the church in God's plan could profit by reference to 2 Co 10:5 and Eph 3:9-10. Should a discussion of "mystery" and "transcendent character" include concerns in some contemporary circles about "spiritual warfare" and personal demonic forces? And where in the discussion is there room for "para-churches" or mission being done by the church invisible?

44. Offering "praise and thanks on behalf of all peoples..." seems presumptuous.

47. "Exhortation" better than "proclamation"?
[no boxes?]

II. The Church in History

A. The Church *in via*

48-56. This whole section might better be placed in part I.

[box: we had a brief but vigorous discussion of the use of the term "sacrament" in relation to the church. A predominant view was of the church as bearer of sacraments.]

50. We agreed that contextuality – in So. California, for us – is important.

51. To what extent is this a description of northern European or American phenomena?

52-56. This section on the essential attributes of the church could profit from the use of categories known elsewhere in the ecumenical world: "essentially, intentionally, constitutionally..." That would clarify, if not ease, the tension marked in paragraph 52 between ideal and reality.

54. Some definitions of holiness involve a set-apart-ness from culture. Or "sinless perfection." Holiness churches can help with this conversation.

55. Some parts of this paragraph seem to belong in a box.

56. The definition of apostolicity in this paragraph – as faithfulness to the testimony of the apostles – seems basically sound.

[box: some definition of *corpus permixtum* is needed. We agreed with what seemed to be the intention of the concluding proposition about sin and holiness, but found the use of the terms "realities" and "level" unhelpful in separating them. See the comment on par. 52-56, above.

B. In Christ – But Not Yet in Full Communion

57. Goal and means are the same? Be clear on the two *koinonias*. In the discussion of the unity of the church, we were reminded that mission includes reaching out to those who are not in the church.

58. Here, finally, is a reference to the *koinonia* of the Trinity which seems to lie under much of

the text. Eph 2-3 would be useful here.

59. The interpretation of 2 Cor 5 as a partial “new creation” undermines the radical newness (a “second Adam”) to which the passage points. Appeals to texts from different authors and times (Lk, Mt, and 1 Jn) effectively waters down the claim of “a new creation.” Different texts are made to say what they don’t say – a dreadful example of relating unity and diversity.

C. Communion and Diversity

61. Are the “problems” recognized by all churches? Or do they more properly belong in a box, as unresolved differences?

62. This paragraph seems to be more “preachy” in character (note the “musts” in the first several paragraphs).

[box: we found the discussion of the “limits of diversity” helpful, although we did not clearly name our respective ecclesial identities as suggested in (c). We thought the box might be more positive in tone if the final sentence did not raise the question of *whether* churches can live in mutual accountability. We agreed that using documents like BEM and the present text (which express convergence) constitute part of the *how*.]

D. The Church as Communion of Local Churches

66. We suggest that in the present day the communion of local churches might be more vitally sustained if congregations had an offering in common – as did the first Pauline churches. That, as paragraph 64 indicates, was part of the church’s early apostolicity and catholicity.

[box: the contents tie to part III, paragraph 99f If left here, it would be helpful to expand the different definitions.]

III. The Life of Communion in and for the World

A. Apostolic Faith

69. The term “relevant” raises concerns. How is it to be understood as shedding “additional light” or as “departure from current understanding”? Suggestion: leave “relevant” out and use the term “alive”

70. How is “fixed formula” to be interpreted? As the first 7 councils? Define.

71. Remove the term “fresh.” Also a concern was raised about traditions which do not come from an “apostolic” tradition. Where do they fit in this paragraph? This is very northern European! (?) [This occupied a good portion of our discussion.]

B. Baptism

76-77. BEM is convergence on the way to consensus. In the box, clarify “effecting” in relation to “ordinance” and “sacrament.” Is this “effecting” or “reflecting”? Add an historical note on the “apostolic” practice of adult baptism and the fact that baptism has changed throughout history. [note the reference to the “text-in-process” F&O piece on baptism, footnote 18]

C. Eucharist

79. An issue is missing: the aspect of “koinonia”

80. Insert “koinonia” after “is not a sharing”

81. The words “communion,” “lord’s supper,” “mass” and “eucharist” are used interchangeably. This needs to be clarified. Many traditions use these words meaning different things. E.g. the distinction between “a service of the word” and “a service of the sacrament” suggests that communion may or may not be part of a full worship service.

[box] Add under-represented voices: traditions who do not see communion as “real presence” but that Christ is always present and communion is a manifestation of that presence.

[box] Not all churches among which there needs to be unity have an “ordained person” presiding or giving oversight (e.g. Disciples of Christ). There are times when lay people institute communion.

What about infant/children and communion? Traditions where understanding is not a requirement of faith? How is this represented here?

D. Ministry of all the faithful

E. Ministry of the Ordained

82. Weak on church as Christ’s mission

83. Mutual accountability

86. Eph 4 plus 1 Co and Ro – “representative” – different qualities of ministry/ ordination / gifts – rationalism and the church

87. “most”?

89. [box] references to other places in the document. E.g. “Eucharistic presidency”

F. Oversight: Personal, Communal, Collegial

90. “Whole community” refers to what? At what level? 93. “Apostolicity of the church” needs definition. NT? [box] – optimism /progress?

96. What is definition of church? Synod? Congregation? Good definition of episcopate.

97. Good definition of collegial

99. “Personal” – who are these if not bishops?

G. Conciliarity and Primacy

99. what is the heart of our belonging together? How are we healing brokenness? Tamara:

African experience: common need to survive; Denis: section “begs the question”? Ray: modern economic system: primacy and power – control of money; social roots of division; needs different world views added – e.g. 2/3rds-world view. Gender-specific, fixed, permanent primacy, and even “primacy” as language, are problematic for feminists.

102. Assumes everyone knows what is referred to by “canon 34 of the Apostolic Canons.”

H. Authority

107. We wondered how “holiness churches” would read this paragraph. And were nervous about the identification of church authority directly with God: as an intention it is fine, but humans are “earthen vessels.” We noted the saying, “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” We also noted the absence of experience and reason as sources of authority. We thought this paragraph should be cross-referenced to paragraphs 12, 53-54. And continued discussion of how different churches define holiness.

108. The paragraph seems tacked on.

109. IV. In and for the World

109-118. This entire section represented, to some of our members, a WCC bias toward social action over evangelization. Notice the proportions: paragraph 110 on evangelization; paragraphs 111-118 on social activism.

Also, the lack of a box here –with the acknowledgment in the text of a host of ethical and theological challenges– functions to gloss over a world of real differences.

109. Since the Greek word *diakonia* is employed in this paragraph, perhaps the text would be unified by reminding the reader about the material about the church as *koinonia* in paragraphs 24-28 and elsewhere.

110. This paragraph, with its mention of evangelization and other religions seems thematically out of place in a section that mostly focuses on global/social concerns. It shares some content with paragraphs 34-42 and a section on evangelization might be constructed of the two. See also the passing mention of other faiths in paragraph 115.

115-117. We agreed on the principle of mutual accountability on ethical issues, and concluded that our own group needed to hear how the issues of “social transformation” are read from minority (e.g. African-American, Hispanic) perspectives.