

44 Vermont Ecumenical Council and Bible Society

Response to the Document

“The Nature and Mission of the Church”

from

The Faith and Order Committee

of

The Vermont Ecumenical Council

October 2009

PROCESS

Our work together began with the earlier document, “The Nature and Purpose of the Church.” Our group included members from the following communities: Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, American Baptist, Episcopal, United Methodist, United Church of Christ—with occasional participation by United Presbyterian and Lutheran communities. (During the four years we worked on these two documents our work was often interrupted by the need to deal with other issues facing the Council.)

We engaged in a close reading of the texts of the two documents, engaging in discussion of issues as we went. Our secretary’s minutes summarized our discussions and were distributed monthly for members to read and reflect upon at their leisure. This response is based both upon those minutes and summaries prepared by individual members of their recollections.

Our responses are directed first to the four questions posed to the churches at the end of the Introduction to “Nature and Mission.” We follow with more detailed comments on the chapters and subsections of the N&M text, and we conclude with suggestions for future development of the text. We use paragraph references (*P*) when referring to N&M rather than pages since we have used both the downloaded version and the booklet in our work.

RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONS

1. We believe that the study document does correctly identify common ecclesiological convictions, invoking as it does traditional language about the Church as a creation of Word and Spirit, the four marks of the Church, some key images of the Church in Scripture, and the mission of the Church as sign and instrument of God’s mission in the world. We believe as well that N&M succinctly names the usual issues which continue to divide us. However, it is not as forthcoming and specific about important ecclesiological and other issues (e.g., ordination of women or homosexuals) where sharp differences are often within ecclesial communities as well as between them.

2. We think that the document, as it attempts to present the traditional terms mentioned above under the theme of *koinonia*, does reflect an emerging convergence on the nature and mission of the Church. We missed, however, a bold and coherent statement of this vision, as our comments

and suggestions below will make clear. Also, N&M needs to expand its vision to include such phenomena as the “emergent church,” African independent churches, Pentecostal churches, and megachurches in various countries and continents.

3. Among concerns we felt were not adequately addressed, we would list an affirmation of the human reality of the church and of the work of the Holy Spirit, the perennial tension between change and continuity, and the question of authority. Our comments and suggestions below will expand on these concerns.

4. This document could help our member churches (of the VEC) take concrete steps towards unity if we can renew ecumenical interest and discover the energy among our members to engage one another in discussion of it—and thus fulfill our covenant to embrace the Lund Principle in our life together.

COMMENT ON THE TEXT

INTRODUCTION

P8 “. . . to participate in a council of churches does not imply that all members regard all other members as church in the same sense in which they regard themselves.” This starting point of N&M appears to be a pragmatic acceptance of division rather than the assumption that there is one Church—which is unfortunately divided. We had a strong consensus that we are one Church and our divisions are manifest in the ways we regard each other’s ecclesial reality and integrity. Therefore no ecclesial body has the right to say to another, “You do not belong to the Church.”

THE CHURCH OF THE TRIUNE GOD

Chapter I A (I): The Nature of the Church

Committee members appreciated several features of this chapter: the overall theme of the church as *koinonia*, a reflection of the divine perichoresis; the equal stress on Word and Spirit as constitutive of the church (*P10*); the firm negation that “the Church is not merely the sum of individual believers” (*P13*)—there was firm consensus on this point; and on the affirmation of the church as *mysterion* (*P45*).

We also appreciated the affirmation of the Church as “both a divine and a human reality.” (*P13*) However we have two concerns. First, care needs to be taken that we are clear that the *relation* of the divine and human realities is clearly distinguished from that in Jesus Christ. Second, the chapter as a whole seems to stress the divine nature and lacks a theological affirmation of the human nature of the church. Even though later in *P48* there is a parallel treatment of the church as both an eschatological and a historical reality, we feel that the church is treated ahistorically. The human dimension is brought out only in Chapter II, as something that counteracts or limits the divine nature of the church. (*P50*) We are not provided the theological resources to deal with critical issues that have divided the church historically, nor are we given an understanding of the positive role played by the human nature of the church. (We shall deal with this more explicitly in our Suggestions section below, where we urge the development of a theological anthropology.)

For some, especially the low-church Protestants, there was discomfort with the stress on the divine reality of the church. It seems so disconnected from our actual experience of the

church as a human reality. (But see our response to *P56* in Chapter II.)

Chapter I A (II): Biblical Insights

In general, we judged that the revision of this section in N&M was an improvement. Yet a question raised about the earlier text still lingered: with the exception of the material on koinonia, what do these biblical insights really add to the document? (One way one might make the images more integral to the argument might be to show how the first three illuminate koinonia, or how koinonia illuminates them.)

The very diversity of scriptural images of the Church provided different visions of the same reality yet they do not contradict one another. The variety found in scripture may be echoed in the diverse visions we have today--as they are founded in common convictions concerning Jesus Christ and his work. They are not to be relativized, but used to discern the varied dimensions of the truth about the Church.

“The Church is related to each of [the] divine Persons [of the Trinity] in a particular way.” *P14* Does the document mean to correlate the three biblical images of the church discussed in the following paragraphs with the three Persons?

P15 “Subsequent reflection must always engage and be consonant with the biblical teaching.” This statement raises, but does not address, underlying questions of canon and authority. It is especially urgent in our “postmodern” context to address the question: what is, and what is not, consonant with Scripture---and who decides? This is another issue we address in our Conclusion.

P20 Our Committee had problems using Ephesians 2 rather than I Corinthians 12 and/or Ephesians 4, to introduce the Body of Christ image. According to this passage Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile—for those, that is, who accept Christ. But with the creation of the Church has not a new wall replaced the old one—between Jew and Christian?

Chapter I B: The Mission of the Church

Our Committee appreciated the inclusion of the “integrity of creation” within God’s vision of koinonia and the Church’s mission. (See particularly *P34* and *40*). This is especially important in view of the growing environmental crisis. Why, then, the deletion of references to creation in the N&M revision? (See old *P57* in N&P vs. N&M *P33*; old *P43* vs. new *P44*)

P35 raised the issue of universalism. If God’s plan is to save all, what is the mission of the Church? Does it mean that heaven has been won for all by Christ; we don’t have to do anything to get there; it is ours to lose. If this is the case, then our mission is to get people to acknowledge Christ as Lord and Savior, not to “accept.”

In *P40* we read “This faithful witness *may* [emphasis added] involve Christians themselves in suffering” We believe it should read, “*will* involve” This would be congruent with the first sentence, “The Church is called and empowered to share the sufferings of all” If the church is a *communio* (koinonia) then the suffering of one is the suffering of all.

THE CHURCH IN HISTORY

Chapter II A: The Church in via

Some of us were concerned that this chapter does not name or discuss the necessary tension between continuity and change as well as it does the tension between unity and diversity. Both tensions characterize the Church as a historical reality. Once again the question arises: what is the positive theological function of the human/historical aspect of ecclesiology?

P50 “[Change], which allows for both positive development and growth as well as for the negative possibility of decline and distortion. . .” Our committee appreciated the distinction, but the key issue is not faced nor resolved: who decides what change is “development” and what is “distortion? Once again we have to deal with the question of hermeneutics superficially and, more generally, with the question of authority.

“The power of sin” referred to in this paragraph as a negative influence on “change” is covered in an interesting way in the box following *P56* and entitled “The Church and Sin.” This box sparked much dialogue in the committee. For low-church Protestants especially, given the premise of the divine nature of the church, the argument that “the Church as such cannot sin” began to make more and more sense the more we thought about it.

In *P56* itself we took issue with the phrasing “The church is called to return continuously to the apostolic truth. . .” This seemed to us to treat tradition as a *depositum fidei*. We would rather speak of tradition not in terms of a past truth but, with Fr. George Florovsky as “the living stream of the Church’s life.”

The Committee also appreciated this chapter’s discussion of the perennial tension between unity and diversity in *P62* and the box following on “Limits of Diversity.” There was near consensus around the criticism that the chapter is not anywhere near as helpful as that on continuity and change. Regarding both “unity and diversity” and “continuity and change” the question of authority still lingers. Who decides whether or not something violates the limits of diversity, or whether some change breaks essential continuity?

THE LIFE OF COMMUNION IN AND FOR THE WORLD

Chapter III

This chapter presents the traditional categories of church order from the vantage point of koinonia—faith, baptism and Eucharist as means of grace to create and sustain communion. Ministry and oversight are seen as exercised in service of the Church’s mission. The basic distinction between the ministry of all the faithful and the ministry of the ordained had been affirmed earlier in the BEM document. We found it instructive that in this chapter the ordained ministry is clearly seen as a subset of the ministry of all the faithful. This is an important corrective to the more familiar and tension-ridden distinction between clergy and laity, where it is assumed that priesthood belongs to the clergy rather than to the whole Church.

The paragraphs on baptism, Eucharist and episcopate sparked deep and mutually enlightening sharing of our varied understandings and practices of them. Yet, overall we found this chapter slow-going and uninspiring. It reads as a dutiful and instructive presentation of traditional categories rather than a fresh statement of church order in the light of the koinonia

theme. This reaction may say more about ourselves than the text: the notions of personal, communal and collegial forms of oversight, not to mention conciliarity and primacy, were new to low-church Protestants, and made us acutely aware of the vast differences that remain between our respective communions.

IN AND FOR THE WORLD

Chapter IV

It was a relief for our group to return to the more familiar language about the mission of the Church in these final paragraphs and hear again that the Church exists not for its own sake but as God's instrument for the transformation of the world. What aroused the most discussion, as relevant to our present situation was *P116*—which speaks of the challenge that divisive ethical issues pose for the Christian community. The counsel of the last sentence that Christians (and churches) engage in dialogue to discern whether such issues are really church dividing spoke to our situation here in Vermont. We have found that some ethical issues are divisive *within* churches rather than reflecting present divisions. This leads us to ponder *how* Vermont Ecumenical Council members might speak together rather than separately on controversial issues.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TEXT

1. The document is neither consistent nor courageous enough in the use of the koinonia model that it strains to validate. The concept is never clarified, nor is it applied as itself a possible clarifier and resolver of such issues as diversity, conciliarity, primacy, or the explication of the Church's "marks." We believe koinonia has this potential since it is so central to the works of the "church fathers" of the undivided church. It is manifest in their treatment of ecclesiology, pneumatology, and anthropology.
2. We repeat that we desire a more fully articulated theological anthropology in the document. Ecclesiology is essential for anthropology, for it deals with the essential relationality of human beings; but it is not dealt with in this manner in the document. The "humanness" of the church is, for the most part, dealt with negatively. What is the positive role of humanity in ecclesiology? It may be that this lack compromises the effectiveness of the koinonia model.
3. The lack of an anthropology also contributes to the ahistorical character of the present document.
4. The document also needs to deal courageously and forthrightly with questions of hermeneutics and authority. We experience differences in these areas not only between ecclesial communities but within them. In a kind of circular fashion perhaps we need to ask what are the limits within the Church to differences with regard to authority.