

45 Council of Churches in the Netherlands

Item: reflections on *'The Nature and Mission of the Church'*

Dear brothers and sisters,

The Council of Churches in the Netherlands discussed your report *'The Nature and Mission of the Church'* in its meeting on the 1st of April 2009. We give our reaction in this letter, so you'll have an impression of the reception in our country. The discussion was prepared by our Commission on Faith and Church Community. Later on the Council drew some final conclusions.

First of all we want to make our compliments. The members of the Council of Churches appreciated the central lines drawn in the report. It is seen as the fruit of the continuing discussion within the Commission of Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches about the central themes of ecclesiology, formerly represented in the process of reception of the Lima reports on Baptism, Eucharism and Ministry. It fills us with joy and gratitude that the common thoughts within the different Churches about these ecclesiological themes are coming closer to each other.

This convergence can be found in themes such as *'the biblical approach of the Church as the people of God'* (nr. 18-19), *'the body of Christ'* (nr. 20-21), and *'the temple of the holy Ghost'* (nr. 22-23). Also the approaches of the Church as the *'mysterion'* (nr. 45) and the Church as the sign and the instrument of Gods salvation (nr. 43) are good examples of how Churches can grow to another in their concept of what the Church is. The biblical theme of *'koinonia'* is a good starting point for the discussion, defining *'koinonia'* as a community with God and with each other; the word helps us as a way to look for a more mutual understanding of the concept of the Church (nr. 24).

It is not without reason that this report speaks already from the first lines onward about the Church as a gift of God; the Church is seen as a creation of the Word and the Spirit (nr. 9 and forward); the Church is built by proclamation and by the sacraments. The more we realize this, the more depressing it is, that there are so many different points of view about the institutional dimensions of the Church (compare the box in nr. 12). We recognize in this report different ecclesiological points of view, which do not exclude one another, but to a certain extent show some kind of convergence. The consequences however of this convergence for the specific questions about ministry and sacraments, as they are shown in the process of reception of the BEM-reports, are not elaborated in this report. On the contrary, in the so called boxes these questions return. So on the specific points of ministry and sacraments there hasn't been much progress. We wonder if the specific questions on these themes, formulated already by Faith and Order after 1989 in the process of reception of the BEM-reports, shouldn't have been broader discussed in order to come further in this dialogue with the Churches.

We would like to emphasize the necessity of the continuing discussion about baptism, which is called correctly the fundamental liaison of unity (nr. 74 onwards). Mutual acceptance between Churches about the baptism has stimulated the vivid contacts between Churches and the ecumenical discussions. The Council of Churches in the Netherlands has the intention to elaborate this item in its own context in order to build out the mutual acceptance of the baptism between different Churches and in order to stimulate the spiritual experiences at the grassroots. We expect that differences in the concept of baptism which still exist can be influenced by this approach (cf. box in nr. 77). We will try to include Churches in this discussion which are not (yet)

a member of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands to stimulate the ecumenical movement in a broader sense.

Reading about the institutional divergence on several places in the report it is important that the text introduces the four 'notae ecclesiae' from the Credo of Nicea-Constantinople. This is very interesting, while in chapter 2 (nrs. 52 onwards) the contrast is shown between the actual confession of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church on the one hand and our practice of a common and separated life in Church on the other hand. We think it is important that these notae are worked out eschatologically: the Church lives 'in statu viae'.

The Council recognizes the sternness of the question saying how the Churches 'understand and claim their own ecclesial identity and how they regard the ecclesial status of other churches and other Christians', as it is explained after box nr 63. We wonder why the history of separation hasn't been described. You mention three types of ecclesiology in the box of nr. 63. We recognize each of these types in the discussions we had ourselves. It isn't clear to us which kind of ecclesiology is at stake in nr. 63 itself. The discussion needs a clear starting point, which is shared by all partners. Some of our members think that the Churches shouldn't speak about 'a full community' anymore, they would like to choose the words 'almost full community'. Others strongly stick to the concept of full community. We think that it should be possible to discuss the programmatic differences on these points more directly, as it is done in the process of convergence that has led to the text of Lima in 1982 and to the mutual declaration about Justification brought out by the Roman-Catholic Church and the LWF. Paper nr. 198 of Faith and Order hasn't used the consequences of these and other crown jewelry of the ecumenical dialogue enough. The same can be said about the results of the dialogue with the Jewish partners about the relationship between Israel and the Church (cf. nr. 18-19).

The classical ecclesiological questions discussed in the report sometimes are far away from the world people live in today and the problems the Churches are facing nowadays. The report should focus more on the actual context of Churches, as nr. 4 explicitly asks. This context however doesn't come back in the rest of the report. We as a Council of Churches realize of course that we do have our own responsibility for this in the first place. It is difficult to explain the relevance of the Church - as a community of Word and Sacraments and the correct ministry of it - within the European society in which individualistic belief, continuous secularization, the development of new spirituality and new religious movements and forms of Churches are wide spread. The report indicates in nr. 121 signs of reconsecration and even signs of anti-ecumenical attitudes within certain Churches. Differences in Church vision and Church forms go back on old and new Christological questions, on the way people want to follow Christ, and on the interpretation of the preaching of Jesus of the Kingdom of God and the implications for the Christian way of life and the ethics for a good life and community. The question remains, how this empirical experience of the Church works through in the brokenness of our vision of a united Church. Probably this aspect could have been worked out better, if the report of Faith and Order had started with the mission of the Church rather than with the nature of the Church. Mission isn't, as you will agree, an abstract concept (nr. 4). Mission is realized by Christians giving a testimony in the actual situation in their own society.

The theme of the context brings us to a last point: the discussions between the Churches in order to come to common decisions. We agree with the idea of 'conciliarity' as an essential characteristic on all levels of the life in the Churches (nr. 99-100). The authors speak about a tension between the concept of 'conciliarity' and the concept of the 'primacy'. It might be better not to connect these topics in an early phase. Otherwise we will stop to investigate the concept of conciliarity while speaking too soon about 'the universal primacy of the bishop of Rome' (nr.

102-104, incl. box nr. 104). The 'conciliar community' has been a leading concept from the start of the ecumenical movement onward. And so it will be useful in order to reach a common understanding of the gospel about the Kingdom of God for the whole of the living world (Mt 24,14), it will help in many situations of crises within Christianity and it might help to prepare an agenda in order to reconcile the separated Churches. May the report of Faith and Order contribute to that process of conciliarity, understood as 'the deep unity in love and truth' (nr.99).

Sincerely yours, as sharing the same faith of Jesus Christ,
on behalf of the Council of the Churches in the Netherlands,

Drs. Henk van Hout, President

Rev. Klaas van der Kamp, General-Secretary.