

**Report on the Study of  
*The Nature and Mission of the Church***

The World Council of Churches, which produced this text, has asked the several churches to study and respond to these specific questions:

1. Does this study document correctly identify our common ecclesiological conviction, as well as the issues which continue to divide us?
2. Does this study document reflect emerging convergences on the nature and mission of the Church?
3. Are there significant matters in which the concerns of the churches are not adequately addressed?

Over the past nine months, a group of Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Episcopalians have studied this document. We are representatives from the following ecumenical commissions: ARCNY (Anglican Roman Catholic New York) from Father Robert Robbins, Director, Commission on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the Archdiocese of New York and the Episcopal Dioceses of New York and Long Island; LEDNY (Lutheran Episcopal Dialogue New York) from the Episcopal Dioceses of New York and Long Island, and from the Metropolitan New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; LRCNY (Lutheran Roman Catholic New York) from the Metropolitan New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and from Father Robert Robbins, Director, Commission on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the Archdiocese of New York; and LRC (Lutheran Roman Catholic) from the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, representing the Atlantic District in the Dialogue and from Father Robert Robbins, Director, Commission on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the Archdiocese of New York.

## **I THE CHURCH OF THE TRIUNE GOD**

### **Convergence**

We are in agreement that our Triune God does indeed call the Church into being by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, and that Scripture plays a normative and central role in the ongoing life of the Church. All of the many Biblical references referring to the nature of the Church are common to us. Our mission similarly is understood in terms of Scriptural references. This increased emphasis on ecclesiology is an important sign of where the ecumenical movement is today. We three traditions are certainly agreed on the four marks of the Church in the Nicene Creed, although we might have different views on what each “mark” contains or embodies. It would have been helpful to reassert the eschatological “holiness” of the Church, particularly as it relates to mission.

We are agreed with the ecumenical effort to view diversity as an aspect of catholicity. “Diversity is a gift of God to the Church,” so stated, resonates well with each of us, but we each celebrate this diversity in the life of our individual churches a bit differently, even as such diversity is reflected in the several books of the Bible.

### **Divergence**

While the centrality of Scripture is non-debatable for all of us, its interpretation and use can often become a divisive issue. Not all of us recognize as canonical an identical list of the books of the

Bible, nor do we all interpret Scripture with the same understanding. While we agree that diversity is certainly an aspect of the catholicity of the Church, we disagree on the limits of that diversity.

Koinonia is an appreciated expression for each of our churches, but the bonds of communion which determine the extent of that koinonia differ one from another. Roman Catholics, among others, would like to see the concept of Koinonia include our communion with the saints, both living and dead.

Similarly, there is disagreement about the subordination of the charismatic gifts given to the people of God vis a vis the role of the bishops in their governance of the Church. While the mission of the Church in broad terms is agreed upon, there is wide divergence in more practical areas. For example, to what degree do we challenge the political establishments? To what degree, and in what manner, do we compete with each other in the mission field?

### **Critique**

We missed a stronger effort to find criteria for discerning when differences represent reconcilable emphases and when they indicate real disagreements. Some of us are much more tolerant of different points of view within the church, while others are more concerned that those empowered in determining the dogma and doctrine of the Church be acknowledged as the final authority. The relationship between the degree of permissible diversity and authority is a constant consideration which needs a more clear discernment.

## **II THE CHURCH IN HISTORY**

### **Convergence**

All would agree that there is a tension in the nature of the Church between “that which is already given” and “that which is not yet fully realized.” We note that our divisions remain a scandal and certainly do impede the mission of the Church. We resonate strongly with the presentation of the Church as an eschatological reality, in constant need of repentance and renewal. We recognize that the presence of sin in the life of Christians mars both the unity and mission of the Church.

We agree strongly that there is a need to discern the abiding from the historically and culturally contingent aspects of our churches. We also agree with the acknowledgment that a particularly prickly area of diversity resides in the methodology used toward arriving at truth itself and in the boundaries of moral diversity in particular. We acknowledge that we live in Christ, but are not yet in full communion with each other. Except for the members of the Lutheran Church -Missouri Synod, we three traditions would agree, that while each diocese/synod contains many local parishes, it is the bishop which symbolizes the unity of the Church.

### **Divergence**

Our understanding of diversity is a major difference in the life of our churches. The degree to which we allow theological, ethical and moral diversity varies. The degree to which some teaching or practice is non-church-dividing similarly varies according to our understanding of what is contained in the core faith of the Church.

### **Critique**

Given the document’s laudable emphases on mutual accountability, we missed specific examples of churches’ mutual discernment of adiaphora. Some thought that re-evaluation of the evolving

term *'subsistit in'* would help ecumenical dialogue. Change exists – even in the Church - but the degree to which the truth of the Church changes or develops is interpreted differently.

### **III THE LIFE OF COMMUNION IN AND WITH THE WORLD**

#### **Convergence**

We are in agreement in our understanding of the centrality of the Creeds and the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. We are all agreed in the need for episcopé for the Church's life and mission. Most of us accept some idea of the development of doctrine or teaching, although our understanding of which teaching has developed, or needs development, differs.

It was noted that with the exception of Eucharistic hospitality, Lutherans find resonance with the material in the first four sub-divisions in Section III ("Apostolic Faith," "Baptism," "Eucharist" and "Ministry of all the Faithful"), particularly since these topics are covered in a similar manner in the Unaltered Augsburg Confession of 1530 to which all Lutherans subscribe. However, Section E, entitled "Ministry of the Ordained," continues to pose serious challenges to Lutherans

While all three of our traditions agree on the centrality of the Nicene Creed, as "the" ecumenical creed of the Church, some wondered whether Section A, entitled "Apostolic Faith," allowed for other forms of confession to be regarded with the same ecumenical importance as the Nicene Creed.

We agreed that because of the separation of the churches, there needs to be much more collegial exercise or witness within society, and that the ecumenical movement is an invitation to church leaders to explore the possibility of more common witness in globalization and global justice. An era of acknowledged interdependence has created a new climate for deeper mutual explorations of the relationships between conciliarism, the historical three fold ministry, and primacy.

#### **Divergence**

While all three churches accept the traditional ministry in principle, Lutherans understand the manner of ordering ministry to be *adiaphora*, while for Anglicans and Roman Catholics, this ordered ministry is one of the essential components of the life of the Church. The succession in apostolicity is one of the means by which we signify the right teaching of the faith. The significance of Apostolic Succession would be a matter of dispute for very few among us now, although the theological necessity for it would be still in dispute by many Lutherans. Lutherans have accepted the historic episcopate on the grounds of mission, not ecclesiology. The idea of a single office – presbyter – remains very strong. The Missouri Synod still does not even use the term bishop.

The Order of Deacons is still in development in all three of our traditions. While it is an acknowledged part of the three-fold ancient ministry by Roman Catholics and Anglicans, most Lutheran synods do not have Deacons yet. Also, the responsibilities given to Deacons do vary from diocese to diocese within the Episcopal Church. Some synods have lay persons serving with the title "diaconal ministers" or "lay deacons."

A major difference also among our three traditions centers around the role of universal primacy, both in the practical matter of universal jurisdiction, as well as in the theological doctrine of infallibility. Much still needs to be done to overcome what many consider to be the major stumbling block to Christian unity.

In terms of the universal primacy most Anglicans would be able to accept the concept of the Bishop of Rome as *primus inter pares* among the five ancient patriarchs, but would have difficulty with a concept of a primacy that is understood as not responsible or answerable to the college of all the bishops.

## **IV IN AND FOR THE WORLD**

### **Convergence**

It was noted that this, the shortest section of the document, is the only section in which there are not boxed matters which indicate differences. There seemed to be within our group a sense that the words of this section do agree positively with each church group in that none of the several paragraphs seemed to contradict the teachings or understandings of the three religious traditions represented.

However, the absence of the boxed materials may create an impression of greater unity than actually exists. Furthermore, it should be noted that persons of good will and strong faith may disagree on how to approach a particular social injustice. There also needs to be an understanding that the Church's social mission may vary significantly according to the conditions existing in different parts of the world.

We strongly agreed with the observation that "diakonia" – service – belongs to the very being of the Church. We acknowledge that the churches' dealing with war, economic injustice, violence and nationalism, must be discerned in a particular cultural and political context.

### **Divergence**

There are many areas of disagreement existing in the different parts of the world, as well as within or among the various churches themselves. Among these divisive social issues could be listed: abortion, birth control, the role of women in the church, sexuality, the effects of colonialism, the overwhelming prevalence of disease in certain parts of the world, and the difference in values in the several parts of the world. It was also noted that even among our three churches, there are different ways of determining what is the social teaching of "the Church," and that mutual accountability, while desirable, has certainly not always been practiced, or in some cases, not even considered.

### **Critique**

While there is much convergence, there was a sense that this was the least developed section of the document in that it generalized the ethical situation without concern for, or mentioning, the explosive areas of disagreement. We would have appreciated some examples of discussion regarding the status of "natural law" as a basis for the formulation of Christian contributions to issues of justice and public policy.

### **Conclusions**

The breadth of this document is enormous. One can only wonder how it would have read, if the material related only to Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Lutherans. The subject matter attempted to be so inclusive that it was in some way counter-productive for our discussions.

This document, with its principal emphasis on convergence, appears to reflect the status quo in very broad terms. This document is less challenging and less persuasive than Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, particularly because the boxed materials contain such an indiscriminating diversity of thought and belief

In terms of our three traditions, it seems that the largest obstacles to unity for us are “ministry” and “authority.” This document does not help us to move forward, but rather simply posits before us the pluralism that is modern Christianity.

Moreover, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church and within individual Christians is likewise a controversial subject. Some Christians practice the re-baptism of persons when they join their congregations; others find this practice offensive. Some see the presence of the Spirit being manifest primarily through charismatic works with little significance given to ministerial and sacramental activities.

The document did not explicitly deal with the premise (supported by some Christians) that organic unity is not an ideal to be attained. Indeed, from certain perspectives such a world-wide united Church might even be seen as counter to “true Christianity”.

The document also did not consider the “matter” of the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Some churches use only wine, while others forbid its usage and use only grape juice.

We resonated strongly with the sentiment that, despite the many difficulties and obstacles, the fact that the ecumenical movement is now discussing the nature and mission of the Church “deserves affirmation.” However, we did miss three things: (1) a discussion of the roots of the “re-confessionalization” that some churches are now experiencing; (2) a section dealing with any “lessons learned” in the practice of ecumenism that might aid us on our eschatological ecumenical journey, and (3) an appreciation of what the liturgical movement has accomplished for ecumenism.

Submitted by:

The Reverend Canon Jay H. Gordon  
Dr. James R. Kelly  
The Reverend Richard Jeske