

Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland (EMW)

Association of Protestant Churches and Missions in Germany

4 February 2008

The Nature and Mission of the Church

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The original English title of the Faith and Order study, entitled in German “Wesen und Auftrag der Kirche”, is “The Nature and Mission of the Church”. We in the Association of Protestant Churches and Missions in Germany, where not only the Evangelical Church in Germany but also a number of Protestant free churches are represented, gratefully welcome the fact that the subject of the Church’s mission has been taken up in this important paper by the Faith and Order movement.

We are aware that the English word “mission” has a broader range of meaning than the German word “Mission”, but what is stated and discussed in this study does also touch on important aspects of what we see as the Church’s missionary task and which we try to further through our work. A wide-ranging discussion of principle concerning our understanding of mission has taken place within EMW; we attach the documentation on this for your information.

We therefore asked our Theological Commission to examine the Study from the standpoint of mission theology and to present a response. The Board of EMW adopted this response which we forward to you here. In the nature of things, these comments cannot go into the questions which you ask the churches to respond to at the start of the document. However, we hope that even in this form our thoughts may also helpfully contribute to the ongoing work

We thank you for the work you have done and would encourage you to undertake further ecumenical work on other theological issues from the standpoint of the church’s missionary task. With warm greetings and our wishes for God’s blessing

Bishop Maria Jepsen
President of the Board

The Nature and Mission of the Church
A response from the Association of Protestant Churches and Missions in Germany

A request for a response to an ecumenical document bearing the original English title of “The Nature and Mission of the Church”, certainly cannot go unacknowledged by an ecumenical body like the Association of Protestant Churches and Missions in Germany (EMW). EMW has therefore drafted a response to the Study with the help of its Theological Commission, although our comments concern only certain aspects of this broad-ranging document which are especially significant in terms of mission theology.

It should be noted from the start that the English word “mission” in the title and in the body of the document is used in a very broad sense which corresponds to the everyday use of the word “Mission” in German and is therefore translated in the title and elsewhere in the text with the word “Auftrag” (task/commission). However, in para. 35, with reference to the calling of all Christians to “proclaim the Gospel in word and deed”, it is rightly stated that “mission belongs to the very being of the church”. We very much welcome the fact that here the affirmation of the apostolicity of the church is seen as the affirmation of the Church’s mission and hence as “inseparable from the other three attributes of the Church – unity, holiness and catholicity”.

In our view, the missionary dimension of the *notae ecclesiae* could have been brought out more strongly if it had been viewed more clearly as being rooted in Christ’s commission, thereby emphasizing the christological foundation of the ecclesiology.

This raises the fundamental question of whether it is still possible today to distinguish between the nature and the mission of the Church, and whether it would not be useful and necessary to consider the nature of the Church as deriving from its mission.

As regards the content of the Church’s mission, this is not described fully enough in our view. Although the paragraph quoted above does speak of the calling of all Christians “to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed”, this is then qualified with the words “They are called to live its values and to be a foretaste of God’s reign in the world”. What are “the values of the Gospel”? The frequent references to “authentic mission” are more in the nature of pious hope than any real clarification of content. In chapter IV “In and for the World” the Church’s service in the world is likewise described in fairly general terms. While the statement in para. 110 that “There is no contradiction between evangelisation and respect for the values present in other faiths” also corresponds to our ideals, it is so far removed from the tensions existing in reality that the subject would also need to be dealt with more fully. The whole section seems to assume that “people of good will” will work harmoniously for good in union with Christians (cf. 47).

This viewpoint is no doubt connected with the way in which the Study speaks of the significance of the Church in “God’s plan” for the world. The Church is “sign *and* instrument of God’s intention and plan for the whole world” (43). “The Church is called to manifest God’s mercy to humanity *and to bring humanity to its purpose*” (34). “The Church was intended...as an instrument, in God’s hands, for the transformation of the world” (109). All this sounds rather triumphalistic to us and does not take account of the fact that the Church encounters resistance in its mission and is also a suffering church. (The fact that it also fails as a church is fortunately addressed with regard to theological differences in speaking of the church.)

We would like to suggest that the exercise of the church’s task of mission in witness, dialogue and community of life, as suggested by Theo Sundermeier, might be helpful in defining the church’s

mission in our times more modestly and more realistically, and articulating the call to faith (or to put it more cautiously: *la proposition de la foi*) in a multireligious society more clearly than in this document.

One final thought: The document sets out clearly and frankly what has been achieved in the way of convergence on central questions of ecclesiology in ecumenical dialogue, and is equally frank in stating where differences persist. This stocktaking basically coincides with our own assessment of the situation.

The question that has to be asked is why this broad measure of convergence has not produced a greater awareness of our common mission and common task but seems, on the contrary, suddenly to have led to differences again being emphasized and some aspects on which cooperation was, or seemed to be, possible are no longer so.

Our thoughts concerning these questions run in two very different directions:

1. Could it be that the reasons that prevent the churches from being more vigorous in exercising their common mission are not only theological, but that non-theological factors like the competition for influence, media presence and preservation of their own identity also come into play? It would probably not be difficult to analyse and elucidate this in terms of sociology of religions. But factors such as these also have their “spiritual” value – even if only in highlighting a problem – and should not be overlooked by ecumenical theologians.

2. Could it be that we have not yet radically enough thought through the nature of biblical ecclesiology as the missionary unfolding of christology and that is why we regularly find ourselves confronted with the phenomenological divergences in our ecclesiologies? On the face of it, this may seem like a question posed entirely from a Reformation perspective and as such not particularly helpful in ecumenical terms. But have we ever seriously tried to talk to one another on this level?

Even though, true to the tradition of doing theology in the German-speaking world, our response chiefly raises points of criticism, we would like to thank the World Council of Churches and its department on Faith and Order for this thorough study and to express our hope that, even in these times when ecumenical documents are not greeted with waves of enthusiasm, patient theological work in ecumenical dialogue does bear fruit.

Dr Walter Klaiber, Bishop Emeritus
Chairman of the Theological Commission of EMW

Provisional translation from the German