

Francophone Ecumenical Association for Missiology  
(*Association Francophone Œcuménique de Missiologie*, or AFOM)

Faith and Order  
World Council of Churches  
150 route de Ferney  
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Paris, 14 January 2009

Dear friends,

The AFOM Council has studied the Faith and Order paper on *The Nature and Mission of the Church*.

Paying particular attention to the paragraphs that deal specifically with the relationship between the Church and mission, the AFOM wishes to make the following observations from an ecumenical, French-speaking perspective.

In this way, we hope to play our part in the joint reflection leading up to the compilation of replies planned for 2010.

Warmest greetings,

For the AFOM

Jean-François Faba  
President

Attachment: reply of the AFOM Governing Committee to the paper *The Nature and Mission of the Church*.

## **Reply of the AFOM Governing Committee to the WCC Faith and Order Commission paper *The Nature and Mission of the Church***

27 June 2008

*The Governing Council of the Ecumenical Francophone Association for Missiology held two lengthy discussions on the paper The Nature and Mission of the Church submitted by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. It then dedicated a third session to drafting a reply. The following thoughts indicate the main issues tackled during the Council's discussions and the conclusions to which they tended. This joint reply gives a flavour of the possibilities and questions considered at the AFOM; it should not be assumed that the Governing Council's supports all the ideas summarized below. Our response is not a statement of systematic theology, nor a thesis on missiology; it is a contribution to a dialogue.*

### **Overall reaction**

The text is good overall, and the AFOM is pleasantly surprised by its quality and accessible style. The presentation using both running text and text windows makes it easy to distinguish between areas where there seems to be fairly broad consensus and topics on which the churches are still divided. As our reply will indicate, it would also have been useful to include windows dealing with alternative ideas with respect to the relationship between church and mission.

However, we are a little unhappy with the number of times expressions such as “some... while others...” are used without any mention being made of the particular confessions involved: it makes the document give the impression that it consists of simply a series of different opinions sandwiched together.

### **An idealistic image of the Church**

Despite being well-balanced overall, the paper nevertheless displays a classical ecclesiology of the kind developed chiefly in the West.

The church emerges looking rather magisterial, weighty, important – whereas, historically speaking, that is no longer the position it holds. The balance between the indicative and the imperative is lacking. One may well support the vision contained in the paper, but the text itself lacks humility. Not enough account is taken of the disparity between the vision and reality as we experience it; this leaves the text feeling somewhat intimidating.

The problem is the gulf between the church and the world. The document's basic message is: “The church may not live up to this ideal, but that's because it's made up of human beings.” We think that this is fundamentally the wrong way to approach ecclesiology. For the truth is that the church can only ever exist in the world, and, what is more, the world will always get into the church. The church is “holy” and sinful at the same time.

Furthermore, the text reads like a description of the Western church – a powerful institution that retains elements of its previous majority status in society. It is patently not written from the perspective of the new, recently founded churches that now represent the majority faith in the continents of the South.

As we read and discussed the text, we asked ourselves: *who* imagined this ideal version of the church? And are those people living in the real world? Are they helping us to bring this ideal to life? How do we connect the people who make up the church and the ideal that is being proclaimed and confessed? True, any group will create an ideology, and, true, there will be a

discrepancy between that ideology and reality. But can we build a bridge between the ideal and the real world?

All too often, those who determine the ideal do live it out, but only within their own circles. Those in charge do not always help others to live out the ideal as well. There are some at grass-roots who feel critically regarding what is going on in the echelons above them.

To return to the relationship between the ideal and reality, the opposite is also true: looking at reality can make us realize that Christians have a mission to change what needs to be changed. Reality lays down a challenge. When we begin by taking a hard look at the reality of the world, it shows us the urgency of our mission. Reality is what calls us to change, for the sake of our faith.

Our discussions also led us to propose that stronger emphasis be placed on the concept of “gift”. This would make the descriptions of the ideal seem less like a demand. A gift is something that is received without obligation.

### **Incarnation**

To continue the discussion on the ideal and reality, we think we can perceive in this text a Platonic mode of thought, a kind of “ideal of beauty and perfection”. It is as if the incarnation were a demotion to our reality (cf. terms such as top-down). Yet we must not set up for ourselves an idealized version of the church that becomes sullied as soon as it is made flesh. For the incarnation is where God meets a broken humanity. It is what happens at the cross. Ontologically speaking, the church is poor. We are “these little ones”; we are the poor. God meets us in our frailty. Christ is there, in the middle of our suffering. Christ is the first person by our side. There, in that place, is where we find God. He is not waiting for you to find your way out of your suffering or your sickness or whatever it may be.

Jesus welcomes you while you’re still a drunk: thanks to this, you may not drink again. He doesn’t wait until you’ve stopped drinking to accept you.

We should perhaps clarify that statement: the fact that Christ is with the alcoholic does not mean that the alcoholic is “in Christ”. There is a step to be made to discover Jesus. We can see this from the example of the centurion in Mark’s Gospel: it was when he saw Christ on the cross that he exclaimed, “This man was the Son of God.” In practice, then, the question that arises is: what do we do to remain “in Christ”?

The section on inculturation needs to go into more depth.

### **Church and mission**

There is a problem with the structure of the text. It is entitled *The Nature and Mission of the Church*: that is to say, it begins by defining an ideal, and then it looks to see how that ideal is going to work out in practice. Yet the visible church is the only church there is. Yes, Colossians speaks of a metaphysical reality – but what of that can we actually grasp?

There is a church *because* there is a mission. The title “...*Nature and Mission*...” makes an artificial distinction. We think it would be better to start with the mission, and then to understand and show that the church exists in and for that mission.

### **The church and the poor**

So where do the poor fit into the grass-roots church? The text sees the poor as the object of study. Yet, according to the communities on the ground, there is no salvation without the poor: they are the first to receive the Gospel. But that is not what this text says.

The primary concern of poor people joining churches after a missionary campaign is this: now that we are Christians, what is the church doing to that will help our situation change? The failure of many churches to give a decent answer to that question is driving many Christians to join Charismatic communities and new religious movements: because they see their situation change, nor just spiritually but in material and personal terms as well.

In this regard, we should not forget that in the New Testament itself, conversion implies an improved social, human and spiritual status. Now here is an ideal that we cannot ignore: conversion leads to improved social standing.

The church is not beyond the bounds of anthropology, which tells us that we are all poor. Unless we understand that, how are we live *with* the poor? Even the person perpetrating exploitation is poor – in the sense of “poor fool”!

We consider that the paragraph on diakonia needs to be reworked, linked in with the issue of poverty, and set in perspective against other theologies apart from the urban[, Western] approach and against poverty, loneliness and the food crisis.

### **An inadequate conception of mission**

From a Pietist perspective, there is a fundamental dividing line between those who are “in Christ” and those who have “not yet found Christ”, and, if we erase that line, nothing is clear-cut anymore. This is an essential question with respect to our understanding of mission.

There is still the Evangelical protest, as expressed in the words of a Baptist pastor to the liberal Protestants: “While you think about the church and how to find Christ among the poor, we’re living as church in the here and now. You talk away while we’re bringing Christ to the poor.” This is fundamentally connected to the divergence between our concepts of or starting points for mission. Seen from this angle, this paper is just one more document in which – so Evangelicals will think – we have lost sight of the purpose of mission, and in which the WCC has given too much ground to the Catholics.

We have noticed a significant shortcoming in recent discussions on ecumenical missiology: the text makes no reference to the intimate relationship between mission and the healing ministry.

### **Eschatology, ecclesiology and mission**

The terminology of “restoration” poses something of a problem. It is as if the text were to be read as presenting a chronological, historicized vision: “before the fall, before sin”, everything was just fine. When we say something like “healing of broken relationships”, what does that actually mean? It seems to be the same kind of vocabulary as that of the WCC’s Decade to Overcome Violence: *can* violence be “overcome”? Is this not just how being human is? Our relationships are broken; we won’t restore anything by looking to the past.

Yes, we must affirm the original goodness of creation, but that has nothing to do with chronology.

What matters here is the eschatological dimension of this theology – can we advance the kingdom of God? Is it realistic to claim that the church is the instrument for the transformation of the cosmos? Is it somehow going to overcome the chaos?

Mission is worked out in history, but we observe two opposing visions in these discussions: an optimistic vision of a church moving forward and a pessimistic vision of a church that is just going round in circles.

The AFOM takes a more pessimistic missiological view of the human condition than the one we see in the text. To take the example of violence: violence cannot be beaten or overcome. It can only be endured. The church must not be seen to be saying, “Just stay poor.” That would be an outrage. What it must say, though, is, “Have courage, for we experience human life with the companionship of Christ.” That is the faithful thing to say.

That is an “ideal” for the church, but not one that denies the facts of our human situation.

It is something we experience and hope for: to be with people 100 per cent, to live alongside them. Yet it does not lead us to Christian Socialism (as in the example of the history of mission to workers).

### **Diversity in the church and in carrying out our mission**

Paragraphs 62 *et seq* are good overall.

How far can our disagreements go (cf. the discussions held by the Evangelical Community for Apostolic Action – *Communauté évangélique d’action apostolique*, or Cevaa)? If we are all so vastly diverse, how are we to imagine unity amid this diversity? That is the question behind paragraph 6, which both explains the structure of the document and sets out a distinction between diversity and the causes of division. We must work out some clear boundaries between the things with which we can travel together and those that stop us from doing so: for instance, where does authority lie within Cevaa? What would be the result if it came to a clash? Should we work for compromise or be a prophetic voice?

There is a postmodern tendency to come to agreements on particular matters while at the same time abandoning the idea of achieving one whole, unified church.

### **“I am with you always”**

So how would we describe our “ideal”? For us, it comes in those extraordinary words at the end of Matthew’s Gospel:

“I am with you always.” (Matt 28).

*That’s* what church means.

For the AFOM Council

*Provisional translation from the French, for working purposes only. The original French with the three words which have been scanned and recognized wrongly need to be sent back to the language service please. Many thanks.*