

Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) Response to *The Nature and Mission of the Church (NMC)*

The Mission and Ecclesiology Working Group of the CWME met on June 24, 2008 at the Ecumenical Institute Bossey to discuss the Faith and Order Commission's document, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*. Their report was discussed, amended, and then approved at the CWME commission meeting held at the Ecumenical Christian Centre, Bangalore in October 2008. A copy of the CWME comments on the NMC document follows immediately below:

Members of the CWME commission are in general favourably disposed towards this document. They **positively affirm** the document for many things, especially its recognition that mission is part of the very essence of the church, its clear statement that the church is founded on the Word of God, and the endorsement by this document of a holistic understanding of mission. We would like to see a version or study guide in language suitable for local congregations. However, there are also a number of **constructive criticisms** that members of the CWME would like to bring to the attention of the Faith and Order Commission.

One concern is with the **title** of the document. The change from *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* to *the Nature and Mission of the Church* is applauded. However, there is still a concern that the title distinguishes two things 'church' and 'mission' that cannot or should not be distinguished if the nature of the church is that mission is its very essence or mode of being. Disappointment was expressed that there appeared to be no awareness of in NMC of **CWME documents on mission**, particularly the Ecumenical Affirmation (EA) (*Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation*, 1982).

Some felt that the statements on mission were not fully incorporated into the document as a whole. Others, however, who had felt this way after a first reading of the document, admitted that after a second reading they did now see that the theme of mission was reasonably well integrated into the document as a whole. We noted a **difference of approach** in that Faith and Order tends to look at the doctrine of the church 'from above', whereas the CWME tends to look at the experience of the church 'from below'. Furthermore, the document seems to be written from and to reflect the ecclesiology of the **established churches** and not that of the **emerging churches**.

There was consensus, however, that while the statements on mission were generally good and acceptable as far as they went, they did not say nearly as much about the mission of the church as they ought to, that mission should be more integral to the document, and also more explicit. For example the document needs an explicit recognition of the *missio Dei*, which precedes the mission of the Church. It should highlight much more clearly that within the wider *missio Dei* there is also the *missio ecclesiae*, and that a very crucial aspect of this mission of the Church is the ministry of **evangelism**, which includes what has traditionally been called the Great Commission, the command to make disciples of all nations¹. The Great Commission must of course always be linked to the Great Commandment to love God with all one's heart strength and mind and to love one's neighbour as oneself. Another crucial aspect of the *missio ecclesiae* is the **prophetic witness** of the Church in society. Both the evangelistic and the prophetic roles may introduce a note of tension in the relationship between the mission and the unity of the church, which needs to be considered in NMC².

¹ See e.g. *Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today* (CWME 2000), §§ 7-17

² See e.g. EA (WCC 1982), §§ 31-36

It was also agreed that the document needs to **emphasis the following mission-related matters:**

- the theology and practice of mission in a religiously plural world
- the contextual aspect of mission, unity in diversity and openness to the ways in which different cultures make the Christian faith their own
- the ecclesiological significance of the poor as subjects and agents of mission
- ministries of healing and reconciliation as an integral part of the mission of the church
- a recognition of the missional implications of Christology, particularly with reference to the suffering Christ.
- the reality of sin and evil in the world, both in their personal and in their systemic dimensions, and the missiological implications of the doctrine of justification by faith
- the implications for mission of the shift of the centre of Christianity from the global north to the global south, and of new forms of missionary movement
- the numerical growth of church
- the implications for mission of new and emerging forms of the church, including cyberchurch
- issues of religious, ethnic and cultural identity in migrant, diaspora and multi-cultural churches
- Other metaphors of church in the New Testament, which reflect the concerns of diverse contexts, could be included, such as the family of God from the African context.
- the different models in different cultures of the relations of church and state
- the different roles in mission of the local church and the universal church

The **mission dimensions** of some matters that are already dealt in with *NMC* could be **further developed:**

- For example, the mission implications of Eucharist, Baptism, Apostolicity, and Ordination could be further drawn out.
- Specific WCC debates on proselytism and the ethics of conversion should be referred to.
- Greater attention to pneumatology and different views of the role of the Holy Spirit in mission would add a sense of the dynamic nature of the church and mission.
- The relationship between the biblical concepts of the church, the world and the kingdom or reign of God need to be clarified.

The Commission also made some **further suggestions:**

- The generally historical perspective on mission needs to be balanced by an eschatological perspective on mission.
- There should be an acknowledgment of the fact that while the church is called to be a foretaste and sign of the new society Jesus Christ came to establish, the failure of church to live out this call can sometimes become a stumbling block to the fulfilment of its own mission.
- All Christians are called to mission. There should be a discussion of mission as carried out by the laity, for example, catechists, lay ministers, missionaries, youth leaders, ordinary church members, etc.
- There needs to be recognition of the role of mission agencies, parachurch organisations, informal groups and spontaneous movements in carrying out the mission of the church. Connected with this is the question of what it is that gives a Christian organization a recognizably ecclesial status.

- As with other areas of theology where Christians have unresolved differences of opinion, there need to be some boxes to highlight differences of opinion about understandings of mission as well.

Ecumenical Christian Centre, Bangalore
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