

Comments to the document

The Nature and Mission of the Church, Faith and Order Paper 198

From Swedish Mission Council, April 2009

Who we are

The Swedish Mission Council is an association of 35 Swedish denominations, mission organisations and other Christian agencies with a broad ecumenical representation of denominations. We have read the document as an ecumenical mission oriented association and from our Swedish context. One of our guiding principal is *to be* rather than *to do*, which has also influenced our comments.

Our comments

Appreciation

First of all, we are very thankful for the hard work done during the process of writing the document. Section 34-47, 60-63 and 109-118 have implications on the mission of the church and are therefore of special interest and appreciation.

We find the document reflecting on such a controversial issue as the relationship between ecclesiological and mission very interesting and important. It serves as an inspiration to studies, reflections and conversations on common ecclesiological perspectives.

Table of Contents

In our view, the table of contents is somewhat difficult to understand. Is there a reason why “A. The Nature of the Church” as well as “B. The Mission of the Church” do not have their own headlines but are under other headlines? We think there is a lack of clear structure and organization in the document, which makes it difficult to notice what is lacking, what could be further developed, and what is given too much emphasis.

Church as sign and instrument - mission as service

In short, the document states that the Church is a sign (43) and an instrument (43, 109) of God’s intention for the world – that is *the nature* of the Church. *The mission* of the Church is to serve, to serve the purpose of God. Service is seen as the very being of the Church (109). One of the greatest services is the proclamation of the Gospel (110). These understandings could have been expanded a bit more, according to us. For example, the difference between God’s mission and the service done by the churches and its people.

Missio Dei

We are aware of the work done in order to strengthen the emphasis on mission in the document. We would have appreciated an even more clear explanation on what mission involves. The document does not directly give notion to the term God’s mission (Missio Dei). Not until the very last section (118), the term “his mission” referring to Christ, is being used. We would appreciate and understanding on why the document does not refer more to God’s mission.

Christology

Surprisingly, it is not until section 77 that the notion of the suffering Christ is being mentioned. In the process of future work on the document, more theological work on the suffering Christ and mission would deepen the document. In general, we miss a deeper study on Christology. For

example, how do we understand *Christ* in relation to mission, to people of other faiths, to people in need and to people in wealth?

Diversity not same as division

The boxes explaining what the churches have different convictions on express a reality and serves as liberating in its honesty. A clear point in the document seems to be that diversity is not the same as division (63). Understanding as well as agreeing upon these differences gives the unity a valuable new strength. Yet, due to necessary respect to the diversity, the document is not able to be radical i.e. state something with a sharp tone or edge.

Three questions

1. For whom is the document written? The life and work of local congregations needs to be kept in mind.
2. What theological traditions is the document built on? The document has a bit too strong Western mindset.
3. A lot is written about the purpose of the church, however the term mission is used. What are the actual difference between *purpose* and *mission* of the church?

Individualism verses community, Sweden

“The Church is not merely the sum of individual believers in communion with God, nor primarily the mutual communion of individual believers among themselves” (13). In Sweden, with a strong sense of individualism, many people prefer to be individual believers without a strong sense of community. Into the Swedish context, the document is therefore a challenge. Section 51 brings up a related challenge that Sweden, namely facing that members of the churches “belong without believing” verses people “believing without belonging”. How do we face these challenges?

Final comments and question

Reading the document and being somewhat familiar with the work of Faith and Order, we understand the document to be written primarily for churches as well as ecumenical work on national level. The early part of the document is unnecessarily heavy with long complicated sentences. The later part is more accessible. In the process of future work on the document, more emphasis needs to be given to the life of the congregations, to make sure its life is being kept in mind more obviously. We also suggest that the following question be kept in mind: Is the text to inspire for the nature and mission of the Church or primarily to be a common understanding on what we can agree upon and what we can not?