

Commentary

*The Nature and Mission of the Church – a Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*

by students of theology at the Eberhard Karl University, Tübingen, Germany

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## 0 Foreword

We are a group of nine Catholic and three Protestant theology students at the University of Tübingen in Germany. Together with our Lecturer in Ecumenical Theology, we are taking up the invitation of the Commission on Faith and Order to respond to the text *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (NMC).

We are doing this together because the commitment to ecumenism is important to us, and because, after completing our studies, we want to work in a church and for a church that sees itself as having an ecumenical commitment. The particular situation at the University of Tübingen, which has both a Protestant and a Roman Catholic faculty of theology, has made it easier for us to read the NMC text together and to share our thoughts about it. In this way we hope to throw at least a bilateral light on the confessionally limited way we each have of reading this multilateral text.

As NMC §4 explains, there can be neither church nor unity, nor reflection on both of these, in a vacuum. Our comments on NMC arise in a particular context, and are formulated from our particular viewpoint; we are conscious of this. Our perspective is that of students of theology, not of experts in ecumenism or established theologians. On the other hand, it is also the viewpoint of Christians who identify with their faith and their church, and whose lives are guided thereby. Some of us will someday work full-time in our church, either in ordained ministries as pastors or priests or in unordained ministries as church officials; others will teach religion along with other school subjects; still others will teach theology at university level. As students we are already involved in our congregations and churches. Thus we can assess many of the problems which are addressed here from practical experience, as in ecumenical youth work, cooperative ecumenical religious instruction, families which bring together different confessions, ecumenical practice, inter-confessional student associations or participation in ecumenical worship services.

Our daily practice of our religion, however, consists mainly of studying theology. As we deal with theological questions, we move from textbooks to lectures to homework to collections of theological texts, seminars, scholarly essays and preparation for examinations. These make up our world. It is from this perspective that, in the following commentary, we express our point of view, in response to the questions in NMC §8. The main focus of our response is on Part III: “The Life of Communion in and for the World”, because it seems to us that here, in reference to the Lima Document, decisive new concepts are presented which will take the ecumenical movement forward. The NMC text is also a continuation of Lima to the extent that the persisting differences with regard to baptism, eucharist and ministry are very closely related to the understanding of the Church as such. On the understanding of the Church, our comments are based on the entire document. Consequently, wherever it seemed appropriate to us in the course of our commentary on Part III, we have drawn upon points of view and questions from “traditional” ecclesiology (from Parts I and II) for inclusion in our observations.

Since we carried out this study together, and have formulated this response in a discussion with all participants on an equal footing, we do not always speak here in a “politically correct” way, from the Roman Catholic viewpoint, of “churches” and “church communities”, especially not in respect of the Protestant church. This would, from the beginning, have given greater weight to the Roman Catholic view in the common sections of our response. Instead, we have done as the *Charta Oecumenica* does and kept to the designation “church” wherever this is the designation used by the Christians in question themselves.

We begin with some basic general reflections on the entire NMC document, and the first question we asked was what the NMC wants to accomplish and can accomplish.

## 1 A basic question: What can and should the NMC accomplish?

A division in a church generally arises when one group or movement within a faith community can no longer recognise another as a true and full expression of the *una sancta catolica et apostolica ecclesia*. It still recognises in the other group traces and “elements” of the true Church, but no longer sees it as the full *una sancta*. This is to say that the “ecumenical capability” of a church or church community<sup>1</sup> depends on its understanding of the Church. The aim of ecumenical efforts must therefore be to help to overcome the situation of division, through convergences leading to a consensus, and to contribute to mutual recognition of one another as true and legitimate expressions of the one Church of Jesus Christ.

The NMC text is both a stock-taking of what has been attained so far and what has still to be accomplished, as well as “a stage on the way to a common statement”.<sup>2</sup> Thus the main NMC text contains a joint review of agreements; the boxes contain problems, a listing of characteristics which (still) divide the churches. In addition, proposals are made for trying to correct and overcome the differences.

Standing behind this way of proceeding is the assumption that the one Church exists; it is a reality in the world, expressed in different forms. For the ecumenical movement, this does not mean that all the differences as such should disappear, but the character of some should change. Through ecumenical efforts, *divisive* differences can become *legitimate* differences. After all, when the New Testament says “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female” (Gal. 3.28), it doesn’t mean that all these differences are swept away outright; for example, Christian communities still include women and men. But the sentence does go on to say, “for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

A more thorough and precise evaluation of the differences, with regard to their divisive character, would (in our estimation) have been helpful in many problem areas.<sup>3</sup> It would also have made sense to have an indication of the hermeneutical method being used in this way of proceeding in the NMC. Is the method intended to be that of a search for convergence or that of a differentiated or differentiating consensus? How would such a consensus best be obtained with regard to the themes mentioned in the individual “problem” boxes<sup>4</sup>?

The assumption that there can be legitimate differences picks up from the biblical idea of *koinonia*. In the New Testament, the Greek word *koinonia* embraces the meaning of the two Latin words *communio* and *participatio*. It means “communion through sharing in” – in the New Testament context, this means communion with God and with one another through sharing in Jesus Christ. It is this two-fold aspect of *koinonia* which could be better expressed in NMC §24. When, in an area of the teaching and life of the church, communion or sharing is no longer assured, then that area of church life can become a factor in division – the area might even be the commitment to ecumenism itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. what we say about this in our Foreword above.

<sup>2</sup> according to the subtitle.

<sup>3</sup> However, we do not suppose that the NMC is intended for the ecumenical “primary school” in theological education or in local churches, but is rather addressed to church leaders and ecumenical experts.

<sup>4</sup> It would be a great help to users if the “problem” boxes were also numbered all the way through.

This also has consequences for the “reception” of ecumenical texts like NMC. The NMC will really only be received if the text corresponds to what is originally asked of all ecumenical texts and makes the unity of the church possible. Thus in the end it must put itself out of its job or go beyond it, and lead to an official multilateral church statement, comparable to the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, but which has as its content a statement on the communion of the Church.<sup>5</sup>

In this context the relationship between multilateral and bilateral dialogue needs re-thinking.<sup>6</sup> A common multilateral dialogue among all church families is needed, to delineate the entire framework of the ecumenical movement. First of all, it would do a service to the stock-taking, by asking, what point have we reached in our dialogue today? and especially, what results have bilateral dialogues actually yielded thus far? What have these results of bilateral dialogues contributed to NMC? Secondly, multilateral dialogue helps to make clear what the consequences are which can and should be carried forward through bilateral dialogue. To this degree, a common convergence statement by the churches on NMC would set a standard for all further bilateral dialogues.

## 2 General remarks on the text

### 2.1 On the German translation of NMC

#### 2.1.1 On the title

In comparison to the 1998 version of this text, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, the title of the present document, instead of “purpose” – what the church is intended to do, in what way it is “useful” – focusses more concretely on its “mission” in the sense of “action”, the “charge” or “assignment” given to it, and also on its quality of being “sent”. This seems to us to pick up on the “signs of the times” which the (Roman Catholic) German Bishops’ Conference formulated in its challenge “To Be a Missionary Church” (DBK [German Catholic newspaper], 26 November 2000).

It strikes us, however, that in the German translation of NMC, “mission” is not compellingly translated by a word meaning “assignment” (*Auftrag*), which can also have an entirely secular meaning. The text fluctuates among the concepts “assignment”, “mission”, “sending forth” and “challenge”, depending on the context. But since the Church is “the creature of God’s Word and of the Holy Spirit” (NMC I.A.i., §§9-13), we suggest that “mission” should be translated into German consistently as “sending forth” (*Sendung*), since the latter is a biblical and theological concept which comes from [GREEK]/[GREEK]. In both the Old and New Testaments, the sending forth of prophets is characterized by a call and a commission, thus it embraces the widest range of meaning. This term (*Sendung*) seems to us here, on the way to a common understanding of a foundation for ecclesiology, which the NMC would like to attain, best suited for a unifying language about the Church.

The word “mission”, both in English and in German (*Mission*), contains in a narrower sense the idea that a church or a religion must propose to others its understanding of its faith. In this context also, it seems to us that *Sendung* in the sense of “bearing witness to our faith” is more in tune with the times. The “mission” or sending forth of the Church is aimed at all humankind, since God wants salvation for everyone. The Vatican’s Pontifical Council on Interreligious

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<sup>5</sup> i.e. bilateral statements such as Porvoo, Reuilly, *Called to Common Mission, A Formula of Agreement*, the Amman Declaration or the Waterloo Declaration would be conceivable as multilateral statements.

<sup>6</sup> Here we have taken up suggestions from the Brecklum Statement.

Dialogue and Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples write in this sense, in their instruction *Dialogue and Proclamation. Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 19 May 1991, §79: “In fulfilling her mission, the Church comes into contact with people of other religious traditions. Some become disciples of Jesus Christ in his Church, as a result of a profound conversion and through a free decision of their own. Others are attracted by the person of Jesus and his message, but for various reasons do not enter the fold. Yet others seem to have but little or no interest in Jesus. Whatever the case may be, the Church's mission extends to all. Also in relation to the religions to which they belong, the Church in dialogue can be seen to have a prophetic role. In bearing witness to Gospel values, she raises questions for these religions. Similarly, the Church, insofar as she bears the mark of human limitations, may find herself challenged. So in promoting these values, in a spirit of emulation and of respect for the mystery of God, the members of the Church and the followers of other religions find themselves to be companions on the common path which humanity is called to tread.”

([http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interelg/documents/rc\\_pc\\_interelg\\_doc\\_19051991\\_dialogue-and-proclamatio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html))

We consider this tracing of a definition of the “mission”/assignment/sending forth of the church to be a deeply ecumenical task, one that is needed worldwide in the thinking of churches and church communities. It is important for our reflections on NMC’s content, and serves as a guide.

### 2.1.2 On the translation of quotations from the Bible

In our understanding of our scholarly task, the identification of biblical (and other) references is an absolute necessity. For example, in NMC §73, “citizens of heaven” is based on Philippians 3:20 (“But our citizenship is in heaven”) without saying so, thus showing that biblical references have not been identified throughout NMC. Only correct references can, in other contexts, ensure that words that have strong connotations or carry other baggage are properly understood based on their place in Scripture.

NMC §19 shows this especially clearly. It speaks of the “chosen race”, God’s own people (1 Peter 2:9). Here, “chosen race” has been translated into German using a phrase strongly associated with Nazi ideology, which should not be used in any German text today. In NMC §75, however, the translation has been taken from the German unified version of the Bible (*Einheitsübersetzung*). It seems to us extremely important that an ecumenical document be consistent in taking into consideration the historical/cultural context of each language into which it is translated.

This example leads to another query regarding the way NMC and its quotations from the Bible are translated from English into other languages, and the form which is appropriate to use.

On one hand, as NMC §19 makes clear, it is important to avoid translations of Bible references and quotations which can be misunderstood in other languages.

On the other, it seems to us that a document which quotes from the Bible should try, as far as possible, to do justice to the original biblical text. This means above all that translations of translations should be avoided. In choosing a version, one that is recognized by churches that speak the language in question should be preferred. In the case of the German translation of NMC, we would plead, for ecumenical reasons, that quotations be taken from the first edition of the so-called unified version.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Einheitsübersetzung der Heiligen Schrift: die Bibel*, ed. and authorized by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference in Germany; *Psalmen und Neues Testament*, ecumenical text, also ed. and authorized by the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany and the German Bible Society, Stuttgart 1980.

Moreover, correct translations into other languages of texts other than those from the Bible are also relevant. Two examples demonstrate this: In NMC §76, a translation of “life-long”, which in the Lima Document was already grammatically and idiomatically incorrect in German, has been repeated. And in NMC §88 ff., the question arises of the general translation for “ordained ministry” into German: should the usual expression (*ordiniertes Amt*) be used, or a closer translation of the English (*ordinierter Dienst*)?<sup>8</sup>

### 2.1.3 On “reception” and *Rezeption/Anerkennung*

A further observation, on language and content, arises from the breadth of meaning of the English word “receive”. It is possible in English to express the fact that churches can mutually *recognize* one another as full realisations of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, by using the same word, “receive”, thus indicating a heightening and culmination of the same process as is used when ecumenical texts and statements are *received*. Mutual recognition of one another as churches, in the true and full sense of the word, can thus also be heard through language as following logically on from the process of ecumenical efforts which results in ecumenical texts.

Unfortunately, the German word *rezipieren* is narrower in meaning than the English “receive”. In German, to “receive something” cannot be placed on the same level of meaning or importance as to “recognize someone”, so the same word cannot be used. And in German, churches cannot “receive (*rezipieren*)” one another! This has consequences for the concepts of “reception” and of mutual “recognition” as churches. In NMC, when churches’ mutual recognition is understood as a heightening of one and the same process, reception, German-speaking readers, for whom this is not an association which they make automatically, must keep in mind for this particular case that the reception of NMC initiates an integrated process which is intended to lead in the end to mutual recognition among churches.

## 3 Remarks on the structure of NMC

Apart from the introductory and concluding remarks on the origin and intention of the paper, NMC is formally arranged in four parts. Part I, “The Church of the Triune God”, describes the nature of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church in reference to the traditional *notae ecclesiae*. Part II, “The Church in History”, directs attention to the tensions, contradictions and temporal aspects which arise because the Church is also part of the world. Part III, “The Life of Communion in and for the World”, is devoted to those characteristics and structures which necessarily belong to the Church’s existence in the world. Part IV, “In and For the World”, points out that the task of the Church is fulfilled, not in and for itself but in its mission, its being sent forth, to the world.

This structure makes obvious sense and is comprehensible. But the relationship between the “Church of the Triune God” and the “Church in History” needs to be defined more clearly.<sup>9</sup> Despite the formal structuring in four parts, at first glance it is striking that Part IV, and thus the Church’s relation to the “world” – since the Church is itself church in the world, its relation to its surroundings, its neighbours – is dealt with only very briefly.

The greatest weight is given to Part III. It is itself divided into five basic elements which are capable of ecumenical consensus: confession of the apostolic faith, baptism, the Lord’s Supper<sup>10</sup>,

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<sup>8</sup> Or has the latter translation now become a part of the interconfessional ecumenical vocabulary?

<sup>9</sup> See especially the Protestant part of our commentary.

<sup>10</sup> This term (*Herrenmahl*) is confessionally neutral in German and is therefore the designation for the eucharist which

the general ministry of all the faithful and (embedded in it) the ministry of the ordained. Part III emphasises the ordained ministry, reflecting on its relationship to the ministry of all the faithful as well as various aspects linked or associated with the concept of ministry (oversight, conciliarity and primacy, authority). The order in which Part III addresses them does not seem arbitrary, since each is built upon the preceding one and follows logically from it. The common apostolic faith is the foundation, it is the basis for the one baptism; the communion in baptism is the basis, in its turn, for the communion in the Lord's Supper; within this communion the ministry of all the faithful is carried out, as ministry to the community; also tasked with serving this community/communion is the ordained ministry in its various forms and aspects. In our commentary we ask what this signifies for the (visible) unity of the Church. Will church unity be bound up primarily with common structures, or with obedience to our common task and our common mission (being sent forth)? Is this even a contradiction, or does it represent alternatives between which we can choose? Does not the one necessarily include the other? Isn't our main interest, not primarily the nature of the Church, but rather its being sent forth within God's plan for the salvation of all humankind – aren't we interested in its nature only insofar as it is related to this mission?

Knowledge of the interrelationships within NMC as we now have it,<sup>11</sup> and the connections with preceding and successive texts, especially with the Lima Document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM) and the Porto Alegre text, *Called to Be the One Church* (CboC), would increase understanding and wherever necessary is given consideration in our commentary.

## 4 Remarks on the content of NMC

In this chapter we would like to offer general observations on the content of NMC as a whole, and also particularly on Part I, "The Church of the Triune God", and Part II, "The Church in History". In doing so we have not taken these up in chronological order, nor according to the NMC structure, but rather according to themes and associations.

### 4.1 *Being church within a context*

We begin our observation with the general theme of "Being church within a context" because it relates to NMC as a whole. It seems to us that NMC has laid out the foundations for the unity of the Church. The unity of the Church is not an end in itself, but rather has a goal that lies outside itself: "that the world may believe" (John 17.21). The consequence to be drawn, that being church is always being church within a context, is not adequately covered in Part IV, "In and For the World". This must also be reflected in the ecumenical movement. The ecumenism of the churches must therefore always be a practical ecumenism.

Each individual church must try to open itself up to others, and to be a church not only *of* the world, but also church *in* the world, church *for* the world, and perhaps also simply the world's church! So to us it seems important that NMC not seal itself off from the world behind a theological or theoretical construct. It is not just a question of being aware of the world; the Church should also be aware, and take seriously, that it is "an instrument, in God's hands, for the transformation of the world" (NMC §109).

There is a tension between the basic attributes of the nature and mission of the Church and the life of the Church in history. The unity which belongs to its nature thus contradicts its actual divisions, the holiness of its nature contradicts its sin, the catholicity of its nature contradicts the

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is capable of ecumenical consensus (see also Note 22 below).

<sup>11</sup> Explicit cross-references in NMC itself would make the text more compelling.



lines of demarcation and the barriers within Christian communities, and the apostolicity of its nature contradicts the shortcomings and errors in the churches' proclamation of God's Word (NMC §§53-56). This field of tension is thoroughly described in NMC and leads to the core of the problem in the question of "Church as Sacrament".

The Church, according to NMC, is *sign*, "participating in the love and life of God ..... (and) points beyond itself to the purpose of all creation, the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God" (NMC §43), and *instrument*, because "the Church is the community of people ..... (who) proclaim the Good News in word and deed, that the world may believe" (NMC §46).

Speaking of the Church as sign and instrument reminds us of the first chapter of the Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*. "The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race." (LG 1). A "sign" means an image of, or a pointer to, an existing reality – here it is the very close "union with God" and the "unity of the human race" which is meant. "Instrument", on the other hand, points to a goal which has not yet been reached, but towards which efforts are intensified. According to this understanding, the Church is the communion of all the faithful, who are bound to one another with and through Christ. In this way, the understanding of church as *mysterion*<sup>12</sup> in its breadth and openness also deepens: "The Church can never be fully and unequivocally grasped only in its visible appearance." (NMC §45). And it also creates the possibility for fruitful discussion in bilateral and multilateral conversations.

The first attribute, the Church's character as sign, points to the nature of the Church which is given in God's own presence, that in it we already see the dawning of God's Kingdom. In this way it is prophetic, already anticipating the eschatological unity of the world (including the Church). But this means that the divisions among the churches are contrary to God's will and God's mission, since they obscure the Church's character as sign and make it almost useless as an instrument of unity!

Thus from the Church's fundamental character as sign – stated in the indicative – arises its clear mission as instrument – the statement of an imperative.

This can and should be taken further in that, besides the "pure" proclamation of the Word, it is expressed in caring for the creation and in actions on behalf of peace and justice. In this way it represents a firm foundation for conversations in a fruitful interconfessional dialogue and challenges the churches to act together from now on.

#### **4.2    *The Church and the loss of religious commitment***

Following the remarks made in the preceding section, we would like to continue with the Church's view of the world. Despite the divisions among the churches, they see themselves confronted with the same problems. So we would like to address the loss of religious commitment, a problem which affects all churches equally.

This is the question of what has happened to people who believe (in something), but who don't belong to a church or don't want to belong to any church. A painful experience of churches in this context is also the discrepancy between general membership in a church on one hand and, on the other, the living practice of the Christian faith. Here the problem arises that many of the faithful no longer feel at home in their local church, while others are still members but plainly

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<sup>12</sup> mystery, in the sense of "holy mysteries". On the Church as Sacrament, see *Lumen gentium* §1 (LG 1) and the box following NMC §48.

“belong without believing” (NMC §51). The churches must devote themselves seriously to this problem. In NMC it is rightly regarded as a challenge that confronts all the churches and extends across all the tensions which exist among us.

### 4.3 *The Church and other religions*

Part of the context in which the Church lives in the world is, of course, the relationship of the Church with other religions, to which we here devote a section of our commentary.

In Part I, “The Church as People of God” (NMC §§ 18-19) begins by speaking of the Church’s relationship with Israel. But what about the relationship of the Christian church(es) to contemporary Judaism? What is meant in this context, when NMC §18 says emphatically that “the Church remains related, in a mysterious way, to the Jewish people”? Who are “the Jewish people” here, only the Israel of long ago or also the Judaism of today?

What about the relationship of the Church to other religions? What about an ecumenical agreement on, or at least reconcilable ways of viewing, the great and ever more urgent task today of a shared “theology of religions” among the different churches? In our opinion, this task can only be appropriately and responsibly carried out in the context of ecumenical reflection on ecclesiology. When other religions enter a conversation with Christianity, they are confronted with an abundance of different churches and accordingly with different interreligious viewpoints and approaches. Interreligious dialogue with Christianity is *de facto* shaped by the different confessions, for one cannot “for example, carve out by a process of elimination that which is ‘Christian’ and would be considered the same, shared Christianity in all confessions! Christianity exists only in a concrete sense in the various churches.”<sup>13</sup> We do not see any thought given to this fact in NMC.

In this connection, it seems to us worth considering anew the following words from the Instruction of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation. Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*: “The Church encourages and fosters interreligious dialogue not only between herself and other religious traditions, but even among these religious traditions themselves..... She is invited by the spirit to encourage all religious institutions and movements to meet, to enter into collaboration, and to purify themselves in order to promote truth and live in holiness, justice, love and peace, dimensions of that Kingdom which, at the end of time, Christ will hand over to his Father (cf. 1 Cor 15:24). Thus, interreligious dialogue is truly part of the dialogue of salvation initiated by God.” (§80)

This also has consequences for the Church’s understanding of itself. In a certain sense, through the inter-religious perspective, the Church and its instrumentality are relativized. As Augustin Cardinal Bea says in his book, *The Church and the Jewish People*, in reference to the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*: “The Church’s work for the salvation of souls is bound to firmly established means and ways, including first of all the sacraments. God, however, is not bound, and does not bind himself, to these means in doing his own work.”<sup>14</sup> Thus it is an asymmetrical relationship: the Church is dependent upon God, but God is not dependent upon it, not even to carry out its mission in the narrower sense. Could this insight not lead to a easing of tension in the debate on ecclesiology?

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Religionen, Religiosität und christlicher Glaube*, Arnoldshain Conference of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany, Gütersloh 1991, 113 [provisional trans., not found in English]

<sup>14</sup> Provisional translation, English not available.

#### 4.4 *The conciliar process on justice, peace and the preservation of creation*

In reading NMC, we have also been struck by the references (cf. NMC §§66, 83) to the conciliar process on justice, peace and the preservation of creation. This seems to us to witness to the churches' sense of responsibility and obligation, and its standing up for JPC. The unity of the Church of Jesus Christ, towards which we are striving but which has not yet been fully realised, should by no means allow the Christian responsibility toward the world to become pluralist and piecemeal, especially in the face of a globalized world.

In its consideration of the conciliar process on justice, peace and the preservation of creation, NMC seems at times to lack a common theological and ethical understanding of the world in the light of the Gospel. This should be about an ecclesiological practice that goes beyond simple recourse to carrying out the basic tasks of *diakonia*, *leitourgia*, and *martyria*. The Christian churches have a common responsibility for shaping the world, as Part IV, "In and For the World", indicates. Following the example of the multilateral *Charta Oecumenica* of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE), we would support an analogous statement of commitment to the implementation of NMC. For example, CCEE and CEC commit themselves "to strive to adopt a lifestyle free of consumerism and a quality of life informed by accountability and sustainability" (§9). The consequence of such a commitment on the part of the WCC should include its acceptance and continuation in bilateral dialogue. In this way, "visible" ecumenical projects may arise, such as the European network for protection of the environment, the "European Christian Environmental Network" (ECEN).

#### 4.5 *The understanding of unity and ecumenical hermeneutics*

A forward-looking point that we would like to address in our comments on the NMC content is that of the understanding of unity and ecumenical hermeneutics. NMC does not offer an explicit description of its ecumenical model for unity, in a chapter of its own.<sup>15</sup> Implicitly it is apparent that NMC assumes that a *koinonia* unity in reconciled diversity already exists. The unity of the Church is not simply postulated by NMC, nor is it a goal to be reached purely through church bureaucracy and through clever ecumenical moves as in a game of chess. The unity of the Church is founded ultimately on the unity which is God's very self, and its aim in turn stretches beyond itself to the unity of the world. This is the Church's mission, to which it is sent forth. In Christ, the unity of the Church is indeed already reality.

The statement of the goal in NMC §57 as "the restoration of unity between Christians" postulates, on one hand, unity as a given which already exists, and on the other hand names him upon whom unity is based and centred: Christ. Perhaps the image of a wheel is relevant: each of the spokes runs from a different direction toward the centre, and the centre is the crucial point at which turning takes place, without which the wheel would not be a wheel. Divisions and differences, brought about by "the distortions of the relationship between human beings caused by sin" (NMC §59), restrict or hinder the fullness of growth towards the centre, the *koinonia* which is the ultimate goal.

Christ as the basis and centre for the Christian churches often seems to become lost to view. Especially when an ecumenical process stands still or goes backward, it would be desirable and helpful to bring this basis into our sights again. This centring and its potential for unity could be made clearer in NMC §§57-59; the title of Part II, section B could then read the other way around: "Not Yet in Full Communion – but in Christ!"

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<sup>15</sup> We would recommend, as an aid to understanding the text, that NMC disclose in its introduction to the purpose and method of the study, for example in §6 or §7, the principles it has followed in its ecumenical hermeneutic.

#### 4.6 *Interim goals*

So far we have explained that NMC operates largely on a theological and theoretical level. But we would like our commentary also to include some practical, concrete suggestions.

The ultimate goal remains recognition by the churches of one another as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church in all its fullness. This goal must continue to be pursued, but we should not shrink from formulating interim goals which lend themselves to action, for contacts lead to understanding and agreement. Taking action together is necessary in the effort towards a common witness, evangelisation, love for one's neighbour and justice. But from these interim goals we should also draw consequences for the ecclesiologies of churches and church communities.

The question remains whether the ultimate goals of NMC may be too far off. Naming realistic interim goals helps to keep the text and the ecumenical issues from being put aside too quickly. If the text is to be understood as offering help to individual churches, the need is urgent to name concrete tasks for bilateral dialogue. Some interim ecumenical steps which have already been realised, after all, speak quite an encouraging word: faculty partnerships between theological faculties of different confessions, the monastic life being shared in religious communities such as Taizé, Bose etc., ecumenical *Kirchentage* [church conventions in Germany], marriages which bring two confessions together, partnerships between local churches, pulpit exchanges (for example during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity), celebrations of the Lima Liturgy, and so on.

A future task for the Commission on Faith and Order could be to invite churches and church communities to discuss the concept of *communio* from a variety of viewpoints, in order to find further shared aspects of local churches which emphasise their communion at the local level. We would see a deepened understanding of “conciliar forms of life and action” (NMC §66) and the adoption of practice-oriented goals as promising approaches.

The catholic and apostolic elements hold the communion of local churches together. With regard to apostolicity, the three aspects ministry, teaching and shared life of the Church are recommended to the Commission on Faith and Order for further study in this context. Especially in the areas of apostolicity as faithfulness to the apostles' teaching and faithfulness to the apostles' fellowship (Acts 2:42), interim goals could be formulated for the ecumenical movement and perhaps partial recognition could be attained. The Holy Scriptures as proof of original faithfulness could be a standard for valid ministries, which proclaim the pure Gospel. But especially with regard to faithfulness to the apostles' fellowship, the churches could be invited to respond to the question of the rightly shared life. Interconfessional and intercultural responses that lead to taking action together appear desirable in the face of globalization. A commitment by the churches to common goals and common action, such as CCEE and CEC have made in the *Charta Oecumenica*, could be an aim for which to strive.

### 5 On Part III: The Life of Communion in and for the World

As mentioned in our Introduction, we would now like to focus on Part III, “The Life of Communion in and for the World”. We are emphasising this part of the document because we see it as a continuation of the Lima Document. Those of us who are Catholic and those who are Protestant have each chosen a different approach and worked on it separately. The Catholics keep very closely to the text in their argument, while the Protestants have selected certain aspects which seemed important to them for particular commentary.

## **5.1 Commentary from the Catholic side**

### **5.1.1 A. Apostolic Faith**

Unlike the Lima Document, which begins with baptism, this chapter begins with a section on our common apostolic faith. The apostolic faith is esteemed to be one of three basic strands (the others are baptism and the eucharist) through which *koinonia*, as an essential central theme of the whole document, is created and sustained (NMC §67). It reveals the area of tension between the “original” apostolic faith and the way it is realised (and must be realised) in concrete ways reaching across many times and many places. The old dogmatic principle prevails, “to say what is old in new ways”.

In this way a widening basic understanding is created, that we may understand our own faith as “only” a reformulation of the apostolic faith, shaped by the context in which we live. Such argumentative thinking on a more over-arching level, in connection with the idea of unity and diversity (cf. NMC §§60-63), allows us to step back and share a new perspective that might be the basis for more open conversation. When we look back at the common root of our faith, the things which bind us together come into view. What remains an open problem (as soon as we leave the over-arching level) is the concrete, everyday experience that, in reality, the expression of our faith has taken all these different forms. To advance in our thinking, we might especially consider how to make it possible for individual dialogue partners to hold together in their minds the concrete expressions of faith which are found “here and now” in all their diversity.

### **5.1.2 B. Baptism**

The first paragraph on baptism (NMC §74) contains the basic statement that baptism is a “bond of unity” and represents a foundation for ecumenical work, so that recognition among Christians of one another’s baptism is especially highly valued. It is emphasised that baptism should be carried out with water and in the name of the Triune God. In a true partnership within Christian communities, baptism is at the centre of the churches’ task.

Although baptism is presented as being very important, little guidance is given on practical ways of overcoming the differences that exist. Only the problem of infant baptism is raised, and reasons are produced for giving it the same status as adult baptism. Other areas of disagreement, such as the practice of “re-baptism” by churches which do not recognise the baptisms of other churches, are not addressed.

The text as a whole does not focus on the real problems, or does not discuss them sufficiently. There is no clarification of detailed issues, but only a statement of the basis for a common recognition of baptism.

Moreover, there could be more reflection on the ecclesiological meaning, for being church or for being churches, of baptism as the beginning or the expression of a life-long process in which believers grow more and more in their relationships to their congregation, to the Church and to Christ, which give them support but also stimulate them always to reflect anew on their faith. What does it mean if this relationship to the Church should consist not only of a relationship to one’s own church tradition, into which one was baptized, but also include (for example in an interconfessional marriage) the building of relationships with other churches which recognise the particular believer’s baptism?

It is also part of the baptismal vocation to model one's life on the life of Christ, to follow him. Through Jesus' solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, with suffering and marginalised persons, the faithful encounter him in these persons. Would it not be worthwhile here to think further about the ecumenical implications of a baptismal ecclesiology and a baptismal ethics and spirituality?

Like the text that precedes it, the "problem" box is not very concrete. The various practices are mentioned individually, but without indicating either which churches experience these conflicts or proposals for reaching agreement. Especially in the cases of (e) the Trinitarian formula for baptism and (f) baptism with water, it is striking that the box text does not agree with the main text, or that a clearer formulation might avoid misunderstandings.

### 5.1.3 C. Eucharist

The Eucharist with its multidimensional structure occupies an exceptional place in the life of the Church and its members. With it and through it, the nature of the Church is defined. Its establishment through Scripture (cf. 1 Cor 10-11), making it the foundation for unity, makes us painfully aware of the real discrepancies with respect to the Eucharist. We have further fundamental difficulties in connection with the question of ministry, involving the preservation of the "full reality of the Eucharist", so that approaches to reaching an isolated solution must be abandoned in favour of a more comprehensive model of thinking and understanding.

The section on the Eucharist makes it very clear that an agreement on this is indispensable for the *una sancta*, but (understandably) presents no possibilities for solving the problem. We see differences especially in the practical implementation, in common celebrations of worship (*leitourgia*). So we Christians are denied the unity around the table until the above-mentioned problems are solved. We ought to confront the challenges, keep our perspective open and not become rigid over certain elements, for example by not confining the *communicatio in sacris* to the narrow sense of the receiving of communion.

We are conscious that we cannot solve the serious problems in the area of the Eucharist. But there are possibilities for carrying out the elements which together make up the Eucharist (*martyria, doxologia, anamnesis, epiclesis*), if not in combination (as is usual and would be preferable), at least each on its own. Opportunities can be found in ritual actions apart from the Eucharist itself, for example, common rituals in the area of confession and searching one's conscience, funerals, daily common prayer according to the canonical hours, and more frequent use of the Lima Liturgy (which we already have!). This liturgy for ecumenical sharing, based on early church practice, was developed by Faith and Order following the discussion of the Lima document (BEM), celebrated in Lima, and given to the churches for their responses and use, even though it was never officially adopted by the Commission or made obligatory.<sup>16</sup>

We recommend rediscovery of ideas which have already been developed, and these should be enlarged and built upon by new concepts.

### 5.1.4 D. Ministry of All the Faithful

First, we find it very positive that, like the Lima Document, the general ministry of all the faithful is addressed in a separate section of NMC. The Lima Document also discusses it in the paragraph on ministry. This section on the "ministry of all the faithful" even precedes the one on the

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/unity-mission-evangelism-and-spirituality/spirituality-and-worship/the-eucharistic-liturgy-of-lima.html>

ministry of the ordained (which reminds us Catholics of the structure of *Lumen Gentium*). In this way, the ordained ministry is not isolated, but rather is placed in a larger ecclesiological context, and the general ministry of all the faithful is given greater status by being linked to the ordained ministry. Thus NMC sees the ordained ministry from two viewpoints: in its relation to the Church as people of God (NMC §§18-19) and as the Body of Christ (NMC §§20-21), and to the other biblical images in connection with *koinonia*.

This connection, the distinction between the ministry of the faithful and the ministry of the ordained and the relationship between them, is not explicated. And a further description and analysis of a problem is missing. In the box on the ordained ministry, the problem areas, which are connected with the ministry of all the faithful, are merely listed.

Within the section on the ministry of all the faithful, unfortunately, only one way of stock-taking of the many and diverse forms of ministry is given, and without drawing any conclusions for ecumenical practice. But the gifts of the Spirit are given to the entire congregations of local churches, and the strengthening provided by the Spirit also relates to all of them in their entirety, so this section should also lead to a prospect for ecumenical practice.

Common aims could be formulated in areas of the basic services, *diakonia*, *martyria* and *leitourgia*. For an ecumenical growing together of structures, the model of partnerships between congregations gives direction for the future. It should be discussed whether this model can be formulated as a multilateral interim goal for the WCC, which can be adopted bilaterally by individual local churches.

### **5.1.5 E. Ministry of the Ordained**

The argument proceeds on the basis for ordination which is found in the Holy Scriptures, names its location in the community of the faithful, and names its meaning, which takes different concrete forms. According to the Bible, the ministry of the ordained was founded by Jesus with the calling and sending forth of the Twelve and of the other apostles. The church tradition has carried this on, through the early church community and ever since, following this example by choosing persons to whom to entrust particular responsibility.

We can read the founding of the ministry in two possible ways: on one hand there is the foundation of ministry as authorized by the community, on the other, there is the reference to the authority of Jesus in charging and sending forth his ministers. Jesus' calling of his disciples, however, does not yet mean the founding of ministry, since those who are ordained are to be "empowered by the Holy Spirit to act as representative persons" (NMC §86). Thus on one hand the ordained ministry serves to build up and strengthen the community, undertaking thereby a great responsibility for the community, and on the other hand cannot do so without reciprocal support from it. This sort of argument proceeds synchronously.

The second way of reading is, instead, more diachronic. Here ministry is placed in relation to the witness of the apostles as its origin. Another diachronic element is the vocation of all the faithful. It also refers back to the calling and sending forth of the apostles and serves, together with the ordained ministry, to preserve continuity with the origin of the Church (apostolicity).

The Catholic Church expresses both these elements of ordination in making the ordained ministry a sacrament. Its origin is in Christ, as mentioned above, and it is also a task which is exercised within the people of God. Its representative character is made clear in that the ordained

person does not act as an individual, but rather *in persona Christi*. Therefore we can identify with the NMC text.

In the following paragraph (NMC §87), the text raises the different *ways of conferring ministry*, which differ according to their context. The sacramental understanding of ministry means that one a ministry can only be received. It is received as a charge to serve the congregation.

Within the same paragraph (§87), the text goes on to name the various *forms of ordained ministry*. This combining of the dimensions of origin and differentiation of ministry complicates matters unnecessarily and would better have been separated into two paragraphs. NMC §87 points out that the three forms defined in the third century were the generally accepted model and can still be found today. For Catholics, at the Second Vatican Council the three-fold sacramental ministry was rediscovered. However, the definition of relationships between the consecration of bishops and that of priests was left open, which has significance for ecumenical conversations. On this basis, in numerous bilateral dialogues, many possibilities for convergence would still be open.

NMC §§88-9 again bring up the responsibility of the ordained. “The ministry of the ordained is to serve in a specific way the apostolic continuity of the Church as a whole” (§89). This means unifying the congregation through Word and Sacrament as well as bearing witness to the Christian life, as NMC defines it.

The ministry of the ordained also includes other aspects, however, which are not named in the text. As Catholics we mention here the obligation of celibacy and the reservation of the priesthood for men only. Celibacy is not a dogmatic requirement for ministry, and its practice is different, for example, in the eastern churches which are united with the Roman church. The situation regarding access to the priesthood for men only, however, is much more difficult. The Catholic Church argues here in favour of faithfulness to the apostolic witness and to the tradition of the Church, in other words, that Jesus himself did not call any women as apostles and this is also the practice that was subsequently followed. Moreover, it is theologically argued that a priest is acting *in persona Christi*, and the interpretation of the concept “person” is gender-specific, although here as well, theological discussions have shown that neither of these reasons constitutes a dogmatic obligation.<sup>17</sup>

There are still many issues to be discussed regarding ministry. On the more functional aspect of the ordained ministry, its service to the community, there is extensive agreement, but not on the subject of its core, its nature. The argumentation of the Catholic Church as presented here proceeds on the basis of ministry as a sacrament, as we have tried to explain above. Ministry as such cannot be considered apart from the nature of the Church itself, and this argumentation is therefore, so to speak, embedded in it.

#### **5.1.6. Oversight: Personal, Communal, Collegial**

NMC states that the Church, as body of Christ and eschatological people of God, is built up by the Holy Spirit through a diversity of ministry(?) and ministries. This calls for a ministry of coordination, a ministry of *episkopé*. Thus it is not only in the Catholic Church that the office of bishop is the central ministry in the church.

The articles that follow (NMC §§91-93) give a retrospect of the development and structures of the *episkopé*, which also are subject to historical conditions. Like NMC, the Lima Document goes

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<sup>17</sup> *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* nos. 2 and 4 of 1994 state emphatically that the Catholic Church does not see itself as authorised to ordain women, therefore can. 1024 CIC/1983 remains valid.



back to the beginnings of the early church and recalls the changes in ministry which have occurred on many occasions since then. Even when these changes led to the development of differentiation among churches, it is nevertheless emphasised that the aim was always the same: the episcopacy was to serve in maintaining the continuity of the apostolic truth and the unity of the Church's life.

The Lima Document presents this retrospect more broadly. It assumes, to a certain degree, a single tradition of faith which is common to all Christian churches. NMC puts less emphasis on this aspect. Instead, after looking back at the first centuries of church history, during which the church was not yet divided by the East-West Schism, it refers to the problems of the Reformation leaders in the 16th century and gives, as the reason why they ultimately accepted the break with the church structures and the ministry of primacy, the desire to remain faithful to the apostolicity of the Church (NMC §93). It is a continuation of Lima in that conclusions of very recent bilateral discussions, for example (even beforehand) the Catholic-Lutheran statement on "The Apostolicity of the Church" (2006) have entered into the NMC text.

The reference to the shared tradition seems to us indispensable at this point, since aspects of ministry and church today are measured against it. While the Lima Document puts more emphasis on what we all have in common, with an eye to consensus, NMC also speaks openly of a time of breakup, which we see as a step forward. This is a legitimate, but nevertheless entirely different view of the apostolicity of the Church. Historical conditions demanded a turning away from the church structures. Luther nevertheless regarded the office of ministry as necessary, so that subsequently a presbyteral succession was adopted, insofar as, in the priestly ministry, the ministry of a bishop is also realised. For Catholics as well, the complete explanation came only with Vatican II whether ordination to the priesthood meant ordination to the full ministry. The question is therefore whether Catholics should really regard the Protestant conception of ministry as dividing the churches.

The box on "Episkopé, Bishops and Apostolic Succession" is focussed only on the issue of whether the apostolic succession is necessary. We, however, believe that defining the relationship between the office of bishop and the priesthood, and between bishops and priests, is just as great an ecumenical problem.

The paragraphs that follow (NMC §§94-98) refer to the practice of the *episkopé*. Oversight must be practised in personal, communal and collegial ways; these not only refer to particular structures and processes, but also "describe the informal reality of the bonds of *koinonia*" (§94).

Here a difference from the Lima Document is noticeable. In Lima, a different order was chosen for the ways in which ministries were to be practised: personal, collegial, communal. In NMC the content of the guidelines is also, in some cases, filled in anew. Lima assumes that the person must be ordained ("personal"), becomes part of a collegium which, as a group, represents the local church and shares this task ("collegial"), and finally is assigned to the community and is rooted in it ("communal"). Basically, however, both Lima and NMC speak of forms of oversight always in relation to a church, though realised in different ways and considered and accented from different points of view.

NMC sees the "personal" practice of the ministry of *episkopé* from within the community, because *episkopé* is not merely a function. The person who carries out this ministry has a fundamental bond with all the faithful and carries a particular responsibility. So the central focus is not on the individual as in Lima, but rather on the bond with the other members through the Holy Spirit.

The “communal” function again emphasises oversight’s orientation to the community, grounded in baptism. That baptism is mentioned in this context is worthy of notice, because it points to the *una sancta*. It raises the importance of the of communion among all baptised persons and of unity in legitimate diversity, implying that this can also be promoted through the *episkopé*.

Collegiality, finally, should make a life together possible which is in harmony with the mission of Jesus Christ. This mission requires cooperation. Such cooperation refers, in NMC, not only to the collegium of leaders within individual churches, but also to collegial work among leaders of different churches with one another. Because the churches are separated, it is stated, oversight is seldom practised collegially by their leaders (NMC §98).

In the Lima document, collegiality means, seen from within a church, that the representation of the community requires a collegium of ordained ministers. NMC, however, translates the concept of collegiality to a completely new, inter-church level, which is rightly mentioned last, as more or less the highest goal.

This inter-church collegiality, broadly defined, possibly also has conciliar traits. This would invest inter-church assemblies such as those of the WCC with a certain conciliar dimension.

### 5.1.7 G. Conciliarity and Primacy

The fundamental tension over the issue of leadership between “authoritarian guidance” (ministry and oversight) on one hand and “communal leadership” (conciliarity, synods) on the other is described as a problematic context for the discussion of conciliarity and primacy. Sociological and anthropological patterns of argument, such as the need for the function of leadership in the shared life of human beings (NMC §101), and structures developed for historical reasons (§§102-104) place the issue in a large and fundamental framework of understanding. The tension between the unity of the one Church of Jesus Christ and its diversity, due to the real existence of cultural and historical contexts and not least of all to the individuality of every human being, is immanent in the system. It has to be endured. Understanding this basic “free radical” character of people’s thinking is helpful in considering the limits within which unity slides towards the pole of uniformity, and diversity towards that of irreconcilable arbitrariness.<sup>18</sup> The same is true of the relationship between conciliarity and primacy.

The goal of ecumenical ecclesiological efforts is “the safeguarding of unity and the flourishing of a legitimate diversity” (NMC §62). If this general goal of “unity in diversity”, as we have just stated it, is to be translated into structures of leadership, conciliarity and primacy are not mutually exclusive. The tension between them has to be endured, just like the one between unity and legitimate diversity.

NMC points out that “as the papacy developed ..... further claims were made for the direct, immediate and universal jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome over the whole church” (NMC §103), and sees this as a problem. Here, as we have noted in other chapters, the text is simply indicating a stock-taking of a problem area. From the Catholic viewpoint, we feel a lack of concrete answers or proposals for solving the problem. However, in §104 NMC does refer to the Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* of Pope John Paul II, in which representatives of churches and theologians of other confessions are invited, with regard to the Petrine ministry, “to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject, a dialogue in which, leaving useless controversies behind, we could listen to one another” (*UUS* §96).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See the discussion following Part II, C. (NMC §§60-63), in the box on “Limits of Diversity?”

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0221/\\_PT.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0221/_PT.HTM)

Although the search for and discussion of the biblical basis for primacy and conciliarity is taken seriously, no concrete possible solutions are formulated even in the closing paragraph; this can be ascribed to the complexity of the issue. A discussion of leadership in the sense of service in NMC §§105-108 would be desirable.

The look back and naming of concrete steps which have already been taken towards a rapprochement (NMC §104) points to a basically hopeful prospect for the future, but it makes the road that still has to be travelled look very long.

### **5.1.8 H. Authority**

The authority of Jesus is described as a sort of renunciation (self-emptying) of an eschatological nature. This alludes to Jesus' actions through which he made salvation visible in the world. With Jesus, the Kingdom of God has already begun to dawn, but has not reached complete fulfilment. This raises the question of how church authority should be assessed if one makes a distinction between the Church and the Kingdom of God.

This tension between "already" and "not yet" is seen in the authority of Jesus. It is just these two poles which are expressed in the text, which can be helpful for dialogue, since ecumenical rapprochement can also be seen in the tension between "already" and "not yet".

The model presented in this text is a liberating authority, which can be the origin and source of a legitimate diversity within a greater, more comprehensive unity, not an authority that only restricts and dictates.

Through such an understanding of authority, every authority exercised within the Church can be seen as fundamentally "coming from God", thus placing God in the centre. "Authorities" which are assessed differently, such as Scripture, tradition, worship and synods point back to God as their origin and thus relativised; it is their task to make way for us to see God and to lead us to God. We can read God's authority, its quality, in Jesus' action for our salvation. The usual human understanding of a ruler is one who dominates, but in Jesus' case it is one who serves.

The question arises of the relationship between authority in the Church and that of the ordained ministry. This is mentioned in NMC §108, but is not spelled out precisely. Is this relationship analogous to that of the priesthood of all believers and the ordained ministry?

## **5.2 *Commentary from the Protestant side***

In every passage of Part III, according to our view, there are a number of unclear points and formulations on which, as seen from the Protestant side, there is (as yet) no consensus. Instead of a commentary on the whole of Part III, we will confine ourselves to pointing out these aspects which we find problematic.

### **5.2.1 A. Apostolic Faith**

#### **5.2.1.1 The understanding of what church is**

The preceding paragraphs have thoroughly discussed the subject of "church" and set out the various ecclesiological dimensions (for example in NMC §§49-50).

Part III is entitled “The Life of Communion in and for the World”. It begins with the statement that “all the gifts and resources needed for its [that is, the Church’s] life and mission in and for the world” (NMC §67) will be discussed in the text that follows.

NMC §50 says: “..... the Church, in its human dimension, is made up of human beings who ..... are still subject to the conditions of the world.”

Thus as long as “church” is understood as located in the world, it and its members are subject to the conditions named here. However, the word “church” is not being used here in its worldly dimension, but rather as an abstract and idealised concept. This appears especially clearly in §§70 ff., which speak of “the Church” in the singular and of “churches” in the plural. Only the latter, plural designation seems intended to speak of concrete church institutions.<sup>20</sup>

To designate different understandings of what “church” is, if it is done at all, only by number leads to misunderstandings. According to our Protestant understanding, “church” is always the communion of all believers, thus definitely, as *creatura verbi*, always the human community in the world. To speak of “the Church” as an entity distinct from its earthly existence is theologically problematic, and one could wonder about the reality of such a Church. The tensions described in NMC between the nature and the appearance of the Church do not arise from a distinction between the holiness of the Church and its human dimension, but rather from a tension intrinsic in the Church’s situation in the world, from its being a communion of those who have been sanctified, but at the same time are still human beings exposed to the power of sin.

Going further, we have the question of whether the continuing characteristics of “church”, as listed in NMC §71 following the colon, should all be given the same weight. Without wanting to deny the importance of the other characteristics, according to the *Confessio Augustana*, which is the confessional document of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, “to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.”<sup>21</sup>

#### **5.2.1.2 Confessing the Holy Spirit**

NMC §73 says: “When Christians confess the Holy Spirit as Lord and Giver of Life, they know themselves to be already citizens of heaven and they commit themselves to discern the Spirit’s gift in their lives.”

The formulation “they commit themselves to discern the Spirit’s gift in their lives” contradicts, from an Evangelical Lutheran viewpoint, not only the concept of the human person but also the relationship between God and human beings. Against this background, it is essential that both these topics be brought into accord with the Reformation doctrine of justification.

The Holy Spirit does indeed reveal itself to humankind through the gift of the Spirit (1 Cor. 1:7). But it is from God that a person receives this gift (1 Peter 4:10-11), by God’s grace alone and not by having earned it oneself (Romans 3:24). Consequently it is not possible for people to “commit” themselves “to discern the Spirit’s gift in their lives”.

#### **5.2.1.3 Justification by faith**

The dialogue between the Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church has been framed, since the Reformation, by “justification”. In 1997 the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. the discussion on being church or not being church of “church communities”, which was occasioned in 2000 by the document *Dominus Iesus* (a declaration by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of the Roman Catholic Church).

<sup>21</sup> *Confessio Augustana*, the Augsburg Confession (1530) – <http://www.bookofconcord.org/augsburgconfession.php>

Justification” was issued, and in 1999 the “Common Statement” was signed, but the latter only formulates a so-called “differentiated consensus”.

An ecumenical document which deals with the “apostolic faith” (NMC §§68-73) should therefore not pass over this topic altogether, failing even to make it the subject of a “box” comparable to those in other sections where problems are presented.

### **5.2.2 B. Baptism**

NMC §75 says: “Baptism involves confession of sin, conversion of heart .....”. As already mentioned with regard to justification by faith, here also an understanding is not excluded which emphasises too much the merit of the human being. But precisely in baptism, according to our Evangelical Lutheran understanding, it is God who is acting upon the human person. The Leuenberg Agreement states decisively that “In Baptism, Jesus Christ irrevocably receives man, fallen prey to sin and death, into his fellowship of salvation so that he may become a new creature. In the power of his Holy Spirit he calls him into his community and to a new life of faith, to daily repentance and discipleship.”<sup>22</sup> Human action is always and only the consequence of divine action.

The definition of subject and object is crucial especially in baptism, especially in speaking of the issue of infant or adult baptism. Different churches have very different views on this, as is clearly acknowledged in the “box” which follows.

### **5.2.3 C. Eucharist**

#### **5.2.3.1 Terminology**

NMC uses different terms for this sacrament (in the title, §§78 and 81 and box, “Eucharist”; § 79 and box, “Lord’s Supper”; §81, “Mass”; §81 and box, “Holy Communion”). The basis for this is the different names by which this sacrament is called in the different churches. Especially in German-speaking churches, these distinctions are very strong and reflect the understanding and theology of this sacrament in each church.

Since there is no ecumenical agreement among the churches on this point, it makes sense to work with these different terms. However, in order not to add to the lack of clarity, this point should be mentioned as a principle in the text and sensible limits set on the quantity of terms used.

As the ecumenical dialogue progresses on the theological understanding of this sacrament, it would be interesting to raise the question of whether the different churches could not agree on one term to be used in common, which would cover the meaning unambiguously and in its ecumenical perspective.<sup>23</sup>

#### **5.2.3.2 Character**

In the box, as remaining “significant differences” regarding the understanding and practice of this sacrament, “receiv(ing) the body and blood of Christ” and “a service of thanksgiving” are placed in opposition to one another. Without question we have here two strongly opposed theologies, in reference to which there is no ecumenical agreement.

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<sup>22</sup> *Leuenberg Agreement*, <http://www.leuenberg.net/2730-0-16>

<sup>23</sup> In German, this would likely be the confessionally neutral term “Lord’s Supper” (*Herrenmahl*), since for us “Eucharist” evokes Catholic associations. The Lima Document, on the other hand, consciously chose the term “Eucharist” as an ecumenical concept.

Unfortunately there is no mention of the fact that these are two examples of sacramental theologies, out of the bandwidth of the various predominating understandings of this sacrament, but which are not comprehensive and do not necessarily indicate the decisive alternatives in the ecumenical conversation. We are thinking especially of Reformed traditions in which the emphasis is on understanding the Lord's Supper as a community meal, a commemoration, and seeing participation in it as an affirmation of faith.

### 5.2.3.3 Exclusion from participation

The consequences of exclusion from participation in this sacrament have not been made a topic of discussion in either the text or the box. Such a discussion would, however, have significance within this document, since in many cases exclusion from this sacrament has not inconsiderable ecclesiological effects for those affected.

## 5.2.4 D.– F. Ministry of All the Faithful, Ministry of the Ordained, and Oversight

### 5.2.4.1 Foundation of, and Subject in, the act of Ordination

The formulation in NMC §86 which says that Jesus' sending forth the disciples "laid foundations for the ongoing proclamation of the Kingdom" is open to misunderstanding. From the Protestant viewpoint, there can only be a consensus here if references are made to the proclamation of the Gospel as having a constitutive function for the Church and to its objective beginning with the proclamation by the disciples. (Cf. Lima II.A.9: "The Church has never been without persons holding specific authority and responsibility. Jesus chose and sent the disciples to be witnesses of the Kingdom (Matthew 10:1-8).")

It appears unclear who is the subject in the act of ordination:

- NMC §86: "Faithful to his [Jesus'] example, from the earliest times there were those chosen by the community under the guidance of the Spirit, and given specific authority and responsibility."
- NMC §89: "This is focussed in the act of ordination when the Church as a whole, through its ordained ministers, takes part in the act of ordaining those chosen for the ministry of Word and Sacrament."
- NMC §90: "The Church, as the body of Christ and the eschatological people of God, is built up by the Holy Spirit through a diversity of gifts or ministries."
- NMC §108: "In ordination, both the action of [the] ordaining minister and the assent of the faithful are necessary elements."

From our Protestant view it must be emphasised that the Church as a whole, as *creatura verbi* and *creatura spiritus*, is entrusted by the Holy Spirit with the task of proclaiming the Gospel. That it does so in institutionalised ways, by creating ministries, has come about through historical necessity. The concrete development of ministries as well as the choice of those who are to serve<sup>24</sup> is a human act in obedience to the divine call to mission. The community of the faithful entrusts a responsible minister with certain aspects of the mission shared by all. A special role for bishops or other officials in an ordination is at most needed if these persons represent the

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<sup>24</sup> NMC [in the German version] speaks almost exclusively of those who serve in ordained ministries with masculine [grammatical] forms; this can only be accepted because there is no consensus on the (possible) role of women in such ministries. In our Protestant view, it is not acceptable to differentiate on the basis of gender when assessing the qualifications or vocation of individuals for the ministry of the clergy. Unlike NMC, in the present text we have consciously used inclusive language.

community of the faithful, which is the actual “subject” in the act of ordination. The formulation from NMC §108 (quoted above) is therefore, at least, misleading.

#### **5.2.4.2 The understanding of “succession” and its significance**

“The ministry of the ordained is to serve in a specific way the apostolic continuity of the Church as a whole. In this context, succession in ministry is a means of serving the apostolic continuity of the Church” (NMC §89). Questions arise here which are not adequately identified in the brief formulation in the box on “Ordained Ministry” under (f).

This formulation would appear to be meaningful only if understood in the sense of a historical succession (as in the box on “Episkopé, Bishops and Apostolic Succession”, following §93). To that we would say from our Protestant viewpoint that it cannot in any case be a necessary means of apostolicity. Moreover, we are sceptical as to whether such an “outward” succession is an appropriate *means* of apostolic continuity at all, and should not instead be seen, more modestly, as a *sign* of apostolic continuity.

The passage quoted above does not seem to us to be reconcilable with the Protestant understanding of succession, which is not oriented to historical connections through ministers of the Church, but rather to material agreement with the message of the apostles. Succession in ministry then, is not a “means of serving the apostolic continuity of the Church”. Instead, succession is based on an “apostolic” carrying out of ministry, in a way appropriate to the mission entrusted to the ordained minister.

In our opinion, the dissent formulated in the box on “Episkopé, Bishops and Apostolic Succession” applies not only to the office of bishop, but to the ordained ministry itself. The churches remain divided on the issue of whether succession in ministry – in the sense of ordination by bishops “ordained in apostolic succession back to the earliest generations of the Church”<sup>25</sup> – is “a necessary component of ecclesial order as intended by Christ for his community, or is merely one form of church structure which, because it is so traditional, is particularly advantageous for today’s community but is not essential”. Other communities see no special reason for privileging such a form of succession, “or even believe it is better avoided, for they see it as prone to abuse.”

#### **5.2.5 G. Primacy**

Section III.G., “Conciliarity and Primacy”, does not seem to us to formulate a real consensus on the possible role of primacy in the church; instead, it seems to cover over the differences which exist. This is true, for example, for the question of how primacy could contribute to “promoting, discerning and articulating consensus” (NMC §101). In §102, primacy is connected with the office of oversight, but NMC does not discuss the question of how a common ministry of oversight is even conceivable without community under one confession.

That “a universal primacy can be seen as a gift rather than a threat to other churches and the distinctive features of their witness” (NMC §103), formulates a possible position within the worldwide church, but in no way a consensus. NMC §§103-104 seem to us to be based on concepts of primacy which have not been clarified at all, and make no attempt to clarify the conditions for the creation of such an office, such these two paragraphs in their entirety are unacceptable to us.

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<sup>25</sup> Here it is pointed out that the English original has “Church”, while the German translation has “churches”.

In the box on “Conciliarity and Universal Primacy” we are told: “There has been significant ecumenical discussion of New Testament evidence about a ministry serving the wider unity of the Church, such as that of Peter or Paul.” Unless one assumes the maximum breadth of understanding of “ministry” – which would not be reconcilable with the rest of the text – what we conclude here is that such a ministry on the part of Peter would be difficult to prove, using the relevant sources; in the case of Paul it could not be proven at all.

### **5.2.6 H. Authority**

NMC §107 says: “All authority in the Church comes from God and is marked by God’s holiness. This authority is effective when holiness shines from the lives of Christians and the ordered Christian community, faithful to the divine teachings. All the sources of authority recognised in varying degrees by the churches such as Scripture, tradition, worship, synods, also reflect the holiness of the Triune God.”<sup>26</sup>

Here it must be emphasised that (once again) the text must be speaking of a “Church” that is distinct from the community of believing persons. In the “real” Church, authority can only be invoked for that which is in agreement with the Church’s mission. Ministries in the church, as well as all sources of authority which churches recognise in varying degrees, such as the Holy Scriptures, tradition, worship, synods, are worthy authorities through their relationship to this divine mission. In human hands they are all subject to abuse and perversion, and thus lose their claim to have authority.

In view of our specifically German experience – but not only in that context – it must be emphasised that a church which has to contemplate abuses of power, in its history and in the present, must be on its guard against the sentence, with its potential for misunderstanding: “All authority in the Church comes from God and is marked by God’s holiness.”

## **6 Concluding remarks**

In working with this text we have noticed that statements about the ministry of the Church are given by far the most space in NMC. Part III is the most thorough, in both breadth and depth. The main problems seem to appear when we grapple with the statements on ministry in the Church, which means that this is the part most in need of further ecumenical and ecclesiological work.

An indicator of the relevance and urgency of this topic could possibly be that in mid-March 2009 the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox churches published a joint document on the understanding of the Church, with the title – significantly expanded over against NMC – “Nature, Constitution and Mission of the Church”. On one hand, this move to give ecumenical weight also to church order is honest and realistic; on the other, we fear that by concentrating on these issues, the ecumenical movement will be losing itself in a sort of navel-gazing and trying only to clarify internal problems. We therefore plead for these issues to be dealt with in the context of the Church’s being sent into the world and for the world, thus keeping the final aspect in view which is the aim of the Church and its ministries. Thus we now turn, in our concluding remarks, to Part IV., before we come to our overall summing-up.

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<sup>26</sup> The authors propose a different translation into German of the second sentence in this passage.



## 6.1 *In and For the World*

Part IV., in comparison to Part III., is extremely brief; it appears to be a sort of postscript, without its own character of taking the discussion further. This is reflected also in the main titles: Part III is entitled “The Life of Communion in and for the World”, while Part IV simply has as its title the second part of Part III’s title, “In and For the World”.

Part IV gives us the reason for the Church’s existence, reflecting the context of its sending forth into the world and for the world. In §109 an analogy is made between God’s love for all humanity and the church’s ministry to humankind; from this the *diakonia* is derived, which “belongs to the very being of the Church”. NMC notes that the Church exists not on its own, but through God and “not for its own sake, but as an instrument in God’s hands” (§109) for humankind. Therefore evangelisation is an important task for the church in its pilgrimage on earth. We welcome what NMC says about evangelisation, since it also includes respect for the values of other religions (§110) and the commitment of the churches to the transformation of the world (§111).

Then §112 takes us clearly into the problems of our time (Aids, famines, wars, injustice, racism etc.); it calls on Christians to be constantly watchful to discern the signs of the times and, by the ethics of neighbourly love, to defend human dignity. This can take place through the churches’ witness in the realms of politics and economics, but also, to maintain authenticity and credibility, by taking a common stand (§116). However, ethics and morality also demand that the churches “be accountable *to each other* with respect to their ethical reflections and decisions” (§117). Here the churches have the possibility, for example, to practise *episkopé* interconfessionally and collegially (as seen in NMC §§97-98) in and for the world.

We consider it highly important always to question one’s own position and find new arguments for it, to avoid the possibility of the fronts becoming hardened, allowing them instead to break open and the dialogue to be kept alive. In view of a globalized world, what seems indispensable to us is not the plurality of ways of acting responsibly as Christians, but rather the building up of a common Christian position, as we mentioned above under 4. *Remarks on the content of NMC* regarding the conciliar process on justice, peace and the preservation of creation (4.4). The progress made, for instance, in medicine and biology demonstrate and demand a common position on current issues like gene technology and genetic manipulation, to strengthen the voice and credibility of the Christian viewpoint. This shared positioning has special significance vis-à-vis politics and the economy.

A positive example at the European level is the *Charta Oecumenica*, already mentioned above. Chapter III of the *Charta*, “Our Common Responsibility in Europe”, speaks of the shared responsibility toward Europe and the world: “Participating in the building of Europe”, “Reconciling peoples and cultures” and “Safeguarding the creation” are the chief themes of the agreement that has been reached. With a joint “We commit ourselves...”, the way appears open for fruitful ecumenical labours.

The intent for which Jesus was sent is named, referring to John 3:17, as *saving* the world rather than *condemning* the world (§118). In our opinion, this applies in the ecumenical dialogue just as in the responsibility of the Church toward the world.

In concluding our remarks on Part IV., we would like to come back once again to the Lima Document. While NMC is intensively concerned with *koinonia*, *martyria* and *diakonia*, we feel the lack of an adequate discussion of the *leitourgia* aspect. We welcome the development of a common liturgy out of the Lima Document as a practical continuation of BEM, as well as a sign

of progress and a milestone in confessional rapprochement, even though the Lima liturgy is not part of the official practice of the individual churches.

## 6.2 *Summing-up*

NMC seeks to describe the point reached by the ecumenical dialogue so far, and to stimulate further goal-oriented conversations. In its Conclusion, it first looks back at past declarations which were aimed at making progress at the level of mutual recognition, but which also have resulted in retrenchment (§§119-121). This is followed by a look forward to the ecumenical efforts of the future, the goal of which will be realised, according to the Canberra Statement, “when all the churches are able to recognise in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness” (§122). NMC adds that this recognition must also be expressed “in a reconciled common life” (§122). NMC thus attempts “to express what the churches might now claim together about the nature and mission of the Church; and, within that perspective, to state the remaining areas of difficulty and disagreement” (§123), intending to lead to a common convergence statement on the nature and mission of the Church with which all churches could agree.

To what extent does NMC do justice to this goal and this claim?

At the formal level, the ongoing text presents perspectives that refer back to the results of previous bilateral and multilateral conversations. The boxes, however, give expression to the differences both within and between the churches. Many might say this makes the text seem more honest and precise. It is not only the points of agreement that appear, but indeed also, through the distinction between text and boxes, the matters which divide. For example, in regard to the ordained ministry, the problems to be discussed outweigh by far the points of convergence, which look small and pale by comparison. We experience this “lifting up” of the problems by the boxes as causing a rupture between the text and the continuing problems. We find that, in contrast, the format of the Lima Document with its inserts, designated “Commentary”, is far more constructive. The problems are kept connected to that which has been attained up to that point, and the character of the ecumenical dialogue as a process is not broken off, even in the document itself.

The formal character of NMC also makes it seem more distant at the level of content. We appreciate its precise and honest language, especially in focussing on problems; however, this also renders it cool and remote at times. For the most part it remains uniform in presenting that which has already been attained, and is clear in defining problems still to be resolved. However, for us this results, again, in bringing out the broken or piecemeal character of NMC, because often the reasons for a position presented are inadequate or entirely lacking. In the Lima Document the dimension of grounding of positions is much stronger, so that in the case of one’s own position, one feels not only acknowledged, but also understood.

We therefore welcome the text *Called to be the One Church* (Porto Alegre, 2006), which speaks directly to the churches and addresses concretely the points on which more work needs to be done. In its brevity, it states the essentials in a nutshell: the close ties among all the churches and the unity which already exists among them and should be expressed. It points out what has been attained, and formulates the tasks that lie ahead through concrete questions to the churches. They are, after all, the ones who must pursue the path and carry the responsibility.

A convergence statement on the nature and mission of the church to which all churches could agree should, in our estimation, be less complex and theoretical, but rather simpler and clearer,

more personal, as is *Called to be the One Church*. The WCC, in its role of facilitator of communication between churches, depends upon their cooperation.

### 6.3 Commentary on the commentary

In this final section we should like to take a look at our own commentary. As mentioned at the beginning, we have worked extensively, especially on Part III, in separate groups according to confession, so that there are really two commentaries here. It is worthwhile looking at the two together here, in a separate section.

The first thing we notice is two wholly different approaches. The Protestant and Catholic commentators were in agreement that NMC chose to use an open language that lends itself to different readings, for example from an Anglican, Orthodox, Catholic, Reformed or Lutheran perspective. This we see as the basis for our differing approaches.

The language used in NMC was to a large extent familiar to the Catholic side, since it reminded them strongly of the Vatican II documents, especially *Lumen Gentium*. This familiarity allowed the Catholic group to connect positively with NMC and to argue closely with the text. The Catholic group sees the openness of NMC as a strength, since in their view it may allow the text to be received. So, based on its Catholic interpretation, the group finds itself in the end able to ask whether NMC has fulfilled its potential.

The Protestant group in some cases could not identify with the content of statements in NMC. It was also more difficult for them to work with the text, because they did not find, in these open formulations, an unambiguous consensus. This is why the Protestant commentary concentrated on the problematic formulations which must first of all be clarified before a consensus can be formulated.

In conclusion, the question arises for all of us whether these differing views of NMC are connected with the differing understandings of unity of our confessions. For the Protestant side it is easier, because of its concept of unity, to formulate a dissenting response. The reason there is a problem here is that the dissent that remains is accorded a different status within the Protestant and Catholic understandings of the Church. So our work together has demonstrated that even the reception of a (multilateral ecumenical) text is strongly dependent on the positions of different churches on the fundamental ecumenical questions.

## 7 The Commentators

### 7.1 *The Protestants*

Julia Früh, passed church examination in Protestant theology, pastoral assistant under care of the regional Evangelical Church in Württemberg

Björn Görder, Diploma in Theology, doctoral candidate

Eveline Günther, 10th semester student of Protestant theology, passed church examination

### 7.2 *The Catholics*

Brigitta Brenner, 6th semester student of mathematics and Catholic theology, passed state examination

Jens Brückner, 4th semester student for diploma in Catholic theology

Mirjam Decker, 8th semester student of German literature and Catholic theology, passed state examination

Florian Gebele, 8th semester student of Catholic theology, passed main theological examination

Ramona Kordes, M.A in Catholic Theology and Religious Studies, 1st semester student for diploma in Catholic theology,

Dr. Annemarie Mayer, Adjunct Lecturer in Dogmatics and Ecumenical Theology

Steffen Vogt, 4th semester student in Catholic theology, passed main theological examination

Horst Walter, 8th semester student in Catholic theology, passed main theological examination

Zita Waschhausz, 6th semester student for diploma in Catholic theology; 4th semester student for master's degree in political science

Jan Eike Welchering, 4th semester student in Catholic theology, passed main theological examination