

Response Sent: June 24, 2008

The Nature and Mission of the Church (Faith and Order Commission, WCC)
A Response by Members of the Boston Theological Institute
May 2008

The Faith and Order publication in Porto Alegre, Brazil, of *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (NMC) in February 2006 is a reason for thanksgiving among professional ecumenists and theologians. The text witnesses to the fact that during the 20th century many of the Christian churches have learned to listen to one another, to compare doctrinal beliefs, to explore their historical and present-day disputes while searching for ways to enter into deeper visible communion.

At the Boston Theological Institute, a consortium of nine theological schools established in 1967, an ecumenical group of theologians (listed below) from different institutions took up the invitation to respond collectively to the NMC text. Over a period of two academic years we met at regular intervals to discuss the text and to prepare a brief response indicating our judgment about the text's understanding of the church. The 2006 revision is a notable improvement over the earlier 1998 version entitled *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (NPC).

We noted that the NMC text builds on the strengths of the earlier Faith and Order Lima document, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (1982), which emerged as one of the foremost common ecclesiological statements of the last century. The Faith and Order Commission, we observed, has found a way of creating open dialogue and, to a notable extent, a method for promoting consensus. Both the Lima and the Porto Alegre texts combine two genres of affirmations: quasi-unanimously agreed convictions vs. ongoing controverted points. This allows for open and creative exchange to take place even before there is total agreement on some doctrinal issues. Part of the present-day challenge is now to determine which differences are strictly church-dividing issues and which are simply alternate emphases that can be permitted within an overarching united community of belief. The text reflects a desire to welcome legitimate diversity within the global community and is generally sensitive to the importance of inclusive language.

Our discussion focused in part on the question about the audience for whom it is written. It appears to be addressed principally to church leaders as well as to professional ecumenists and theologians. This specialized audience thereby tends to restrict its accessibility to the church membership at large. This characteristic of most official bilateral and multilateral ecumenical consultations is perhaps inevitable, but it may explain why this kind of statement often has little impact on the church's wider membership. The need for religious educators to instruct the faithful on these issues is crucial. Without this instruction, the wider Christian community may continue to experience the problem of "non-reception" of consensus statements. It would be well to stress the church's need to educate young Christians in the basics of belief through Bible study and religious instruction.

Our discussion group reacted favorably to the first section of the NMC (nos. 1-47) entitled "The Church of the Triune God." The use of New Testament texts is a notable improvement over the NPC draft. The emphasis here, which is similar to the teaching of the church document of Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, and the recent agreement of the Anglican Communion and the Orthodox Church, the Cyprus Report, *The Church of the Triune God* (2006), places the origin of the

church in its ultimate grounding, the Trinity. It guards therefore against a kind of Donatistic approach which would see the church as *our* creation. Spelled out more explicitly the text describes the church as Gift of the Father (“called into being by the Father”), creation of the Word (the Logos, the Son), and creation of the Holy Spirit. We found helpful the short definition: “The Church is the communion of those who, by means of their encounter with the Word, stand in a living relationship with God, who speaks to them and calls forth their trustful response; it is the communion of the faithful” (no. 10). This definition then expands into a lengthy reflection on the biblical data regarding the church, with special reference to the church as People of God, as the Body of Christ, as Temple of the Holy Spirit, and as Koinonia/Communion. Since the definition mentions the need for our “trustful response” to these divine initiatives, the description of the church’s nature (nos. 9-33) is then complimented with a section on “The Mission of the Church” (nos. 34-42), to which is then added a short section describing the “Church as Sign and Instrument of God’s Intention and Plan for the World” (nos. 43-47). One might have affirmed in this section that the various churches in the light of their reality are called upon to practice mutual hospitality at various levels.

One aspect that was judged to be insufficiently addressed in this section was the role that public worship or liturgy play in embodying the nature and mission of the church. Clearly the communal response of adoration and thanksgiving play an essential role in understanding the church and its responsibilities. Since the liturgy is a matrix for the church’s life, some fuller discussion of it is called for.

The second section of the NMC document is devoted to “The Church in History” (nos. 48-67). This shorter but rich segment touches on the notion of the church as pilgrim “*in via*” (nos. 48-56). It notes that “the Church is an eschatological reality, already anticipating the Kingdom. However, the Church on earth is not yet the full visible realisation of the Kingdom” (no. 48). We judged that this rather terse assertion (with which we agree) needs to be more fully explained. For example, a relativizing attempt to “locate” the church in its essences, in distinction from its “temporal” definition has been caught up over the past two centuries in various visions of the church with apocalyptic significance. Despite the significant influence that this has had in popular culture and upon contemporary ecclesiology, little or no reference was made in the text to this dynamic theological and historical interplay. The text does touch upon by the distinction between the kingdom of God and the church, and the fact that the kingdom is already in our midst but not yet fully realized (nos. 57-59). This second section is then concluded with brief descriptions of “Communion and Diversity” in the church (nos. 60-63), and the notion of “The Church as Communion of Local Churches” (nos. 64-66). Without going into detail about the well-known public debate between Ratzinger and Kasper regarding which is prior, the church universal or the local churches, the text does appropriately place greater stress on the fullness of the local church, that is, the fact that the local church does not lack anything that must be added to it from the “universal” church.

The third major division discusses “The Life of Communion in and for the World” (nos. 68-108). In some ways this section reaffirms the work of Faith and Order in his project on the Apostolic Creed (nos. 68-73), as well as various themes of the BEM report (nos. 74-89). It was felt useful that this section addresses the notion of “oversight” (*episkopé*) in the church, and the various ways that over the centuries that ministry has been exercised in a personal, communal, collegial manner (nos. 90-98). Within that context the previously heated discussions of “conciliarity and primacy” were then raised as a church-dividing issue (nos. 99-104, especially nos. 102-104 for raising the possible role of a personal primacy). The section closes with a brief reflection on the ecclesial understanding of “authority” (nos. 105-108). What is not included is a demand for accountability on the part of those who bear special pastoral responsibilities of oversight in the church.

The fourth and final chapter “In and For the World” (nos. 109-118) followed by a “conclusion” (nos. 119-123) explains the church’s role *ad extra*, its missionary and testimonial responsibility for the non-evangelized world. This is the only section which enters into some of the ethical roles that the church needs to engage in within the secular city. The section is rather short and terse, thereby creating the impression that social action is a rather minor role for the church. Our group felt that there was need of further strengthening the affirmation of the ethical obligations of the church. In our view, more discussion of the interplay between church and civil government, not to dim the separation between church and state, but to show how the church is appropriately a teaching voice in the public domain in facing ethical challenges relating to such issues such as: warfare, poverty, medical care, discrimination, the beginning and end of life, etc. The ethical thrust of the document reflects certain deficiencies.

Despite the incompleteness of these several areas, we judged *The Nature and Mission of the Church* to be a gift to the Church and an invitation for responsible response.

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