

The NATURE and MISSION of the CHURCH.
A Stage on the way to a common Statement.

Nairobi Study Group.

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REACTION TO “THE NATURE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH”

It is a good statement, theologically balanced on the state of the ecumenical question today. It appreciates what has been achieved and states what remains and the complications involved.

There is no doubt that significant advancement has been made by the ecumenical movement over the years. Much has been achieved at theological level and the documentation available as a result of the various conferences, Church Council and other meetings are evidence to that fact. Yet there are important questions that remain and areas that still require attention. We are still a long way from the implementation of the resolutions of the Second Vatican Council with its decree on Ecumenism.

- Visible Unity can be understood in various ways so our discussion and efforts towards unity risk to bear little fruit if we do not agree on what we are looking for. Most Christians would agree with unity as *koinonia* understood in the sense presented in the 7th Assembly of the WCC, #2.1 (Canberra, 1991) as “*koinonia* given and expressed in the common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one Eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognized and reconciled; and a common mission witnessing to the gospel of God’s grace to all people to all people and serving the whole of creation. The goal of the search for full communion is realized when all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness.”

Others however still hold onto the unity in the “rainbow” model where the different churches keep their respective shades but are united in some way by what they hold in common. Such model minimizes the differences and goes as far as considering separation as desired by God and thus settle down to what the 7th Assembly at Canberra called “satisfied to co-exist in division”. There is still confusion between “diversity and division” that still requires to be clarified.

* The same need for clarity and common agreement can be extended to areas of terminology and theological language. For example the document gives the various models of the church derived from the scriptures which it rightfully presents as complimentary. We know that in practice churches tend to emphasise one or two models and not the others so when we talk about church, we do not actually understand the same thing, at times even among people belonging to the same church. The need for clarification and explaining to the Christians what we mean by church is important to the ecumenical movement and should be emphasised in the document.

- Emphasis has been put on appreciating what we have in common and celebrating it in our ecumenical encounters. This has also included common initiatives and projects at the service of the common good, charity and justice and peace. That effort has helped greatly to bring the different churches together and it must be acknowledged as a positive fruit of the ecumenical movement. The danger at the moment is to cover up the differences and on certain occasions pretend that they do not exist. More effort is required in dealing with our differences, suspicions and superiority complex. Compromises do not solve matters and the issues that divide the churches must be addressed with all the complexity and

sensitivity that the exercise may involve. It is at this level that I would understand “Ecumenism of truth” to which the document on the nature and mission of the Church is surely a good preparation.

- Much has been done at theological level or among Church leaders but one questions must be asked: has enough effort been put into the ecumenical endeavour at pastoral level? My limited experience made at least in three African countries shows that ecumenism is often remembered during the week of prayer of Christian Unity and occasionally for the common stand on certain socio-political issues. There are a few small groups that are committed to this cause but they have remained isolated and often lack the support of their respective churches. I would like to ask: what pastoral steps have been put in place or included in the pastoral planning of the church in order to promote ecumenism at the grassroots? Vatican council II stated several years ago that “There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart.” #7. The council saw the search for unity as a concern for all (#5) and also the council “commends this work to the bishops everywhere in the world to be vigorously stimulated by them and guided with prudence.”#4. I would suggest that some testimony of what is actually being done in the different parts of the world should be added to the document on the nature and mission of the Church to help the other churches and to show the possibilities of what could be done.
- Most African Christians and I would believe the same elsewhere, belong to a particular church just because they were born and baptised in it. Very few would actually express the reasons for belonging to one church and not to another. Faithfulness to the church of the parents or grandparents and sometimes of the tribe or ethnic group seems to carry a certain importance. This explains in part the frustration of many parents when their children and grand children join the current Pentecostal/ evangelical churches. Other than the sentimental arguments common among the ordinary Christians, there is still need to explain our differences and theological goals in the language of the ordinary person. This would also offer the opportunity to know the other churches. One of the reasons for fearing to participate in the ecumenical dialogue is the insecurity resulting from uncertainty of what we believe as a church. Vatican Council II already recommended the importance of study and competent experts (#4 and #9), but also that “the Catholic faith must be explained more profoundly and precisely, in such a way and in such terms as our separated brethren can also really understand.” (#11). It would be important that this statement on the nature and mission of the Church be translated in simpler language and in local languages to enable the particular churches benefit more from it.
- The question of proselytism where some churches attempt to convert members of other churches to their communion and at times using aggressive means is not clearly addressed but it is important since it affects the relationship between the churches.