

The Nature and Mission of the Church (WCC)
Response: Robert Allan Hill
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It is a privilege to participate in the Boston conversations about ecclesiology. One experiences the readings, meetings, friendships and discussions as a space where 'the work is play for mortal stakes'. My own initial, full reading of the document provoked the following brief comments. I also here note my ongoing gratitude to George Todd for introducing me to the WCC in 1978, through work in the Office of Urban Industrial Mission

1. Koinonia is a choice choice for focus in ecclesiology. Absent in this document is translation, like that in Phil 1:3 RSV, of the word as 'partnership'. I prefer that rendering, given the troubles in with some others (sharing, etc...). Also, to note as an aside, the personalists and others distinguished between koinonia (the communion of the real spiritual church) and ecclesia (the necessary, historical and historic, earthly, organized church).
2. A Wilder identified some 90 images of the church in the New Testament. The four chosen here are fine, but I wonder what argument was used to select them out of the many others? Are they thought to include, or subsume the others?
3. The section on the mission of the church uses no 'new creational' language (Gal. 2, 3, 6, other). As someone who sings 'finish then thy new creation' with regularity if not with fine musicality, I wonder about this.
4. The box on church as sacrament is of lesser interest to me than many of the others.
5. I caution against shadowy negative use of the term 'membership'(p13). Mere membership is not a negative, but a start. Likewise, taking nothing away from oneness, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity, a fuller emphasis on expansion and embrace of the 'other' would appeal to me, in discussion of the nature of the church. Church without fierce welcome is less than church.
6. A box on the church and sin, for the northern USA, is of less timeliness than a box on the church and death. That is, sometimes our discussions in comfortable rooms at twilight neglect or deny the actual, current dormancy to death of the churches that formed the WCC 60 years ago, among them my own Methodist Church. My home conference in upstate New York had a membership of 150,000 in the year of my ordination; today the number is 70,000.
7. A minor quibble: the citation of 2 Cor 5:17 (p15) does not really (to my mind) support what it means to support (a 'natural' bond between 'human beings and humanity and creation'). It is new creation not creation which by this text and others brings such bonds. (Maybe I misread this).
8. I love this sentence: 'authentic diversity in the life of communion must not be stifled: authentic unity must not be surrendered'(15). Good!
9. Do we have in mind actual denominations inside the three ecclesiologies? If so, may they be brought out?
10. In IIIA70, I miss reference to 'education' or 'discipleship' in the list of 'the living traditions of the church'.
11. Another minor quibble: does anyone ever ask anymore about occasional use of inclusive language (eg IIIB75), or is that a past interest? Likewise, I wondered at IIIC79, the discussion of eucharist, about the absence of reference to 'thanksgiving' and 'presence'.

12. The section on the ministry of the faithful felt light to me. And regarding the ministry of the ordained, I puzzled a bit, at the box. Have we decided not to ask about the necessary concomitance of the gifts of ministry and celibacy, on the one hand, and the gifts of ministry and heterosexuality, on the other? Perhaps these have already been addressed, or placed in other contexts.
13. One discussion we might have is whether the 'ministry of universal primacy' is truly a gift to the ministry of primacy itself, or in what ways it is a gift?
14. Toward the very end of the document there appears a mention (p30 #115) of 'adherents of other religions', which I am glad to see, though its lateness and brevity are also of interest to me.
15. In general, I find the document clear, helpful and purposive, and am grateful for those who have labored hard to prepare it. It is an honor to consider it, in the company of such a varied and bright group. I think we also will need to keep clearly in mind the physical deterioration, during the years of ecumenical activity, of some of the church, and some of the churches who supported the earlier ecumenical 'surge'. Now Christianity is more southern hemisphere than northern, and more southern state than northern. It causes me to qualify my own set of interests, in a different way.