

**In Appreciation of *The Nature and Mission of the Church*:
A Response from a United Methodist**

Kenneth Loyer
October 24, 2006

The Nature and Mission of the Church, Faith and Order Paper Number 198 (2006), seeks to address two crucial questions, as the title suggests: (1) What is the church? (the question of its nature) and (2) What is the church for? (the question of its mission). Building on earlier ecumenical work, especially *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (1998), this Faith and Order document is a major text which has the potential to contribute in some way, by God's grace, to the fulfillment of Christ's prayer that all Christians may be one, as he and the Father are one, so that the world may believe (John 17:21). There is a definite need for an ecclesiology which will serve the purpose of Christian unity, and a study such as this one might go a long way in addressing that need.

While the matter of reception will of course be very important, for many this is a much-anticipated document to which great expectations have already been attached. In fact a World Council of Churches press release dated July 31, 2004—some seventeen months before the publication of the text—quoted Bishop John Hind, from the Church of England, as saying that the document bears the hope of becoming, “ultimately, and however long it takes,” a “convergence text on the church analogous to the [...] text on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” (which, incidentally, is now in its 37th edition in English with about 500,000 copies in circulation in over 35 languages worldwide).¹ Obviously, whether *The Nature and Mission of the Church* will in fact become the BEM of the 21st century remains to be seen. Yet what is clear is that this text represents a new and substantial ecumenical statement on ecclesiology. As such, it merits careful—and indeed prayer-full—consideration among the churches in this, our tragically divided state. In appreciation then of *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, I issue this response to the text from my own perspective as a United Methodist. My response will focus on four points which stand out as noteworthy to me, and I shall then reflect on a question which emerged in my reading of the text. Now, on to the four points which I particularly appreciate in this text and which will serve as the basis of my response.

The first is the trinitarian language which is quite appropriately used. According to the text, “The Almighty God, who calls the Church into being and unites it to himself through his Word and the Holy Spirit, is the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”² We proceed to find a trinitarian exposition of the Church as “people of God,”³ “Body of Christ,”⁴ and “Temple of the Holy Spirit.”⁵ This exposition leads nicely into a discussion of *koinonia*, which is now incorporated with other biblical images for the Church more fully than in the previous text, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*. This change allows for the intersection between the doctrine of the Trinity and the concept of *koinonia*, as applied to the Church, to be highlighted, in such expressive statements as this one: “Through the death and resurrection of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians enter into fellowship with God and with one another in the life and love of God.”⁶ Elsewhere, in the section on baptism, a trinitarian schema is also employed, and is very fittingly couched in terms of *koinonia* or communion: “As people are baptised they are clothed in Christ (cf. Gal 3:27), they enter into the *koinonia* of Christ's Body (cf. 1 Cor 12:13),

¹ <http://www2.wcc-coe.org/pressreleasesen.nsf/index/pr-04-26.html>. Accessed October 12, 2006.

² *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), §14.

³ *Ibid.*, §§18-19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, §§20-21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, §§22-23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, §29.

they receive the Holy Spirit which is the privilege of God's adopted children (cf. Rom 8:15f), and so they enjoy, in anticipation, that participation in the divine nature which God promises and wills for humankind (cf. 2 Pet 1:4)."⁷ Perhaps the most beautiful example of trinitarian language appears in the section on the Eucharist:

[The Lord's Supper] is a proclamation of the Gospel, a glorification of the Father for everything accomplished in creation, redemption and sanctification (doxologia); a memorial of the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus and what was accomplished once for all on the Cross (anamnesis); an invocation of the Holy Spirit (epiclesis); an intercession; the communion of the faithful and an anticipation and foretaste of the kingdom to come.⁸

Such fully trinitarian accounts of the Christian faith, and of ecclesial practices, deeply resonate with the doctrinal standards of the United Methodist Church, which unambiguously declare that the one God is the Blessed Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁹

A second aspect of the text for which as a United Methodist I am particularly grateful is the emphasis on mission. This emphasis has been strengthened through attention to the responses to the previous ecclesiology document, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*. In title as well as content important changes have been made, and mission now figures more prominently than before. Paragraphs 34-42, for example, contain a rich account of the Church's mission which is, in a phrase, "to serve the purpose of God as a gift given to the world in order that all may believe."¹⁰ There is a striking allusion here to John 17:21, Christ's famous high priestly prayer for the unity of all Christians "so that the world may believe." As our Lord himself makes explicit, Christian unity is for the sake of mission. And yet the visible disunity among Christians, which amounts to a direct denial of Christ's prayer, thwarts the Church's mission and flagrantly compromises its witness in the world.¹¹ The connection between the Church and its mission is quite plainly stated in the text: "Mission...belongs to the very being of the Church."¹² This in itself is a significant statement. Moreover, it is skillfully connected to the subsequent statements on the four attributes of the Church—unity, holiness, apostolicity, and catholicity—all of which (as it is noted) "relate both to the nature of God's own being and to the practical demands of authentic mission."¹³ Thus we find here a clear affirmation that the mission of the Church is central to its identity.

On the subject of mission there are strong resonances within the United Methodist heritage (and, certainly, the same applies to other ecclesial traditions, but I myself am speaking, again, as a United Methodist). The Methodist movement began in 18th-century England as a movement of renewal within the Church of England. John and Charles Wesley, along with the other early Methodists (so called for their disciplined and methodical approach to Christian faith and life), were driven by a profound sense of calling to what we might today term mission, that is broadly speaking to preach the Gospel to all persons and indeed to embody it in both its personal

⁷ NMC, §76.

⁸ Ibid., §79.

⁹ The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church, "Article I—Of Faith in the Holy Trinity" in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church—2004* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), p. 59; The Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, "Article I—God" in *ibid.*, p. 66. Since these documents are protected doctrinal standards, it is equally correct to refer to them as The United Methodist Articles of Religion and The United Methodist Confession of Faith.

¹⁰ NMC, §34.

¹¹ Cf. NMC, §57.

¹² Ibid., §35.

¹³ NMC, §35.

and social dimensions. John Wesley described the ultimate aim of Methodism in these oft-quoted words: he believed that God had raised up the people called Methodists “to spread scriptural holiness across the land.”¹⁴ Methodism was born in mission, and from its inception it has, no doubt more faithfully in some times and places than in others, borne the fruit of its mission to the glory of God. According to Albert Outler, the distinguished Methodist scholar of the late 20th century who taught for many years here at SMU, what Methodism has “to contribute to any emergent Christian community is not our apparatus but our mission.”¹⁵ He made this observation in 1964, and four years later he would serve as an architect of the merger between the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church to form The United Methodist Church. In 1996 The United Methodist Church, one of numerous extant churches growing out of the early Methodist movement, adopted the following statement of mission: “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.”¹⁶ It is not entirely clear whether the mission described in this statement is understood to be the mission of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church or the distinct mission of the United Methodist Church.¹⁷ In any case, according to the statement of “Rationale for Our Mission” this mission is to be enacted by “proclaiming the good news of God’s grace and by exemplifying Jesus’ command to love God and neighbor, thus seeking the fulfillment of God’s reign and realm in the world.”¹⁸ Such a vision of the Church’s mission is certainly compatible with the emphasis on mission in the ecumenical text before us, an emphasis which a United Methodist such as myself can earnestly welcome.

A third aspect of the text to which I wish to call attention is its honest identification of the issues which still divide the churches. Here I shall identify two of these issues and go on to provide a brief response to each. One of the boxes is devoted to the thorny question of the Church and sin: can the Church sin, or only its members? “All the churches agree that there is sin, corporate and individual, in the Church’s history (cf. Rev 2:2). Yet they differ as to how this reality should be understood and expressed.”¹⁹ Three positions are sketched: (1) “[f]or some, it is impossible to say ‘the Church sins’ because they see the Church as a gift of God, sharing in God’s holiness”; (2) others state that the Church, as the creature of God’s Word and Spirit, the body of Christ, is holy and without sin, and yet they say at the same time that it does sin—because they define the Church as the communion of its members who, although justified believers, in this world are still sinful human beings; (3) still others believe that although we cannot speak of the sins of the Church, sin in the Church “may become systemic and also affect the institution.”²⁰ Following an acknowledgement of these three different understandings of the Church and sin a statement is then set forth in search of agreement: “The relationship between sin and holiness in the Church is not a relationship of two equal realities, because sin and holiness do not exist on the same level. Rather, holiness denotes the Church’s nature and God’s will for it, while sinfulness is contrary to both (cf. 1 Cor 15:21-26).”²¹ From the perspective of a United Methodist, I can in good conscience agree with this proposition. The Wesleyan emphasis on holiness in God as the goal of human existence—the state for which God has made us—is consistent with the claim that holiness and sin do not exist on the same level, whether in regard to the individual Christian or to the Church.

¹⁴ Jackson, *Works*, VIII, p. 299.

¹⁵ Albert C. Outler, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?” in *The Doctrine of the Church*, edited by Dow Kirkpatrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1964), pp. 11-28 (from p. 28).

¹⁶ *Book of Discipline*, p. 87 (§120).

¹⁷ There has been a discussion between Ted A. Campbell and Scott J. Jones on this question. While Campbell argues that this mission statement denotes the distinct mission of the United Methodist Church, Jones contends that it is meant to signify the mission of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church. It is in keeping with the Faith and Order ecclesiology study to state that in claiming this mission the United Methodist Church is not actually clear about which of these two positions is being affirmed.

¹⁸ *Book of Discipline*, p. 87 (§121).

¹⁹ *NMC*, p. 33.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Another one of the “problem boxes” concerns the propriety of speaking of the Church itself in sacramental terms. Although all churches agree that the Church is a sign and instrument, use of the term “sacrament” in regard to the Church remains an unresolved issue ecumenically. Some churches use the expression “Church as sacrament” “because they understand the Church as an effective sign of what God wishes for the world,” while other churches do not use the concept of sacrament for the Church, for at least two reasons: (1) the need to distinguish between the Church and the sacraments: “the Sacraments are the means of salvation through which Christ sustains the Church, and not actions by which the Church realises or actualizes itself”; and (2) the use of the word “sacrament” for the Church obscures the fact that, in their view, the Church “is a sign and instrument of God’s intention and plan—but it is so as a communion which, while being holy, is still subject to sin.”²² Regarding this issue I wonder if the concept of the means of grace might have something to offer. Though it long preceded the beginning of Methodism, Methodists, for example, have found much use for this concept. Wesley’s sermon of the same title features a developed account of the means of grace, which he describes as the “ordinary channels” through which God mediates grace to human hearts.²³ He cites three chief means: prayer, “searching the Scriptures,” and receiving the Lord’s Supper.²⁴ As Wesley insists, God always remains above the means and free to act as God so chooses. Further, these means possess no power apart from the action of the Holy Spirit. Yet those who wait for the grace of God in the “ordinary channels” do not wait in vain because God will prove faithful to deliver grace through the appointed means.²⁵ Wesley speaks of God dispensing his grace in a variety of ways, most often through ecclesial practices (including corporate worship, communal support, and accountability, along with the primary means identified above). Because the Church plays a vital role in the means of grace which Wesley identifies, God’s grace can be said to come essentially through the Church itself. Thus the Church can itself be spoken of as a means of grace. While much more could be said about the possible usefulness of this concept in a discussion of the Church’s sacramentality, we can see how it would seem to meet the first objection cited above: in the means of grace, as in the sacraments (the question of number aside), the Church does not actualize itself; rather, it is God who acts to make the means efficacious for salvation. Consideration of the Church as a means of grace might also serve to allay the concerns of those for whom calling the Church a sacrament obscures the fact that, in their view, while the Church is holy insofar as it is a sign and instrument of God’s intention and plan, it is nevertheless subject to sin. The concept of the means of grace has been employed in the Roman Catholic-Methodist bilateral dialogue, and it has proven useful in negotiating the question of the Church’s sacramental character.²⁶ Perhaps it could be put to use with similar results in other ecumenical circles.

My fourth set of comments deals with the marks of the Church: unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. I appreciate the keen attention throughout the text to these ecclesial attributes. As is shown in the document, these attributes are essential to understanding both the Church’s nature and its mission. Under the heading of the nature of the Church we read: “Being the creature of God’s own Word and Spirit, the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic.”²⁷ And under the heading of the mission of the Church the explanation is given, as noted above, that these attributes relate so closely with the Church’s mission that its mission is compromised if in the life of the Church any one of them is impaired.²⁸

²² NMC, p. 29.

²³ John Wesley, “The Means of Grace” in *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, edited by Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 160

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 166, 168.

²⁶ E.g., the Seoul report (2006), entitled *The Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church* (Lake Junaluska, NC: The World Methodist Council, 2006).

²⁷ NMC, §12.

²⁸ Ibid., §35.

The repeated references to these four ecclesiological attributes give rise to a certain question: Where can the Church concretely be found? This question, it seems to me, is intimately bound up with the doctrine of the Church: in its fullest sense of the term, an ecclesiology will account for not only what the Church is and what it is for but also where it can presently be found. Or, put slightly differently, in accounting for what the Church is and what it is for we must also account for where it can be found in our current and deeply lamentable state of visible Christian disunity.

Different views on the identity of the Church, that is, on its concrete location, are linked to differences as to its unity, mission, and nature.²⁹ Of course we cannot expect to find an ecclesiology shaped in a time of division to be entirely satisfactory, as was observed in the Methodist-Roman Catholic report of Nairobi (1986). Yet the need of recognizing the Church remains. That same report goes on to say that “our explorations towards a more adequate ecclesiology have begun and are helping us to give proper recognition to each other’s ecclesial or churchly character. They will also assist in overcoming our present state of division.”³⁰ The topic of ecclesiology is revisited in the Seoul report of 2006, with Methodists and Roman Catholics offering a mutual recognition of one another’s ecclesial character. In the words of the report, “It is time now to return to the concrete reality of one another, to look one another in the eye, and with love and esteem to acknowledge what we see to be truly of Christ and of the Gospel, and thereby *of the Church*, in one another.”³¹ The purpose is to call attention to the gifts which the Holy Spirit has endowed Roman Catholics and Methodists, respectively, and which Catholics and Methodists might suitably offer one another in the service of Christ in the world. The matter of reception is obviously a critical one, and no doubt much work remains until the stated goal of “full communion in faith, mission, and sacramental life”³² can be attained, but in acknowledging what they recognize to be truly of the Church in each other the partners in this dialogue have been able to take a step forward.

Of course the task of concretely locating the Church is crucial for multilateral dialogues, no less than for bilateral dialogues. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the ecumenical movement as a whole. According to the leading Methodist ecumenist Geoffrey Wainwright,

Not even an ecumenically formulated ecclesiology may be perfect, yet it remains the task of the ecumenical movement to fashion a faithful doctrine of the church that will best allow for the recognition of the Christian reality wherever it is found, for the reconciliation of those who have been divided, and for the life henceforth in a church that is seeking that perfection of unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity which will mark the completed kingdom of God.³³

Does this text, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, “best allow for the recognition of the Christian reality wherever it is found”? Out of a sincere ecumenical spirit I should hope not, for the text, frankly, does not say much about this issue. Granted, and not insignificantly, it does acknowledge that “The goal of the search for full communion is realised when all the churches are able to recognise in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church in all its fullness.”³⁴ And it alludes to the difficulty of identifying the Church in the box on limits of

²⁹ Geoffrey Wainwright, “Church” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, second edition, eds. Nicholas Lossky et al. (Geneva: World Council of Churches), pp. 176-186 (p. 176).

³⁰ *Towards a Statement on the Church* (Lake Junaluska: The World Methodist Council, 1986), §22.

³¹ *The Grace Given You in Christ*, §97.

³² *Towards a Statement on the Church*, §20; cf. *The Grace Given You in Christ*, §12.

³³ Wainwright, pp. 185-186.

³⁴ *NMC*, §66.

diversity.³⁵ Yet the document also reflects the tension, which seems to me to be ultimately an unhealthy tension, between a commitment to ecclesiological neutrality on the one hand (in this case, that of the World Council of Churches), and the need for a concrete identification and location of the Church on the other. Certainly, we should hope that a more robust account of the Church's identity and location, however difficult the task of formulating such an account may be, can—and will—be offered. Given the importance of the issue one wonders if it could not be more fully treated here so as to enhance the exposition of ecclesiology which is in other ways quite fruitfully articulated in *The Nature and Mission of the Church*.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 37-39. To be fair, I concede that there is more material in this box than in any other by my estimation. It is regrettable, however, that a more constructive statement on the matter could not be offered, for in talking about the nature and mission of the Church it is essential to locate the Church in so far as it is possible even (or, better, especially) in our lamentable, present condition of visible Christian disunity.