

**A Response from the members of the Core Group of the programme for Just and Inclusive Communities of the World Council of Churches**

**to the Nature and Mission of the Church: A Study Document of the Faith and Order Commission**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Commission on Faith and Order,

This open letter brings you Christian greetings from the members of the Core Group of the Just and Inclusive Communities who met in Nagpur, India between the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> of December 2009 under the theme: *Hospitality, Inclusion and Justice: A theological response to old and new forms of discrimination and exclusion*. One of the tasks of this meeting was to respond to the Nature and Mission of the Church Document from the perspective of the five specific constituencies of the Programme for Just and Inclusive Communities – namely people who experience racial and caste discrimination, migrant communities, Indigenous people and people living with disabilities. We would like to underline that we represent people who are a part of the church but experience discrimination and exclusion on account of certain cultures, traditions, world views and anthropological views and practices that have not only received theological legitimization but are also rooted in religious resources and institutions, including churches.

WCC's committed engagement with these networks and movements during the past decades has given visibility, purpose and relevance to its ecumenical vision and vocation. As we continue to struggle for a more just society that affirms and safeguards the dignity of all, we also look forward to a church which embodies within itself those values of love, justice and peace that our Lord preached, for which he died and rose again, and for the realization of which we believe the church was called into being. Therefore, as we respond to this document, we want to underline our vantage points of experience of and struggle against discrimination and exclusion in the church and society.

We were appreciative of the hard work and effort that have gone into in producing a document such as the *Nature and Mission of the Church: A Study Document of the Faith and Order Commission* that takes into account a variety of perspectives, backgrounds and expectations. We certainly agree with you that developing a common understanding on the nature and mission of the Church is the need of the hour. As you continue your work of revisions to this document, we would like to offer the following comments under the categories of methodology, general content of the NMC document, and specific observations.

**Methodology:**

We basically understood the document as a consensus document that attempts to articulate a basic common understanding of the nature and mission of the Church for all the churches. While we recognized the validity of such a document, it was specifically felt that what was ultimately said could be no more than the lowest common denominator. Against this background we make two observations about the methodology.

1. Process: a) Although the church is a theological idea and a religious institution, it is essentially a human and social institution. Therefore the church reflects through its being and doing the complexities and dynamics of human histories, cultures, anthropological presuppositions concepts of power. These complexities and dynamics also include concepts of God and the corresponding symbols and belief systems, etc., of the people who compose the church in each local context. This reality of the empirical nature of the church needs to be acknowledged at the outset in order that what we say of the nature and mission of the church is grounded in a realism and pragmatism that both makes sense to and answers the real-life questions of the world and of God, of the people who compose the church. b) In the document, we find that the Church is treated in a very abstract, ahistorical way. We felt that the central concern of the document seems more of dogma and doctrine rather than people. The effort seemed to be to bring about a unity of doctrine rather than a unity at the level of people. Developing a consensus seemed more important than wrestling with issues of human differences and inequalities that make unity elusive in many cases. c) Though the document speaks about the 'nature' of the church, it does so in terms of doctrine rather than demographics. The significant feature of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century is that the church today is no longer white, north, male and European but is instead black and brown, indigenous, Asian, African, Latin American, South and made up largely of women. Most of these communities share their space with many other religious communities, often competing or threatened by each other, and are composed of people who are politically, socially or economically powerless. These realities of the empirical church, in other words the dynamic character of every visible expression of the church, need to be acknowledged and kept in mind as we reflect on the nature and mission of the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. d) In the recent discourses on unity, ecumenical instruments such as the Faith and Order have moved beyond ecclesiastical identities and confessional theologies with a view to tackle challenges posed by national and ethnic identities to the unity of the church. While we welcome this, we would like to insist on a thorough examination of the role of cultures in shaping attitudes and structures of relationships. The shameful presence and practice of discrimination and marginalization of the people of colour, migrants, Dalits, Indigenous peoples and those others with disabilities, right within many of our church communities in many parts of the world, unfortunately expose the shallowness of our efforts towards unity at the level of church structures and bureaucracies. We also feel that such rootedness in the life of the despised and disenfranchised will not only help the document to be relevant but also help the church to rediscover itself with credibility and purpose. This leads us to our second point – contextuality.
2. Contextuality: We also felt that the NMC document lacked contextuality and in that it ignores the concrete historical reality of the church. This lack of contextuality seemed to designate the church as being static rather than a continually evolving movement that responds to its context. In fact the document seems to speak from the context in which Christianity is a majority religion, which is in itself problematic as this is not the situation in several parts of the two-thirds world and is no longer the situation in the first world. Furthermore, a document about the nature and the mission of the church needs to take shape against the backdrop of the dominant discourse on globalization, the laissez faire

logic that seems to gain wider acceptance in all human institutions, the increasing partnership between hegemonic powers, etc. It is in this context that the Nature and Mission of the Church should stand out in clear opposition to these other 'texts'. By other texts, we mean, these other structures, formations, visions, etc., that prescribe, guide and judge options and patterns of relationships. The cultures of discrimination, derision, exploitation and exclusion that some people are subjected to are not the same as the challenges of poverty, war, HIV Aids, climate change, etc. The former deeply affect relationships, cause, sustain and legitimize human abuse. Therefore, we urge you to take note of and assert the incompatibility of these cultures of discrimination which deny the image of God in others to the affirmation and practice of faith in today's world. We make this point with the conviction that the church whose mission does not resonate with the aspirations of the poor for justice and participation loses its credibility completely.

### **General Observations**

1. The document speaks about the nature and the mission of the church without indicating the purpose of the church. Many other religious communities do not operate within or under large structures and organizations with a book, a head/heads, structures and discipline, like the way church does. If others could remain as vibrant as and even more populous than churches, in which people seem to find adequate space for expression of their religiosity, what makes the church so special? What is its purpose? Or is the church that we belong to, a purely western instrument of religious discipline for social cohesion?
2. We would like to assert that the church is essentially people. Bishops, clergy and male adults do not make the churches. It was felt that the document was gender insensitive as well as being insensitive to the emergent tensions between generations. For example, the document does not recognize the role of the church in legitimizing gender stereotypes nor does it make any reference to the unequal participation of women in the context of the church, especially women in positions of leadership and decision making. Further the document does not recognize the increasing reality that women are the majority members of the church the world over. Likewise the document is silent about both the striking absence of youth in the church as well as the continual marginalization of the youth who are present in our congregations. Similarly the document makes no reference to children at all, indicating that somehow the church is a community of adults alone.
3. The document seems to operate with a traditional understanding of Church rather than responding to the new formations, such as the post-denominational churches, informal fellowships, online churches, cyber churches, etc. The document also does not seem to refer to church as a worshipping community. The aspects of prayer, caring, etc., were missing. Worship is central to the very being of the church and it is in the act of worship that the church not only reminds itself of God's saving act in the world but in doing so it also discovers itself and its purpose to be the sign of the kingdom in the world. Ironically, it is often during worship, churches are found wanting in practicing what they are affirming. Various forms of discrimination and exclusion are allowed to be a part of what goes on in worship.

4. The document does not spell out its understanding of humankind. It is our belief that the church is first and foremost a human institution whose concern for unity cannot preclude issues of human dignity and justice. In fact we would argue that unity should be for the sake of justice and not at the cost of it. In this sense we feel that the document seems to call for a doctrinal unity that transcends real flesh and blood people and their concerns. In this sense the document should contain a section on what it means to be human.
5. The prevailing idea of the church is one in which the church is privileged above the people. The idea seems to be that the Church should reach out to the suffering, this seems to indicate that the church does not have suffering people in its midst. It could be argued that the church is made up of the suffering. This idea comes out in paragraph 40 most clearly where the Church sees itself as reaching out to the victims of history rather than a community of the victims itself.
6. While we were appreciative of the many claims to diversity and plurality of the church, we were also uncomfortable with the language of limiting diversity that was used in the document (Cf. paragraph 62, box after section II C). The questions of whose diversity and whose experience was being considered were asked. It was also felt necessary to connect the language of diversity to power. It was similarly felt that to be diverse was to open up oneself to the other. One cannot hold on to power, privilege, pride and prominence in a relationship of partnership. Likewise we were uncomfortable with the use of the language of heresy. The history of the church has shown that what is heresy and what is normative is not just a matter of perspective but is also a matter of power. It is in this light that it was felt that the church was not so much a space for the discerning of dogma, however true or of the laying down of rules, however perfect but was a creative space for the celebration of God's grace to all humanity, "receiving one another as Christ has received us" (Rom. 15:7)

### **Specific Observations**

1. Paragraph 9 begins with John 3:16 which speaks of God's love for the world. The paragraph then seems to equate this with God's love for the church. This reduction needs to be reconsidered and it may be rearticulated with out any scope for misinterpretation.
2. Paragraphs 18 – 19 speak of the Church as the people of God. Shouldn't this be more nuanced to indicate the difficulties of theologies of selection/election in which the powerful see themselves as the elect, thereby legitimizing their own actions as the will of God? Further nuancing may be needed because are not all the people of the world the people of God? The Church is the people of God as long as they discern and fulfill God's purposes, witnessing through their common life and work the vision of God's grand plan of reconciliation (Eph. 1: 8-10).
3. Paragraphs 20-21 speak of the Church as the body of Christ. It is perhaps necessary to name those factors which cause brokenness of this body. The image of the body does not go very well with the experience of those with disabilities and with the Dalits who are considered outside the body of the primordial man. Paragraphs 55& 63 speak of disunity but considers this mainly from a denominational perspective, while it does indicate other

forms of disunity, the document should not shy away from naming them. The issues of caste, racism as well as discrimination against people living with disability, migrants, and indigenous people should be specifically named.

4. Paragraphs 86-89 speak of the ministry of ordination and while it does acknowledge in a single line the restriction of ordination to the word and sacrament to men only, thereby excluding women it does not recognize that there are also others who are excluded from ordination. People with disabilities in some places are rejected from ordained ministry. Pastors from Dalit communities are not allowed to minister to upper caste congregations. Sadly, some of these churches belong to the World Council of Churches.
5. Paragraph 112 which speaks of justice sees it as what the church does and not what the church is based on or is. Transformative justice is the very reason for the existence of the church, its purpose in the world so to speak.

In conclusion we would like to say, many within the church, such as us, experience discrimination and exclusion. These groups aspire for a church that is just and inclusive, one which makes present the reign of God to come. How does this vision of the church, as the document unveils, resonate with these aspirations? Is not the church called to be the very epitome of a just and inclusive community? Our question is, if the church should reject this calling, does she still remain a church at all?

Yours in Christ,

The members of the Core Group for the Programme for Just and Inclusive Communities  
(List attached)

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