

Study on “Moral Discernment in the Churches” (MDC)

Background

The Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches has long had a mandate to address issues that threaten to divide the church. For the majority of the past fifty years, that mandate has focused largely on theological issues related to ecclesiology, such as baptism, eucharist, and ministry. However, in recent years there has been a growing awareness that Christian communities hold principled disagreements over a number of moral issues related to reproduction, sexuality, human dignity, wealth and poverty, war, and political power that are increasingly threatening the unity of the church. Principled disagreements, by their very nature, reflect deeply divergent theological assumptions and hermeneutics. In the midst of these disagreements, it is important for Christian communities and communities of Christians to be able to engage in meaningful theological discourse and debate that allows for the Holy Spirit to work in our midst as we seek to live faithfully in a changing world.

With these issues in mind, the Standing Commission on Faith & Order designed a study that intends to do three things: 1) claim the common ground Christians share; 2) help churches understand how and why they often come to different conclusions; 3) search together for ways to prevent the principled differences from becoming church dividing.

The study on Moral Discernment in the Churches is a continuation of the previous work of Faith and Order that has focused on issues of morality and ethics. More specifically, this study intends to build on the important insights gleaned in two previous studies, *Ecclesiology and Ethics* and *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology*.

Goal

The purpose of this study is to facilitate a deeper understanding of our common commitments and core values as followers of Christ even as we recognize and address particular moral issues over which different groups of faithful Christians hold principled disagreements. The goal is to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of theological difference and disagreement in order to develop study material and resources that facilitate difficult conversations and theological discussions about moral issues in our world to prevent our differences from becoming church dividing.

Methodology of the study

This study process will engage in three methodological tasks. 1) Case studies provide a *descriptive account of the issue* that offers examples of how particular communities of Christians engage in moral discernment in relation to particular moral issues. 2) **Members of the Plenary Commission will engage in *analysis of the disagreement* that focuses on mapping the underlying nature and root causes of disagreement in ways that help us understand our Christian brothers and sisters with whom we disagree while helping us to build a foundation for continuing theological debates and conversations across lines of difference.** 3) The final study document that will be developed will offer a *constructive response to conflict over moral issues* that offers concrete resources to help communities negotiate principled disagreement over moral issues.

By using case studies and thereby examining how churches, communities, and individual Christians are responding to a particular moral crisis, it is hoped to gain deeper insight into how God is working in the world today and how the ecumenical movement might work more closely together to respond to social crises in our midst and thus move more visibly toward being the church in the world in ecclesial partnerships that bridge denominational and doctrinal divisions.

The Case Studies

Four case studies¹ with the following considerations have been chosen, prepared by four different scholars from different confessional backgrounds:

1. The topic of using stem cells in research offers the opportunity to examine an issue of science and religion. This case study is focusing on current disagreements between Catholics and Protestants in Germany over stem cells.
2. A variety of issues related to sexuality offer potential points of divergence and disagreement in our churches including abortion, polygamy, divorce, and homosexuality. Given the preeminence of the struggle within the Anglican Communion over the issue of homosexuality, this is the topic of our second study.
3. Issues of economics, wealth and poverty are also moral issues and the increasing divide between the wealth of the global North and the global South, tensions are mounting with regards to differing assessments of economic patterns and ideologies in our world. The third case study will focus on how churches from the global North and the global South responded to the issue of neoliberal globalization at the 24th General Council meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Accra, Ghana, in 2004.
4. The political transformation of Eastern Europe over the last twenty years has created a situation that has allowed for increased capacity for foreigners to travel to this area. A variety of Christian churches and organizations have engaged in mission work in Eastern Europe that is causing tensions with the local, traditional church bodies. This case study is examining the issue of evangelism and church plantings in Russia.

Each case study offers in the first place a narrative account of the issue followed by a commentary. This includes 1) an overview of factual information about the historical and cultural circumstances and background of the case; 2) relevant information from medicine, psychology, sociology or any other related discipline that offers tools for helping understand the different perspectives in the case; 3) identification of each group or stakeholder in the conflict and a presentation of their perspective on the issue, this should include an overview of significant theological perspectives that relate to the issue; 4) a historical timeline of key events, actions, or

¹ A word on the case studies

Much attention was given to the selection of which case studies to include in this study. The criteria that the study group of the Standing Commission discussed as they selected the case studies included: questions of authority; different loci of moral discernment; intra-communion and inter-tradition differences; global north/global south; how we use sources (bible, tradition, science); different regions – how do we balance; different combinations of communions; cultural elements; even in disagreement one should not shut the other out; predominantly moral rather doctrinal. The study group classified the four cases studies chosen as inter-tradition (stem cells); intra-communion (homosexuality); global North/global South (neoliberal globalization); and evangelical/established local churches (proselytism). They believe that the four case studies they are proposing allow for the examination of the critically important issues that were identified in a variety of ways.

other relevant activities that relate to the case with brief discussion that highlights the theological assumptions and commitments of how each stakeholder acted and responded. The purpose of the case study is to offer readers information about the case and enough of an overview of the issues at stake so that the readers are able to engage in discussion about the dynamics and engagement of the participants in each case.

The Role of the Plenary Commission

Thus the members of the Plenary Commission have a specific task in making a contribution to the study on Moral Discernment in the Churches. For this purpose the four case studies will be presented and studied in working groups at the Plenary Commission meeting.

Each working group has two sessions, in which they are asked to deal with one of these case studies assigned to them. The group studying the case will work together to analyze the dynamics of the case with the intention of identifying the points of divergence and disagreement and discussing potential strategies and resources for helping the churches continue to stay in dialogue with one another in the midst of their disagreement. The point of the case studies is not to argue the merits of either side, or to “solve” the issue, but rather, to think strategically about how we can engage in meaningful dialogue and debate in the midst of theological diversity and disagreement.

At the end of August, each Plenary Commission member will receive a copy of the case study to which they have been assigned so that they may prepare for meaningful participation in Moral Discernment in the Churches study process.