

## **Background information on the Faith and Order study, “Moral Discernment in the Churches”**

While the Faith and Order study on “Moral Discernment in the Churches” takes up an issue that is not on the classic agenda of Faith and Order, dealing with ethical and moral questions is not new to Faith and Order. These questions have appeared as threats to the unity of the churches during the last 20 to 30 years. Faith and Order took up ethical questions for the first time in the 1990s with a study on “Ecclesiology and Ethics”.

The study which is underway during the meeting of the Plenary Commission on Faith and Order is in its early stages. The goal of the study is to prepare a study paper that will be shared with the churches for their consideration which would help them (1) to understand how and why they often come to different conclusions (2) to claim the common ground we share, and (3) to search together for ways to prevent these principled differences from becoming church dividing.

At the present stage the Commission will study and analyze the different ways, methods and principles which the churches use for making moral decisions. After the Commission meeting a study group will do further work and eventually draft a study paper. The role of the Plenary Commission is, therefore, a crucial one in identifying and clarifying the different ways of making moral statements and discerning ethical positions.

The methodology chosen for this study uses case-studies which is somewhat different from the traditional Faith and Order consensus or convergence methodology. This is due to the nature of the issue and the goal of the study: to understand why Christians often come to different conclusions on moral issues; to claim the common ground we share; to search together for ways to prevent our principled differences from becoming church dividing.

The case-study methodology demonstrates the methods and mechanisms of moral discernment, rather than the study of policy statements of churches or private authors on specific moral issues. This is especially significant when we consider that few churches have published general statements on their ethical or moral principles. The case studies are working tools for the study on “Moral Discernment in the Churches”; they are not Faith and Order statements or position papers on the respective issues.