

## **The Future of the Nature and Mission of the Church: the next Stages on the Way to a Common Statement**

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### **Introduction:**

The Faith and Order study on Ecclesiology—with an initial study-text published as Faith and Order Paper No 181 (1998)—was revised in December 2005. The revision was based on the responses received and after careful discernment by the Standing Commission at its various meetings.

As it now stands, the text seeks to express common convictions about the church, its nature and mission, and to identify the ecclesiological issues which continue to divide the churches today.

The subtitle of the texts, *A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, indicates that it is a provisional text; in other words, it is still a work in progress. The text, it is hoped, will be enriched and become more mature as the Commission takes into consideration the responses received since 2006 from the churches, and others, and the responses that will be received until the end of January 2010.

### **The Process:**

The response process to *The Nature and Mission of the Church* is many faceted. It includes the formal written responses from the churches, ecumenical organizations, councils of churches, missionary organizations, academic institutions, and individuals. It also includes consultations and conferences. It takes into account published work of theologians and academic associations on ecclesiology, such as Ecclesiological Investigations. Faith and Order has placed the highest priority for its work on preparing the next version of the text on the basis of the formal written responses received from 2006 to early 2010 and the responses emerging from this meeting of the Plenary Commission.

### **The Purpose of the Responses: why do we want them?**

The introduction to *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* identified the responses as “essential as Faith and Order continues its work to develop a common agreed statement on the nature and purpose of the Church” (p. 8). The introduction to *The Nature and Mission of the Church* makes the following remark on the responses received to the earlier text:

Faith and Order is grateful to those who responded to this invitation but is conscious that the responses were not fully representative of all the churches. Nevertheless, we hope that the changes occasioned by the suggestions will be evident. One of the frequent suggestions was to strengthen the text’s emphasis on mission. In making this changes both in the title and in content we have tried to ensure that these changes confirm the continuity with the previous work, but also to meet the new concerns. (Page 11)

The comment both illustrates the tone of regret at the lack of response, and signals the purpose of responses: to affirm a direction taken, to suggest avenues of change. The responses are taken seriously by Faith and Order, as is clear in the progression in name from *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* to *The Nature and Mission of the Church*.

The dialogical methodology of Faith and Order reflected in the ecclesiological texts is consistent with that taken with BEM from the 1960s to 1982. The text evolves in dialogue with the churches. But in wrestling with the text, some churches may raise new questions of ecclesiological self-understanding.

The success of Faith and Order's ecclesiological work depends on both the representative quantity of the responses, as well as their quality. Simply put: the better the responses, the better the next text.

The Ecclesiology Working Group has identified three broad options for the future of the text:

- A first response might be simply to submit the 2005 text to the next Central Committee, together with all the responses, and close this particular chapter on the work on ecclesiology.
- A second response might be to revise the current text on the basis of the written responses received from the churches and others, as well as the responses from this Plenary Commission. Such a response might be a *Nature and Mission of the Church II*.
- A third option might be to take into account not only the written responses and the response of the Plenary Commission, but also to take into account what we have learned from the 2006 Assembly Statement "Called to be the One Church". Could a new kind of document emerge, something in between "Called to be the One Church" and *The Nature and Mission of the Church*? Such a text could combine the brevity, precision and tone of the one, with the depth and insights of the other. The form and presentation of such a text might look more like BEM than the current *Nature and Mission of the Church*.

### **Responses from the Churches:**

Like the 1998 *Nature and Purpose of the Church*, the 2005 *Nature and Mission of the Church* was sent out to the member churches for response and reaction.

*The Nature and Purpose of the Church* invited "churches, commissions, colleges, institutes, and individuals to respond to the text: forty such responses were submitted to the Faith and Order Commission." (p. 8) By contrast, *The Nature and Mission of the Church* asked more pointedly for "especially the churches to respond" (p. 12), for in the end, "A Common Statement on the Church" is directed to the churches, and like BEM, derives its ultimate authority by being received by the Churches. So, responses from the churches have a priority for Faith and Order.

By the end of September 2009, nearly fifty responses had been received by Faith and Order; of these, only eighteen were from the churches.<sup>1</sup> We anticipate more responses in the coming

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<sup>1</sup> As of 23 September 2009: the Anglican Church in Aotearoa New Zealand, Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, The Church of the Lord (Aladura), The Church of England, Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, Evangelical Church in Hessen and Nassau, Reformed Church of France (ERF), Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (Roman Catholic Church), United Protestant Church in Belgium, The Uniting Church in Australia, Disciples

months from the churches, but also from councils of churches, institutes, the academy, and individuals. Nevertheless, the low response rate is worthy of some analysis, especially given that many of the churches represented on both the Standing and Plenary commission of Faith and Order have not responded!

### What have we heard so far?

The responses from the churches and others are as varied as the churches themselves. Some are very brief; one or two pages long, while others are much longer, up to 62 pages in one instance. Some are very general in nature, others are far more specific. Some follow the series of four questions posed by Faith and Order on page 12 of *The Nature and Mission of the Church*; others follow different sets of questions.

Without exception, the churches who have responded so far are encouraging of the direction taken in *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, and supportive of the enterprise as a whole. They differ widely on improvements to the text. An area of commonality is the areas of convergence set out in the body of the text, and the areas of disagreement set forth in the boxes. On the other hand, there is no agreement as to whether the distinctions between the covergences and disagreements so laid forth are helpful or just confusing.

We all have to wonder, however, how to interpret the low response rate from the churches to the text, and what this tells Faith and Order about *The Nature and Mission of the Church* itself, or more broadly, the concerns of the churches for ecumenical ecclesiology.

Yet, Faith and Order has gratefully received responses from other sources as well. I would draw attention to the responses from councils of churches, mission organizations, and the academy. These responses, like those of the churches, are extremely varied.

We are pleased by the responses of the mission organizations, and especially by the encouraging response from our sister commission in the WCC, the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism. The shift in name from *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* to *The Nature and Mission of the Church* has ushered in a new spirit of cooperation between Faith and Order and those engaged in mission, to our mutual advantage.

We are particularly pleased by responses which are academic in nature, from theologians, but especially from students engaged in the field of ecclesiology. We note with gratitude the responses from graduate students from evangelical institutions such as Fuller Theological Seminary, and students from the Catholic faculties of theology at Padua, Leuven and Tübingen.

On the whole, the responses received—so far—have been positive and encouraging. No one has told us that we are on the wrong track completely. The responses generally indicate what is appreciated about the text, as well as areas of concern and recommendations for future work. Slightly less than one quarter of the responses answer the series of questions posed on page 12 of *The Nature and Mission of the Church*.

It is not possible to include every detail of the responses in this presentation, as there are hundreds of pages in the 50 responses that we have received. Moreover, responses have been received since the end of July that have not been studied, and many more responses are both expected and promised in the coming months before the deadline of the end of January 2010.

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of Christ, the Church of Scotland, the Evangelical Church of the River Platt, the Evangelical Methodist Church of Argentina, the Disciples of Christ.

*General remarks:*

There is a clear sense of appreciation for the text as it stands, and the work that went into the revisions from *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*. The responses identify *The Nature and Mission of the Church* as a useful document for reflection on ecclesiological issues, providing a good basis for further steps along the way to Christian unity. As in BEM, with *The Nature and Mission of the Church* Faith and Order has found a way of creating open dialogue and a method for promoting consensus.

Some affirm clearly that *The Nature and Mission of the Church* correctly identifies our common ecclesiological convictions, as well as the issues that divide us.<sup>2</sup> Others affirm that *The Nature and Mission of the Church* does **not** correctly identify our common ecclesiological convictions, as well as the issues that divide us.<sup>3</sup> Some responses suggest that convergences are articulated too confidently and that the text is too optimistic about describing common convictions. Others suggest that *The Nature and Mission of the Church* lacks clarity around the goal of the ecumenical endeavour, and that using the language of “visible unity” to describe the ecumenical goal does not create clarity because different churches mean different things by the term.

*Methodology:*

Appreciation is expressed for the use of two kinds of affirmation: quasi-unanimous agreed convictions as well as ongoing controversial points. In this way, the methodology of *The Nature and Mission of the Church* builds on that of BEM.

In *The Nature and Mission of the Church* there are different ecclesiological points of view that do not exclude one another, but show a kind of convergence. Some of the responses welcome *The Nature and Mission of the Church*'s reflections on the similarities and differences, with a clear recognition of diversity. On the other hand, other responses observe that there is not enough recognition of diversity, and that the text fails to offer a methodological model of how dialogue can be maintained in the face of diversity.

Appreciation is expressed for the running text and boxes. There were many comments on the uses of the boxes in *The Nature and Mission of the Church*. The boxes are overwhelmingly welcomed; they facilitate further work on the issues raised within them. However, criticism is raised about their use. For instance, they need to be clearer about which confessional positions are reflected; for example, the “some believe...” statements ought to name the traditions in question. The boxes ought not to be an inventory of disagreements, but could provide explanations for the disagreements. Some responses express the need for more boxes, while others find the already large number of boxes to be depressing.

Appreciation is expressed for how *The Nature and Mission of the Church* builds on the strengths of BEM and its use of the achievements of the bilateral and multilateral dialogues. On the other hand, criticisms are raised that the text does not take into account the response to BEM and other Faith and Order texts. Two responses note that *The Nature and Mission of the Church* needs to be read with “Called to be the One Church”.

Criticism is expressed of the text's purely deductive approach; some prefer a more inductive approach. Some responses note that the classical ecclesiological questions treated in *The Nature*

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. Anglican Church in A&NZ ; Aladura; Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland; Uniting Church in Australia.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. The Church of England

*and Mission of the Church* are far removed from the lived reality and experience of Christians and the churches.

*The Bible:*

The responses reflect an appreciation for *The Nature and Mission of the Church's* use of biblical texts, noting the use of a genuinely constructive biblical hermeneutic. Others note the need for a more disciplined biblical hermeneutic.

Some responses welcome the great variety of biblical texts and images, and note that the biblical insights form a good foundation. Others assert that the text needs more extensive work on the New Testament understandings of church.

Appreciation is expressed that ecclesiology is rooted in the Holy Scriptures. On the other hand, some suggest that the biblical texts are too loosely connected to the topics at hand, and ought not to be used as a resource from which appropriate verses are drawn — rather, the Scriptures ought to be the starting point for drafting a theological text.

*Mission:*

Questions around mission characterize many of the responses. Some responses express appreciation and special interest on the place of mission. The change from *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* to *The Nature and Mission of the Church* is applauded with the recognition that mission lies at the very essence of the Church. For some, *The Nature and Mission of the Church* succeeds in offering a genuine mission ecclesiology, and is significant in terms of mission theology.

On the other hand, *The Nature and Mission of the Church* is also critiqued for its treatment of mission. The content of the church's mission is not described fully, and mission ought to be more integral to the text. There is an inadequate conception of mission. The very title of the text is held to be problematic: the Nature *and* Mission makes an artificial distinction, and that mission and church are distinguished from one another. There is still some lack of clarity about the difference between the "mission" and "purpose" of the church. Criticism is expressed about the seeming lack of awareness and use of CWME texts on mission.

*Style:*

Several responses raise in different ways questions about the intended readership of *The Nature and Mission of the Church*. For whom is the text written? While some responses express appreciation for the quality and accessibility of the text, others are critical of its style, which assumes an academic formation. It ought to be broader than the specialized audiences of church leaders, professional ecumenists and theologians; the next text ought to be a document accessible to a wider church readership, including congregations. Criticisms are expressed that the text as it stands is too abstract, that on the whole it is too long, and needs to be abbreviated.

Concerns are expressed in the responses about the western context which the text seems to represent, not taking into account the emerging churches of the Global South that have become so important to world Christianity.

Some responses suggest that *The Nature and Mission of the Church* is helpful in discussions with Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican traditions: the text is perhaps overly representative of

these three families.<sup>4</sup> For instance, *The Nature and Mission of the Church's* treatment of Ministry of the Ordained assumes Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican understandings of ordained ministry.<sup>5</sup> One response expressed concern about the language around “Eucharist” which is thought to represent a particular theological position, noting that the use of the term “Eucharist” was a criticism launched against the BEM text; the use of the “Lord’s Supper” is preferable.

#### *Areas of future work:*

Many areas for future work are noted in the responses. They include categories such as the understanding of Christian unity including the goal of the ecumenical process, and organic unity versus the “communion of local churches”. There are fundamental ecclesiological questions such as the diverse ordering of the churches and their relationship with the nature and mission of the church, apostolicity and ordination, the relationship between local church and the Church universal, distinction between the invisible and visible church, worship and ecclesiology, appropriate levels of decision making, the relationship between church and state, and the place of the Blessed Virgin Mary in ecclesiology. Future issues are raised in terms of ethics and ecclesiology, including human sexuality, the place of men and women, cultural diversity, and the environmental context. Other areas of future work include mission implications of baptism and the eucharist, pneumatology and the role of the Spirit in mission, and eschatological perspectives on mission. A study guide was recommended.

#### **Responses from the Plenary Commission:**

At its meeting during the Standing Commission meeting in Cairo, June 2008, the Ecclesiology Working Group made the conscious decision to seek the advice and counsel of the Plenary Commission. Unlike Plenary Commissions before 1998, the current Plenary has no legislative authority, but it does have *influence*.

Ecclesiology was an important topic at the 2004 Plenary Commission in Kuala Lumpur. However, because that meeting was so close in time to the 2005 publication of *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, the Plenary Commission itself had little impact on the final redaction of the text. In 2009, the Plenary Commissioners have a clear role in the shaping of the next version of the Faith and Order text on ecclesiology.

There are three general sets of questions that you will be discussing in your small groups.<sup>6</sup>

- First, what are your reactions to the various discussions about *The Nature and Mission of the Church* during the Plenary Commission meeting? What were new insights for you? What issues raise further questions for reflection and clarification? To what extent do your reactions reflect the attitude of your church?
- Second, and perhaps most importantly, how can you advise Faith and Order with the ongoing process? For example, is *The Nature and Mission of the Church* sufficiently mature as a text to be commended as a convergence statement? Is a further revision of the text based on the responses the best direction towards a convergence statement? Or, ought a new kind of convergence statement to be imagined, based on the present text of *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, the responses received, and the accessibility of “Called to

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<sup>4</sup> Ev. Lutheran Church of Finland.

<sup>5</sup> Ev. Church in Hessen and Nassau.

<sup>6</sup> From the minutes of the 9 March 2009 meeting of the Ecclesiology Working Group.

be the One Church?”. What recommendations can you make regarding the next stages to a common statement?

- Third, how can you encourage the churches to become more committed to ecclesiological work of Faith and Order?

**Conclusion:**

Consensus on ecclesiology is central to the future of theological ecumenism. Faith and Order may be very close to proposing such a consensus to the churches. The work of this Plenary Commission, and the ongoing work of the Plenary Commissions, is critical for the success of the ecclesiological enterprise. Your own reflections, and the work of your groups today and tomorrow, will set us in the right direction.