

Faith and Unity Commission

A Response to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*

The Faith and Unity Commission studied *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* over a number of meetings. The document was received with enthusiasm, recognising that it represents a significant convergence and a milestone on the road to that unity for which Christ prayed.

While we received responses from individual Commission members for our member churches, the major benefit of our study was the dialogue it provoked among the Commission members. Accordingly, this response is not intended to take the place of responses made by each of our member churches directly to the Faith and Order Commission. Rather, in making this response we have endeavoured to present the fruits of the dialogue that has occurred among us as we have studied the text and presented our individual church responses. Our dialogue has brought about two important ecumenical achievements: it has assisted each individual church in its own dialogue with the text and reflection on its own ecclesiological self-understanding; and it has focused our dialogue with each other.

Common Affirmations

Together we affirm the starting point for understanding the church, namely “the vision of God’s great design (or ‘economy’) for all creation.” (§1) We appreciated the biblical basis of this vision. We believe that we are able to share a common understanding of this biblical foundation. We can affirm that, created in God’s image, men and women bear “an inherent capacity for communion (in Greek *koinonia*) with God and with one another.” (§1) The drama of human sin and disobedience damaged the communion between God, human beings and the created order. Human history is a history of God’s mighty work to restore that communion. We recognise that while we have not always shared a common theology of sin and grace, we can nevertheless affirm that “the dynamic history of God’s restoration of *koinonia* found its irreversible achievement in the incarnation and paschal mystery of Jesus Christ.” (§1)

We welcome the focus on the Holy Trinity and *koinonia*. This is a laudable corrective to ecclesiologies that focus too narrowly on Christological or institutional aspects of the church. Instead, there is a bigger vision of the church that encompasses the creator God, the saving mystery of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit continuing the mission of God in the world. Accordingly, we embrace the statement, “Communion, whose source is the very life of the Holy Trinity, is both the gift by which the church lives and, at the same time, the gift that God calls the church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity in hope of reconciliation and healing.” (§1) We recognise in this statement an affirmation that the church exists by the grace of God, and that the church shares in the mission of God.

The biblical vision of the church points to the close link between unity and mission. We acknowledge that among our churches this link has not always been made. We affirm the importance of unity as expressed in the document. We have been encouraged to learn from the New Testament churches, which recognised that tensions are present and can create division. The church was born ecumenical! This reminds us of the imperative to seek unity. The experience of the New Testament churches and the ways they sought to maintain unity are instructive of our own search for unity.

Most of our member churches were able to affirm the list of ecclesial elements identified in §37: “communion in the fullness of apostolic faith; in sacramental life; in a truly one and mutually recognised ministry; in structures of conciliar relations and decision-making and in common witness and service to the world.” While Commission members are not agreed on what church unity will ultimately look like, the convergence expressed in the text is a good basis for further dialogue. Our members that do not practice liturgical sacraments, appreciated the recognition of their affirmation “that they share in the sacramental life of the church.” (§40)

We have moved much closer to each other in reaching a common understanding of the place of diversity in a “united church”. We affirm the fundamental principle identified in §30 and based on Acts 15:28, viz., that no burden beyond what is essential should be imposed on churches. However, while each of us has our own criteria for legitimate diversity, these criteria are not held in common. Moreover, the criteria are not always shared even within an ecclesial tradition.

Some of our churches affirmed the statement about the eschatological reality of the church. This was one of the most fruitful sections of the document for the Commission’s dialogue. We recognise that previously two different approaches to eschatology gave rise to different visions of church unity. For some, unity was an eschatological gift for the future, while for others, unity could find concrete expression in our own time. We hope that the affirmation that “the church is an eschatological reality, already anticipating the kingdom, but not yet its full realization” (§33) will open up ways of thinking more deeply about the church. This may help us to tell the story of the church in a reverse direction, as it were: from the end time until now. In the words of the text, there are “visible and tangible signs which express that this new life of communion has been effectively realised.” (§34)

We want to affirm the equally strong emphasis on the church in history. This history of salvation approach accords well with the biblical foundation that opened the text. It reminds us that the church has its own role in the unfolding of God’s saving work in Christ through the Holy Spirit. The church, in this approach, is not some abstract ideal, but is manifest in concrete places. We recognise that this historical approach does not amount to a sociological view of the church, nor should it be reduced to this, but is a genuine theological understanding. We affirm this emphasis on the church as part of God’s saving plan for the world as it exists in history.

Areas that our churches are willing to consider in a new context

We have experienced great grace in studying *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* in a multilateral context as a national ecumenical council. We have found that the insights of one church have shed light on particular sections of the text so that other churches have been able to gain a deeper insight into the text. We have also noted how some churches have been able to prompt others – in a charitable way – to identify how the text challenges their own faith, life and witness. Our member churches have identified a number of areas where they have been challenged to think in fresh ways.

For some, the idea of church as sacrament is not language they use, and they have been suspicious of using such language for the reasons identified in the text (cf. §44). The text, however, has challenged them to consider this language within a larger context of the place of the church in the economy of salvation, and as sign and instrument of the kingdom.

Not all our member churches have a three-fold ministry or a personal episcopate. While taking such a step would be challenging for some of these churches, they recognise that the proposal in the text that the episcopate may be an important sign of the church’s continuity with the apostolic faith places the question in a new context – with a focus on the apostolic faith (cf. §52). For this reason they are not opposed to studying the question further. They also ask if there might be a reciprocal recognition that an episcopate is not a sufficient condition of apostolicity.

Some of our members have identified the impetus the text is giving to their church to address

questions of renewal in their own church life and practice. They identified an urgent need to study further the section of the text on the priestly, prophetic and royal people of God with a view to addressing the role of the laity in the church and their place in decision-making and discernment on matters of faith and morals. Others, for whom the distinctive function of a ministerial order or office is less robustly valued, are also challenged to look at their own structures of authority and decision-making.

All of our member churches recognise that *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* attempts to transcend the particular ecclesiological self-understanding of any one church. Some have heard a challenge to consider their corporate identity in a new light and to take seriously the emphasis on the *Missio Dei*. Others described the challenge in terms of thinking about the church theologically and not simply sociologically. This may raise the question as to what extent some of their own cherished traditions could be re-examined in the light of the convergence achieved in the text.

A basis for growth in unity

As we studied this text we have been very aware that we are all signatories to *Australian Churches Covenanting Together*. This national multilateral and multi-dimensional document has affirmed the unity that we already share and set out the ways we can be together as a result of that unity. We see a challenge to make use of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* in reviewing the commitment already expressed in the covenanting document and in looking for ways to take further steps towards unity. This will involve examining each dimension of the covenanting arrangement to see if it can be deepened.

We have also been aware that most of us have a strong commitment to bilateral dialogue and that most of our churches are in dialogue with more than one other church. Some of us acknowledged that many of the key foundational concepts in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, such as *koinonia* or *episkope*, have been the subject of bilateral dialogues. Churches have been able to bring their experience of bilateral dialogue to bear on their study of the text in a multilateral context. In general there is a harmony between the advances made in the bilateral dialogues and the expression of convergence in the WCC text.

Recognising that we already share a deep degree of *koinonia*, some of our members have identified a challenge to find suitable ways to give expression to the unity we already share. For some, this could take the form of a genuine church fellowship and cooperation even if at this stage it is a limited fellowship.

Conclusion

The members of the Faith and Unity Commission wish to express their deep gratitude to the World Council of Churches, and in particular the Commission on Faith and Order for *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. Our response represents a first stage in our reception of the document. In offering this response, we also hope that it will assist the member churches of the National Council of Churches in Australia to continue to engage with the text and to receive it. We are very mindful of the statement from the Third Assembly of the WCC (New Delhi 1961) that the unity of the church will involve nothing less than the death and re-birth of many forms of church life as we currently know them. In others words, the unity that Christ prayed for will be realised through renewal in each of our churches so that we become ever more faithful to the Gospel. The church is always in need of renewal and reform under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We receive this document as an instrument of renewal. It offers a way for each of us to work with our ecumenical partners as we listen to the voice of the Spirit in our own time.

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June 2015