THE CHURCH
TOWARDS A COMMON VISION

Faith and Order Paper No. 214
# CONTENTS

**Foreword** ................................................................. v

**Preface** ........................................................................... vii

**Introduction** ................................................................. 1

**Chapter I - God’s Mission and the Unity of the Church** ........................................... 5

  * A. The Church in the Design of God (1-4) ......................................................... 5
  * B. The Mission of the Church in History (5-7) .................................................... 7
  * C. The Importance of Unity (8-10) ..................................................................... 8

**Chapter II - The Church of the Triune God** ....................................................... 9

  * A. Discerning God’s Will for the Church (11-12) .................................................. 9
  * B. The Church of the Triune God as Koinonia (13-24) ........................................ 10
    The Initiative of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (13-16) ......................... 10
    The Prophetic, Priestly and Royal People of God (17-20) ......................................... 11
    Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit (21) .................................................. 12
    The One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church (22-24) ......................................... 13
  * C. The Church as Sign and Servant of God’s Design for the World (25-27) ............. 15
  * D. Communion in Unity and Diversity (28-30). .................................................... 16
  * E. Communion of Local Churches (31-32). ......................................................... 17

**Chapter III - The Church: Growing in Communion** .............................................. 21

  * A. Already but Not Yet (33-36) ........................................................................... 21
  * B. Growing in the Essential Elements of Communion: Faith, Sacraments, Ministry (37-57)  
    Faith (38-39) .................................................................................................. 23
    Sacraments (40-44) .......................................................................................... 24
    Ministry within the Church ................................................................................. 26
    Ordained Ministry (45-47) ................................................................................... 26
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Gift of Authority in the Ministry of the Church (48-51)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ministry of Oversight (Episkopē) (52-57)</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter IV - The Church: In and for the World</strong></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. God’s Plan for Creation: The Kingdom (58-60)</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. The Moral Challenge of the Gospel (61-63)</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. The Church in Society (64-66)</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusion (67-69)</strong></td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Historical Note: The Process Leading to The Church: Towards a Common Vision</strong></td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In my visits to the churches around the world, I am introduced to many challenges to the unity between and within the churches. The many ecumenical dialogues between churches and church families are a reality that contributes also to the multilateral relationships between them. New connections are established thereby. However, there is a certain and reasonable impatience among many to see more movement in the reception of ecumenical dialogues and agreements. Some of the churches and families of churches find that there are also new questions that are potentially dividing. The ecumenical movement seems also in some churches to have less power and fewer committed spokespersons than in earlier periods. There are tendencies toward fragmentation and more attention to what is uniting the few rather than the many. Of course, the call to unity is not ended by new challenges, rather the contrary. Yet we also need to see more dimensions of the call to unity and remind ourselves that we are always embraced by and called to love (1 Cor. 13).

Into this context the WCC’s Commission on Faith and Order presents to us a gift, a statement about the
Church: it is a fruit of their many years of work on ecclesiology. Stemming from *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982) and the churches’ responses to it, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* was received by the central committee in 2012 and sent to the churches to encourage further reflection on the Church and to seek their formal responses to the text. This study and its response process will have an important role in the coming years for discerning the next steps toward visible unity. Work on ecclesiology relates to everything the Church is and what its mission implies in and for the world. Thus, *The Church* is rooted in the nature and mission of the Church. It reflects the constitutional aims and self-identity of the WCC as a fellowship of churches who call each other to the goal of visible unity.

Unity is a gift of life and a gift of love, not a principle of unanimity or unilateralism. We have a calling as a fellowship of churches to express the unity of life that is given to us in Jesus Christ, through his life, cross and resurrection so that brokenness, sin, and evil can be overcome. For as *The Church* proclaims: “The kingdom of God, which Jesus preached by revealing the Word of God in parables and inaugurated by his mighty deeds, especially by the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection, is the final destiny of the whole universe. The Church was intended by God, not for its own sake, but to serve the divine plan for the transformation of the world” (§ 58).

*Olav Fykse Tveit*
General Secretary
World Council of Churches
The convergence text *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* belongs to the biblical vision of Christian unity: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:12-13).

The primary purpose of the Commission on Faith and Order is “to serve the churches as they call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe” (2012 bylaws).

The goal of this mutual calling to visible unity necessarily entails a mutual recognition of each other as churches, as true expressions of what the Creed calls the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.” Yet in the abnormal situation of ecclesial division, the churches’ reflection on the nature and mission of the Church has given rise to the suspicion that the various
confessional ecclesiologies are not only divergent from one another but also irreconcilable. Hence agreement on ecclesiology has long been identified as the most elemental theological objective in the quest for Christian unity. This second convergence text of Faith and Order follows from the first, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982), and the official responses to it, which identified key areas in ecclesiology for further study; it follows as well from the ecclesiological questions raised in the study text *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition* (2011).

For twenty years, the delegated representatives of the Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican, Evangelical, Pentecostal and Roman Catholic churches in a World Conference on Faith and Order (1993), three Plenary Commissions on Faith and Order (1996, 2004, 2009), eighteen meetings of the Standing Commission, and countless drafting meetings have sought to uncover a global, multilateral and ecumenical vision of the nature, purpose, and mission of the Church. The churches have responded critically and constructively to two earlier stages on the way to a common statement. The Commission on Faith and Order responds to the churches with *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, its common – or convergence – statement on ecclesiology. The convergence reached in *The Church* represents an extraordinary ecumenical achievement.

There are at least two distinct, but deeply interrelated, objectives in sending *The Church* to the churches for study and official response. The first is renewal. As a multilateral ecumenical text, *The Church* cannot be identified exclusively with any one ecclesiological tradition. In the long process from 1993-2012, the theological expressions and ecclesial experiences of many churches have been brought together in such a way that the churches reading this text may find themselves challenged to live more fully the ecclesial life; others may find in it aspects of ecclesial life and understanding which have been neglected or forgotten; others may find themselves strengthened and affirmed.

As Christians experience life-long growth into Christ, they will find themselves drawing closer to one another, and living into the biblical image of the one body: “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

The second objective is theological agreement on the Church. As important as the convergence achieved by Faith and Order in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* was the official response process that followed. The six published volumes of responses manifested the varying levels of documented convergences among the churches themselves on the key questions around baptism, eucharist and ministry. The effects of the ecclesial convergence surfaced by *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* toward Christian unity are well-documented and ongoing. The responses to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* will not only evaluate the convergence reached by Faith and Order but also reflect the level of convergence on ecclesiology among the churches. Just as the convergence on baptism in the responses to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* gave rise to a fresh impetus toward mutual recognition of baptism, similar ecclesial convergence on ecclesiology will play a vital role in the mutual recognition between the churches as they call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship.

“Ecclesial responses” for the Commission on Faith and Order includes the churches that are members of the Commission and the fellowship of churches in the

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World Council of Churches. It is also hoped that those churches that are new to the ecumenical movement will accept the invitation to study and comment on the text. The Commission also welcomes responses from ecclesial bodies, such as national and regional councils of churches and the Christian World Communions, whose official dialogues among themselves have contributed so much to the convergence reflected in *The Church*. The specific questions posed by Faith and Order to the churches to guide their response process are found at the end of the Introduction to *The Church*. The questions for study and response are theological, practical, and pastoral. The Commission requests that official responses be sent to the Faith and Order secretariat at the World Council of Churches no later than 31 December 2015.

As this text was two decades in the making, we express our thanks to those on whose shoulders, prayers and theological gifts this text stands: the Faith and Order commissioners, the churches and theologians who responded to *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (1998) and *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (2005), members of the Faith and Order secretariat, and our own predecessors as moderators and directors of the Commission on Faith and Order.

*Canon John Gibaut*  
Director  
Commission on Faith and Order

*Metropolitan Dr Vasilios of Constantia-Ammochostos*  
Moderator  
Commission on Faith and Order
“Thy will be done” are words that countless believers from all Christian churches pray every day. Jesus himself prayed similar words in the garden of Gethsemane shortly before his arrest (cf. Matt. 26:39-42; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42). In John’s gospel, moreover, he revealed his will for the Church when he prayed to the Father that all of his disciples be one, so that the world may believe (cf. John 17:21). To pray that the Lord’s will be done thus necessarily requires a wholehearted endeavour to embrace his will for and gift of unity. The present text – *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* – addresses what many consider to be the most difficult issues facing the churches in overcoming any remaining obstacles to their living out the Lord’s gift of communion: our understanding of the nature of the Church itself. The great importance of that gift and goal highlights the significance of the issues to be treated in the pages that follow.

Our aim is to offer a convergence text, that is, a text which, while not expressing full consensus on all the issues considered, is much more than simply an instrument to stimulate further study. Rather, the following pages express how far Christian communities have come in their common understanding of the Church, showing the progress that has been made and indicating work that still needs to be done. The present text has been elaborated by the Faith and Order Commission, whose aim, like that of the World Council of Churches as a whole, is to serve the churches as they “call one another to visible unity in one faith and
one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.”  

Such visible unity finds a most eloquent expression in the celebration of the eucharist, which glorifies the Triune God and enables the Church to participate in the mission of God for the transformation and salvation of the world. The present statement makes use of the responses of the churches to Faith and Order’s work on ecclesiology in recent years as well as earlier ecumenical documents which have sought convergence through common reflection upon God’s Word, in the hope that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Lord’s gift of unity can be fully realized. Thus it is the result of dialogue at the multilateral level, especially the responses of the churches to *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, of the suggestions offered by the meeting of the Faith and Order plenary commission held in Crete in 2009 and of the contributions of the Orthodox consultation held in Cyprus in 2011. In addition, the text draws upon the progress registered in many bilateral dialogues that have taken up the theme of “Church” in recent decades. 

We hope that *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* will serve the churches in three ways: (1) by providing a synthesis of the results of ecumenical dialogue about important ecclesiological themes in recent decades; (2) by inviting them to appraise the results of this dialogue – confirming positive achievements, pointing out deficiencies and/or indicating areas that have not received sufficient attention; and (3) by providing an occasion for the churches to reflect upon their own understanding of the Lord’s will so as to grow towards greater unity (cf. Eph. 4:12-16). Hopefully, such a process of information, reaction and growth, by confirming, enriching and challenging all of the churches, will make a substantial contribution and even enable some decisive steps towards the full realization of unity.

There is a structure to this text, based on the ecclesiological issues that we are addressing. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* opens with a chapter exploring how the Christian community finds its origin in the mission of God for the saving transformation of the world. The Church is essentially missionary, and unity is essentially related to this mission. The second chapter sets out the salient features of an understanding of the Church as Communion, gathering the results of much common reflection both about how Scripture and subsequent tradition relate the Church to God and some of the consequences of this relation for the life and structure of the Church. The third chapter focuses upon the growth of the Church as the pilgrim people moving towards the kingdom of God, especially upon several difficult ecclesiological questions that have divided the churches in the past. It registers the progress towards greater convergence about some of these issues and clarifies points about which churches may need to seek further convergence. The fourth chapter develops several significant ways in which the Church relates to the world as a sign and agent of God’s love, such as proclaiming Christ within an interreligious context, witnessing to the moral values of the Gospel and responding to human suffering and need.

The many official responses to Faith and Order’s *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, of 1982, showed that the process of reception that follows the publication of a convergence text can prove to be just as important as that
which led to its production. So as to serve as an instrument for genuine dialogue about ecclesiology to which all may make a significant contribution, the churches are urgently requested not only to give serious consideration to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* but also to submit an official response to the Faith and Order Commission, in the light of the following questions:

- To what extent does this text reflect the ecclesiological understanding of your church?

- To what extent does this text offer a basis for growth in unity among the churches?

- What adaptations or renewal in the life of your church does this statement challenge your church to work for?

- How far is your church able to form closer relationships in life and mission with those churches which can acknowledge in a positive way the account of the Church described in this statement?

- What aspects of the life of the Church could call for further discussion and what advice could your church offer for the ongoing work by Faith and Order in the area of ecclesiology?

In addition to these general questions, readers will find, printed in italics and interspersed throughout the text, paragraphs about specific issues where divisions remain. These questions are intended to stimulate reflection and encourage further agreement among the churches on the path to unity.

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