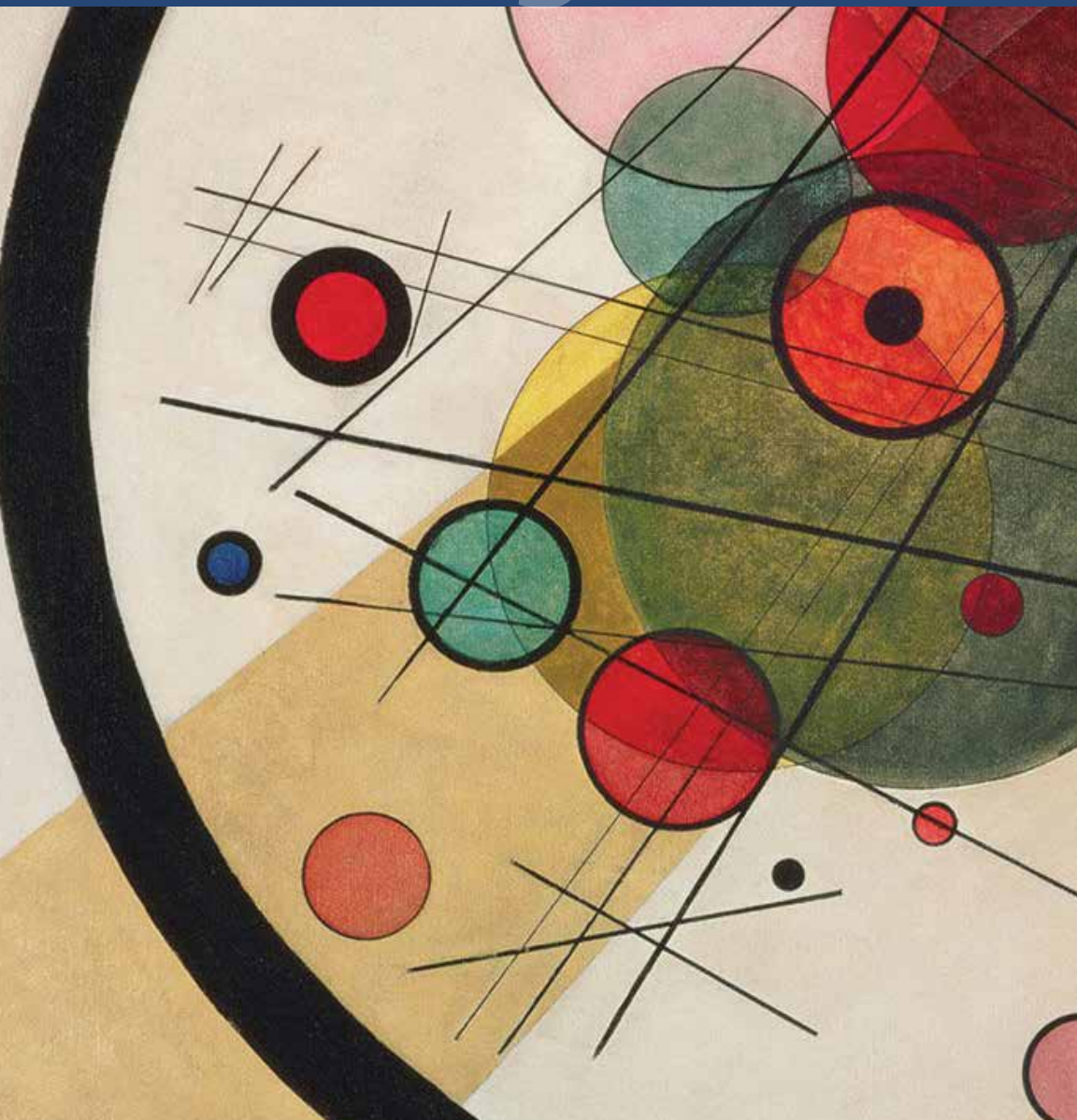


3  
Churches and Moral Discernment



Facilitating Dialogue  
to Build *Koinonia*



# Churches and Moral Discernment



Churches  
and  
Moral Discernment

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Volume 3

**Facilitating Dialogue  
to Build *Koinonia***

Faith and Order Paper No. 235



**World Council  
of Churches**  
Publications

Churches and Moral Discernment Volume 3  
Facilitating Dialogue to Build Koinonia  
Faith and Order Paper No 235

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# Preface

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This study document is the fruit of a multilateral study process on moral discernment that began at the Faith and Order Commission meeting in Caraiman (Romania) in 2015 and ended in 2021 when the Commission approved the present report.

*Facilitating Dialogue to Build Koinonia* is unique in its approach, and at the same time, builds on the continuous work undertaken by the Commission in this field in recent decades. In addition to facilitating the reception of the 2013 study document *Moral Discernment in the Churches*, the mandate formulated in 2015 focused on “deepening the knowledge about moral discernment processes in the churches,”<sup>1</sup> and articulating uniting and dividing factors, as well as attention to the role of authority.

What kind of “knowledge” is needed for the churches to engage meaningfully with existing disagreements on moral issues? The Commission convincingly shows that it needs to be knowledge acquired through authentic ecumenical dialogue geared toward *koinonia*. Thus, the full title of this text: “Churches and Moral Discernment. Facilitating Dialogue to Build *Koinonia*.”

Given significant disagreements on moral issues, the study process was designed to build a connection between two processes, starting with self-descriptions of ecclesial discernment processes in different church traditions.<sup>2</sup> This first phase responds to the need to overcome misperceptions and misrepresentations that continue to haunt ecumenical dialogue in the area of moral teaching. It offers an invitation to churches to listen to one another attentively to understand the ecclesial procedures and structures of authority. “Thus we owe each other mutual accountability and mutual admonition as we share in mutual vulnerability and seek to grow in fellowship.”<sup>3</sup>

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1. WCC Commission on Faith and Order, *Minutes of the Meeting at the Monastery of Caraiman, Busteni Romania, 17–24 June 2015*, Faith and Order Paper No. 222 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2015), 92.

2. Myriam Wijlens and Vladimir Shmaliy, eds, *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 1: Learning from Traditions*, Faith and Order Paper No. 228 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021).

3. Odair Pedroso Mateus, “Faith and Order from Today into Tomorrow,” *The Ecumenical Review* 71:3 (July 2019), 316.

The second phase focused on historical examples of situations in which churches were confronted with a particular moral challenge such that they entered into a substantive moral discernment process. The Faith and Order Commission studied nineteen historical examples from different contexts and church traditions to understand how the churches discerned the relationship between continuity and change.<sup>4</sup> The study revealed that these are complex and not always linear processes. Several distinct ways in which change occurred in the past have been identified and analyzed in this second phase.

The uniqueness of this study is that, based on the self-descriptions of church traditions and the study of historical examples, it proposes a tool that helps to navigate the landscape of moral discernment in the churches.

To do justice to complex ecclesial realities, the study is to a large extent descriptive and analytical. At the same time, it is inspired by the key ecumenical commitment of the Faith and Order Commission: to serve the churches as they call one another to visible unity and to find concrete ways to grow in communion.

*Facilitating Dialogue to Build Koinonia* is divided into five chapters. It begins by articulating our common Christian heritage and affirms that “The command to love God and to love the neighbour as oneself (Matt. 22:34-40) shapes and orients the lives of Christian believers and communities.” The second chapter introduces the notion of “the conscience of the church” as a key to understanding ecclesial moral discernment and explores the churches’ commitment to continuity with the gospel in responding to new challenges arising in history. The third chapter outlines different ways in which change did occur in moral discernment processes in the past and describes how continuous commitment to remain faithful to Christ has led to a change on specific matters.

The fourth chapter presents a tool that helps identify common features that provide the churches with a way to enter into constructive dialogue on moral issues. Moreover, this tool helps to speak about a) differences that occur between churches, and also differences that occur within a particular church; b) differences that occur at the same point in time (synchronic), and also differences that occur over time (diachronic—where there is an apparent difference between a moral view at one time in history and a moral view at a later time in history); and c) differences that occur between universal doctrine and local

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4. Myriam Wijlens, Vladimir Shmaliy, and Simone Sinn, eds, *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 2: Learning from History*, Faith and Order Paper No. 229 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021).

practice in specific contexts inspired by pastoral care. The fifth chapter summarizes the findings and invites the readers to pray with words from St Basil.

We are grateful to the members of Faith and Order Study Group 3 for their unfailing commitment to this complex and demanding study process, particularly to the two co-conveners Prof. Dr Myriam Wijlens from the Roman Catholic Church and Rev. Prof. Dr Vladimir Shmaliy from the Russian Orthodox Church.

We are confident that this document, and the tool it offers, will help the churches as they themselves face some of the most urgent ecumenical questions of our times. It provides ways of deepening understanding, of entering into dialogue with calmness and confidence, and of strengthening communion between and within our churches. We end this preface with the first words of the prayer of St Basil that you find in full at the end of this study document:

O Eternal God,  
 the everlasting light  
 which is without beginning,  
 the Creator of all creation,  
 the fountain of mercy,  
 the sea of goodness,  
 and the inexorable depth of love to humanity;  
 illumine us with the light of your face,  
 O Lord.

Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca  
 Acting General Secretary  
 World Council of Churches

Rev. Dr Susan Durber  
 Moderator  
 WCC Commission on Faith and Order



# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1 The Greatest Commandment: A Common Christian Heritage

### 1.1.1 The Common Commitment to the Christian Moral Life

- (1) Reflection about the moral life is a vital concern shared by every Christian community—how to live and how to please God (1 Thess. 4:1-3). No church is indifferent to the consequences that Christian faith implies for the way of life of the disciples. This common concern unites all believers because, as believers, they are called to holiness: “as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet. 1:15-16; see also Lev. 19:2; Matt. 5:48; Heb. 12:14). The command to love God and to love the neighbour as oneself (Matt. 22:34-40) shapes and orients the lives of Christian believers and communities.
- (2) Both scripture and other expressions of the “Tradition of the Gospel”<sup>1</sup> throughout history have bestowed on all Christians common ground concerning insights, norms, and guidance about what kinds of behaviour are truly an expression of that life of holiness, sanctification, or *theosis*. These are grounded in their baptismal vocation, in which, by pure grace, they participate in the fruits of Christ’s salvific work. The call to holiness is inspired by the promise of the abundance of life (John 10:10) and the fullness of joy that no one can take from them (John 15:11; 16:22).

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1. The Faith and Order Commission clarified the meaning of the terms “Tradition” and “traditions” in the document *Scripture, Tradition and traditions* (1963): “By *the Tradition* is meant the Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the Church, Christ himself present in the life of the Church. By *tradition* is meant the traditionary process. The term *traditions* is used in two senses, to indicate both the diversity of forms of expression and also what we call confessional traditions.” Patrick C. Rodger and Lukas Vischer, eds., *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963*, Faith and Order Paper No. 42 (London: SCM Press, 1964), para. 39.

### 1.1.2 The Call to Be Holy

- (3) What then does it mean to be holy? Surely, it is to follow in the way of Jesus, who taught his disciples how to live through both his word and his actions, and who commanded them to love one another as he had loved them (John 13:34; 15:12). Jesus was baptized. His ministry flowed from his deep inner life of prayer. From his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) and the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-49), his many parables (Matt. 13), and his teachings about church life (Matt. 18) and mission (Matt. 10; 28:18-20) to his actions in caring for the sick (Mark 2:1-12; 3:1-6; 5:24-43; Luke 13:10-13), welcoming children (Matt. 19:13-15) and the stranger (Matt. 25:35; 25:40), and ministering to those on the margins (Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:27-32; John 4:4-42), there is abundant witness to how God is calling Christians to pray, to cultivate virtue, and to live faithful and just lives. The love of God and neighbour includes all the good that Christians do and is nourished by their inner life of prayer and commitment to God that flows from their baptism.
- (4) In the Acts of the Apostles, the simple term “the way” is used to describe Christian discipleship as a whole and the life of the early Christian community (Acts 9:2; 19:9-23; 22:4; 24:14-22). St Paul specifies aspects of this way in his letter to the Galatians, where he writes “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). In St Paul’s reflections on virtues in a holy life, he exhorts Christians to faith, hope, and love, the greatest of which is love (1 Cor. 13).
- (5) Faithful followers of the way, like Tabitha, are exemplars of lives devoted to good works and acts of love (Acts 9:36-39). Within the ongoing life of the church, there are many other exemplars of faithful and holy people whose lives shine forth as a beacon for those who follow the Lord. Moreover, there are good and faithful teachers, preachers, missionaries, martyrs, and catechists who evangelize the world, guide the life of community, and form the faith, consciences, and practice of believers. Through liturgy, worship, and prayer, the believer is drawn into the life of God, and the memory of the One who died for all. There are the legacies of leaders—ecclesial, spiritual, intellectual, and charismatic—who have formulated authoritative wisdom that guides the authentic witness

of the church to the truth of life in Christ. All of this testifies to the moral life not merely as an individual commitment but as a collective effort of the church, guided by the Holy Spirit and aided by the Spirit's gifts, as a community of pilgrims witnessing together the Truth that sets them free.

- (6) In St Paul's letter to the Colossians, he writes, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God" (Col. 3:16). In this text, the community engages in moral discernment, calling one another, admonishing one another, and encouraging one another; this moral discernment is as much a part of the life of the church as liturgical practices mentioned in the same text. In Romans 12:2, St Paul provides insight into how to discern Christian moral behaviour: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

### 1.1.3 Moral Discernment: A Communal Commitment

- (7) The connection between the moral life and the communal life of the church has been taught as pointed out by scripture, endorsed by Tradition, and affirmed by ecumenical dialogues. Ecumenical reflection provides insights into shared criteria for a Christian life: Does it lead to holiness? Does it build up *koinonia*? Does it lead to the fullness of life for all? Does it reflect the love by which the world is to recognize the disciples of Jesus (John 13:35)?
- (8) Ecumenical documents have consistently witnessed to the depth and breadth of the common ground shared by Christians. The "Toronto Statement" speaks of this common ground, referring to "the preaching of the Word, the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, and the administration of the sacraments."<sup>2</sup> In the ecumenical movement, it is recognized that "our baptism unites us to Christ, and therefore to one another. This forms the basis for *koinonia* which, even if it cannot yet fully be expressed in a common eucharist, nevertheless calls all in the body of Christ to common

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2. "Toronto Statement: The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches—The Ecclesiological Significance of the World Council of Churches," WCC, July 1950, para. IV.5, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/toronto-statement>

witness and service in the world.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in the same study on theological anthropology, “our churches agree . . . on the unique worth and dignity of every human being.”<sup>4</sup> The 2013 *Moral Discernment in the Churches* study generated “insight into common ground that Christians share in processes of moral discernment”<sup>5</sup> and identified the common sources that churches share: the guidance of the Holy Spirit, scripture, tradition, teaching authority, spirituality, and church culture.<sup>6</sup>

- (9) The connection between the church’s life and moral discernment is affirmed in the World Council of Churches’ (WCC) document, “Costly Unity,” when it says:

Faith has always claimed the being of the church as itself a “moral” reality. Faith and discipleship are embodied in and as a community way of life. The memory of Jesus Christ (*anamnesis*), formative of the church itself, is a force shaping of moral existence. The Trinity is experienced as an image for human community and the basis for social doctrine and ecclesial reality. Such explication could continue, but need not, since it all comes to the same point: the church not only has, but is, a social ethic, a *koinonia* ethic.<sup>7</sup>

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3. *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology*, Faith and Order Paper No. 199 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), para. 125.

4. *Ibid.*, para. 117.

5. World Council of Churches, *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document*, Faith and Order Paper No. 215 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), para. 86, <https://archive.org/details/wccfops2.222>.

6. The common sources that the churches share are identified in *Moral Discernment in the Churches*, paras. 31–37. *Moral Discernment in the Churches* defines church culture, in part, as “unwritten or unofficial practices, beliefs, or values that reflect a particular ecclesial culture or ethos” (37).

7. “Costly Unity,” in *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), para. 6. See also *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), para. 62. See also Orthodox Special Commission, *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, ed. David Bentley Hart and John Chrysavgis (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2020), para. 2, which states, “To say we are made to serve God is to say we are made for loving communion: communion with the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; and through communion with God as Trinity, human beings are also called into loving communion with their neighbors and the whole cosmos,” <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos>.



This “*koinonia* ethic” is further elaborated in the document “Costly Obedience”:

Moral-spiritual formation in the church is of a distinctive kind. Effectively or not, with better or worse outcomes, Christian congregations engender certain ways of seeing life just by being the kinds of communities they are. Indeed, it is evident that ecclesiastical politics play out in certain forms of life, certain ways of living, which shape the way church members comport themselves in the world. There is no way of talking about “Christian ethics” without asking how the congregation functions in moral formation. We are asking about the actual thinking that goes on in these worshipping communities and about their capacity to shape peoples’ patterns of action. We are “formed” in specific ways in the community of faith, by its liturgy, its teaching, the texture of its common life.<sup>8</sup>

- (10) In its pilgrimage through history, the church always has an eschatological character, hoping that the promise of the reign of God is fulfilled. Yet this promise is not merely in the future; rather, it calls Christians to reconciliation and love in this time and this place. In the eucharistic gathering, Christians both witness to the reign of God and become a sign of God’s reign in the here and now. When the disciples ask Jesus about the reign of God, his parable affirms how the righteous inherit the kingdom because they feed the hungry, give the thirsty something to drink, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, look after the sick, and visit the prisoners (Matt. 25:31-46). These everyday actions of reconciliation and love, in the same way as the liturgical practice of the church, render the reign of God present in history.

When God, from the human race, calls together the church (*ekklesia*), it is because God wills it to be a sign of the reconciliation of human beings to God and to one another. It not only points to something else, but is already the effective beginning of the new humanity.<sup>9</sup>

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8. “Costly Obedience,” in *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), para. 20.

9. *Church and World: The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community: A Faith and Order Study Document*, Faith and Order Paper No. 151 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), para. 3.2.6.

We celebrate and affirm the treasures with which our common heritage as believers in Jesus Christ has endowed our communities in their pursuit of a holy, faith-filled, and morally good life.

## 1.2 The Need for This Study: Building *Koinonia*

- (11) Despite this vast treasure trove of common ground, evident differences in moral convictions exist both within and between churches. In most cases they are nevertheless not a threat to unity; in some cases they are. In our time, the cry is heard of churches confronting the pain of evident disagreement, difference, and in the worst cases division on some moral issues. In an effort to contribute to the reconciliation and love to which all Christians are called, this study draws its motivation from two related principles that are firmly grounded in the common Christian moral heritage, namely, the call to unity and the call to love. For if the Church is indeed to be a sign of the reconciliation of human beings to God and one another, then love seeking unity is the way.<sup>10</sup>
- (12) Scripture affirms, time and again, that Christians are called to love God with all their hearts, and their neighbours as themselves (Matt. 22:34-40).<sup>11</sup> Grounded in holy scripture and the words of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, and present in the witness of the lives of Christians in history, in this commandment lies the basis of a shared moral commitment among the churches and all Christians to the pursuit of the morally good and the right.
- (13) Despite the fundamental commitment of the Christian believer, and of Christian churches, to loving God and neighbour, Christians and Christian churches sometimes fail, either to fully realize what the most loving thing to do is, or to actually do it. Individuals stumble as they seek to

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10. "Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches," *The Ecumenical Review* 55:1 (2003), 4-38: "Faced with the need to develop Christian ethics that respond to current problems and struggles, it is the responsibility of each church to shape its own moral teaching. At the same time, the Special Commission recognizes the WCC as a vital forum for raising and reflecting together on moral issues facing churches and society," para. 23.

11. See also, among others, Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 17-19; Matthew 7:12; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28; Romans 13: 9-10; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8; 1 John 3:23; 4:11-12.

grow in holiness and moral virtue. In a similar way, as the churches have journeyed as communities of believers through history, there have been times when moral teachings, beliefs, or practices of church communities, institutions, or their leadership have fallen short of the full glory of the reign of God.<sup>12</sup> The history of the churches contains painful examples of church leaders who have misused their power to defend, authorize, or engage in acts of oppression and abuse, often affecting the most vulnerable people and groups. Scandals such as sexual abuse severely damage the mission of the churches involved.

- (14) Yet, just as the individual believer who sins does not lose the dignity of being created by God, so too the Church as the Body of Christ cannot lose its holiness, even when particular church communities, institutions, or leadership teach or practise that which in retrospect is judged to be morally wrong. The holiness in the Church as Body of Christ makes it possible for all churches to sincerely seek God's will in moral matters and to engage in dialogue with other churches in an effort to be a sign of visible unity.
- (15) In light of the call to love and the call to unity, it is prudent that all churches should look into the history of their common struggles in moral discernment to better understand how and why they mostly agree and sometimes differ, and when and why a difference might be a threat to preserving or restoring unity. History reveals the differences, but it also reveals that churches still have a lot in common.
- (16) It is in a spirit of humble dialogue and careful listening, of understanding moral discernment as at least in part a process of pastoral accompaniment, that the WCC Commission on Faith and Order understands its task. *Moral Discernment in the Churches* "calls on Christian churches to seek increased dialogue focused on the common ground that is shared

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12. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (TCTCV) reflects on the notion of sin of the Church, for example, in paragraph 35. During the current mandate of this Faith and Order Commission, the responses to TCTCV have been analyzed. For a reflection upon the responses on the theme of sin, see Georgios D. Martzelos, "The Theme of Sin in Relation to the Church as Such," in Faith and Order Paper No. 233 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021). See also: WCC Commission on Faith and Order, *Come and See: A Theological Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*, Faith and Order Paper No. 224 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2019), para. 30: "Christians join in confessing the inhospitality and persecution that some Christians have at times enacted when they have been in positions of power."

as a foundation for seeking understanding of the other in the midst of perceived disagreements.”<sup>13</sup> It is precisely in this spirit that this study may be of use to the churches in their quest for visible unity.

### 1.3 Overview of Methodology and Structure

- (17) This document is the fruit of the work of Study Group 3 of the Faith and Order Commission appointed by the WCC Central Committee in 2014. The study process, titled “The Church in a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace Engaged in Moral Discernment,” was approved by the Faith and Order Commission at its meeting at the Monastery of Caraiman, Busteni, Romania, 17–24 June 2015.<sup>14</sup>
- (18) This study process builds on the 2013 document published by the Faith and Order Commission *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document* in three ways. In light of the ecumenical commitment that any dialogue must begin with learning from and listening to each other’s tradition, the study group first commissioned and published studies from 14 traditions that present a self-description of how each one engages in the process of moral discernment.<sup>15</sup> Each study explains which authorities and sources are taken into consideration by its tradition and sheds light on who in that tradition actually has the authority to issue binding teaching within that tradition.
- (19) Subsequently, the study group decided that learning from history might be beneficial for responding to challenges the churches currently face. After all, history reveals that churches at times saw themselves confronted with new challenges and developments causing them to re-examine their teaching on a given moral issue. How were historical challenges to unity on moral matters between and within traditions overcome? Hence, the study group asked the authors: What can the churches learn from the

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13. *Moral Discernment in the Churches*, para. 86.

14. WCC Commission on Faith and Order, *Minutes of the Meeting at the Monastery of Caraiman, Busteni Romania, 17–24 June 2015*, Faith and Order Paper No. 222 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2015).

15. Myriam Wijlens and Vladimir Shmaliy, eds., *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 1: Learning from Traditions*, Faith and Order Paper No. 228 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021).

past? The studies investigate why the process occurred, what happened in and during the process, and how a reconsidered position emerged. Of eminent importance is the question of how the respective tradition was able to preserve unity within its own tradition and how it possibly did not impede the already existing unity with another tradition. A special challenge in this is certainly the question of why some topics seem to be unity-threatening and others are not.<sup>16</sup>

- (20) The current text is the third contribution in this study process. It presents a tool both for recognizing what common ground is shared and for understanding differences in moral teaching in or between churches, enabling the churches to engage in a dialogue in love to work for unity and the realization of the *koinonia* ethic. The tool is developed from the analysis of the causes of disagreement and means of resolution of the historical cases. Consequently, the present text also references these studies in some detail; they can be found in the second volume of papers described above.<sup>17</sup>
- (21) The tool makes use of a number of figures or diagrams. Those familiar with Faith and Order texts of the past may find the use of such figures rather novel. That being said, the use of figures, and indeed the development of the tool itself, is intended to provide a simple, graphic way of keeping these factors in mind, which hopefully will assist the reader in understanding and making use of the findings.
- (22) The tool presented in the present text is intended to facilitate dialogue about historical or current divisions over moral issues. It can also be used to examine how different churches undertake moral discernment on contemporary issues. It can thus help to unlock the theological riches of different traditions and may open up possibilities for discerning

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16. The study group engaged with the scholars on their papers and analyzed the examples from history during its meeting in Erfurt (Germany) in 2016 as well as in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) in 2018. Myriam Wijlens, Vladimir Shmaliy, and Simone Sinn, eds., *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 2: Learning from History*, Faith and Order Paper No. 229 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021).

17. Drafting meetings took place in Frankfurt (Germany) in October 2018 and in Stuttgart (Germany) in March 2019. The study group meeting in Bossey (Switzerland) in January 2020 reviewed the text. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the work of the study group shifted to online meetings, and the study document was finalized in autumn 2020.

common commitments to unified action. As will be shown, at the heart of many of the historical cases are systematic theological issues, which are the mainstay of the work of the Faith and Order Commission. The tool presented here does not resolve these systematic theological issues. Nor does it resolve certain ecclesiological issues, such as the role of structures and practices of authority in moral discernment. Rather, it aids in understanding these issues by offering a way to reflect on the theological, ecclesial, and moral understandings that underscore the moral discernment processes of one's own church and of other churches. The tool aims to be a mirror and a lens. As a mirror, it helps churches better understand themselves. As a lens, it helps churches better understand each other. By better understanding the theological richness and reasoning of other traditions, which also want to remain faithful to Christ, churches may see new pathways to express unified views and action on contemporary ethical issues. In line with the mandate of the Faith and Order Commission, the tool presented in this document therefore helps to engage in systematic theological study in order "to serve the churches as they call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship."<sup>18</sup>

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18. By-laws of the Faith and Order Commission (2014), para. 3.1. See also para. 3.2, which states that the task of the Faith and Order Commission is "a) To study such questions of faith, order and worship as bear on this purpose and to examine such social, cultural, political, racial and other factors as affect the unity of the church; . . . d) To study matters in the present relationship of the churches to one another which cause difficulties or which particularly require theological clarification."

## 2. Moral Discernment: The Conscience of the Church in History

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### 2.1 Dialogue on Moral Discernment Begins from Commitment to Continuity with the Gospel

- (23) Alongside the extensive agreements that characterize much of the history of Christian witness on morality, at times the churches held different positions on certain moral issues, a situation that is occurring again in our time. Mostly, such differences do not threaten the unity of or between the churches. Sometimes, however, differing positions can be a source of division and animosity.<sup>1</sup> For dialogue to be possible between and within churches on differing moral positions, understanding the processes by which a position has been reached should be the starting point. By examining the grounds and reasons for holding a particular position, people of differing moral positions can enter into a dialogue about why and how they arrived at a different decision or disagreement. As shown in the introduction, Christians share much common ground, not least the biblical calls to love and unity. Consequently, dialogue seeking a unified moral witness should begin with the presumption, arising from our shared mutual respect as Christians, that all who are involved are engaged in a *sincere* effort to discern what they are called to do as Christians in a given situation. Concerning the different ways various Christian traditions have understood God's will for the institutional ordering of the Church, the Faith and Order convergence text *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* spoke about the reality of continuity and change:

Through their patient encounter, in a spirit of mutual respect and attention, many churches have come to a deeper understanding of these differing sensitivities and convictions regarding continuity and change in

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1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, para. 63.

the Church. In that deeper understanding, it becomes clear that the same intent—to obey God’s will for the ordering of the Church—may, in some, inspire commitment to continuity and, in others, commitment to change. The churches are invited to recognize and honour their respective commitment to seeking the will of God in the ordering of the Church. We further invite them to reflect together about the criteria which are employed in different churches for considering issues about continuity and change. How far are such criteria open to development in the light of the urgent call of Christ to reconciliation (cf. Matt. 5:23-24)? Could this be the time for a new approach?<sup>2</sup>

The issue of continuity and change also needs to be explored in relation to moral discernment, and the present study hopes to contribute to such reflection.

- (24) Moral discernment is a process to arrive at an outcome: a decision to act in a certain way. Frequently, it is the comparing of different outcomes that leads to tension and animosity. Nonetheless, it is also clear that a mere focus on outcomes of discernment processes cannot advance a dialogue, since the judgments have been reached. At best, each partner can merely restate their position to the other. This cannot further the understanding of why the other partner has reached that decision in the first place. For this reason, this study maintains that dialogue must begin with an effort to understand processes of moral discernment and that this must begin from the assumption that the dialogue partner has engaged sincerely in these processes.
- (25) The importance of conscience in moral discernment is widely recognized across traditions. For many traditions, conscience has normally been used to refer to the moral discernment of individual Christians. Churches, as communities, have a collective desire to pursue God’s will in a given situation; the communities draw on collective knowledge and wisdom to develop and apply relevant criteria to the issue; these communities reach a collective judgment in light of these criteria and reasoning; and the communities act upon these judgments together. This study uses the term “conscience of the church” to refer to this dynamic corporate

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2. Ibid., para. 24.



engagement of a church with the moral challenges it confronts—analogous with how, in many traditions, the individual believer engages with moral challenges through their conscience. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* describes how the whole community is involved in this corporate engagement.<sup>3</sup>

- (26) *Moral Discernment in the Churches* identified faith sources for moral discernment on which churches draw to engage in moral discernment. These included not only the guidance of the Holy Spirit, scripture, and tradition, but also teaching and decision-making authority, spirituality, and church culture. Furthermore, the study document stated, “The lived experience of individuals and groups directly involved in particular moral issues is a critical component of the process of moral discernment.”<sup>4</sup> The conscience of the church also includes all the processes of moral discernment that a church accepts as valid for itself in light of its reception of these sources of Christian faith. In this study, the term “conscience of the church” is a term for how all these sources are at work in the dynamic activity of the body of Christ that believes it is being guided by the Holy Spirit. Put another way, the conscience of a church is everything in that church’s life that can be, and is, brought to bear on the task of moral discernment by and for the people of God.<sup>5</sup> The concept of conscience of the church is discussed at length below.<sup>6</sup> What is important for now is to recognize that it is a term that denotes every church’s communal effort to realize a *koinonia* ethic by discerning

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3. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* uses the term “sense of the faith” (*sensus fidei*) and elaborates: “The ‘sense’ for the authentic meaning of the Gospel that is shared by the whole people of God, the insights of those dedicated in a special way to biblical and theological studies, and the guidance of those especially consecrated for the ministry of oversight, all collaborate in the discernment of God’s will for the community. Decision-making in the Church seeks and elicits the consensus of all and depends upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit, discerned in attentive listening to God’s Word and to one another” (para. 51).

4. *Moral Discernment in the Churches*, para. 45.

5. *Ibid.*, paras. 31ff.

6. In the Faith and Order study process on moral discernment, an Orthodox account of the conscience of the church was presented. See Metropolitan Vasilios and Kristina Mantasavili, “Approaching Moral Questions from the Conscience of the Church,” in Wijlens and Shmaliy, *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 1*, 1–8. This study document reflects how this notion was further developed in relation to ecumenical dialogue by the study group.

the good and the right in a given set of circumstances through interpretation of its Christian heritage.

- (27) Starting dialogue from the presumption of the sincerity of the dialogue partner to be faithful to Christ does not mean that the results of the partner's discernment processes must be accepted. Indeed, results that are the product of self-interest or expediency can be, and maybe must be, legitimately challenged. Indeed, correction and challenge are an important part of the church's shared work of moral discernment—and also an exercise of charity. Nonetheless, the starting point for dialogue about different *results* of moral discernment—different moral teachings, or different practice on moral issues—is a careful attempt to understand the *processes* of moral discernment that lead to these results. From there, it may be possible not only to achieve mutual understanding, but even to understand more accurately the processes at play in one's own church. In this way, dialogue becomes both a mirror and a lens. From this point of better understanding of one's own position and the position of the other, it may be possible to see new pathways to mutual cooperation to “build up *koinonia*” and the “fullness of life for all.”<sup>7</sup>

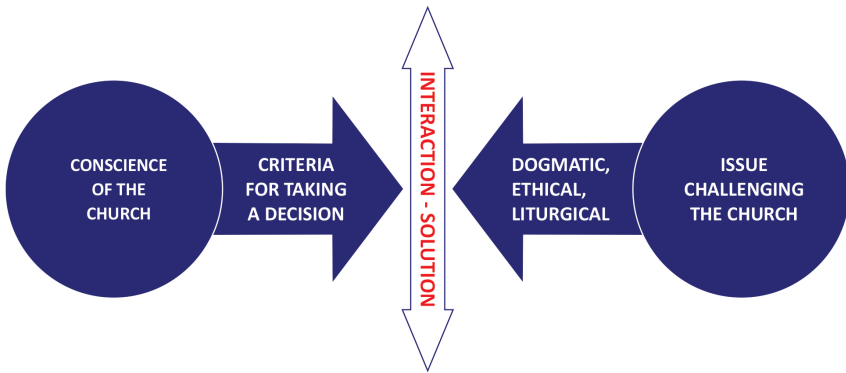
## 2.2 The Conscience of the Church Interacts with Emerging Challenging Issues

- (28) As churches engage in God's mission in and with the world, new circumstances arise that pose challenges for a given church's position at the time. This is true for all sorts of issues, not only moral ones. They may be doctrinal, liturgical, ecclesial, pastoral, and so on.
- (29) Figure 1 illustrates at the most abstract level the interaction between issues that challenge a church and the application of the conscience of the church: this interaction gives rise to moral teaching or practice relevant to the situation. From the study of historical examples of moral discernment and the accounts of moral discernment provided by different

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7. Respectively, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, and *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: An Instrument for an Ecumenical Reflection on Hermeneutics*, Faith and Order Paper 182 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998).

traditions,<sup>8</sup> it is clear that such an interaction, in its broadest sense, is something that all churches share.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 1: The interaction between the conscience of the church and the issues challenging the church**

- (30) Scripture tells us how responding to new challenges was already part of the earliest experience of the church. Some argued that circumcision for Gentiles who wanted to become believers was necessary for salvation, whereas others held a different view. Clearly, the subject threatened to cause a division in the church. The question was brought to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem by Paul and Barnabas on behalf of the church in Antioch. The Council of Jerusalem engaged in a discernment process and the church was guided by the Holy Spirit to reach a common decision (Acts 15).
- (31) Even in the much more recent history of the ecumenical movement, distinctions were made to work out the basis for membership in the WCC.

8. See the specific studies commissioned by Faith and Order study group 3 for the purposes of investigations into moral decision making, published as *Churches and Moral Discernment: Learning from Traditions* (vol. 1), and *Churches and Moral Discernment: Learning from History* (vol. 2).

9. For example, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* affirms, “Many historical, cultural and demographic factors condition the relation between Church and state, and between Church and society. . . . The explicit call of Jesus that his disciples be the ‘salt of the earth’ and the ‘light of the world’ (cf. Matt. 5:13-16) has led Christians to engage with political and economic authorities in order to promote the values of the kingdom of God, and to oppose policies and initiatives which contradict them” (para. 65).

The original basis approved by the inaugural assembly in Amsterdam in 1948 read, “The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour.” By the 3rd Assembly of the WCC in New Delhi in 1961, the basis had become “The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” This was in response to criticisms of the first basis, and to studies of those criticisms, and even this was not met with unanimous support.<sup>10</sup>

- (32) The two examples illustrate that churches frequently need to respond to issues of various kinds that call for a new decision by the church concerning various doctrinal, liturgical, ecclesial, moral, and other matters. These issues that challenge a church are illustrated by the circle on the right of Figure 1. The nature of the challenge—for example, doctrinal, liturgical, or moral—is represented by the arrow on the right.

## **2.3 The Conscience of the Church Informs the Criteria to Arrive at Solutions**

- (33) To arrive at a solution to a challenging issue, the matter is studied in light of the conscience of the church (see the circle on the left of Figure 1). The church—engaging the whole conscience of the church—applies relevant criteria to the situation (illustrated by an arrow arriving from the left). The church arrives at a decision point: the interaction with the situation and the outcomes. This section further elaborates on the concept of the conscience of the church introduced in section 2.1. In particular, the present section addresses how the conscience of the church is related to the nature of the church as both expressive of the reign of God and instrumental in bringing about that reign—as both “already” and “not yet.”

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10. See T. K. Thomas and Tom Stransky, “Theological and Historical Background of the WCC Basis,” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 2nd ed., ed. Nicholas Lossky, José Míguez Bonino, John Pobee, Tom Stransky, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Pauline Webb (Geneva: WCC Publications; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). See also *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, para. 30.

- (34) The conscience of the church (as described in 2.1) is shaped by the church's nature as a community of believers constituting the body of Christ rendering the eschatological reality of the reign of God present in history. According the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism,

The mission of the Church ensues from the nature of the Church as the body of Christ, sharing in the ministry of Christ as Mediator between God and his creation. At the heart of the Church's vocation in the world is the proclamation of the kingdom of God inaugurated in Jesus the Lord, crucified and risen. Through its internal life of eucharistic worship, thanksgiving, intercessory prayer, through planning for mission and evangelism, through a daily life-style of solidarity with the poor, through advocacy even to confrontation with the powers that oppress human beings, the churches are trying to fulfil this evangelistic vocation.<sup>11</sup>

- (35) The conscience of the church includes all that is known from scripture, Tradition and traditions,<sup>12</sup> as well as the lived practice of the church as a community of prayer and service to God and neighbour. Thus, the shared experience of worship is part of this conscience and is "both *instrumental* (in that God uses [it] to bring about a new reality), and *expressive* (of an already-existing reality)."<sup>13</sup> Especially in the celebration of the

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11. World Council of Churches, "Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation" (1982), in *You Are the Light of the World: Statements on Mission by the World Council of Churches*, ed. J. Matthey (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), 8, cited in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, para. 4. See also paras. 33 and 34: "The Church is an eschatological reality, already anticipating the kingdom, but not yet its full realization. The Holy Spirit is the principal agent in establishing the kingdom and in guiding the Church so that it can be a servant of God's work in this process. Only as we view the present in the light of the activity of the Holy Spirit, guiding the whole process of salvation history to its final recapitulation in Christ to the glory of the Father, do we begin to grasp something of the mystery of the Church."

12. The papers we received indicated that there has not been universal reception of the outcome of the discussions in the Faith and Order Commission that led in 1963 to a distinction between Tradition (with capital T), tradition (with small t), and traditions. In our report, following the 1963 report, we use "tradition" to mean the forms and practices through which the gospel is transmitted within the churches, and "traditions" or "confessional tradition" to draw attention to the diversity within this process: see Patrick C. Rodger and Lukas Vischer, eds., *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963*, Faith and Order Paper No. 42 (London: SCM Press, 1964), 50, para. 39.

13. *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition: A Study Text*, Faith and Order Paper No. 210 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2011), para. 30.

eucharist, the church *expresses* the already-existing reality of the gospel, of all that God has already accomplished in creation, redemption, and sanctification (*doxologia*), of the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus and of what was accomplished once for all on the Cross (*anamnesis*).<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the eucharist is *instrumental* in that God uses it to bring about the deepening of the communion of the faithful “as an anticipation and foretaste of the kingdom to come, impelling them to go out and share Christ’s mission of inaugurating that kingdom even now.”<sup>15</sup>

- (36) Through participation in the proclamation of the gospel and the liturgical life of the church as the body of Christ, which includes for many churches “sacraments” or “ordinances,”<sup>16</sup> the believer experiences faith and experiences being in relation with God and the other members of the body of Christ. Whatever criteria in the conscience of the church are identified as relevant to an issue, they are identified out of concern for these two interrelated realities, namely, that the church as the body of Christ (a) continues to be the visible sign of God’s reign *already* established and (b) can serve the salvation of the believer and the world (the not yet). “The Church is an eschatological reality, already anticipating the kingdom, but not yet its full realization.”<sup>17</sup>
- (37) In the Orthodox tradition, one way of holding together these dimensions in the church’s moral discernment is by applying *akriveia* (canonical accuracy) and *oikonomia* (pastoral discretion). *Akriveia* is the precise application—to the letter—of the already-existing norms found in the conscience of the church, for example, the prohibitions found in scripture or the canons of a church, which may include among other things predetermined canonical penances (ἐπιτίμια). *Oikonomia* (οἰκονομία) is pastoral discernment and the philanthropic (φιλάνθρωπος) application of the norms found in the conscience of the church, so that these could become curative for human beings and their salvation.<sup>18</sup> The primary

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14. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, para. 42.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition*, paras. 28 and 29.

17. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, para. 33.

18. The term *oikonomia* has two senses: (1) applying to God’s salvific plan for humanity and all creation, and (2) as in this document, applying to the discernment exercised by the church in day-to-day life, and aiming at the healing of the person.

concern is interpretation and application for the salvation of the believer rather than the strict application of an existing rule or norm. All churches balance the need to hold principles strictly with the need to attend to pastoral needs in a given situation. Whereas some churches refer to this as applying *akriveia* and *oikonomia*, others might take recourse to similar principles but use a different terminology. Others, again, might give a preeminent relevance to the conscience of the individual believer. Both approaches are valid and can be validly applied at different times by a church, but they will have differing consequences both for the conscience of the church going forward (discernment processes in the future) and for individual believers.

- (38) Where the emphasis lies on these two approaches can vary between churches and within churches according to the issues being addressed. At times, the emphasis may be on *akriveia*, and at other times on *oikonomia*. Consider the following example of *oikonomia* in the history of the Orthodox church regarding the participation in war and killing an opponent in the battlefield.<sup>19</sup> Murder is an act forbidden for any Christian and the penance for murder in the Orthodox tradition is 20 years of abstinence from divine eucharist. Nonetheless, Christians throughout history found themselves forced to participate in war in order to defend themselves, their families, homelands, and in some cases to protect their faith. So, in cases where a Christian was forced to kill during war, the application of *oikonomia* resulted in the penance being reduced to a three-year abstinence from divine eucharist. This milder penance was meant to send a double message. First, it affirms the message inherent in the original prohibition of murder that war and violence are incompatible with the gospel and that they are not part of the heavenly kingdom pursued by Christians and experienced liturgically in the divine eucharist. Second, and at the same time, it recognizes that in the present world dominated by human greed, war and killing are sometimes unavoidable, and in the interests of the salvation of returning soldiers who have found themselves in this situation, a shorter abstinence from divine eucharist is imposed in order for them to repent and then return to communion.
- (39) The history of the churches, and of each church, reveals a variety of examples in which moral discernment processes—responding to the

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19. This example is also discussed later in the present text: see Box 19, in section 4.3.8 below.

challenges of specific historical situations—have resulted in different responses and reactions. Some of these reactions consist of a firm reiteration of a church's position; some of these reactions include accommodation of a particular situation at a pastoral level without any change to the meaning and force of an existing position; some of these reactions include developments in the understanding of an existing position, affecting its application without altering its existence; some of these reactions may even lead to changes or modifications of practice and moral teaching, and the abandonment or even condemnation of the previous position.

- (40) In some cases, large-scale shifts have eventually involved all or most churches in a given context—for example, the move from absolute condemnation of usury to widespread acceptance of the lending money at interest.<sup>20</sup> In other cases, and at other points in time, different church moral discernment processes on the same issue have produced noticeably different results, in some cases contributing to church division: for example, disagreements on the morally right way to tackle the problem of slavery in the southern states of the USA. Some felt that toleration was necessary to ensure continued access to enslaved persons who are Black for the salvation of their souls,<sup>21</sup> whereas others felt that any toleration implied complicity in the sin of slavery.<sup>22</sup> Still others felt justified in resorting to violent means to free enslaved persons.<sup>23</sup>
- (41) For dialogue to be fruitful today, it is helpful to start from the presumption of sincerity; that is, that the dialogue partner is sincerely trying to seek the will of God regarding the issues at hand. This is not to say that one must accept the resulting norms for behaviour proposed by the other. This is only to say that there ought to be mutual recognition of the sincerity of the processes of discernment in the dialogue partner as a starting point for substantive dialogue.

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20. See Boxes 5 and 6 in section 3.5 and Box 18 in section 4.3.8.

21. See Box 13 in section 4.3.3.

22. See Box 12 in section 4.3.3.

23. See Box 4 in section 3.4.



## 2.4 Historical Examples Reveal Common Factors in the Processes of Discernment

- (42) Studying historical examples of moral discernment processes is helpful because it allows a detailed exploration of how churches have met the moral challenges of new situations. It shows how their moral discernment has been shaped by key elements of the conscience of the church as well as by relations to their historical contexts. The study of *diachronic* differences (how and why a church's moral discernment produces different results over time) makes it easier to study and appreciate *synchronic* differences (how and why churches today might hold different moral positions on a current issue). But it also opens up new pathways to promote not merely mutual understanding but shared solutions to new problems without compromising the heritage of one's own church. Also important, though beyond the scope of the present study, is the consideration of how diachronic continuity without change and synchronic agreement take place. Comparing the accounts of such differences and agreements can help to reveal the criteria for distinguishing change that is acceptable, and even called for, from change that is not faithful to the gospel.
- (43) Careful study of churches' moral discernment processes may reveal them to be sincere attempts to maintain faithfulness to the gospel, arising from the conscience of the church. From an ecumenical perspective, a substantial result of this study document could be that Christians from different church traditions can recognize in each other this shared intention, reflected in their moral discernment processes, to remain a faithful witness to the gospel.
- (44) This would not imply accepting the *results* of another church's moral discernment process, nor indeed accepting that the conscience of that church is rightly formed.<sup>24</sup> However, an important starting point for dialogue on any specific issue of moral teaching or practice is to have mutual recognition that the respective churches did not reach their positions

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24. Following the Toronto Statement of 1950, the suggestion here is that developing mutual understanding of churches' moral discernment processes can be acknowledged as a way of following the "traces" of the true Church that all recognize in fellow WCC member churches ("Toronto Statement," para. IV.5).

arbitrarily. Rather, they reached them in attempted faithfulness to—and accountability before—authoritative sources and traditions, and through moral discernment processes that are integral to a church's identity. That said, embracing this starting point can also help to identify where a particular church is actually not being true to the will of the Lord or where particular “results” are not results at all, but rather expressions of prejudice, expediency, or hegemony.

- (45) This basic level of mutual recognition does not preclude or replace critical dialogue and evaluation of each other's moral teaching or practice. In some cases, indeed, the results of a church's moral discernment will be perceived by other churches—and potentially also by members of that church—to change the essential character of that church body in a way that places it outside the Christian fellowship. This happened when some churches accepted and enacted apartheid in South Africa.<sup>25</sup> Even in such cases, it is useful, particularly with the benefit of hindsight, to study the processes that led to such results—not least in order to understand how it was possible for these churches to subsequently change their position and re-enter the dialogue in a new light. The readmission of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa to the WCC in 2016 testifies to how dialogue on moral issues, and especially the systematic theological issues that underpin them, can promote visible unity.<sup>26</sup>

## 2.5 The Challenge of the Language of Change

- (46) Some churches would describe the result of moral discernment processes, in at least some cases, as a change in moral position. Others would resist this description and say that applying the unchanging conscience of the church to a new situation—and hence producing a “new” specific solution to the problem at hand—does not constitute moral change. This difference explains how disagreements can arise between churches about how change is perceived. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* offers

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25. See Box 7 in section 3.6.

26. Daniel Buda, “From Cottesloe (1961) to Trondheim (2016): The Journey of the Dutch Reformed Church back into the Ecumenical Family of the World Council of Churches,” *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies* 74:4 (2018): 1–6.

an example of different views about change concerning an ecclesiological issue: the institutional form of ordained ministry in the church: “Some hold that faithfulness to the Gospel may at times require a break in institutional continuity, while others insist that such faithfulness can be maintained by resolving difficulties without breaks that lead to separation.”<sup>27</sup> The same difference in attitudes can be affirmed, analogously, regarding change in moral positions. Some are more inclined to say that the church’s moral position can or should change to maintain faithfulness to the gospel, while others are more likely to emphasize unbroken continuity in the church’s moral discernment.

- (47) *The Church: Towards A Common Vision* invites further reflection on issues of continuity and change in matters of church order. A later section of the present document contributes to that reflection by considering how different ecclesiological predispositions to matters of continuity and change may affect approaches to moral discernment.<sup>28</sup> For now, the key point to note is that all churches’ moral discernment processes are undertaken intending fundamental *continuity*, in continued faithfulness to the gospel. All churches’ moral discernments will involve finding responses to *new* challenges precisely in order to remain faithful. In moral discernment, churches have developed different ways of safeguarding continuity. They have also developed different ways of responding to, and collectively evaluating, the moral discernment that happens at many different levels—from the individual Christian to the local congregation to the regional, national, or global body. As *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* notes:

The “sense” for the authentic meaning of the Gospel that is shared by the whole people of God, the insights of those dedicated in a special way to biblical and theological studies, and the guidance of those especially consecrated for the ministry of oversight, all collaborate in the discernment of God’s will for the community. Decision-making in the Church seeks and elicits the consensus of all and depends upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit, discerned in attentive listening to God’s Word and to one another.<sup>29</sup>

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27. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, para. 24.

28. See section 4.3.6.

29. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, para. 51.

- (48) Something that is perceived within one church as a development or modification of a position within a continuous fundamental identity might be perceived by other churches as a change or even break with tradition. The same is true for different groups that can hold different opinions within one church. It is important to understand that the very notion of change can itself lead to difficulties, even at the outset of dialogue. Recognizing that what looks like change for some might look like application of the unchanging for others allows dialogue to begin to focus on the process of moral discernment without getting prematurely fixated on apparent differences from the beginning. Instead, dialogue can begin from the common presumption of a desire for continuity with the gospel.

### 3. How Changes Emerge through Moral Discernment Processes

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- (49) This section explores what happens—in terms of continuity and change within churches—when a moral discernment process within a church leads to a norm for behaviour that appears to differ from previous norms. A moral norm, in a very general sense, is simply a statement about what ought to happen in a given situation. “You ought not to steal” is an example of a widely held moral norm.<sup>1</sup>
- (50) Based on historical examples, this section maps *some* of the ways in which changes, developments, adaptations, or reconsiderations of moral teaching or practice can occur. This mapping is not intended to be comprehensive; rather, it will illustrate how processes of moral discernment can lead to various kinds of difference or division. In other words, while the previous section described how discernment processes result in making distinctions that can have implications for church self-understanding and practice (as in Acts 15), this section deepens the understandings of the kinds of distinctions that can be made in relation to moral discernment. This section uses six historical examples to illustrate some of the different kinds of outcomes of moral discernment processes. These examples are drawn from the historical studies commissioned by the study group.<sup>2</sup> The examples selected and the processes they exemplify are intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. The following brief summaries of these examples (which will be discussed in detail in later sections) indicate how the changes, developments, or reconsiderations in moral teaching or practice in these different historical examples are in fact of different kinds.

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1. Norms can be of several kinds. They are not all necessarily moral in nature. In the broadest sense, norms are instructions for practice or behaviour: for example, about liturgy. They may also be known by different names in different churches or contexts, e.g., canons, rules, disciplines, and so on.

2. Wijlens, Shmaliy, and Sinn, *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 2*.

- The first example considers changed practices in the Coptic Orthodox Church with regard to holding funeral services after a person has committed suicide. In this case, what was previously culpable is no longer treated as culpable *per se*, thus allowing for an ecclesial funeral in certain circumstances.
- The second example considers changes that permit conscientious objection to military service in the Lutheran church. In this case, what was morally unacceptable becomes morally acceptable on grounds that differ from those used to justify the existing norm. These different grounds are nonetheless accepted as valid grounds alongside the previous morally acceptable norm and grounds.
- The third example considers changes to the teaching on the use of contraception in the Anglican church. In this case, what was morally unacceptable becomes morally acceptable under certain circumstances through reconsideration of the *same* previously valid grounds. The same grounds that generally proscribe the practice permit it in certain circumstances.
- The fourth example considers changes to the application of the principle of opposition to slavery in the Methodist church in North America. What is morally obligatory is treated as morally unattainable by some in the church on grounds of circumstances and on grounds of other values, for example, salvation. This leads to a division between those who insist on the obligatory nature of the existing norm regardless of the circumstances, and those who accept the norm as an ideal that is a barrier to other goods.
- The fifth example considers changes concerning the practice of usury, that is, lending money at interest in the Roman Catholic and the Reformed churches. In this case, what was morally unacceptable becomes morally acceptable, but for *different* reasons or grounds in two *different* communities. Different processes of reasoning arrive at the same conclusion about acceptability of a practice.
- The sixth example examines the development and demise of apartheid and the Dutch Reformed Church. In this case, a new practice arises in a community, is given spurious theological grounds, and is accepted as theologically and morally justifiable until reflection reveals that these grounds were wrong and the practices morally sinful. The community repents and returns to its previous morally acceptable practice.

This differs from the slavery example in that opposition to slavery was never a core tenet of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. Rather, entrenched racial division arises as a novel practice in the worshipping community and is given theological justification.

- (51) Each of these examples is explained in more detail below; based on the studies of the historical examples, members of the study group have written summaries that are presented in boxes. These summaries are presented where they are most apt and may also be referred to again elsewhere in the text. Note that these are illustrative of outcomes and are in no way meant to evaluate whether the outcome described or the process used was right or wrong, good or bad. It is also important to remember that the examples offered here are not intended to be exhaustive. They are examples that emerge from the work commissioned by the study group. Nonetheless, the examples serve to illustrate that moral “change,” development, or reconsideration does happen. Reflection on these examples can help churches to examine their own historical developments or present tensions.

### **3.1 Circumstances May Prompt a Redefinition of Actions in Certain Cases such that an Existing Norm Does Not Apply**

- (52) A new development in moral discernment within one part of a church may be recognized more widely as a refinement of the application of existing norms in the conscience of the church to individual needs and circumstances that is integral to good pastoral practice. An example of this refinement is the Coptic Orthodox Church’s treatment of some cases of death by suicide, allowing for the church’s care to extend to those who commit suicide as result of mental illness (see Box 1). This is a position that would be more widely recognized as good pastoral practice.<sup>3</sup> In this example, there is a concrete change in practice: some cases of suicide that would otherwise be treated as a morally culpable sin (with all this might entail for the Coptic Orthodox Church) are not considered as free acts, and therefore the people are not considered culpable. Hence, the pastoral response is different. The traditional norm proscribing suicide has not changed, maintaining a fundamental continuity. Nonetheless, in

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3. See also Box 14 on the Roman Catholic treatment of suicide in section 4.3.4.

applying this norm to specific cases at the pastoral level, the church as a whole has acknowledged that certain suicides should not be treated as suicide in the sense implied by the existing norm. This is because the persons who killed themselves were not in control of their actions at the time due to mental illness and thus cannot be held responsible for them.<sup>4</sup>

#### BOX 1

##### **“Suicide: A Coptic Orthodox Perspective”**

*by Wedad A. Tawfik*

Tawfik’s study opens with a brief history of the Coptic Orthodox Church, explaining that scripture is the first source of teaching within the church. Tradition is seen as a second source, but not of lesser importance.

When the church faces different circumstances and contexts, there is always need for reflection and response. Within the Coptic Orthodox Church, decisions on matters like moral discernment are referred to the local bishop, who then also refers to the Holy Synod. Even the patriarch cannot make a decision on his own: the Coptic Orthodox Church is a synodical church.

Tawfik explains the terms *akriveia* and *oikonomia*. *Akriveia* refers to the strict adherence to the laws of the church; and in reference to moral discernment, *oikonomia* concerns the way the church handles new matters that arise, unrelated to the fundamentals of the faith.

In the case of suicide, there is clear scriptural prohibition. The commandment in Exodus 20:13 against murder also applies to suicide, and this commandment is affirmed in the New Testament teaching of Jesus (Matt. 5:21, 22; 19:18). Further, scriptural examples of suicide are clearly viewed negatively (e.g., King Saul and Judas Iscariot). Based on these biblical passages, a person who commits suicide has committed the crime of killing, with no repentance. The *akriveia* understanding is clear, therefore, and suicide is condemned. From the earliest times, there was church consensus about this, leading to a refusal by the church to administer funeral prayers over a person who died by suicide.

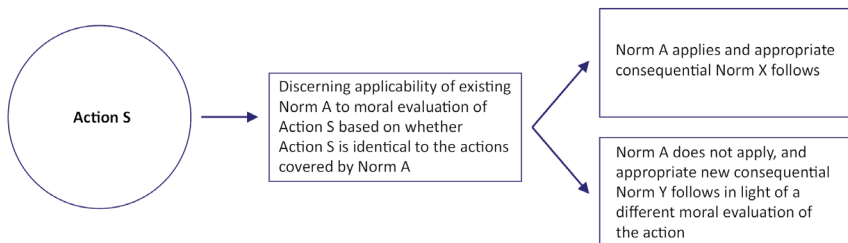
At the same time, however, *oikonomia* is also applied within the church in the case of suicide. St Timothy I, Pope of Alexandria (381

4. See also the explanation in paragraph 31 in the Orthodox Special Commission document, *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*.



A.D.), in his Canon (14) says, “No oblation shall be done for a person who murders himself, except the case be very clear that he was distracted” (St Timothy I of Alexandria, Canon 14, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, 2nd Series, vol. 14 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 613). This is now expressed as an understanding that a person with a mental illness is not to be held responsible for their actions. In such circumstances, a person who has committed suicide can receive a church funeral and prayers.

- (53) In this case (see Figure 2), the existing norm (A) (the prohibition of suicide in the example) has been preserved. However, some actions that might at first look like the kind of action prohibited by (A) are recognized as being sufficiently different from the kind of action prohibited by (A) to warrant another moral evaluation. Recognition of this different kind of action (in the example, suicide as a result of mental illness) results in different moral evaluation and consequently different pastoral responses.<sup>5</sup>

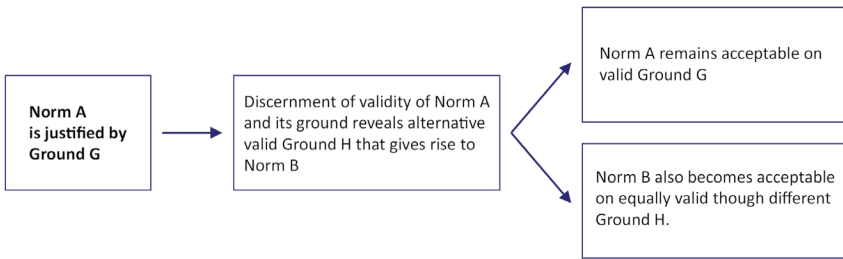


**Figure 2: Discerning the applicability of an existing norm based on new awareness of circumstances surrounding an action**

5. Other examples of this kind of development can be found: for example, the Roman Catholic Church's development of doctrine around usury, in which the prohibition of usury remains but some kinds of lending at interest are no longer treated as usury (see Box 6, section 3.5) and the development of Greek Orthodox understandings of killing during war, in which this type of killing is treated as different from murder and consequently incurs different, lighter consequences (see Box 19, section 4.3.8).

### 3.2 Recognition of Additional Grounds Can Permit a Range of Morally Acceptable Norms

- (54) At times, a moral discernment process might lead to a wider range of moral views or practices on a particular subject being accepted than was previously the case. In this case (see Figure 3), the existing norm (A) remains in place and is unchanged. However, discernment processes lead to the recognition of additional legitimate grounds or reasons that support an alternative norm (B). Consequently, both (B) and (A), on the basis of both having different but legitimate reasons to support them, are recognized as morally acceptable options.



**Figure 3: Recognition of additional grounds permitting a range of morally acceptable norms**

- (55) A historical example of this can be seen in the experience of the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* (EKD, Evangelical Church in Germany) in West Germany in the 1950s (see Box 2). The question for the churches was whether conscientious objection to military service could be permitted, especially as it was recognized as a constitutional right. The existing position was that military service in the defence of the state was required (existing norm A) on the grounds that “if a God-given authority, like the West German government, took up arms, the consideration, whether the upcoming war was a just war, would not rest with the individual, but was clear by definition, so to speak: a good authority only wages just wars” (Ground G).<sup>6</sup> However, conscientious objection to military service was recognized as a morally legitimate option (norm B) on the grounds that, in light of the new risk of nuclear war and total annihilation, “war

6. Hendrik Meyer-Magister, “Christian Conscientious Objection: Moral Debate and Discernment in West German Protestantism in the 1950s,” in Wijlens, Shmaliy, and Sinn, *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 2*, 202.

was no longer an inevitable fact and a means of God's providence in this world, but opposed to his will" (Ground H).<sup>7</sup> The solution to the problem invoked the principle of complementarity, which argued that both positions and their grounds can be legitimately supported by a unified church provided they are chosen in good conscience by the individual as the best way to ensure peace in the world.

## BOX 2

### **"Christian Conscientious Objection: Moral Debate and Discernment in West German Protestantism in the 1950s"** *by Hendrik Meyer-Magister*

Meyer-Magister explores moral discernment about conscientious objection in Protestant churches in West Germany in the 1950s, a process that brought German Protestantism to the edge of division. Conscientious objection was a challenge to Protestant churches at that time, and the particular contextual and political motives were inseparable from the theological reflection. Prior to this, the Lutheran understanding of war was based on the doctrine of "two kingdoms," which separated church and state, in this instance arguing that the state has the right to defend itself by military force and the faithful Christian was obliged to participate. There were two new aspects to this discussion: the West German constitution and the changes in understanding brought about by the possibilities of nuclear armaments.

The West German constitution legally enshrined conscientious objection as part of the protection of religious freedom, as some religious minorities were persecuted in the Nazi era. This was accepted within Lutheran Protestantism, but there were two views within the church. One, a more conservative position, accepted conscientious objection essentially as a matter of the toleration of religious minorities. But a more left-wing position appreciated the legitimacy of conscientious objection, particularly with weapons of mass destruction in the equation.

Meyer-Magister refers to a paper presented to the synod in 1958 that argued that opposition to nuclear arms was a *status confessionis* matter. The discussion brought the church to the brink of division because

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7. Ibid., 199.

this synod (the “fainting” synod) refused to decide the matter in order to remain together.

A “study commission on war in the atomic age,” which included two physicists, argued in a set of 11 theses, the Heidelberg theses, that both options—serving in a nuclear-equipped army and conscientious objection—can serve world peace, and that an individual’s decision must always be oriented toward this goal. These options, although mutually exclusive, need and support each other. It was summarized in the phrase, “Not everybody must do the same, but everybody must know what he is doing.” Although this was criticized as morally indecisive, it allowed the church to remain together, accepting both participation in war and conscientious objection as faithful options for the Christian, with the locus of decision-making shifted to the individual and their perception of the situation.

### **3.3 Reconsideration of an Existing Ground Can Permit a Range of Morally Acceptable Norms**

- (56) A new social or scientific development can lead to collective deliberation in the decision-making bodies of a church and then to a change in the official position of the church in light of this new information. In the 1930 Lambeth Conference’s deliberations on the moral acceptability of contraception, it was resolved that although the existing norms of abstinence were preferable, contraception could be morally acceptable in some circumstances (see Box 3). This is clearly a newly acceptable moral practice that was not accepted previously. Nonetheless, it is still interpreted as being in continuity with the commitment to the gospel:

In those cases where there is such a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, and where there is a morally sound reason for avoiding complete abstinence, the Conference agrees that other methods may be used, provided that this is done *in the light of the same Christian principles*. The Conference records its strong condemnation of the use of any

methods of conception control from motives of selfishness, luxury, or mere convenience. (*Italics added for emphasis.*)<sup>8</sup>

**BOX 3****"The 1930 Lambeth Conference and Artificial Contraception:  
A Paradigm of Anglican Moral Discernment"**

*by John Gibaut*

Gibaut's study analyzes how the Lambeth Conference of 1930 addressed the topic of artificial contraception. Understanding the discernment process requires returning to developments from the late 16th century onward, when the Anglican communion recognized three sources of authority—scripture, tradition, and reason—based on the teaching of Richard Hooker. Given that no church would claim to be "unreasonable" in their theological methodology, this cannot be seen to be a unique claim within Anglican theology. But this particular focus on reason and its significance is a distinctly Anglican theological method of discernment.

Hooker's methodology arose in the midst of Puritan disputes, where questions of the church/state division, ministry, and particularly the episcopate, as well as of sources of authority within church and society, were all deeply divisive matters. To Hooker, reason is linked to tradition and scripture. Reason is necessary for reading scripture, and Hooker argues that a reasonable reading of scripture could justify a church acting against something prescribed in scripture if, for example, it can be reasoned that a passage in its historical setting is irrelevant to the current context. Reason is also competent to deal with questions that are not raised in scripture. Scripture, however, is entirely sufficient when it comes to salvation and eternal life. Reason itself, according to Hooker, is not an independent source of authority; it needs to be applied within the "triad" formed with scripture and tradition.

In the Lambeth Conference of 1930, the Anglican communion gave qualified permission for the use of artificial contraception by faithful members of the Anglican communion. The authority of reason in the 1930 conference showed clearly in the resolutions on human sexuality,

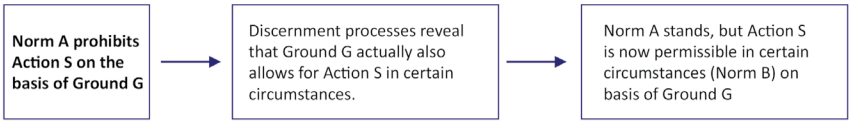
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8. *The Lambeth Conference Resolutions Archive from 1930* (Anglican Communion Office, 2005), <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/127734/1930.pdf>.

but this emphasis is evident earlier in the conference as well. Resolutions 2 and 5 cited increases in scientific knowledge and understanding, which were seen as part of historical Anglican discourse on authority of reason. Resolution 3 affirmed reading and interpreting scripture in light of reason.

The Lambeth Conference resolutions on “The Life and Witness of the Christian Community—Marriage and Sex” brought this specifically Anglican understanding of reason to the fore. The bishops clearly preferred abstinence as the highest form of birth control, but nevertheless did affirm that moral situations exist that make other methods necessary. This decision was affected by the best medical advice and scientific authority of the day—that is to say, by “reason.”

(57) In this case (see Figure 4), a prohibition of an action, norm (A), has been replaced by a permission of an action, norm (B). Note, however, that this happens in a context in which other positions remain unchanged and recommended. So, while the practice of not using contraceptives is recommended in 1930, the practice of using contraceptives is also acceptable in certain circumstances and still governed by the same Christian principles. What has changed is that there is no longer an absolute prohibition of a specific action (use of contraceptives in marriage).



**Figure 4: Discerning that what was previously morally unacceptable (A) is now acceptable (B)**

### 3.4 Different Interpretations of How to Apply an Existing Norm Can Lead to Division

- (58) A moral discernment process might lead to ongoing divisions or a split in a church. An example of such a split occurred in the Methodist church in North America prior to the American Civil War (see Box 4). The split was in part caused by differences in how to apply the traditionally strong opposition to slavery inherent to Methodism. Methodism, as established by John Wesley, was against slavery. When the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) was formed in North America, it was also against slavery. Nonetheless, because slavery was strongly entrenched in the US South, the MEC began to make concessions to churches in the southern states. Officially, opposition remained a central moral tenet of the MEC, but slaveholders in the South were no longer barred from receiving the eucharist. The official argument offered was that legal and civil circumstances in the South made active dismantling of slavery impossible in the short term, and it was more important to tolerate the practice so as not to upset slaveholders and thereby ensure access to church members among the enslaved persons to spread the gospel and save souls. This position was unacceptable for many African American members of the MEC, for whom active opposition to slavery was a non-negotiable principle of Christianity as received from John Wesley. The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) was formed as a breakaway from the MEC to maintain a strong opposition to slavery as part of its ecclesial identity.

#### BOX 4

##### **“Moral Discernment and Slavery: The Case of the African Methodist Episcopal Church”** *by Dennis C. Dickerson*

Dickerson’s study recalls that the African Methodist Episcopal Church was founded by Richard Allen in 1787. Allen, who was born into slavery in 1760, was deeply influenced by the theology of John and Charles Wesley, which emphasized themes of freedom from bondage. Allen became a travelling Methodist preacher within the MEC, where he saw African American converts treated equally.

At the Christmas Conference in 1784, however, Allen perceived an increased emphasis on the trappings of respectability. Another significant event at the Christmas Conference was a relaxation of the strictures against slavery, which had required refusing communion to slaveholders. This requirement was resisted by Methodists from the South as southern preachers wanted to preach to enslaved persons and needed the support of the slaveholders. By the early 19th century, white Methodists increasingly tolerated slavery. In Allen's experience, this "poisoned" the treatment of Black Wesleyans, including his own treatment as one of the most prominent Black preachers in the MEC. Allen was invited to preach in Philadelphia, but when he proposed building a church, he was opposed. On a proposed preaching tour, Bishop Asbury forbade Allen to mix with enslaved persons and told him to sleep in his carriage; Allen then refused to participate. In 1787, when Black members were segregated and mistreated at St George's MEC, Allen left the MEC and started the AME church.

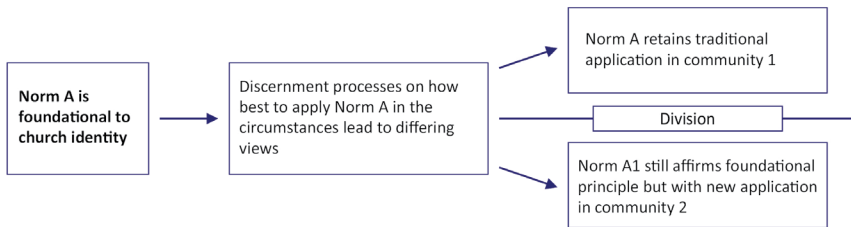
The AME maintained a very clear antislavery position throughout the years of the war. However, the AME did face some difficulties in discerning how to embody their antislavery stance. Some AME congregations were closely linked to insurgency movements. Other congregations felt that the church should be a refuge from racist structures in society.

The AME also faced complex decisions when members wanted to purchase enslaved persons to free them. In 1856, a majority report to the conference condemned "the buying and selling of men, women and children, except with an intention to free them immediately." However, this report was not accepted but replaced by a report that eased the time frame for release of enslaved persons. These difficulties for the AME never represented a change in the church's foundational understanding opposing slavery, but they do show a church struggling in challenging circumstances to respond faithfully to the different circumstances it faced.

- (59) In this case (see Figure 5), an existing norm of opposition to slavery (A) is interpreted differently by two communities to result in two differing practices: one community, the AME, continues to hold strictly to the existing prohibition (A), whilst the second, the MEC under the influence of members in the southern states, uses the circumstances of slavery



in the South to justify a toleration of the practice to ensure access to enslaved persons to focus on saving souls (A1).<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 5: Different interpretations of an existing norm leading to division**

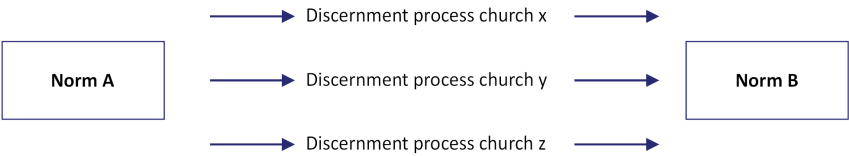
### 3.5 Different Discernment Processes in Different Churches Can Arrive at New Norms that Permit the Same Practice

- (60) There are also many possibilities when we compare the outcomes of moral discernment processes in different churches. Two churches facing the same challenge may arrive at a very similar result despite differences in (for example) ecclesial self-understanding, structures of authority, or ways of approaching different kinds of moral norms.<sup>10</sup> The parallel developments within the churches in the early modern period of responses to new economic practices provide a good example of this (see Figure 6). In this case, two churches have an existing position (A), for example,

9. This example is A and A1 rather than B because, at least in official records of the MEC, opposition to slavery is maintained as a foundational principle. The claim is that the principle must be applied differently in the circumstances. It should also be noted, however, that apologists for slavery used a very different rationale, even in the Methodist churches in the South. These would rather have simply disposed of the traditional opposition to slavery by arguing that slavery was in fact not merely tolerable under the circumstance in the pursuit of other goods, but indeed theologically justified. This would be more like the position described in 3.6 below, where a church moves from position A to position B and then back again. Indeed, increasing justification, rather than mere toleration of slavery by churches in the South led in 1840 to a split in the MEC, into the MEC North (which opposed slavery) and the MEC South (which largely accepted it). See Box 12 in section 4.3.3.

10. See section 4.3.2.

prohibiting an action (the lending of money at interest). They both arrive at a position (B), in this case permitting the action (lending money at interest). However, their reasoning for why this is permissible is different.



**Figure 6: Different discernment processes in different churches arriving at new norms permitting the same practice**

Nonetheless, the reasoning is related to a continuity and refinement of the meaning of the original norm. In the cases of usury, the Calvinist reasoning concluded that usury (lending money at interest) was not a sin in some circumstances (see Box 5).<sup>11</sup> As a result of the challenges it met, the Roman Catholic tradition refined its understanding of the notion of usury as a prohibition on *unjust* lending (see Box 6). In that case it was prohibited. Other practices of lending at interest were not described as usury. Hence, the prohibition remained, but the notion of usury changed. In the end, the effect on practice is the same, that is, an action that was previously prohibited in all circumstances is now licit in both traditions in specific ways.

**BOX 5**

**“Calvin and the Ban of Usury”**  
*by Cornelis van der Kooi*

Van der Kooi in his study recalls that in the 16th century, usury was prohibited by the church, although various exceptions were made to allow loans on pastoral grounds. For example, in cases of poverty within the community, money could be loaned to allow someone to live. This was essentially an internal, community law. Foreigners could be charged interest, but not “your brother.”

This understanding was grounded in biblical laws. Aristotle’s understanding of money was also influential: money is understood as a static thing that won’t increase simply by being stored. It is, therefore, a kind of theft to ask for more in return than was originally given.

11. See section 4.3.8.

Writing in Geneva, John Calvin reached a different view of usury. Geneva saw a shift in social conditions and understandings of money in the 14th century. By the 16th century, Geneva was at the forefront of a growing pattern of international trade and needed trading for its survival. This undoubtedly put pressure on the understandings of money and interest.

Calvin acknowledged the social change that was surrounding him, and in reflecting on the scriptures, he reached a reinterpretation of the law. Calvin notes the need to take into account the relationship between law and the legislator. The law is not God, but is given by God, and is then interpreted in a framework of covenants. The eighth commandment is presented within a larger framework of how people deal with what they possess. Life is a gift, as is all we own. In response to this, all social and economic affairs should be driven by equity and love. In Calvin's understanding, the law does not stand on its own but is always located in covenant, an expression of a bond with God. This, for Calvin, becomes a means by which to interpret all other laws and obligations. The law, then, does more than forbid theft; it provides an obligation to be attentive to the needs of poor people. Christians are called to obedience to the interpretation of the law, governed by a dialectic between justice and love.

According to van der Kooi, Calvin sees money itself as productive, and draws a careful distinction between a loan for basic needs and a loan for investment and production. It would be wrong to charge interest on the first; but the second is a question of mutual benefit for the wealthy, and interest becomes a question of equitable sharing of profits between partners.

#### BOX 6

### **"Did the Catholic Church Change Its Mind on Usury? Yes, and No"**

*by Christina McRorie*

McRorie's study reveals how over the course of 20 centuries, the position of the Roman Catholic Church has evolved from forbidding a lender from receiving any form of financial gain to the current understanding that the prohibition of usury only applies to forms of lending that

are excessive and exploitative. Within the Catholic church, this development unfolded in a casuistic process.

The early church fathers universally condemn usury, although the nature of the sin is only loosely defined. The case-based process of medieval reasoning made explicit the assumptions underlying the understanding of usury. Up to the early medieval era, a loan was a form of personal assistance offered in time of need. Moral norms call for charity in these situations, rather than seeking gain. Another assumption underlying the discussion of usury was an understanding that money does not grow or reproduce.

There were, however, permissible ways to profit from loans. One was a form of contract called a *societas*. This was a partnership in which one person provided funds and another managed operations; both shared the risks and the profits. Another was called a census, in which a buyer purchased the annual return from a property in advance. Both of these were forms of loans that generated earnings but were not seen as usury. The 13th century saw the proposal of payments for losses incurred by the lender. There were also cases in which money was seen as an opportunity for the lender's industry and for profit, and lost profits could also be compensated. Another development came through the application of insurance. In 1485, a lender could insure funds with the partner in a *societas*, and so receive a profit on the principal, even if the venture was not profitable. This concept, called a "triple contract," was debated by scholars through to the 1700s. These cases show a clear move away from the understanding that money was sterile, and with this shift came a development in ideas of recognizing possible returns on capital.

McRorie argues that the Catholic debate about usury shows how each fundamental assumption changed in response to a changing social and economic world. The end result was that there were many acceptable forms of loans charging interest. Within the Catholic church, usury is still condemned, but not in the absolute terms common in the Middle Ages.

### 3.6 Reassessment of a “New” Norm Can Lead to a Return to the Original Norm

- (61) A church may begin with a position that is modified on some grounds. Subsequently, the revision leads another group within the church to reject the change. Finally, the whole church returns to its original position. The Dutch Reformed Church (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk—NGK) in South Africa began with a position in which the whole community celebrated the eucharist together (see Box 7). The synod (that is, central authority) in response to local question<sup>12</sup> decided that segregation, while not desirable, was permissible. This eventually evolved into the main position and the supposedly theological justification of the political policy of racial segregation in South Africa (apartheid). Over time, however, some within the church, as well as most outside, rejected this position as theologically unsound and immoral. In the end, the NGK recognized this error and returned to the original position of full inclusion.

#### BOX 7

#### **“On the Role of Authority in Churches’ Moral Discernment during Apartheid”**

*by Dirk J. Smit*

Smit opens his study by recalling that in 1857, the Reformed Church Synod in South Africa, a society divided by race but not yet governed by laws of apartheid, faced a difficult moral discernment. A congregation asked permission to have race-based celebrations of the Lord’s supper. The synod’s discernment was that this practice was not in accord with the scriptures, but that it was wise to allow the possibility “for the weakness of some.” Smit argues this discussion within the synod was a conflict between (i) authority of racist understandings and experience and (ii) authority of theological and biblical understanding. According to Smit, the synod was “explicitly aware of this conflict . . . and made their choice (for experience) consciously and deliberately.” In time, separate denominations were developed on racial, ethnic, and cultural grounds. In the ongoing discussion within the church, it seems that the basis of the

12. See section 4.3.4.

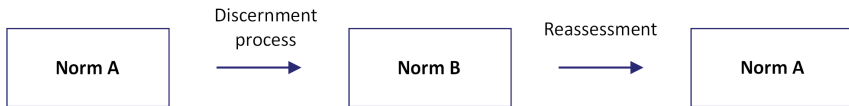
original decision was forgotten, and theological and biblical arguments were developed.

When apartheid was established, it was common within South Africa to claim that the Bible has nothing to say about politics. This was used to criticize earlier interpretations, but also undermined biblically based critiques. This became a struggle regarding the limits of the authority of the church. In the 1960s and 1970s, the authority of the synods and church institutions were undermined, and synod decisions proved not to be enforceable. A person's reputation as a loyal and trustworthy member of the *volk* was more important than either their arguments or their official role in a church structure.

Over time other churches opposed apartheid as unfaithful to the gospel. The Roman Catholic Church responded through its official bodies with documents, statements, and sermons. The Pentecostal and evangelical churches' responses relied more on the messages of individual preachers, and within the Reformed tradition responses focused around biblical interpretation and confessional responses. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) declared a state of confession (*status confessionis*) with regard to the situation in South Africa, and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church adopted the Belhar Confession.

The change away from apartheid South Africa was complex. Smit notes that it is often difficult to judge whether a visible change results from a conscious moral discernment process or from a recognition of political and economic realities. Within the change process, however, it became clear that individual conscience was strengthened, while collective thought and action, as well as the significance of belonging and loyalty, were weakened.

- (62) This type of change is important because it demonstrates that changes are not always one directional. They do not always involve a "liberalisation" or "relativization" of an existing moral norm. They can indeed lead to a strengthening or narrowing of an existing norm. In Figure 7, position (A) moves to (B) and back to (A). Again, as in the other cases, there is an element of continuity in the reflection that leads to each of these changes. Nonetheless, it is ultimately the judgment that (B) is not compatible with being a Christian, thus leading to a return to (A).



**Figure 7: Reassessment of a “new” norm leading to a return to the original norm**

### **3.7 Conclusion: Change Is Complex but Continuity Is Always Present**

- (63) This section has looked at the kinds of developments, changes, or corrections that can emerge, and how they emerge by considering some historical examples. It is not meant to be an exhaustive survey of all possible changes or to evaluate them in any way. This section shows the following:
- A variety of actual changes in history have occurred in churches’ moral teaching and practice.
  - These changes can emerge in a number of ways.
  - These changes arise from applying the conscience of the church to the challenge raised by a concrete situation.
  - In the case of a concrete change, this change is intended by the church to be in continuity with the conscience of the church. Continuity and change, therefore, are not opposites; the continuous commitment to remaining faithful to Christ might lead to a change in the outcome of the moral discernment process.
  - Moral discernment is an ongoing process that at times requires that a change is reconsidered and reversed in order to remain faithful to Christ.
  - Finally, there can be situations where one group judges changes by another group to be so “discontinuous” with the conscience of the church as to be outside any kind of acceptable practice. This is when change can lead to division unless other structures can mitigate this split (e.g., structures of obedience and authority).
- (64) Given the reality of historical change, and the reality of contemporaneous disagreement on a number of issues, it is worth considering more carefully what factors can contribute to agreement and disagreement.

What factors lead to the different interpretations of norms in the conscience of the church that result in different solutions to problems posed by given situations? At the same time, it is worth looking for systematic theological categories that offer pathways for partners to dialogue about agreement and difference. These will aid in their efforts to better understand each other in a compassionate way and to move toward a unified position on an issue. How can churches, despite a plurality of views on some issues, come to affirm their common convictions on so many issues rooted in the conscience of the church? As illustrated by the case of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, ongoing dialogue *can* bring about a unified vision (in this case, the recognition by all parties that apartheid was morally wrong).<sup>13</sup>

- (65) The next section presents a tool that helps to address these questions. The tool is the result of a substantial analysis of the kinds of situations presented above and is similarly supported by historical examples. The tool is not only useful for the study of historical processes. In light of our understanding of historical processes, it can also help dialogue partners understand the processes and concepts that operate in the conscience of the church, as well as the circumstances prompting reflection. In this way, dialogue partners can better recognize the sincerity of the processes used in particular instances of moral discernment, where the proponents of the solution truly believe it stands in continuity with the gospel. Such a tool and subsequent mutual awareness can, it is hoped, foster a commitment to affirm the continuity and commonalities between dialogue partners. It will give them a better understanding of what the differences are, how they arise, and how they might have a certain rationale in their own right, even if one holds them to be ultimately incorrect on the basis of one's own understanding. At the same time, the (re)discovery of the riches shared in the common Christian heritage can foster ongoing dialogue to find ways to achieve visible unity in areas where it is possible.

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13. A similar fruitful outcome of dialogue that can unite a church rather than divide it is the retrospective reflection evidenced by the Evangelical Churches in Germany after the end of Nazism and the recognition that the Landeskirchen (Regional Churches) and the Confessing Church regretted not taking substantial action against the dictatorship. See Box 17 in section 4.3.6.



## 4. A Tool to Understand Moral Disagreement and Facilitate Dialogue To Build *Koinonia*

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### 4.1 Introduction

- (66) Churches differ on a number of issues, including moral ones. Nonetheless, they agree on many theological and ecclesiological issues.<sup>1</sup> Churches in history have responded to challenges of their time by applying the conscience of the church<sup>2</sup>—which includes knowledge from scripture, Tradition, and traditions, as well as the nature and experience of the church as a community committed to making the eschatological reality of the reign of God present in history through prayer and service. In all cases, applying the conscience of the church carries a strong desire to be in continuity with the life of the community in worship and service. The worshiping community is both a foretaste of the eschatological reign of God and actively transforming history in the light of the gospel. The conscience of the church, therefore, can lead Christians to develop norms of moral behaviour that transform history because they represent the reign of God. As the Lord's Prayer puts it, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).
- (67) As reflected upon more extensively in previous sections, by applying the conscience of the church to different moral problems that arise in concrete historical circumstances, the churches have witnessed various changes in their histories. The language of "change" can be problematic for some churches, especially because of the implication of a "discontinuity" with the existing norms in the conscience of the church. Nonetheless, changes in teaching and practice do happen, and they can

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1. See introduction in section 1, and, for example, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.

2. See section 1.

happen in a number of ways).<sup>3</sup> Such changes may be based on, among other things:

- refined or deepened understanding of existing norms,
- recognition that there may be more than one morally acceptable ground and norm,
- recognition that what was once thought to be unacceptable in all circumstances is now seen as morally acceptable in some new circumstances for the same reason as the previous prohibition, or
- recognition that changes that previously occurred were not in adequate continuity with the conscience of the church and so were wrong.

Sometimes, these changes can lead to division in churches.

- (68) Because these changes in practice or teaching occur as an application of the conscience of the church to a challenging situation, the process is presumed to involve a commitment to continuity. This core commitment to continuity with the gospel means that possibilities for fruitful dialogue towards *koinonia* always exist. The evident complexity of the processes that surround these changes, and their interrelationship with the continued commitment to existing teachings and practices in the church's conscience, means that a tool that would help us understand these complexities would be useful. Moreover, such a tool can help churches better understand how their own commitment to continuity with the conscience of the church has throughout history led both to maintaining some moral convictions and to, at times, arriving at concrete changes in teaching and in practice. Understanding these processes in one's own tradition can help in dialogue with others on moral issues. While *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* notes that the churches must acknowledge each other's commitment to seek the will of God, it invites the churches "to reflect together about the criteria which are employed in different churches for considering issues about continuity and change."<sup>4</sup>

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3. See section 3.

4. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, para. 24.

- (69) The tool proposed here is a new approach. It aims to help churches reflect on the criteria they find in the conscience of the church that they and others use in considering moral issues. Considering these criteria leads to better understanding both of how change and continuity on moral issues occur in one's own church and what is at stake when two groups differ. Furthermore, this tool provides a possibility for development of joint action by Christian churches in the face of new moral situations that arise. The tool does *not* present a way to do moral discernment or guarantee unity. Nor does the tool account for all matters that affect how churches make judgments on moral matters.<sup>5</sup> The tool does, however, draw dialogue partners' attention to relevant theological and ecclesiological issues at stake in moral discernment processes. How we account for these different elements, which is a systematic theological question, has implications for the church's ongoing self-understanding and its conscience.
- (70) Drawing attention to all the relevant elements and how they reflect various faith commitments may help dialogue partners to at least acknowledge the possibility of different reasoning processes on moral issues so that they are able to remain committed to the quest for visible unity. The tool can also help to identify biases, distortions, or even errors in one's own reasoning driven by interests (e.g., political expediency or private economic interests) at odds with a sincere search for the will of God. At its best, however, the tool may open new pathways to levels of agreement about the importance of particular elements as part of the process of moral discernment. Indeed, using the tool may lead ultimately to agreement on the application of a particular set of theological and methodological assumptions to arrive at an agreed moral position on certain issues. Nonetheless, the scope of the present work is more modest, inviting the churches to use the tool with a view to developing mutual understanding in a way that honours and preserves the richness of each tradition.

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5. Churches differ widely on how judgments are reached and expressed, depending on their theology and practice of authority. The issue of authority in the church is a complex one affecting all areas of church life, not just moral discernment. As such, it must be studied in a different way, and such study will have implications for moral discernment. See *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, paras. 48–57. The Faith and Order study process on moral discernment provides self-descriptions from 14 different church traditions in Wijlens and Shmaliy, *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 1*.

## 4.2 Aims of the Tool

(71) The tool can be used to gain insight into how churches do moral discernment, how agreement is preserved, and how differences arise. Since agreement does not constitute a challenge to visible unity, the aim especially is to understand the following:

- differences that occur between churches, and also differences that occur within a particular church;
- differences that occur at the same point in time (synchronic), and also differences that occur over the course of time (diachronic—where there is an apparent difference between a moral view at one time in history and a moral view at a later time in history); and
- differences that occur between universal doctrine and local practice in specific contexts inspired by pastoral care.

The tool provides this insight by helping to *identify* common features that provide the churches with a way to enter into constructive dialogue on moral issues. The aim *is not* to say that this or that way of doing moral discernment is the right or the wrong way. The Faith and Order study document *Moral Discernment in the Churches* found that dialogue of this former kind would be beneficial to the churches:

Affirmation of the value of engaging in structured dialogues about the process of moral discernment is the greatest recommendation developed over the six years of the Moral Discernment in the Churches study. Through the case study process, feedback consistently indicated that participants valued their increased clarity about the process of moral discernment as well as careful study of the causative factors that contribute to moral disagreements. Through the development of additional study materials, the Faith and Order Commission and the World Council of Churches can help encourage and support churches, persons, and communities to engage in moral discernment processes that are more illuminative and less divisive.<sup>6</sup>

The tool presented here aims to be such an additional study material to help and support churches and communities.

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6. *Moral Discernment in the Churches*, para. 96.

- (72) As a general rule, models and schemas may be presumed to be imperfect representations of the phenomenon being examined. This tool is no exception. Such models can, however, be helpful to better understand a phenomenon. Moreover, by helping to understand a phenomenon, they also provide a common basis for further discussion and development.
- (73) The tool presented here helps to see how in every apparent change—be it within a particular church or across a number of churches—there are always elements that remain unchanged. The awareness that some elements remain unchanged is very important, because it underscores the unity in apparent disunity, both diachronically and synchronically. If Christians can see these fundamental continuities behind the shifts in the outcomes of moral discernment across time and within the churches, this can also help them to see elements of the possible fundamental unity of churches or groups that hold different moral positions.
- (74) *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* notes that legitimate diversity is a gift from God and can be part of an essential unity of the church. The challenge is in discerning which diversity is legitimate:

Ecumenical dialogue in search of the unity for which Christ prayed has, in large part, been an effort by representatives from various Christian churches to discern, with the help of the Holy Spirit, what is necessary for unity, according to the will of God, and what is properly understood as legitimate diversity. Though all churches have their own procedures for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate diversity, it is clear that two things are lacking: (a) common criteria, or means of discernment, and (b) such mutually recognized structures as are needed to use these effectively.<sup>7</sup>

In response to this invitation to offer positive steps that can aid in common discernment, this tool can draw our attention to how much churches have in common by identifying common criteria, processes, and structures.

- (75) The tool presented here helps to show common features that are characteristic of all Christian moral discernment processes even if all Christians do not agree on a particular moral issue. These common features form

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7. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, para. 30f.

the *semantic equivalents* that provide the churches with a way to enter into constructive dialogue on moral issues.

- (76) Semantic equivalents are concepts for which different traditions have a term or concept that has a similar or equivalent meaning. Dialogue can be frustrated when partners use the same term but mean something different by it.<sup>8</sup> Dialogue can also be challenging if dialogue partners insist on using different terms when they mean the same thing. The tool, by trying to develop semantic equivalents for investigation of the process of moral discernment in churches, aims to address this problem. The tool can provide a shared language in which each of the partners can see reflected the important meanings found in their own tradition and in the conscience of their church. The model neither exhausts nor replaces the richness of the meanings found in particular traditions. It merely points to shared meanings that are worked out and characteristic of different traditions in different ways. When using this tool, then, one should try to see where one's own tradition fits into the understanding of the different elements. It is unlikely that any tradition will see itself perfectly reflected in the whole tool. Rather, one is invited to see where one's own tradition fits, and then also to try to see where the understandings of key elements might be situated for one's dialogue partners. For example, all churches and Christians acknowledge the importance of scripture and all churches admit of some kind of authority in their ecclesial organization. Yet exactly how scripture is understood and applied to a particular issue, or how scripture is or ought to be related to ecclesial authority in thinking about moral issues, can differ within and between churches because of how their conception of scripture is related to the other common elements.<sup>9</sup>
- (77) It is hoped, in other words, that all traditions will be able to find a way to use the tool to explain what theological, ecclesiological, and methodological convictions underpin their approach to arriving at a position on a given moral issue. They should thereby be able to communicate more effectively with other users of the tool in comparing moral discernment processes. If the tool provokes robust and fruitful dialogue on

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8. *Moral Discernment in the Churches*, paras. 53–55.

9. *Ibid.*, paras. 33–35.

change and difference in the process of moral discernment in the church as whole, then it has succeeded in its purpose.

- (78) Strikingly, despite the differences, a great deal of similarity emerges, not only in terms of the fundamental elements of moral discernment processes, but also in terms of the outcomes of moral discernment processes (i.e., normative prescriptions and practices). From an ecumenical perspective, it is important to realize, as the introduction to this document outlines, that the Christian churches hold much in common as morally important. Where there are normative differences, this presents an opportunity, perhaps using this tool, to better understand what is common in the processes and the outcomes, as well as where the difference arises.<sup>10</sup>
- (79) It should also be noted that this tool does not intend to answer the question “Which is better?” or “Who is right?” However, the tool does provide a lens for those working toward normative agreement on specific issues to focus on the many elements at stake and to ask how these contribute to possible misunderstanding and disagreement. A shared understanding of how differences occur, and of how moral discernment processes can have different outcomes, will further the quest for unity.

### **4.3 A Tool for Analysis and Dialogue on Processes of Moral Discernment**

- (80) This section presents the tool (Figure 8), explains each of its components, and explores how these components unfold in the moral discernment of the churches over time. The historical cases of change in moral teaching or practice—which members of the group studied to understand how difference and change emerge in churches—are referred to and presented in detail in featured boxes. This illustrates how the tool can be used to understand change in moral views and promote mutual understanding, dialogue, and commitments within and between churches.

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10. Ibid., paras. 92–93.

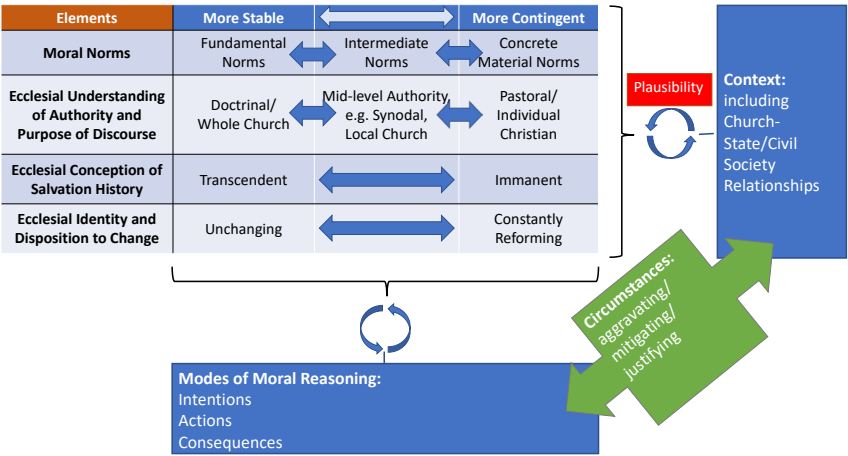


Figure 8: Tool for analysis and dialogue on processes of moral discernment

4.3.1 Context, the Conscience of the Church, and the Challenge of Plausibility

(81) In exploring the tool and its practical value, it is useful to see how it relates to what has already been said about the conscience of the church and its role in moral discernment (see Figure 1 in section 2). Moral discernment becomes necessary when issues arise in the historical context that challenge the plausibility of existing church moral teaching or practice. Sometimes this can be the result of new ideas, experiences, or possibilities for which the church does not have existing teachings or practices (e.g., developments in biomedical technology or artificial intelligence). These teachings and practices can be called *norms*. As teaching, norms are statements about what one ought to do or ought not to do, what a good human life looks like, or what is to be valued. They may be laws, rules, canons, or some equivalent notion of an authoritatively specified behaviour. As practices, norms are expected behaviours or customs in certain situations. There may be no explicit teaching by a church authority in this respect, but a well-established custom indicates what behaviours are morally acceptable. The conscience of the church is applied to the new challenge to arrive at a solution. In the tool, this is depicted through the interaction between context and the conscience of the church (Figure 9).



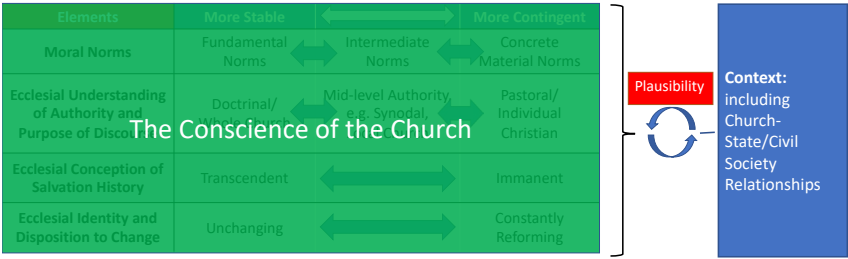


Figure 9: The conscience of the church engages with context

- (82) For the purposes of the tool, *context* includes any of the historical realities that can pose a challenge to the church.<sup>11</sup> It is worth specifying, however, that this includes church–state and church–civil society relationships. For example, an “established” church is in a different position, and arguably faces different issues with respect to how its moral norms may be represented in the civil laws of the country compared to a church that is “merely” a recognized organization in a secular state.
- (83) As noted above, no model is a perfect representation of a phenomenon. The same applies to this tool. The circular arrows linking the conscience of the church to contexts are important because they show, first, that the church and its context interact with and influence each other. Second, they show that church is not something that sits entirely outside of a historically situated context. The church is part of the context and also influences and shapes context. Thus, challenges of context can also arise from within the church and not only from outside.
- (84) This dynamic and integral interaction demonstrated by the circular arrows helps to flesh out the meaning of *plausibility*. The term plausibility denotes how much sense the existing norms make in the context. Thus, plausibility does not simply mean that context requires existing norms be discarded to fit with the current zeitgeist. Rather, plausibility challenges the conscience of the church to account for its norms in a way that makes sense in the current context—both the context of the church itself and the historical context in which it finds itself. In this way, it is not only that the church is challenged by context but also how

11. See *Moral Discernment in the Churches*, para. 51.

the church can account for the truth it claims to proclaim in a way that challenges context.

- (85) Among the many historical examples studied in the development of this tool, two stand out to illustrate this interaction with context. Both concern the understanding of marriage. In Cameroon, traditional Christian marriage is challenged by both polygamy and serial monogamy.<sup>12</sup> This challenge arises from the interaction of Christian marriage and traditional African understandings and practice of marriage, as well as secular influences and economic pressures (see Box 8). Another example is the practice of mixed marriage in the Malaysian context (see Box 9). Originally, the Methodist church saw such marriages through the lens of being a missionary church, where the non-Christian partner might be “converted.” This view has come under pressure because the net effect of this practice has been that most children of these marriages are raised Muslim. Other examples of historical contexts relevant to moral discernment and studied in the process of developing this tool include:

- the changing economic and monetary systems in the Middle Ages
- chattel slavery in the American South
- the rise and fall of Nazi Germany
- military dictatorships in Brazil
- the awareness of potential benefits of spacing or controlling births in the 20th century
- the Vietnam War
- the Christianization of the Roman Empire under Constantine

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12. Serial monogamy is when a person has an exclusive sexual relationship with another person until, for whatever reason, that relationship ends and the person starts another exclusive sexual relationship with a different person until that one ends, and so on.

**BOX 8**

**"Marriage in the Presbyterian Church  
in Cameroon: African Polygamy"**  
*by Emmanuel Anyambod Anya*

The practice of polygamy is still prominent in Western Africa. Anyambod Anya's study explores the responses of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon to this practice. In Cameroon, polygamy is permitted in customary and civil laws and is prevalent among Christians and non-Christians. Many Christians sign polygamous marriages at the civil registry.

The biblical witness about polygamy is mixed. The Old Testament does not prohibit polygamy, but the regulation of it is set out in Torah (Ex. 21:10; Deut. 21:15-17). Polygamy seemed to be in decline during post-exilic times, and three passages in the New Testament (1 Tim. 3:2; 3:12; Titus 1:6) explicitly indicate that a church leader shall be married to only one wife. It is unclear, however, whether this applies only to leadership or refers to a Christian standard of behaviour.

In Africa, it is a common understanding that a person is considered a "man" only if he has fathered a child, particularly a male child. This is part of the drive toward polygamy (technically toward polygyny, as polyandry is almost unknown in Africa). There is a cultural drive to have many children, and multiple marriages form social alliances and can foster increased economic and social security.

It was only after colonization that polygamy was condemned, and the condemnation can be seen as a result of colonialism and the views of European missionaries. The Presbyterian Church in Cameroon did not allow membership to polygamists. To be admitted, a man had to divorce all but one wife, and church marriage rites were only monogamous.

In the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, rising levels of education among women and their growing economic power and political participation together with an increasing acceptance of single parentage, has led to women being resistant to polygamous practices. Discussion favouring polygamy is usually blocked by an enlightened and educated female wing of the church. In 1995, however, the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon, despite strong opposition from the women, decided to allow membership to polygamists. Although excluding them from the sacraments, voting, eldership, or leadership, it allows them to serve on project and finance committees. Church marriages remain monogamous. A variety of opinions remain within the church, and certainly some feel that polygamy is more a social and cultural matter than a religious one.

**BOX 9****“‘Till Faith Do Us Part . . .’ The Reality of Interfaith Marriages and the Response of the Methodist Church in Malaysia”**

*by Hermen Shastri*

Shastri in his study points out that Malaysia—located between Chinese, Indian, and Arab civilizations—has been a centre of trade and commerce since the 10th century. This brought about the existence of many different religions, and thus questions arose on how to handle interfaith marriages.

The country currently has 27 million inhabitants, of which 61.3 percent are Muslim, 9.2 percent Christian, and the rest comprise a variety of other religions. The country guarantees religious freedom for its citizens, but relationships with the Muslim majority are proving to be difficult. Recent changes mean that in order to marry a Muslim, a person must convert to Islam. This is difficult for those who wish to hold onto their faith. Also, if the marriage ends for any reason, a process of “de-converting” would be regulated by a Sharia court, and the penalties for apostasy can be severe.

Due to the sensitivity of this situation, Shastri only addresses the marriage of Christians to other minority religions in this paper.

Mixed marriages have been a common feature of this culturally mixed society since before the arrival of Christians. Until quite recently, the Methodist church has welcomed couples and families in mixed marriages. The church viewed this as an opportunity for evangelization. But in 2011, the Methodist synod formally revised their understanding of marriage and the rules for marriage within the church.

This revision ruled out interfaith marriage as an official practice in the church. The new rules specify that the couple must both be Methodists for marriage in the church. If both are Christian and marry in a civil ceremony, a blessing service may be conducted. But such a blessing service is not open to a multifaith couple.

This 2011 revision relies on a scriptural basis, with a more exclusionary view of marriage. It is a move away from the previous pastorally welcoming and evangelically open reading. The current practice is for those entering an interfaith marriage to marry in a civil ceremony and seek a blessing ceremony in a family or informal setting. In this way, interfaith couples are still welcomed to the church.

### 4.3.2 Four Elements in the Conscience of the Church

- (86) For the purpose of understanding different moral discernment processes, it is helpful to see the conscience of the church in terms of *four elements* (Figure 10). In section 1, the conscience of the church was defined as incorporating all that is known and practised in the life of a church that can be drawn upon in the process of moral discernment. The conscience of the church is rooted in both the certainty of God's presence in the life of the church and the confidence in the coming eschatological fulfilment of God's promise. Thus, it is concerned with both the *already* and the *not yet*. The guidance found in the conscience of the church—be it from scripture, Tradition, traditions, or authoritative statements—has always to be reflected in the processes of moral discernment with reference to the respective time and age. This can mean firmly holding to this guidance without any modification or it can mean maintaining this guidance by adapting it to changed circumstances. In both cases, the binding authority of the conscience of the church is for the good of the salvation of believers, and can be applied either strictly (*akriveia*) or, if necessary, philanthropically in pastoral care (*oikonomia*).<sup>13</sup> The elements presented in the tool represent clusters of ideas in the conscience of the church. Each gives expression to how a church has formed its self-understanding through that church's particular use of scripture, Tradition, and so on. For example, appeals to scripture will in some way inform what the church understands by moral norms, authority, salvation, and change. The same is true for all the sources that comprise the basis of the conscience of the church.



Figure 10: Four elements of the conscience of the church

13. See para. 37 in section 2.

- (87) Four elements in the conscience of the church play a role in moral discernment:
1. understanding of moral norms,
  2. ecclesial understanding of authority and the purpose of a particular discourse,
  3. conception of time and salvation history, and
  4. ecclesial identity with respect to change and a particular church's disposition to change.
- (88) Each of these elements will come into play in any given situation of moral discernment, although they may not always be explicit. The tool helps dialogue partners make explicit what is often implicit in dialogue on moral discernment.
- (89) Each of these elements has dimensions that are *more stable* and tend to be more indisputable or more unchangeable, and dimensions that are *more contingent* and tend to be more changeable in response to a particular context (Figure 11). Each of these will be described in more detail below.
- (90) The intention of the tool is to better understand where there is continuity and discontinuity in moral discernment processes and the resulting decisions. What is “unchanging” or “indisputable” for a church doing moral discernment seems to depend on where that church draws the line on the scale of *more stable* and *more contingent* expressions of the



Figure 11: Stable and contingent dimensions of the elements of the conscience of the church

element in question. Each of the four elements has a corresponding range of “positions” or “types” that go from typically more stable (i.e., less prone to change in response to changes in circumstances) to more contingent (i.e., more susceptible or likely to change in response to circumstances).

- (91) The elements and their respective stable and contingent dimensions interact with each other such that beliefs about one element affect beliefs about another element. In other words, there is a clear systematic theological character to how these elements interact with each other. For example, what someone believes about the authority of the Bible for the church (second element) can affect what they believe about the status of the moral norms in the Bible (first element), about relevance of these norms for salvation (third element), and about how reformable their church and its praxis are in response to contextual challenges (fourth element).
- (92) Consider the following example (see Box 10). The Lutheran understanding of the two kingdoms—state and church—is a part of the third element of the conscience of the church (ecclesial understanding of salvation history). In the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil, the understanding of the two kingdoms is a Lutheran “identity marker” and it operates as a norm in Lutheran moral discernment—the first element. This understanding of the doctrine of the church as a fundamental norm interacted with the idea that the leadership of the church carries authority over the whole community—part of the second element in the conscience of the church (ecclesial understanding of authority and the role of discourse). These two elements led to a collaborationist attitude toward the government. When the Lutheran church in Brazil was challenged both by the interaction with Liberation Theology and by the Lutheran World Federation over the violation of human rights in Brazil, what resulted was both a reconsideration of the relation between church and state and some movement in the church’s understanding of authority. The place of the understanding of the church-state relationships as a formal norm changed, making it more contingent and open to modification, and there was a broader understanding of authority in the church and a greater sharing of power.

**BOX 10**

**“Sources of Authority:  
The Latin American and Brazilian Lutheran Context”**  
by Valério Guilherme Schaper

Schaper in his study explores two significant moral challenges within the Lutheran church in Brazil. The first was the cancellation of the assembly of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and its relocation to France in 1970 in light of concerns about human rights violations by the dictatorial Brazilian regime. The second was a divisive case in Brazil of the pregnancy of a nine-year-old who had been abused by her stepfather.

He opens with a discussion situating theological development in Brazil in its colonial and ecumenical context. Theology in Latin America in the 1970s was profoundly influenced by the development of Liberation Theology, primarily by Catholic theologians. Liberation Theology, which reflected on power and authority within and by the church, offered a profound critique of Protestant theology in Brazil. The theological development and stance of Protestant churches in Brazil avoided critiques of power and ethical social reflection, tending toward a Protestantism of pure doctrine and politically basing itself in the doctrine of the two kingdoms. Protestant leadership was reluctant to criticize the government. Reactions to social conditions also tended to regard poverty as less important than the transformation of the internal disposition of the individual through conversion.

In this contested theological context, the LWF’s decision to cancel the meeting in Brazil precipitated a crisis for the church. It challenged the collaborationist approach of clergy and middle-class congregations and created the need to face the widespread international denouncement of torture. While the process was slow, the decision led to Protestant critique, albeit somewhat muted, of the state about violations of human rights.

In the second case, Schaper reflects on a document published by the Lutheran church, *Ethical Discernment: An Evangelical Perspective of the Lutheran Confession*, in 2009. The document directly addressed the case of a nine-year-old who had been abused by her stepfather. The document was based on two essential Lutheran presuppositions. The first is that the Lutheran tradition does not recognize magisterial authority in an unambiguous way but expresses a continual need for believers to seek discernment in light of scripture about situations placed before them.



The second is that humans remain always within the influence of sin. There is no perfect, or even a good option in this case, but believers need to seek the way that best preserves life and saves dignity.

4.3.3 Levels of Moral Norms: Stable Fundamental Norms to Contingent Concrete Material Norms

- (93) *Norms*, as previously defined, may be teachings in the form of codified authoritative commands (e.g., “Thou shalt” or “Thou shalt not”) or they may be practices that have the status of custom such that, despite not being codified, they are accepted as part of the conscience of the church.
- (94) For the element of moral norms (Figure 12), *fundamental norms* are typically more stable, *intermediate norms* less so, and *concrete material norms* more contingent.
- (95) Fundamental norms, which are the most stable, may also be referred to as formal norms, first principles, or foundational principles. They are principles of thought or behaviour from which other norms of behaviour can be deduced and to which all other norms must correspond. They are also the most general. “Do good; avoid evil” is an example of such a fundamental norm. “Love God and love your neighbour as yourself” is another example. As discussed in the introduction to this document, we could also include “Be holy” and “Build up *koinonia*” (*The Church*

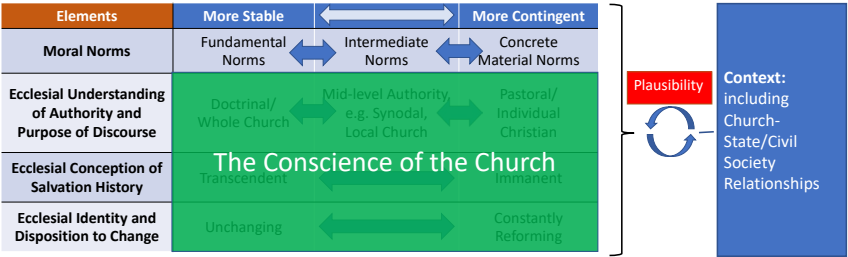


Figure 12: The element of moral norms

*Towards a Common Vision*) or “Promote the fullness of life for all” (*Treasure in Earthen Vessels*).

- (96) At the other end of the continuum are concrete material norms. Concrete material norms are specific to each particular concrete moral question. They make material or functional the ideas that are found in fundamental norms. For example, how does one “do good” or “love God and neighbour” in relation to the specific questions that arise in complex situations? The kind of complex reasoning and appeals to other norms and analogical situations, together with the specificity of the situation requiring an answer, means that concrete material norms for one situation are not easily applied, unchanged or unqualified, to a range of different moral situations. Many of the specific laws detailed in Deuteronomy and Leviticus are arguably also of this kind, and St Paul’s letter to the Romans is an attempt to deal with the challenge that these very specific norms raise for the beginnings of the Christian community.<sup>14</sup>
- (97) In terms of fundamental norms, there will be wide general agreement among Christians. The more specific and concrete a norm becomes, the

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14. For example, Leviticus 19:18b provides an example of a fundamental norm: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” Commandments like, “You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another” (Lev. 19:11) are examples of intermediate norms. A concrete material norm is found in Lev. 19:36: “You shall have honest balances, honest weights, an honest ephah, and an honest hin.” These measures are specific to the context and it would make no sense to apply them literally today. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus concretizes the intermediate norm regarding retaliation: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile” (Matt. 5:38–41). The meaning of the “second mile,” “the right cheek,” and “the cloak” are specific to the laws and customs of the time and Jesus’ norms facilitate a nonviolent resistance to unjust treatment. In Romans, St Paul discusses at length the importance of the Jewish law. He reiterates the same fundamental and intermediate norms found in Leviticus (Rom. 12:9–21; 13:8–10). Then, with reference to how this law should not apply given that Christianity has spread to the Gentiles, he provides concrete material norms about the food that is permissible, that differs from the equivalent concrete material norms in the Jewish law. “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:14–17).

more likely it is that different views will arise within or between churches, at times leading to disagreements. Such disagreement is not inevitable; it is merely more likely as one moves along the continuum from fundamental to concrete material norms. These different views can arise for a variety of reasons. For example, there may be debate about whether a concrete material norm adequately realizes the more fundamental norm. Different views may also arise because some more fundamental or even intermediate norms are held to be more important than others and consequently have an effect on the favoured concrete material norm.<sup>15</sup> For example, is it more important to promote unity or to promote freedom? These Christian values can come into perceived conflict, for example, in contemporary societies marked by religious plurality. Disagreements can arise about their relative importance or indeed about how to reconcile them in relation to that context. Regardless of which more fundamental norm or foundational value is favoured over others in deducing a concrete material norm, justification for doing so needs to include an appeal to other ecclesiological or theological ideas, and possibly also to context and modes of moral reasoning with respect to circumstances.

- (98) One example of competing fundamental norms can be seen in the Roman Catholic Church's decision to affirm a right to religious freedom in 1965 (see Box 11). The fundamental norm underpinning the Roman Catholic Church's traditional opposition to religious freedom was that one is obliged to seek the truth. Since truth is good, and, indeed, "will set you free" (John 8:32), human beings are obliged to seek religious truth. Because the Roman Catholic Church had long asserted that it alone contained the fullness of divine revelation, truth (and indeed salvation) could only be found in the Roman Catholic Church. Furthermore, since all authority, both spiritual and temporal, comes from God, the state authority was obliged to protect the truth revealed in the Roman Catholic Church. According to this argument, it would therefore be wrong of the state to protect any other religion or religious indifference because doing so would not support the fundamental norm to seek the truth and could lead to people not being saved. This pre-Vatican II position was encapsulated in the aphorism, "error has no rights."

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15. See *Moral Discernment in the Churches*, para. 80.

- (99) The Roman Catholic Church's traditional position was increasingly challenged by claims to a right to freedom of religion, from within as well as outside the church. Many of these claims emphasized a different fundamental norm relating to the use of human freedom. Since human beings are created by God to be rational and free, they ought to be allowed to make decisions for themselves, provided others are not harmed.
- (100) The apparent conflict between competing concrete norms could therefore be interpreted as a more foundational conflict between (i) a fundamental norm to seek and uphold the truth and (ii) a fundamental norm to respect human freedom. In resolving the tension, the Roman Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council in its 1965 Declaration on Religious Freedom appealed to its own theological tradition to explain the relationship between these fundamental norms and to conclude that indeed there ought to be a civilly-protected right to freedom of religion. To do this, the council affirmed as more fundamental the moral norm to respect the dignity of the human person.

**BOX 11**

**"Change in Catholic Moral Teaching:  
The Right to Religious Freedom in *Dignitatis Humanae*"**

*by David G. Kirchhoffer*

Kirchhoffer reflects on Catholic moral teaching about the right to religious freedom in the framework of a discussion of the nature of change itself. He draws a distinction between literal change (in practice or wording) and change as an essential or substantial departure from the truth of revelation and Tradition.

A literal change in teaching on religious freedom came about through the document *Dignitatis humanae* of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. It is clearly a literal change in teaching: ideas of religious freedom were explicitly rejected in 1864 in an encyclical letter by Pope Pius IX. Although debate about this continued to grow in the first half of the 20th century, the church's rejection of religious freedom continued. The 20th century, however, brought significant change to the context of the church. The church's political dialogue partner changed from state authority to civil society, given the rise both of totalitarianism and of the

idea of the citizen. There was also an increased appreciation of the role of culture and its conditioning of both reason and freedom.

Kirchhoffer presents the extensive debate about religious freedom at Vatican II, with groups for and against the idea on varying grounds. Those against a universal right to religious freedom argued from the principle “error has no rights.” Other religions should only be tolerated when necessary to avoid greater evil or conflict, and civil authority has no competence in matters of religion. Those in favour of religious freedom used an argument that saw religious freedom as a juridical concept, in tune with human rights. For this group, civil society is the main conversation partner, and the function of civil authority is to protect rights, including religious freedom as a natural right. A third view, also basically in favour, sought to ground the right to religious freedom theologically and scripturally, returning to the sources for further reflection.

Vatican II’s document *Dignitatis Humanae*, which arose from this debate, acknowledges the plurality of human self-understanding and the role of culture. It affirms that the human person has dignity, a conscience, is free, and is called by God. To pursue and embrace truth, human beings need freedom. In this formulation, the church found new ways of speaking about a human’s relationship to the objective truth of God. Literal change in the church’s teaching occurs here, with the changed context of the church. It is nonetheless deeply rooted in revelation and Tradition.

- (101) Disagreement can also arise regarding where the line is drawn about what is unchangeable or indisputable. For some churches, only fundamental moral norms will be unchangeable; for others, it may be the concrete material norms that are unchangeable; and there will be a range of positions in between. For example, opposition to slavery is technically a more intermediate norm than the fundamental norm to love your neighbour because it specifies a particular practice. Indeed, the command to love your neighbour is arguably the fundamental norm concretized in the abolition of slavery. Yet, for churches in the Wesleyan tradition, this intermediate norm has the character of an immutable, non-negotiable norm. For example, the immutability of this intermediate norm concerning opposition to slavery lay behind the 19th-century split in the MEC in the United States (see Box 12). The churches in the South increasingly pushed for a softening of this fundamental tenet of Methodism. The

situation reached a head when a southern bishop was found to actually own enslaved persons himself. When the northern churches pushed for his suspension, the southern churches split from the MEC to form the MEC South (MECS). In the years following the split, the MECS removed all antislavery legislation and became increasingly aligned with the political and secessionist interests of the South.

#### BOX 12

### **“Against Their Established Interests: Proslavery Co-optation of Antebellum White Methodism”** *by R. Drew Smith*

Smith in his study reflects on slavery in the first half of the 19th century in North America, when a vast majority of white southern churches explicitly or implicitly aligned with a pro-slavery agenda. There were other voices at the time that could have produced other outcomes, but they did not. This paper is largely a study of the interaction of religion and politics at this time, with focus on the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) and later on the Methodist Episcopal Church of the South (MECS).

The MEC had a particular sociological base of the “common folk.” In the early 19th century in the US, there were many tensions over authority and church governance and a violent anti-clericalism. Methodism was at the centre of the populist movement. Methodism called on the common people as teachers and preachers. The governing authority, however, was given to bishops and some of the clergy. On the one side, the clergy elite were seen as a tyranny; on the other side, the clergy complained of a lack of theological sophistication among laity.

Significant tensions also existed about slavery. The clergy expressed unease and testified against it as a moral evil until about 1800. The vocal defenders of slavery were wealthy, well-educated white lay people in the South. In the 1830s, two-thirds of white southern households owned no enslaved persons, and by 1860 three quarters did not. Nonetheless, a minority of large-scale slaveholders exerted a social influence toward the interests of the slavocracy. The church as a whole fell prey to the allure of upward mobility and eventually to a deep-seated white racial solidarity in the face of abolitionist attacks.

Smith's study shows that there were growing calls for separation. The breaking point came over Bishop James Andrews, who was a slaveholder. This occupied the attention of the 1844 Methodist General Conference, which endorsed a plan of separation and the creation of MEC and MECS; this and similar splits among Baptists and Presbyterians at about the same time gave precedent and momentum for the secession of Confederate states.

A lack of unanimity on slavery persisted in the South, particularly with resistance from clergy. Southern church leaders turned attention to clarifying boundaries of authority between church and civil powers. Nonetheless, southern Methodists were strongly associated with pro-secessionist viewpoints. A diversity of opinion remained up to the start of civil war; but with each passing year, those dissenting became a smaller minority.

- (102) Consider, by contrast, the examples of Anglican and Puritan acceptance or toleration of slavery in British colonial America in the 17th century (see Box 13). Anglican Morgan Godwyn opposed the theologies of slavers who argued that slavery was God's will because Africans were inferior and that Africans did not need to be evangelized or baptized. Instead, he emphasized the natural equality of all people. Nonetheless, he did not seek to abolish slavery. Rather, he accepted slavery as historically inevitable and, in accordance with his eschatological transcendent vision, focused on ensuring access to enslaved persons in order to carry out the norm to save souls through baptism. For churches with Methodist and Baptist roots, however, the intermediate norm of opposition to slavery was indisputable. It is not surprising that it was these traditions that seemed to take hold amongst African Americans. The African American Christians read scripture as speaking about a God of immanent deliverance, not slavery.

**BOX 13****“Ecclesial Justifications and Resistance to Slavery in British Colonial America”**

*by Tamara E. Lewis*

Lewis in her study explores various Christian responses to slavery in the early colonial period in America. She looks at the writings of Anglican missionary Morgan Godwyn and the Puritan pastor Cotton Mather, both providing ideological and theological justifications of slavery. Lewis also examines the resistance to slavery, both in the Quaker community and among African American Christians.

Godwyn worked to evangelize and baptize African enslaved persons into the Anglican church. He faced opposition from those who believed that enslaved persons were less than human, and from others who feared that conversion of enslaved persons might lead to their manumission. He explicitly denied the inferiority of people of African descent but argued that slavery was a historical inevitability: a reality to be dealt with, a form of poverty (and not the worst form). He argued that baptism did not confer freedom and rationalized that making enslaved persons Christian made them more docile.

Cotton Mather, a Puritan leader, followed a similar path to Godwyn and provided a reconciliation of Christianity and slavery. He advocated humane treatment of enslaved persons but argued biblically to justify slavery. For Mather the “negro” was an inferior being, and he equated God’s will with Black slavery, God using slavery to procure the salvation of some. He provided no biblical authority for enslaved persons being Africans but assumed that this was the case.

The Quakers of Germantown were the first group to publish a written complaint against slavery in 1688, arguing biblically and theologically, primarily from the Golden Rule. The petition was submitted to the quarterly and the annual Quaker meeting in 1688 but was ignored, and it was not until 1776 that the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting agreed to ban slaveholding. Although the Germantown Quakers’ petition was ignored for 88 years, it prompted a growing level of discussion questioning the slave trade among other religious communities.

Lastly, Lewis considers the actions of enslaved Black people to achieve their own freedom. In 1781, Elizabeth Freeman won her freedom by arguing that the natural rights of an individual invalidated enslavement—a process that led to the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts.



African Americans developed their own distinctive communities of Christians with distinctive patterns of worship, and a critical hermeneutic of scriptural arguments used to support slavery.

4.3.4 Ecclesial Understanding of Authority and Purpose of Discourse

- (103) This element concerns the decision-making roles of different organizational levels within a particular church. All Christians, as bearers of personal conscience, have responsibility for making moral decisions in their lives. However, every Christian is also always in relationship with others and with the church and its structures. These other voices, and the structures of the church, help individuals in their moral discernment.
- (104) There are churches, or indeed situations within a church, in which a specific group engages in moral discernment to define doctrine for the whole church. In other churches, or for other issues, the discernment and decision-making is done by a local group for the local church. And finally, for other churches or issues, discernment occurs at the level of the pastoral care of the individual Christian. It is true that what might be relevant at the level of individual moral discernment might not become the doctrine of the whole church; the weight of an individual decision is different from a declaration about a moral norm that is meant to address the whole church (Figure 13).<sup>16</sup>

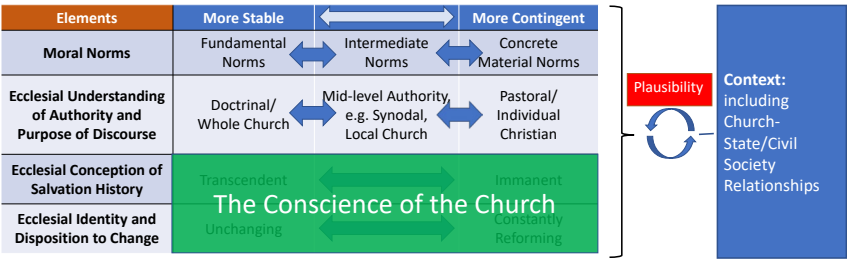


Figure 13: The element of ecclesial understanding of authority and the purpose of discourse

16. See *Moral Discernment in the Churches*, para. 66.

- (105) A positive doctrinal formulation promulgated by an official decision-making organ of the church, such as a synod, and intended for the whole church will usually tend to be more stable. Norms developed to address a particular situation, even if developed at a level that is intended for the whole church, tend to be circumscribed by those circumstances and are not thought to change more stable general doctrinal teachings.
- 106) Moreover, churches may also differ in whether they place more emphasis on the importance of the pastoral formation of conscience of the individual Christian in their spiritual journey, or on the preservation of doctrinal purity at the church-wide level. The level that different churches emphasize in terms of authority in a particular context will have an impact on how moral disagreement or change occurs.
- (107) A declaration about a moral norm that is intended for the whole church, and made by the appropriate level of authority, would tend to be more stable over time than a decision at a more local level. What is said to different individual Christians in the case of pastoral care relationships may vary considerably. And indeed, in some cases, a church may accept variations in practice at the contingent level because of the realities of dealing with the lived experience of individual Christians; but it might not allow for such variation or change at higher levels of authority.<sup>17</sup> As a clear example of this, consider the treatment of suicide by the Roman Catholic Church (see Box 14).<sup>18</sup> The Roman Catholic Church, at the level of formal doctrine for the whole church, regards suicide as a sinful act that precludes a church funeral. This has never changed. However, from very early times the church has recognized that at the level of pastoral care for individual Christians and their immediate family, particular circumstances, including the possibility of certain mental illnesses, might have to be considered. In later times, changing medical and psychological understanding further affected the understanding of free will in cases of severe depression. At the pastoral level, not all cases of self-killing are treated as the “sin” of suicide because a person cannot commit a mortal sin without full knowledge and full freedom (both of which are compromised by mental illness).<sup>19</sup> Alternatively, a church may

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17. *Ibid.*, para. 37.

18. See also Box 1 on the Coptic Church's treatment of suicide in section 3.1.

19. *Moral Discernment in the Churches*, para. 43.

live with substantial variation between regions in how the local church responds to different contexts and feel it has no need to make decisions at the global level. All of these and many other possibilities can affect how the church deals with moral language, disagreement, and change. This too is affected by, and has an effect on, the other elements as well as context and moral reasoning.

**BOX 14**

**“Funerals after Suicide:  
Human Sciences Cause New Perspective for Catholics”  
by Michael Karger**

Karger in his study reflects on refusing or granting a funeral after suicide. From the earliest times, a church funeral was a special service expressing a living faith and proclaiming that the baptized person participates in Christ's death and resurrection. If, however, communion with the church was impaired because of a serious sin, a church funeral became impossible.

With the case of suicides, however, there could be some ambiguity. Suicide was not rejected outright if committed by individuals to protect themselves from harm in Christian persecutions, for instance. Still, after Augustine adopted an argument that the biblical prohibition of killing implies a prohibition of suicide, his position came to be generally accepted.

Karger explains that behind this growing consensus lay a basic assumption that suicide was a voluntary action, an expression of free will. It therefore expressed the intention of an individual to separate themselves from God and from the church, and so suicides were refused funeral rites in the church. While exceptions could be made on the basis of mental incapacity, the difficulty of assessing the free will of the deceased meant that the burden of proving this fell on the family.

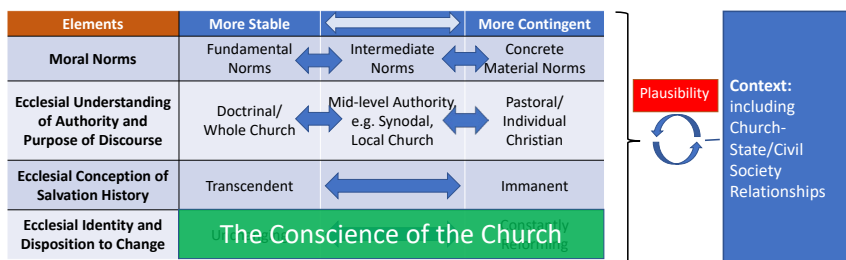
The injunctions against suicide were affirmed after the Council of Trent (16th century), but the consequences were suspended if a person who committed suicide had acted out of mental illness. At that time, the responsibility for evaluating the mental health of the deceased was transferred to a local bishop. The condemnation against suicide was intensified when the church rejected the consensus scientific opinion that “a suicide's capacity for bearing responsibility is always impaired . . . in

situations of emotional conflict” (1866). In an alternate thread in this discussion, however, some canonists gave increased weight to this opinion. One particular case was a critical turning point. In 1835, Giovanni Turriani killed himself in the midst of a personal crisis that included the accusation he assaulted a woman, the jealousy of his wife, and conflict with his father. In this case, the Holy See affirmed the official condemnation of suicide but, based on medical advice, argued that the capacity for free choice and responsibility was impaired. It thus allowed a quiet funeral. This represented a paradigm shift toward a case-by-case approach, paired with the consultation of medical authorities.

After Vatican II, suicide as an act of free will remained a grave sin; however, deeper insights of suicidology led to the elimination of regulated refusal of funerals in canon law. The current rules presume that suicide results from a disturbed mental state.

#### **4.3.5 Ecclesial Conception of Salvation History: Between Transcendence and Immanence**

- (108) Christian theology offers a range of conceptions of salvation history. The existence of this range has an impact on moral discernment processes. Some churches emphasize atemporal, metaphysical, transcendent claims about God, revelation, or humanity, while others emphasize God’s immanence—an ongoing process of God’s revelation, and participating in God’s work in the world. How a church or an individual understands God’s salvific action will affect moral discernment.
- (109) Section 2, in discussing the conscience of the church, highlighted how some churches may emphasize the dimension of the church as actualizing in the present the gifts of saving grace (transcendent/already), whilst others may emphasize the service of the church assisting the ongoing transformation of the believers (immanent/not yet) (see Figure 14). In some churches or in some circumstances, the concern may be more about preserving the vision of the church as an expressive sign of the eschatological reign of God. In other churches or at other times, the concern might be more about the church being an instrument of the realization of the reign of God in the present.



**Figure 14: The element of ecclesial conception of salvation history**

- (110) For example, a church may believe it is important to engage in the world because it believes in God's coming reign of righteousness, joy, and peace in the lived reality of today's world. Consequently, such a church may be willing to engage actively against perceived injustices in the world, in some cases subversive actions, even to the point of risking persecution or the destruction of the church in that context. Since the situations of injustice change in place and time, what is done in any time and place is contingent upon the circumstances. In other words, an emphasis on God's immanence might tend to lead to concrete moral norms that are more contingent. However, there may also be those, either churches or individuals, who emphasize the coming of God's reign not in this life and on this Earth, but in the heavenly afterlife. With this understanding, a church's moral discernment may be to build churches and conduct evangelistic activities, whilst tolerating unjust situations in the social context to ensure that the church, as the place where people can come to be saved, is always there.
- (111) An example is the North American Mennonite churches' experience of the change in the doctrine of non-resistance to active nonviolence. In the development of moral thinking on pacifism in the Mennonite church, two views emerged (see Box 15). The traditional conservative view is seen in the work of Guy Hershberger, who sought a single unifying moral principle in scripture and concluded that it was peace (a fundamental norm). Such a view insisted that it could only be interpreted as in line with the Mennonite tradition that non-resistance is the concrete material norm of "biblical nonviolence" (i.e., passive non-resistance that is apolitical and in no way coercive). This was the only way to be Mennonite. This view was based on a strong separation between this world

and the kingdom of God. In this view, it is better to “remain aloof” from the politics of the world and live a life that witnesses to genuine non-resistance than to get involved in the politics of this world that will lead to an inevitable compromising of this fundamental principle. On the other hand, in light of the awareness of the silence of the churches in Nazi Germany and the experience in relief work (especially in post-war Europe and Vietnam) and in the civil rights movement in the USA, reformers in the Mennonite community sought more political activism. They argued that this traditional norm of non-resistance in the interests of witnessing to transcendent peace of the kingdom of God should be reinterpreted as active nonviolence. Because of changed circumstances and new understandings of scripture, peacemaking took priority over a passive understanding of non-resistance. This does not mean that the two sayings in Matthew—“Blessed are the peacemakers” and “Do not resist an evil person”—are contradictory; but Mennonites had a certain understanding of non-resistance that no longer made sense in new circumstances. New circumstances bring new understandings.

#### BOX 15

##### **“From Passive Non-resistance to Active Nonviolence: A Change in the Mennonite Tradition”** *by Anne-Cathy Graber*

Graber in her study underscores that a commitment to peace as a critical identity marker in the Mennonite tradition can be traced to the first Mennonite confession, the *Schleitheim Confession*. She analyzes how this identity marker went through a significant change in the 20th century, from a doctrine of “non-resistance” to “active nonviolence” or “reconciliation.”

In the 19th century and into the 20th, the Mennonite tradition followed “the Gospel of non-resistance” and the avoidance of military service on grounds of non-resistance. However, the imprisoning of American Mennonites who refused military service in the Great War, combined with the need to understand their place in a changing world (urbanization due to industrialization), raised significant theological questions. These questions were further informed by an increased awareness of global suffering that accompanied Mennonite relief and humanitarian

work and the establishment of the Historic Peace Churches. This awareness clarified the need to define non-resistance.

Mennonite leadership commissioned theologian Guy Hershberger to examine these issues, and in 1944, Hershberger argued in “War, Peace and Non-resistance” that peace was a fundamental law of God. He said choosing peace was not only an ethical option but part of God’s very being, and he affirmed the duality between the kingdom of God and the world, thus maintaining a preference for remaining aloof from political action.

According to Graber, this initiative did not solve the problems, and strong tensions remained in Mennonite churches. A growing understanding that non-resistance could lead to passivity about social justice was particularly fuelled by younger theologians with experience of humanitarian work. Some emphasized daily discipleship, which opened up new options for peaceful mediation. Others reacted to the context of war and refugees with discussion about complexity and tragic necessity, arguing that Mennonites needed a theology to speak to contexts where no choice is good. A change in emphasis in readings of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5) was critical here, with a move from verse 39 (Do not resist an evil person) to verse 9 (Blessed are the peacemakers).

This movement in thought was reflected in the 1983 official statement, “Justice and the Christian Witness,” with a move from the language of non-resistance to a position that was activist, with a holistic understanding and focus on nonviolence, the restoration of shalom, and a systemic understanding that incorporated denouncing structural and institutional injustice. Graber reports that this shift in understanding was endorsed in 1995 with greater specificity on violence today, and in 2006, with a move completely away from the language of non-resistance to the language of reconciliation.

- (112) Another example comes from the Syriac Orthodox Church. Reading the signs of the times in the 4th century, St Ephrem (c. 306–373) considered it important that women, being created equal to men, were not deprived from praising God by having to remain silent in the church, as St Paul had instructed (see Box 16). He not only created choirs for women but also composed stanzaic songs (*madroshe*), providing them with Orthodox theological education in a memorable form. This was relevant in times of

persecution. The women are referred to as “teachers (*malphonyotho*) among the congregations.” St Jacob of Sarug (c. 451–521) praised and endorsed Ephrem’s initiative: worship should render immanent the eschatological promise of equality, confirmed in the sacramental equality of baptism, and present in the liturgy through public worship and teaching by choirs of covenanted women. Jacob concludes that Ephrem thus created an entirely new world, expressive of the eschatological promise of equality.

#### BOX 16

##### **“From the Pauline Admonition to Remain Silent to St Ephrem’s Creation of Women’s Choirs in the Liturgy”**

*by Mor Polycarpus A. Aydin*

Mor Polycarpus in his study explains how and why in the Syriac tradition, in the 4th century, St Ephrem the Syrian was inspired by scripture to create choirs for women, so that they would not have to remain silent (see 1 Cor. 14:34) but would be able to give praise to God in the liturgy.

St Ephrem (c. 306–373) is acknowledged as the greatest poet and theologian in the Syriac tradition. His biblical commentary had a lasting impact. He was a man of great vision with a gift for reading and interpreting the signs of the times, especially with regard to education and instruction of women and their role and ministry in the church.

Ephrem considered praise to be a joy and the duty of every believer, also to be expressed within the liturgy. Hence, he established choirs for women and composed stanzaic teaching songs (*madroshe*) for them so that all could join in offering praise. The songs also provided women with Orthodox theological education in a memorable form, which was relevant in times of persecution.

St Jacob of Sarug (c. 451–521) wrote a metrical homily on St Ephrem, through which he contributed to the reception of Ephrem’s wisdom and teaching. Jacob showed a preference for a theology of symbol and paradox, which was also characteristic of Ephrem, rather than the more analytic approach to theology common following the Council of Chalcedon in 451. In his homily, Jacob endorses Ephrem’s creation of choirs and composing of songs from eschatological, typological, sacramental, and soteriological perspectives. He praises Ephrem for having created the women’s choirs to fight against the errors of heresy and idolatry, allowing them to offer praise and glory to God.



Jacob pays tribute to the innovation, stating that Ephrem realized the eschatological significance of women's participation:

*Your teaching signifies an entirely new world;  
For yonder in the kingdom (of heaven), men and women are equal.*

Jacob lifts Ephrem's status by portraying him as the second Moses, thus elevating his authority:

*Just as Moses gave tambourines to the young girls,  
thus did this discerning man compose hymns for virgins.*

Mor Polycarpus concludes that Ephrem's seeing the need of his time moved away from a literal interpretation of scripture. It responded with a remedial solution while drawing upon the church's therapeutic tradition of the Syriac Orient, which is rooted in the Semitic world from which the Bible and Christianity sprang.

- (113) All churches are necessarily part of this world. A decision to engage actively against injustice in the world and a decision not to engage in this way are both moral decisions and both have moral impacts in the wider context.

#### **4.3.6 Ecclesial Identity and Disposition for Change: Between Unchanging and Constantly Reforming**

- (114) As noted in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*<sup>20</sup> and discussed above,<sup>21</sup> churches have "differing sensitivities and convictions regarding continuity and change in the church." Some churches claim a constant or continuous tradition as important to their identity. Such churches will tend to favour stability in moral norms and practice, and such claims are indeed themselves resistant to change. Other churches who perhaps "hold that faithfulness to the Gospel may at times require a break in institutional

20. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, paras. 24f.

21. See section 2.5.

continuity”<sup>22</sup> may have a greater disposition for or acceptance of the possibility of change in moral discernment when circumstances demand it (Figure 15). There are many ways of expressing the disposition of a particular church, or even of a church in a particular context or set of circumstances, that fall in this continuum. For example, a church may describe its disposition to change as “organic development” or “dynamic adaptation.” What is important is that in any particular case of dialogue on moral discernment, this element can help churches to identify how their disposition to change could affect their approach to the moral problem and their willingness to develop, apply, or change moral norms.

- (115) A church’s ecclesial identity and disposition for change clearly influence moral discernment. This disposition for change, however, is also relative to the other elements. For example, a church that has a strong commitment to continuity, together with a high level of concern about actively engaging in the world may be more ready to consider adapting its practice to address a perceived injustice than a church with a strong commitment to continuity but not such a strong concern about engaging in the world.
- (116) An illustration of the effect of ecclesial identity and disposition to change on moral discernment can be seen in the Evangelical (Lutheran, Reformed, and United) churches in Nazi Germany (see Box 17). The so-called German Christians (a group within these churches) aimed to adapt Christianity to what the Nazi ideology defined as the current needs and values of the German “Volk.” Some referred to the Lutheran distinction of “law and gospel” and claimed that “law” means the concrete

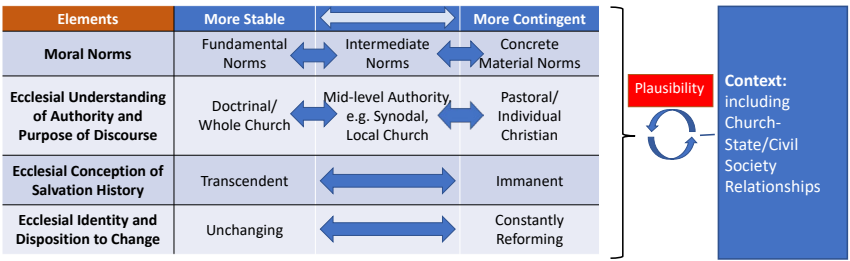


Figure 15: The element of ecclesial identity and disposition to change

22. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, para. 24.

“Volksnomos”: that is, the normative (cultural and political) structures of the “folk” Christians that are subject to change throughout history. In contrast, the Confessing Church, most clearly in the Barmen Declaration, rejected the right of the state to intervene in the inner life of the church. It did not want to interfere with politics but strongly insisted on the church’s core function to proclaim the unchanging gospel. After the defeat of Nazism, the evangelical churches in Germany were challenged to reflect upon their role in the time of the Nazi regime. They learned to see that Barmen was an important reminder to always stay firmly and faithfully with the gospel, which must not be changed. Nevertheless, their abstinence from politics had prevented them from raising their voice against injustice, discrimination, and crimes, and thus had failed to witness a core element of the gospel. This led from the 1960s to a new consciousness of the church’s responsibility to engage in social life, which resulted in public statements to foster social justice as a first, albeit imperfect, image of the presence of God’s reign in this world.

**BOX 17**

**“The Development of Moral Discernment in  
the Evangelical Church in Germany in the Light  
of the National Socialist State Crimes”**

*by Thomas Martin Schneider*

Schneider opens his study recalling that in the face of the challenge of National Socialism in Germany, authorities and members of the Evangelical churches held a broad spectrum of positions—from unqualified support to strong objection. *The Barmen Declaration* of 1934 declined any influence of the state in the doctrine and practice of the church itself. But with respect to the political sphere, officials of the Evangelical churches largely remained silent, for example, about the Jewish boycott, the Nuremberg race laws, the pogrom of 1938, and the deportation of the Jews. They were even indirectly involved in the growing crimes of the regime, for example, by providing access to church records of “Aryan ancestry.” Among radical “German Christians”—a group within the church that supported a national socialist transformation of Christianity in Germany—there were those who even justified persecution of Jews. The only significant protest was against the “euthanasia” program targeting the mentally ill and physically disabled.

Schneider describes the silence and indirect involvement as a moral disaster for the Evangelical Church.

There is now nearly unanimous consensus within the church about the protection of human life, commitment to the weak and persecuted, and commitment to peace and justice. This modern, post-war commitment to a public engagement of the church results from the insight into the church's failure to raise its voice against the National Socialists' crimes. This remarkable change in the church's position intensifies the need to explain why the church was so silent before.

Correlations between the Reformation and modern ideas of freedom and democracy are complex. But following the Reformation, there were close links in Germany between throne and altar—between sovereigns and Protestant church authorities. The abrupt end of monarchy in Germany in 1918 also meant a collapse of the ecclesiastical order, and many in the church found it hard to adjust to the first German democracy, the Weimar Republic.

This unease about democracy, however, does not fully explain support of or non-resistance to National Socialism. Schneider argues that in the atmosphere of the times, theological backgrounds did not play a crucial role for either supporters or critics of National Socialism. Contemporary political and ideological convictions took precedence over theology. Another key factor was the strength of an interpretation of the “two kingdoms” doctrine, which led to objections only being raised when the freedom and independence of the church was threatened.

In the *Stuttgarter Schuldklärung* of October 1945, German church officials accused themselves in a general sense of “not having confessed courageously enough.” But it took them a few more years to recognize that, at least through their silence and neglect, they had contributed to the structural prerequisites of the crimes. Schneider concludes that in the long run, this realization changed the church's attitude toward political engagement.

#### **4.3.7 Modes of Moral Reasoning Interact with the Conscience of the Church**

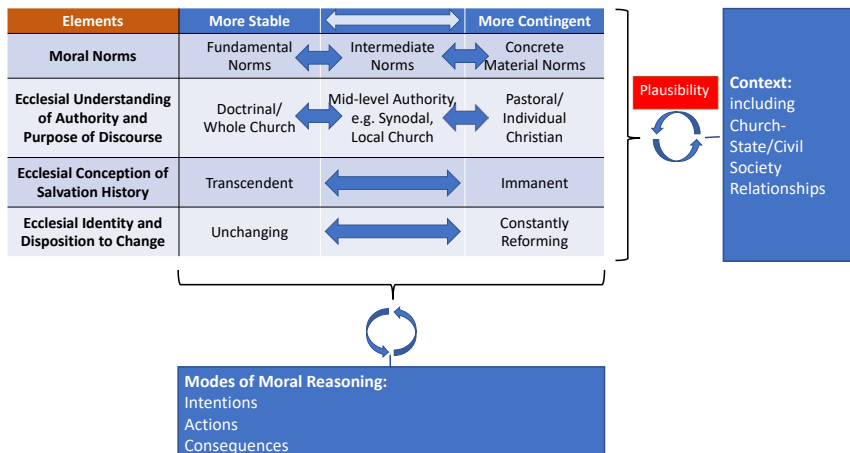
- (117) Just as the conscience of the church interacts with issues raised by context, there is also interaction with modes of moral reasoning. Favoured

modes of moral reasoning can affect the conscience of the church and vice versa (Figure 16).

- (118) The history of the debates on methods of moral reasoning is long and complex. As discussed in *Moral Discernment in the Churches*:

There are various methods of moral reasoning at one’s disposal. Typically these are categorized into three groups: those that focus on questions of the actor’s intentions and character (virtue ethics); those that focus on the moral goodness or badness of particular actions in themselves (deontological or value ethics); and those that focus on the consequences or outcomes of an action (teleological or consequentialist ethics).<sup>23</sup>

Given the complexity of the philosophical and theological debates about moral reasoning, a whole range of further distinctions and nuances could be made. For example, it could be argued that virtue ethics is teleological, but not consequentialist, since its end, or *telos*, is the cultivation of character. Different churches may more strongly identify with one or other of these modes of reasoning or have a variety of other nuances in their tradition and at their disposal in moral discernment.



**Figure 16: The interaction between modes of moral reasoning and the conscience of the church**

23. *Moral Discernment in the Churches*, para. 42.

- (119) In the tool, the four elements interact with the modes of moral reasoning used in a particular church, by a particular person, or at a particular time as indicated by the revolving arrows. How the ideas of intentions, actions, and consequence are weighed in moral reasoning will have an impact on how moral norms (especially concrete moral norms) are formulated. It should be remembered that churches can and have evaluated some modes of moral reasoning. For example, Christian thought has developed traditions about how to adequately take consequences into account in moral reasoning. An approach in which the end always justifies the means would be rejected by many Christian communities.
- (120) The preference for one or other method will be influenced by the “unchangeable” or “indisputable” line drawn with respect to each of the four elements. As a very simplistic illustration of this, a church that, on a specific subject, believes that concrete material norms revealed in scripture are absolute and immutable may tend to emphasize a deontological (i.e., duty or act-centred) approach to moral reasoning to express its affirmation of the immutability of the laws in the Bible regarding that subject.
- (121) With these various methods of moral reasoning in play, tensions frequently arise, for example, between those who emphasize obedience to laws or duties as determining the moral quality of an action (deontological) versus those who emphasize maximizing the goodness of the outcome (teleological). Added to this are approaches that emphasize the development of virtues. These ongoing debates about methods of moral reasoning resonate in most debates within churches and between churches on moral issues. The interaction is represented by two arrows in a circle. Sometimes a particular mode of reasoning will be based on theological and ecclesial presuppositions; but at other times, the choice of mode of reasoning, even by the same church, may challenge theological presuppositions or determine how they are interpreted and applied. Awareness of both of these possibilities in examining any individual case is important.
- (122) For example, Calvin’s treatment of usury is teleological in that it sought to clarify the outcomes that would justify morally acceptable usury; on the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church tended to define particular lending practices as “not usury” whilst keeping the deontological

prohibition on usury.<sup>24</sup> In Byzantine Orthodoxy, the approach was similar to Calvin’s, focused on maximizing the good consequences of charitable works of the church; but in such circumstances, usury remained a necessary evil rather than a just action in itself.<sup>25</sup>

4.3.8 Circumstances Influence Moral Discernment  
via Context and Modes of Moral Reasoning

(123) Finally, the tool contains a block for “circumstances” with arrows connecting it to both context and modes of moral reasoning (Figure 17). Circumstances are clearly a part of our understanding of context. However, circumstances are also important in determining the moral quality of actions. This is especially true with respect to how churches or people might invoke circumstances to mitigate or aggravate the guilt of a particular action. This can be seen clearly in the suicide example from the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>26</sup> As a result of the reception of findings of suicidology, the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that “grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship,

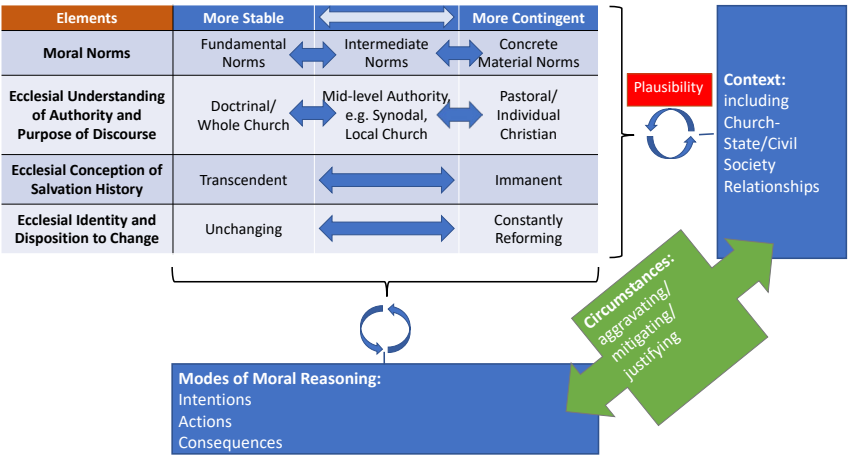


Figure 17: Circumstances interact with moral reasoning and context

24. See Boxes 5 and 6 respectively in section 3.5.  
25. See Box 18, section 4.3.8.  
26. See Box 14, section 4.3.4.

suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide.”<sup>27</sup>

- (124) In some cases, circumstances may even be invoked to justify certain behaviours in certain contexts, especially where the same behaviour may be unjustifiable at other times. For example, one might ask whether it is ever permissible to take something that does not belong to one. Typically, the answer is “No” and the only justification required is a simple appeal to the Decalogue’s proscription against stealing. However, at times it may be permissible—for example, a person in extreme need stealing food to feed their starving child. Nonetheless, this exception is rarely taught as a rule. Moreover, it is not usually permitted in a way that undoes, or even changes, the original proscription. Rather, it permits it in light of the circumstances: in this case, dire need. Moreover, the permission can range from affirming it as sinful and the person as having committed a sin but with no or reduced penalty or punishment (using circumstances to mitigate guilt), to affirming the action as good and right in these circumstances (using circumstances to justify an action and modify its moral quality). Aggravating circumstances are those that make an action that is already morally wrong morally worse: for example, a person who has no financial need stealing from a poor person.
- (125) In the Orthodox churches in Byzantine times, circumstances played a substantial role in thinking about the morality of usury (i.e., lending at interest) (see Box 18). When economic circumstances changed, churches and monasteries justified usury as a necessary evil in order to ensure that they could continue charitable works for the poor. Here, circumstances serve as a mitigating factor: the evil of usury is not denied but tolerated in favour of a greater good. On the other hand, circumstances of power imbalances between creditors and debtors during times of economic hardship meant that under Patriarch Matthaios I, poor people could appeal to the patriarchal court to have their debts abolished. The circumstances here aggravated the wrong of demanding interest at the expense of poor debtors, and so the patriarchal court applied *oikonomia* to judge in favour of the debtor, even threatening the creditor with excommunication for what was otherwise a tolerated practice amongst laypeople.

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27. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992), para. 2282.



**BOX 18**

**“Serving Both God and Mammon?  
The Orthodox Response to Usury in Byzantium”**  
*by Antigone Samellas*

Samellas in her study asserts that the core arguments against usury remained unchanged in the Orthodox church throughout the Byzantine era, although practices varied, especially after late antiquity. The church fathers condemned usury on biblical grounds. Gregory of Nyssa, and later Nicolas Cabasilas, argued that loaning at interest to poor people is misnamed “philanthropy” because the interest charged to the poor amounted to theft and exploitation and a loss of freedom. They said this practice was, in fact, usury because it reflected injustice and dishonest practice. In all trade and commerce, just pricing should reflect the interests of all parties. Usury, however, is unnatural, and came to be equated with heresy, paganism, and avarice. The church, by contrast, was seen as standing for the poor.

In the 4th century, however, as the church embarked on ambitious social welfare programs, it needed credit to fund schools and hospitals. It was also argued that without interest, credit would not be available to poorer members of society. Usury, then came to be seen as a necessary evil, with theologians using various strategies to control and limit it. Simeon the Stylite (mid-5th century), for example, did not prohibit usury but tried to control it. In times of financial crisis, patriarchal courts favoured the borrower, requiring the lender to be content with a return of capital. John Chrysostom argued that it was not acceptable to receive alms from the profit of usury. Opinion on this, however, seems to have been divided, as Basil of Caesarea (4th century) argued otherwise: someone who charged interest and then spent the profit on the poor could later be received into the clergy, and examples are provided of a bishop and some exemplary saints who donated profits from taking interest.

To meet charitable needs, churches and monasteries also became involved in trade. This involved practising usury, although this was usually concealed or indirect, with the interest charge either being listed as part of capital loaned, or the interest being earned in “partnerships” rather than through loans at interest.

Samellas concludes that the Orthodox church remained firm in condemning usury, although it recognized that it was necessary in a number

of circumstances. It was always seen as a necessary evil, but nonetheless an evil; this remains true also with regard to many modern forms of usury today.

(126) How circumstances are understood for the purposes of moral reasoning will be affected by:

- the church's understanding of the unchangeability or indisputability of certain kinds of moral norms (first element),
- the church's understanding of ecclesial authority and relevance to different levels of discourse (second element),
- the relationship of the behaviour to the conception of salvation history (third element), and
- the church's disposition for change (fourth element).

So, to return to the example of stealing, the use of circumstances to talk of mitigating or aggravating a wrong action expresses a position that affirms the indisputability of at least intermediate norms. These norms apply to the whole church in all circumstances but can allow for different kinds of treatment at the pastoral level in light of how this action is deemed to affect the salvation of the soul of the person who perpetrated it without “changing” anything. On the other hand, a position that uses the circumstances to “justify” the taking of something that does not belong to one in the event of dire need might similarly affirm the indisputability of the Decalogue's prohibition on stealing. But in this case it will argue it is justifiable since it was a choice between life and death, and it was right and good to choose life in this case. Here, the affirmation is of a “higher” level norm (i.e., respect for life over respect for property). Though the notion that it is permissible to take what is not yours could never be taught to the whole church, it could be taught that, in circumstances of extreme need, this might be justifiable. However, the actual sinfulness of a particular action would still need to be determined on a case-by-case basis.

- (127) The Greek Orthodox Church's reflections on the morality of killing in war present two views of how circumstances change the moral quality of the act of killing another human being (see Box 19). Following St Athanasius, killing in war is arguably not only morally licit but indeed admirable. In this view, such killing is not murder but rather a good action justified by the good of protecting the church, one's family, or the nation. Those who follow St Basil, however, argue that St Athanasius' example was not authoritative but rather illustrative. St Basil's idea that killing in war is still murder but justified as a necessary evil is formulated as a canon for the whole church. In the application of this canon and its penalties, however, many have argued that the penance for killing in war of three years exclusion from communion is excessive. The Orthodox approach allows room to apply *oikonomia* to the cases of particular people at the pastoral level, which does not detract from the important message of the canon. This message is that killing is an evil that is opposed to the gospel ethic of nonviolence, and so at best it can be a necessary evil in war but can never good in itself.

#### BOX 19

##### **"Is Participation of the Christian in War Ethically Acceptable? An Orthodox Approach on the Basis of Two Patristic References"** *by Miltiadis Vantsos and Kristina Mantasasvili*

War is a common phenomenon in human society. Vantsos and Mantasasvili in their study underline that the Orthodox Church views this as an evil, as Christ's teaching set standards of nonviolence and non-resistance to evil. In the days of the Roman Empire, Christians, as a minority religion, could choose not to serve in war. Following Constantine's conversion, however, Christianity rapidly became the majority religion and increasingly Christians were obliged to participate in warfare. In response, the church fathers started formulating their positions toward war and Christian participation. This study examines two patristic passages: Athanasius the Great's letter to Amun, and Basil the Great's letter to Amphiloichius.

Athanasius mentions Christian participation in war as an example. He argues that everything created by God is useful and that an act is

ethically evaluated in conjunction with the purpose for which it is performed. Murder is condemned by Christian ethics, but it is considered legitimate and commendable when carried out in the context of war. This is why monuments are raised to those who have fallen in war.

The authors state that other theologians dispute the force of this argument, since Athanasius is only elaborating on an example. The example could have been chosen as a common one in Athanasius' society. He could be expressing the state's opinion and not the church's opinion, especially given the note about the raising of monuments, which is a state function. Nonetheless, Athanasius gives this positive, albeit limited, assessment of participation in war.

St Basil the Great, on the other hand, offers a more systematic development. Basil accepts the distinction between murder and killing in war. War is needed for the defence of virtue and piety; and in the case of a killing in war, Basil recommends a three-year abstinence from the divine eucharist, as the person's hands are not clean. This was a comparatively light penance as the penance for murder was 20 years' excommunication.

The authors write that although Basil's ruling is clear, it was not always enforced in the church. Zonaras argues that enforcement of this would pose a burdensome penance, because soldiers may participate in wars frequently, often successive wars in a short period of time. With this mild penance, however, St Basil sends the message to the whole society that while war and violence are not compatible with the gospel, they are a part of the present world—at best a necessary evil.

- (128) Circumstances also interact with context. For example, continuing to consider the case of stealing, a church could ask if any institutional structures or socio-cultural practices could have presented an alternative means in this instance: for example, foodbanks for those in need. In the case of killing in war in the Greek Orthodox Church, the issue became a problem when the context changed under Constantine (see Box 18). Prior to this, Christians were able to pray whilst others fought the wars. However, when Christianity became the state religion, it became unavoidable for Christians to kill in defence of the Empire. Moreover, the interaction with context via moral reasoning about circumstances

for the churches raises questions about the role of churches in changing the context so that such circumstances would not exist; in this case, the church could engage in social justice action to bring about the changes in society that would reduce the numbers of people in extreme poverty. This would then refer back to the element concerning the church's view of salvation history, and with it, the other three elements.

- (129) Though circumstances interact with context, they are not the same as context. Context is the historical ground in which the church finds itself. Circumstances, on the other hand, refer to the details of context that are morally relevant to a particular moral problem. These may be different for different individual or group actors in a particular context. As such, what might be judged morally appropriate for one party in a specific context may not be applicable to all. A poor woman who steals to feed her children in a context of general shortage (e.g., after a war or during the Great Depression) is in different circumstances than a wealthy person in the same context. Similarly, an established church in a given context is in different circumstances than a persecuted church in the same context. Thus, the morality of a given norm is not and should not be determined entirely by a consideration of circumstances. But how circumstances are taken into account by different churches, authorities, and so on in particular contexts may also be a point of tension that it is critical to examine as part of a constructive dialogue.



## 5. Concluding Remarks

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- (130) After publishing the document *Moral Discernment in the Churches* in 2013, the Faith and Order Commission decided that the next phase should focus on “deepening the knowledge about moral discernment processes in the churches and identifying uniting and dividing factors.” This study document is the third step in a process of learning. It began by listening to and analyzing self-descriptions of 14 traditions about how each of them engages in moral discernment. This enabled the deepening of knowledge about one’s own tradition and other Christian traditions as well as learning where similarities and differences can be found in these discernment processes within the different traditions.
- (131) The second step consisted of studying 19 examples in which churches, over the course of history, have modified their understanding or changed their view on a given moral issue. Becoming aware of how and why diachronic differences occur (why the outcome of a church’s discernment process might lead to different results over time) can pave the way for understanding what is happening when synchronic differences occur (when churches hold different views on a given moral issue at the same time). Such awareness might be a pathway not only for promoting understanding and possibly appreciation, but also for churches to engage in responding to new challenges together while remaining faithful to their respective traditions.
- (132) From the analysis of the historic examples, the Faith and Order study group identified two insights that might contribute to ongoing dialogue about questions of moral discernment in the churches. First, it recognized that in responding to emerging moral challenges in a specific context, a church’s moral discernment process is shaped by its own understanding of what can be referred to as the “conscience of the church.” Second, in examining both the discernment processes of different traditions and the historical examples, it is possible to see that when churches engage in a moral discernment process they do so because they intend to preserve fidelity to the gospel.

- (133) The concept of the conscience of the church refers to the idea that a collective desire exists within all churches to pursue God's will in a given situation. In order to discern that will, communities draw on collective knowledge and wisdom to develop and apply relevant criteria to the issue at stake. These communities reach a collective judgment in light of these criteria and reasoning, and they act upon these judgments together. In interaction with the context, the community is guided, in various ways, by the Holy Spirit, holy scripture, Tradition, traditions, teaching authority, spirituality, and church culture. This is what is meant when this study document says that the churches discern in the light of the conscience of the church. That term thus gives expression to every church's communal effort to realize a *koinonia* ethic.
- (134) Acknowledging that churches engage in moral discernment because they seek to pursue God's will and remain faithful to the gospel implies that a dialogue can begin with a presumption that the dialogue partner is sincere without yet necessarily or automatically accepting the outcome of the partner's discernment process. Hence, instead of just focusing on the outcomes of a discernment process, a new pathway for dialogue can be to attend to understand the process that leads to an outcome. A better understanding can reveal new pathways for mutual cooperation to "build up *koinonia*" and "the fullness of life for all."
- (135) This enables a different understanding of change: a change in the outcome of a moral discernment process occurs precisely because the church wants to preserve continuity with the conscience of the church. Change and continuity are therefore not opposites; rather, the continuous commitment to remain faithful to Christ might lead to a change in the outcome of the discernment process. Therefore, it is helpful to realize that continuity and change do not occur on the same level. Yet this raises the question: What causes churches to sometimes arrive at different interpretations of the norms of the conscience of the church leading to different responses to moral challenges? And by the same token, how is it possible that churches, despite different interpretations of the conscience of the church, sometimes arrive at the same response to a moral issue?
- (136) The study document, therefore, offers a tool to better understand the different factors that play a role in the way the conscience of the church is understood and how it affects the moral discernment process. The



tool identifies four elements in the conscience of the church that play a role in moral discernment: (1) the understanding of moral norms, (2) the ecclesial understanding of authority and the purpose of a particular discourse, (3) the conception of time and salvation history, and (4) the ecclesial identity with respect to change and a particular church's disposition to change.

- (137) The hope is that the tool will assist in deepening knowledge about moral discernment processes and their outcomes in one's own tradition as well as in other traditions. In this way, it may shed light on different views that exist between and within churches, whether at the same point in time (synchronic) or over the course of history (diachronic). It may also shed light on the relationship between, on the one hand, a universal doctrine and, on the other hand, a local practice shaped by pastoral care in a specific context.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the tool is not to determine what is the right or wrong way to address a moral question. Rather, the tool is intended to help to understand the process, to recognize how and why differences might emerge, to affirm shared commitments and points of agreement, and in so doing, to further mutual respect on the journey toward visible unity.

- (138) It is a tool to help build *koinonia*.

May the prayer of St Basil guide the church of Christ on this journey.

### **Prayer from St Basil**

*Prayer from the First Hour*<sup>2</sup>

O Eternal God,  
the everlasting light  
which is without beginning,  
the Creator of all creation,  
the fountain of mercy,  
the sea of goodness,

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1. In order to facilitate dialogue and understanding, an appendix with guiding questions is provided.

2. See Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca, vol 29: S. Basilii Caesariensis Episcopus* (Paris, 1857), 375.

and the inexplorable depth of love to humanity;  
illumine us with the light of your face,  
O Lord.

Shine within our hearts,  
O spiritual sun of righteousness,  
and fill our hearts with your gladness.  
teach us always to study  
and talk about your word  
and ever praise you,  
our Master and benefactor.

Direct the works of our hands  
towards your will,  
and enable us to do  
what is pleasing and acceptable to you.

Thus, your all-holy name  
of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
of the one divinity and kingdom,  
might be glorified  
even by us, the unworthy ones.

For your divinity  
is due every glory, honor, and worship  
for ever. Amen.

## APPENDIX:

# Guiding Questions to Use the Tool

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The tool presented can assist churches in deepening knowledge about moral discernment processes and their outcomes in their own tradition as well as in other traditions. It is intended to help to understand the process, to recognize how and why differences might emerge, to affirm shared commitments and points of agreement, and in so doing, to further mutual respect on the journey toward visible unity. In order to facilitate dialogue and enable understanding, the following questions can guide those who seek to use the tool to engage in dialogue about moral discernment processes.

### 1. Levels of Norms

- 1.1. What norms were appealed to by different parties or at different times and at what level were these norms (see 4.3.3.)?
- 1.2. Did conflict arise about (a) how a fundamental norm should be interpreted and applied in a concrete material norm, (b) the relative importance of norms at the same fundamental or intermediate level, or (c) the level at which a norm should be considered unchangeable or indisputable? If so, describe these.

### 2. Ecclesial Understanding of Authority and Purpose of Discourse

- 2.1. Which positions (norms) were held by which levels of authority and what was the purpose of the discourse at each level (see 4.3.4.)? Did the fact that a particular level of authority held a position have an effect on the norms being perceived as unchangeable or indisputable?

### 3. Ecclesial Conception of Time and Salvation History

- 3.1. What conceptions of time and salvation history appear to underpin different norms and what effect does this have on their perceived stability or contingency (see 4.3.5.)?

#### **4. Ecclesial Identity and Disposition to Change**

- 4.1. What is the overarching ecclesial identity with respect to change in operation in this church or churches and what impact does this have on the stability of norms (see 4.3.6.)?

#### **5. Modes of Moral Reasoning**

- 5.1. What modes of moral reasoning are involved at different times or by different parties in the debate (see 4.3.7.)? For example, is there a focus on the morality only of the action (a deontological approach), on the intention (a virtues approach), or on the outcomes (a consequentialist approach)? What difference does a particular focus make to how the different positions unfold?

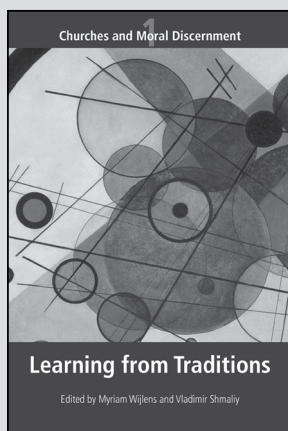
#### **6. Context**

- 6.1. Were there contextual changes that raised questions about the plausibility of the existing moral norms (see 4.3.1.)?
- 6.2. What was the church's relationship to temporal authorities in this situation or at different times, and what role might this have played?

#### **7. Circumstances**

- 7.1. How did circumstances affect moral reasoning, either through mitigation and aggravation arguments or through arguments that suggested a particular practice did not meet the definition of the moral norm and so were licit/illicit (see 4.3.8.)?
- 7.2. How did circumstances affect the church's response in the specific context? In other words, were there other licit means to achieve the outcome that the church could have supported or proposed?

*Look for the other volumes in this series—*



# Facilitating Dialogue to Build *Koinonia* —

Current tensions within and between churches are often the result of disagreements over moral issues. Seeing the urgency of the matter, the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission took up the task to assist the churches in finding a way to deepen mutual understanding. Learning from the moral discernment processes of different church traditions and a range of historical examples, this study document proposes a tool to deepen knowledge about the processes, recognize how and why differences might emerge, affirm shared commitments, and in so doing, to build *koinonia*.

Instead of just focusing on the outcomes of a discernment process, understanding the process can lead to a new pathway for dialogue. The study document proposes the concept of the conscience of the church. Acknowledging that churches seek to pursue God's will as they want to remain faithful to the gospel implies that a dialogue can begin with a presumption that the partner is sincere without necessarily accepting the outcome of their discernment process.

"*Facilitating Dialogue to Build Koinonia* is unique in its approach, and at the same time, builds on the continuous work undertaken by the Commission in this field in recent decades. (...) We are confident that this document, and the tool it offers, will help the churches as they themselves face some of the most urgent ecumenical questions of our times. It provides ways of deepening understanding, of entering into dialogue with calmness and confidence, and of strengthening communion between and within our churches."

—From the Preface of Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Saucă and Rev. Dr Susan Durber

FAITH AND ORDER PAPER 235



World Council  
of Churches  
Publications

ECUMENISM / ETHICS

