

# WHAT ARE THE CHURCHES SAYING ABOUT THE CHURCH?

KEY FINDINGS AND PROPOSALS  
FROM THE RESPONSES TO  
*THE CHURCH: TOWARDS A COMMON VISION*

Faith and Order Paper No. 236



World Council  
of Churches



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## Preface

*Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.*

—Revelation 3:22

The declared purpose of the World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order is “to serve the churches as they call one another to visible unity in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world.”<sup>1</sup> One part of fulfilling that calling must be undertaken through careful, patient, and open listening to the churches themselves.

This document is but one small part of a long story of a particular conversation about the Church over decades. That conversation has included various elements: the preparation and publication of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*; the reception of and responses to *BEM*, followed by reflection and decisions on further work; conversations on the way to the publication in 2013 of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*; and then the patient waiting for responses to *TCTCV* from churches, from ecumenical organizations and from passionate ecumenists. The work has continued as those responses, in turn, have been carefully read with faithful attention and have become material for reflection and discernment.

The responses themselves are now available and published, along with an additional volume

of papers on key themes that emerged from the responses. This text, much shorter than either of those, provides an accessible, go-to summary of the findings of a process that took years of intense and hope-filled listening. It is by no means a complete summary and neither will it tell the reader all the findings there are to discover in the volumes of responses. What it can provide are some highlights and impressions of what those who have listened discern that they have heard. There is some sorrow that there are responses that did not come and that there are voices missing. There is rejoicing here at the very positive tenor and grace of some responses, while also some wincing at the sharpness of some critiques. There is much evidence here that churches have energy and will to explore further what visible unity might mean and entail, what place a true and broad diversity might have within unity, whether a deeper conversation on baptismal ecclesiology might open new paths, what it means for the churches that mission is a more common passion, and what a more shared theological understanding of humankind might be.

We hope that readers will find this short text fascinating, challenging, and significant, and that it will encourage the churches to take stock of the theological unity made evident here. We hope too that it will provide a positive moment in the long conversation about the Church: when the fellowship of churches within the World Council of Churches may be strengthened, when its relationship with the Roman Catholic Church might be deepened, and when the whole conversation about what it really is to be the

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<sup>1</sup> “Bylaws of the Commission of Faith and Order,” 2012, World Council of Churches.

Church together might be joined by others within global Christianity.

Any text that comes from the Faith and Order Commission comes with the hope that it will enable all the churches to live their life more fully, that we might all rediscover things we have forgotten or neglected about being the Church, and that we might all find our own traditions strengthened and affirmed. And any piece of work that Faith and Order undertakes is always one in which we seek to listen to the churches, to what they tell us that the Holy Spirit is saying, so that

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

we may join together in calling one another to visible unity. This slender booklet seeks to distil years of work, prayer, conversation, debate, and listening, and to place some possible signposts to future work. May it fulfil its purpose.

Our profound thanks to the Faith and Order commissioners who have given years of work to this listening, to those churches, organizations, and individuals who responded to *TCTCV*, and above all to the God who continues to speak to the churches through the power of the Holy Spirit.

*Rev. Dr Odair Pedroso Mateus*  
*Director*  
*Commission on Faith and Order*

## Introduction

1. In 2013 the Faith and Order Commission published *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*, its second convergence text. It was sent out to member churches and ecumenical partners of the World Council of Churches (WCC), as well as to all those who belong to the WCC Faith and Order Commission. Responses were invited and were received from those churches and from other interested bodies, from ecumenical groups, from theological faculties and study groups, and from some individuals too. Between 2015 and 2020, a group of Faith and Order commissioners met often to read, analyze, and reflect together on the more than 78 responses received. Representatives themselves of the member churches of the Faith and Order Commission, they brought their collective prayer, theological expertise, and ecumenical experience to the important task of ecumenical reflection on the responses to this text, that follows the 1982 convergence text *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*. They have also reflected on what to say to the churches and on how to challenge the churches about their fellowship, as a result of this work. They identified 16 key themes or issues often raised by the responses, and produced papers on each of these. The churches' responses have been published and made available.<sup>2</sup> The 16

papers, each written by a particular author, then edited and affirmed through discussion together, will also be published.

This report does not pretend to contain the complete findings but presents some of the significant things that have emerged from the process of reception of *TCTCV* so far: what the churches are able to affirm, what they can say confidently with one voice, what questions remain, and what ways forward might be suggested. The responses are quite varied, but this report seeks to draw together some of the highlights and the areas where a consensus might be said to emerge. Obviously, given that the responses from different churches did not agree on all points, choosing and formulating these highlights in a way that reflects such diversity and yet produces a harmonious presentation of highlights was no easy task. All comments by the churches could not be explicitly mentioned here. Therefore, for access to a complete overview of the responses to *TCTCV*, the reader is advised to consult the additional volumes in which they have been published as well as the volume of 16 themes drawn up by Faith and Order commissioners on the basis of those responses. That being said, we are confident that the points included in the present report do offer an effective summary of much of the fruit to be garnered from those who have kindly offered their feedback about *TCTCV*. We have reached a real milestone on a long journey over decades and many of the churches have responded positively to this convergence text with both affirmation and constructive criticism. This conversation needs to be seen, of course, within the broader context of the churches' dialogues

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<sup>2</sup> The responses, *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards A Common Vision*, Faith and Order Papers Nos. 231 and 232 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), are available in print at <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources>, and online at <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/churches-respond-to-the-church-towards-a-common-vision-volume-i> and <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/churches-respond-to-the-church-towards-a-common-vision-volume-ii>

(both bilateral and multilateral) on ecclesiology; within the broad and fast-moving context of world Christianity that has led, for example, to the generation of new ecumenical spaces such as the Global Christian Forum; and also within the context of the changing world in which we live, where the pressing cries of many human beings and of creation itself demand and need to be heard. In a time when we are facing the profound challenges of a pandemic, of climate change, of inequalities of caste relations, of rich and poor, and between men and women, among so many others. In a world where some have privilege while others face discrimination, where there is racism, and in which economic systems bring poverty to so many, there is a profound need for Christians to find that unity for which Christ prayed and for which so many long.

2. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982) and all the conversations that led to its publication produced insights that over the years have proved to be profoundly fruitful. The responses to *BEM* revealed that a study on a common understanding of the Church might help to address some of the remaining controversial issues that continue to divide the churches. *TCTCV*, this second convergence text, builds on the achievements of *BEM*, marking one more step on our pilgrimage of unity. In what follows, readers may reflect on how far the ecumenical landscape has changed in recent decades, so what are now considered controversial issues may be different from those that were pressing in the time immediately after *BEM*. *TCTCV* addresses ecclesiological issues not considered by

*BEM*, reflecting both growth in ecumenical agreement since the convergence stated in *BEM*, and challenges that have emerged since 1982, when *BEM* was published.

3. Many of the responses to *TCTCV* acknowledge that *TCTCV* does identify many important elements of convergence and even agreement in matters of ecclesiology. Both *TCTCV* and the responses to it make it clear that *we, the churches, now agree more than we disagree* on many characteristics of the Church, including (among many others) that the Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic; that it is by its very nature missionary; and that the Church is called to fulfil its vocation in witness, worship, and discipleship in fidelity to God and in service to the world. At the same time, some of the responses make vivid the continued, and even in some ways deepened, wrestling of the churches with some difficult issues, while they also hold up vital things about contemporary ecumenism and ecclesiology that should encourage the churches: from a commitment to pray for visible unity to a profound common emphasis on mission; from a renewed focus on ecumenical spirituality to a deeper and common commitment to an ecclesiology that begins with baptism; from an increasing convergence on the significance of holding together catholicity and the local to a deeper sense of an evangelical imperative to proclaim the gospel together in a hungry and hurting world.

4. The responses demand attentive and reflective interpretation. There are some issues that are barely mentioned, but probably only because the



insights of *BEM* and of other ecumenical conversations and dialogues have been so well-received that agreement has become our common experience. So many of the issues that once drove Christians from different traditions even to shed blood have found now a warm consensus. We agree more than we disagree, for example, on many aspects of the apostolic faith, on much about our understanding of the sacraments, and on the imperative to serve God's people in the world. Some responses have provided very welcome breakthrough moments or comments, often because of their tone, emphasis, and approach. Those given the task of analysis have helped one another, through a prayerful and patient group process of discernment, to draw what they hope are appropriate and helpful conclusions so that the churches can see, from each other's responses to this convergence text, where we do indeed find a common vision, but also where significant issues and obstacles to unity remain.

5. The Faith and Order Commission, recognizing that so much of world Christianity has not yet engaged with the text of *TCTCV* or with this ecumenical conversation on ecclesiology, has also set out intentionally and proactively to engage more churches from regions and from traditions that represent some of the fastest-growing parts of global Christianity, whose voices have not always been clearly or strongly part of the conversation within the Commission. This "broadening of the table" has been realized both in its regional dimension (by holding consultations with local theologians in Africa, Latin America, and Asia) and in its denominational dimension (by analyzing major

bilateral dialogues and other theological documents that came from or included the participation of evangelical, charismatic, independent, and Pentecostal churches, as well as by holding consultations with theologians from such churches). These regions and denominational families are the ones where the conversation now needs to develop further, so that Faith and Order may continue to be part of the growing understanding of what it means to be the Church within the contemporary context of world Christianity, and to do that with much broader participation. This is an essential, and urgent, part of the future ecumenical reception of *TCTCV*, and of the whole ecumenical movement. The deep awareness of the centrality of the Church and its ministry in God's purpose for the human family and the whole creation is one of the most important gifts that the ecumenical movement can share with a Christianity that becomes both more strongly identified with the global South and more evangelical, charismatic, independent, and Pentecostal. The ecumenical movement, in turn, sorely needs the voices of those who have not historically been part of it, if it is truly to be, in every sense, ecumenical, and to speak within and for global Christianity. This is why, for example, *TCTCV* has now been translated into Portuguese, Indonesian, Swahili, and Mandarin. There is a strong imperative to continue the conversation and to gather more voices, regions, denominational families, and traditions to be part of it, as we envisage future work.

## What Responses to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* Have Been Received?

6. Seventy-eight responses were received, from 45 churches, from 13 world communions, national councils of churches, or regional ecumenical organizations, and from 20 other ecumenical organizations and individuals.

There were ten responses (among those categories listed above) that came from churches and organizations that have, in different ways, a global presence and reach, which means that their responses include involvement from both global North and global South: the Baptist World Alliance, a Christian Law Panel of Experts, the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council, the Focolare Movement, the International Old Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Union of Utrecht, an Inter-Orthodox Consultation, the Episcopal Church (with dioceses and convocations in the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, and North America), the Roman Catholic Church, the Salvation Army, and the United Methodist Church.

Of those responses that came from a particular region, the highest number were from Europe (43) and North America (13), while there were 5 from the Pacific, 4 from Eastern Europe, 2 from the Caribbean, and 1 from Asia. There were no responses that came exclusively from either Latin American or African contexts.

7. The Faith and Order Commission is deeply grateful for the responses received and welcomes them all, including those that are critical. It is regrettable that only a small percentage of the member churches of the WCC responded and it

is understood that not to respond at all is in itself a response that needs to be heard. The absence of responses from some contexts, and notably from the global South, is profoundly significant and demands interpretation and understanding. For some churches, and in some contexts, ecclesiological questions addressed in this way or in this style of document are not as pressing and urgent as concerns for justice and renewal. It may be that, for some, the remarkable witness of *BEM* to those things on which we agree made this document seem unexciting by comparison. In some places the questions discussed in *TCTCV* do not now seem so pressing. *TCTCV* seemed, some responses reflected, less compelling than some other recent WCC texts like *Together Towards Life*.<sup>3</sup>

## What May We Learn From the Responses?

8. After careful reading, analyzing, and reflecting on the responses, Faith and Order commissioners have written papers on key themes that emerge in many places among the responses. These theme papers, along with the two volumes of responses, are to be published. They hold up a mirror to the churches and other respondents about what they reported back. The theme papers are on visible unity and mutual recognition, communion (*koinonia*), apostolic faith, laity, threefold ministry, the church local and universal, ecumenical councils, experience, reception, church and mission, church in and for the world, sacraments and

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<sup>3</sup>Jooseop Keum, *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes, with a Practical Guide* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/together-towards-life>)

sacramentality, legitimate diversity, authority and moral discernment, the role of women, and the church and sin. The papers offer a more detailed way to discern what the churches have said about *TCTCV*; the fullest appreciation of the responses and their significance can be found, of course, by reading the responses themselves and those key theme papers. This report provides a shorter introduction and a further selection of themes. It also sets out some suggestions that have been made, or to which the responses point, for future work. Below are explored some themes that, it is hoped, hold before the reader the main lessons to be learned from the responses, which might shape the way ahead.

### **Visible Unity**

9. According to God's design and intention, the Church is one. From its founding in Amsterdam in 1948 (echoing the first Faith and Order Conference in 1927), the WCC has expressed its vision and goal in terms of visible unity. For those churches within the fellowship of the World Council of Churches, and their ecumenical partners, visible unity is declared to be the ultimate goal of the ecumenical movement. That this unity is *God's gift* and that it should be *visible* have been twin pillars of the ecumenical movement; and at every assembly of the WCC a statement about the unity that is God's gift and our calling has been affirmed. The responses to *TCTCV* reveal that almost all the churches remain convinced that unity is to be understood as the gift of God, that the unity for which we pray and search has to be *visible* unity, and that such unity demands

mutual recognition of one another as belonging to the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church." For some churches, there may be changes since the time of *BEM* in how that visibility may now be understood. Communion (*koinonia*) may have become a more helpful way for some to describe how they now understand what God is giving us and what we are seeking—more relational and dynamic, more open to degrees of perfection or imperfection, and perhaps more open to diversity within unity. There may be less enthusiasm now for models of unity that seem to be institutional in form. But there remains a strong commitment to the unity for which we pray to be *visible*, tangible, and vivid enough to shape the life of the world.

10. Although visible unity (unity in faith, unity in sacramental life, and unity in service, including in ministry and mission) is very much still the goal, many of the responses, nevertheless, express a need to think more precisely about what this means or could mean. Some of them place "visible unity" always in quotation marks, demonstrating a sense that its meaning is yet unclear. There is, from some, a sense of disillusionment or weariness with the expectation that visible unity must be about institutional unity (sometimes called "organic" unity), and a desire to find unity in new ways. Some reflect that it has proved very difficult to move towards unity (on issues such as authority and ministry, for example). The responses suggest that more common work and thought is needed about how to rediscover a vision of a visible unity that can inspire, energize, and excite in these times: a unity that provides an

eloquent witness to the world of Christian love; a unity that will include working together for peace and justice (though also more than that); and one that is a faithful response to the prayer of Christ that “they may all be one.”<sup>4</sup>

11. There is now something of a *change of emphasis* in how visible unity might be imagined. More churches than ever before speak of unity becoming visible through common *mission*, expressed in terms of speaking together for justice and peace, or acting together in service to the world. This is sometimes presented as an alternative to visible unity as organic union, or visible unity understood as a being only about doctrinal agreement. However, in naming common witness and service as visible signs of unity, many churches today are echoing what has always, from the beginnings of the ecumenical movement, been recognized as one of the visible signs of unity. It is clearly vital for future conversations that this focus on mission and on speaking and acting together for justice and peace is recognized, affirmed, and honoured as a truly visible sign of the unity that Christ brings.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John 17:21

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, three recent WCC Faith and Order publications: *Come and See: A Theological Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*, Faith and Order Paper No. 224 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2019); *Love and Witness: Proclaiming the Peace of the Lord Jesus Christ in a Religiously Plural World*, Faith and Order Paper No. 230 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021); and *Cultivate and Care: An Ecumenical Theology of Justice for and within Creation*, Faith and Order, Paper No. 226 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021). These and other resources are available at <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources>

12. There is, very evidently from the responses, now a greater sense than once there was that a *visibly* united church can cope with diversity and even with some very painful differences for the sake of overcoming the principal scandal of disunity. There is a sense of impatience and longing to find ways to celebrate and express even our imperfect communion where that is possible: through sharing in prayer together in common Bible study; in keeping together the World Day of Creation; in prophetic and visible gestures by our church leaders; and in sharing and deepening ecumenical spirituality (working towards and looking forward to the time when we can all celebrate the eucharist together—the fullest expression of the visible unity of the Church). There is a greater sense than there might have been at the time of *BEM* that some forms of church life (in the global North, for example) are waiting and hoping for a renewal—and that a renewed Church can only be imagined as a more visibly united Church. There is strong encouragement among the responses for us to make our unity visible whenever and in whatever ways we can. Many of the responses told us of examples of unity already practised and made visible in local congregations and in regional bodies, where Christians of different traditions have found the courage and wisdom to live their faith, to share ministry, and to act in service to the world in ways that can be “seen” by those around them. In some instances, there is a sense of “not waiting” for official ecumenical achievements, but rather a determination to act together locally and to receive the gift of unity in anticipation.

## Mutual Recognition

13. The ecumenical movement has long emphasized that if the church is to find or express visible unity, then visibility is not only about what those outside the church “see” of unity between us, but also what we “see” (in the sense of recognize) in each other.<sup>6</sup> The responses from the churches to *TCTCV* indicate that in this area of mutual recognition there are very wide differences of understanding indeed. Within the real but imperfect communion we share, there remains considerable divergence, which finds expression in, for example, the following:

- Some responses emphasise that unity in *faith* is the way in which mutual recognition of one another becomes possible.
- Some responses make a distinction between visible unity and mutual recognition by suggesting that mutual recognition is enough, *without visible unity*. They see mutual recognition simply as a joyful acceptance of difference, seeing no impediment to recognising other Christians as “church.”
- For some, “mutual recognition in love” is defined as something different from agreement on matters of doctrine or

ministry, and therefore more readily achievable than “full visible unity.”

- “Recognition” is sometimes said to be clear as churches work together for justice and peace, but is not always, in every place, clear in terms of doctrine, shared faith, common decision-making, or ministry.
- Some would plead for us to build on the visible unity we have found in witness and service to move closer in terms of sacraments and ministry.
- Some voices say how much it would mean to them if only other churches would truly “recognize” them as church.
- Some responses say that there is not everywhere a consensus about the possibility of describing other Christian communities as “church,” let alone as “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” For some this remains an open question and the question of the “boundaries of church” is an important one.
- For some it is hard to understand why full interchangeability of ministries and full communion seem elusive, even when mutual recognition seems to be agreed upon and present.

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<sup>6</sup> See *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (TCTCV), §9: “Visible unity requires that churches be able to recognize in one another the authentic presence of what the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople (381) calls the ‘one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church.’”

From the beginnings of the ecumenical movement, mutual recognition has been seen as *part* of visible unity. The responses, however, reveal that there are wide differences between churches here.

There clearly remains considerable work to be done on this question, and it needs to be part of further and future ecumenical conversation.

### **Communion (*Koinonia*)**

14. Some responses suggest that communion (*koinonia*) has become a, if not the pre-eminent, way of putting into words the unity which is God's gift to us and for which the Church might be a sign to the world. Most of those who responded to *TCTCV* do seem to embrace communion, or *koinonia*,<sup>7</sup> as a helpful way of speaking of the relationship of the persons of the Trinity, the relationship of Christ to his Church, and of relationships between Christians. Because some churches see communion as making space for a number of diverse interpretations, because communion evokes something relational (and not only institutional), because it is dynamic and moving, and because it gives space for diversity and for celebrating real but imperfect communion or for unity in stages, it has shown itself to be helpful and hopeful. Some would say that communion would seem a better description of the aim of the ecumenical movement than "full visible unity." Communion can be found among us in many and different embodied, actual, and non-abstract ways; and it allows for movement towards that for which Christ prayed. Many responses affirm *TCTCV*'s emphasis on communion as both "the gift by which the Church lives and the gift that God calls the Church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity" (*TCTCV* §1). Communion strikes some as a more modest, and

yet hopeful way to express how the Church has something to offer the world. There are many who want to be free to celebrate the communion that the churches do have, rather than only regret the full unity that is not a reality among us yet.

15. There are some voices among the responses that offer a note of caution or critique about *koinonia* as it is presented in *TCTCV*. Some see the model as too much belonging to one view or tradition. Some argue that the biblical idea of "covenant," with its thoroughgoing grounding in the initiative of God as well as its emphasis on the human realities of relationship in communities, is missing from the text and obscured by an over-emphasis on communion. For some, communion ecclesiology is wonderfully founded in the relationships between the persons of the Trinity, but they would argue that thinking about the Church needs to begin at the foot of the cross. Some would also argue that so much talk of communion implies that the Church is always founded in the eucharist, whereas for them the Church is a creature of the gospel.

16. Even those who offer a critique of communion ecclesiology encourage Faith and Order to continue to develop an understanding of communion as the foundation of our call to unity, to go further in exploring its potential, and certainly to go on speaking of unity in ways that are relational, vivid, dynamic, and rooted in the unity at the heart of God. A possible way of expanding the notion of communion, with its strong eucharistic dimension, may be to balance it with a more

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<sup>7</sup> See Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 10:16

robust baptismal ecclesiology on which an ecclesiology of *koinonia* must also depend.

### **Beginning From the People: The Baptised, the Faithful, and the Gathered**

17. From many of the responses comes a growing sense that any understanding of the mission and unity of the church must begin from the baptized, from the *people* themselves. Many responses expressed disappointment that the importance of the ministry of the whole people of God was not made more clearly visible in *TCTCV*, particularly since this *has* been a growing area of ecumenical convergence in recent decades. There is clear recognition that disagreement and division among churches often become more apparent when the conversation moves to discussing the meaning and purpose of particular *ministries*, but that a more fruitful conversation is often possible when we begin, instead, with baptism.

18. Conciliarity and synodality are very strongly affirmed in many of the responses and are evidently seen, more and more, in many different churches. The local church community cannot exist in isolation but needs to be in communion with other local churches. Many more of the churches than would once have been the case now speak much more positively about the role of conciliar structures and synods within the life of the Church, and these are now understood and valued precisely as places where church unity is fostered and maintained. Similarly, there is increased openness, among some of the churches, to forms of *episkopé* at all levels of church life—local,

regional, and even universal—precisely to serve the aim of unity.

19. Deeper reflection is called for about the proper role of all the baptized faithful in these conciliar processes, especially beyond the level of the local community. For some churches, the involvement and inclusion of the whole people of God in decision-making structures within these churches has been a long-standing norm. A number of churches are engaging in this discussion, wishing to acquire a deeper understanding of what it means that all baptized share in responsibility for the Christian faith and how this translates in discernment processes and decision-making structures.

### **Not Only Institutional, but Also an Emphasis on the Experiential Dimension of Ecumenism**

20. The responses reveal a wide variety of views about the potential future shape and style of ecumenism, with some urging very radical changes from traditional methods, while others affirm the recognized and familiar goals of the ecumenical movement. It is striking that many of the responses, from a wide variety of contexts around the world, advocate forms of ecumenical relating that do not limit themselves to the institutional, but also embrace the more experiential. There is an evident desire to move beyond some of the traditional ways of engaging in ecumenism (beyond theological dialogues seeking to agree on formulations and documents, for example). Some readily affirm that the absence of formal agreements does not mean the absence of communion or growing fellowship and

that there are measures of unity other than agreed doctrinal formulation. There is a sense of weariness in some places with well-established models of ecumenical dialogue, and a desire not to be limited to those. There is a longing to honour the finding of shared patterns of life and habits of faith that can be more swiftly and readily adopted by people “on the ground.” There continue to be some very effective and highly-valued formalized relationships (from united and uniting churches, to fellowships such as the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, to local ecumenical congregations and mission projects). But churches have also shown themselves willing to consider and sometimes simply to receive into their own discipleship and church life insights and practices from other churches, in an informal way. This widespread ecumenical reception is simply happening among the people and among the churches in many places. Some speak increasingly of “ecumenical spirituality” and of “receptive ecumenism,” but many simply testify that there are many places where we are naturally learning from one another and receiving one another’s gifts. Some of the responses reflect and even say explicitly that ecumenism is now part of the “tradition” and is already taken into account in all of church life.

21. Some voices urge that churches, and people, have found for themselves a kind of ecumenical “space in between” (between what sometimes seem to be two alternatives of either doctrinal dialogue or shared practical action), and that this in-between space often makes room for ecumenical prayer together and for finding and sharing

common habits of faith or spirituality. This insight may prove profoundly helpful in overcoming the sometimes-expressed view that we need to leave behind the search for doctrinal agreement and simply “work together.” It suggests that here might be a place to make a fruitful new beginning in the ecumenical pilgrimage. Impatience with the slowness of the ecumenical pilgrimage sometimes leads to the conclusion that common working together, while bypassing the dividing issues, is the only way forward for the divided churches. For some, the theological dialogue might seem to slow us down when the weight of the world’s needs is so great. However, there are those who are finding that “working together” and “theological dialogue” may be more valuable when done in close association with each other. As we walk together on a common pilgrimage of justice and peace, we are led to reflect profoundly and practically on the theological questions that have kept us on different paths. And, as we begin a theological conversation, the practical implications sometimes become very evident. We are whole beings: bodies, minds, and spirits. The ecumenical journey demands that we bring all of ourselves to the journey; and we cannot separate thought from prayer, prayer from action, or action from thought. The traditional divisions within the ecumenical movement can no longer hold, and different approaches to the search for unity are called for.

### **Mission**

22. Many of the responses reveal how profoundly the imperative of mission has really become a key



priority in the life of many of the churches, both in the sense of service to the world with the transforming of injustice, and in the sense of proclaiming the gospel for evangelism. Many voices urge that *TCTCV* needed a stronger focus on mission; and there may be a shift in the understanding of mission too, with more emphasis now on service to the world (though there are also strong voices who call for the need to proclaim the gospel). For many who responded, what matters most is that the Church is an effective sign and servant of God's mission in the world, rather than that theological agreement about the shape of the Church is found. Some respondents reflect that they have lost patience with the kind of ecclesiological discussion that *TCTCV* represents; that they want, above all, to pursue mission together and perhaps even to bypass ecclesiological discussion. This call for more attention to be given to mission is echoed in many of the responses, even from churches and contexts where in the past, ecclesiological discussion has been strong. Many churches in North America and Europe, for example, reveal a new and strong urgency about mission in their own contexts, given the challenge to them of proclaiming the gospel in cultures that are sometimes hostile to religion, and in which Christianity is now declining in influence. They urge that ecumenical dialogue should not delay or make more complicated the imperative to meet the many needs of the people and creation, or to mute the urgency of proclaiming the gospel in cultures and places where Christianity is now culturally marginalized. Some examples among the responses urge that we have to move "to speaking out together in society,"

or that "our bond of union is our *service* to the one Lord." There is encouragement for example, in a few responses to focus on "*action* rather than words, service rather than beliefs," to find a "unity more expressed in sacramental living rather than Eucharistic fellowship," and to join in a kind of "*koinonia* as unity in *service*." While the responses come from very different and diverse contexts, it is striking that nonetheless so many urge that chapter 4 of *TCTCV*, the chapter about the Church in relation to the world, needed to be much fuller and more comprehensive. Many respondents wanted more weight given to the Church as servant and sign of the kingdom of God amidst the many challenges that the world faces, including the need for a swift and radical response to the crisis of climate change.

23. This emphasis on mission is now something truly common among the churches and is itself a sign both of a significant renewal (or desire for it), and a striking expression of unity among us. The churches in the global South, for a long time profoundly mission-shaped, have given much to churches all over the world by inspiring and encouraging a clearer focus on mission. This draws churches together as we seek to be signs and servants of God's kingdom, and to proclaim God's love in the world. It is evident that any ecclesiological discussions among the churches now must begin with the mission of God to the world and the response of the Church to that divine mission of love. This is, of course, where *TCTCV* does begin. But the responses are persuasive that ecclesiological discussions must be more consistently

rooted in and attentive to the call of the Church to serve God's mission in the world.

24. Many of the responses also express a genuine yearning to do theology differently, in ways that are more connected to the concerns of daily life, and to the people of the churches rather than to those some would see as professional theologians. Some responses affirmed the WCC document *Together towards Life* as one that resonated more readily than *TCTCV* with their most immediate concerns. The responses reflected a strong call for theology that is grounded in human realities and expressed in a style and language that truly connects with the people. For many there is no appetite for theology that seems abstract or that comes framed in the language and the preoccupations of the global North. The common emphasis on mission does not at all exclude the necessity for theological reflection, but rather invites it in a new way. This new starting point for ecumenical conversation is already making a great difference to the life of the churches and to the pilgrimage of unity.

### **Legitimate Diversity**

25. Many responses reveal that questions about the limits of diversity are often those that are most troubling and challenging for the churches. Here, the pain of unresolved questions and of a struggle to find ways forward became most evident. There is a very strong sense from the churches that plurality and diversity are, in themselves, good and positive things. As a greater diversity of voices is heard and experiences listened to in the churches, our communities are enriched, our learning deepened,

and wisdom gained. However, there is also a sense that diversity has proper limits. Many voices in the responses were asking how we can celebrate diversity, but also honour ways of finding together how to judge between healthy diversity and the kind of difference that leads to division and the breakdown of unity. The question of how much and which diversity is to be celebrated, and what diversity is, by contrast, unhealthy division and should be overcome, is evident in connection with a whole range of issues: the shape of ministry, the understanding of worship, the interpretation of scripture, and much more. But it is, overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, in the area of morality and ethics that, today, questions of legitimate diversity become most acute and painful.

26. Many churches and bodies responded that they long for, and would welcome, *commonly shared criteria* for discernment, even within their own communities, so that some of the most difficult questions that threaten unity can be addressed by reference to things held in common. The responses reveal the deep sense of frustration and sorrow within and between the churches that some of the difficult issues are so intractable and so very painful to discuss. What churches certainly have in common is that, though there are many ways in which we recognize how much agreement there is both between churches and within them, we are all experiencing painful division on some issues, and even finding it difficult to know how to go about having a conversation on some of them. Many of the responses feel more like cries for help in the midst of pain than

a realistic sense that ecumenical discussion might, in itself, reveal a solution.

27. Among the responses are also reflections from many different churches that it is hard to find solid *sources of authority* for developing agreement on difficult questions, and certainly to find authorities that can be truly shared and that many will accept. There is a recognition too that the authority of the Church (in many places) has come under question more widely and generally within today's world. A loss of the authority of the churches in some places and in particular ways (the scandals relating to sexual abuse, for example) only make this crisis much deeper. There is a deeply felt need, expressed in some of the responses, to find again a sense of confidence in authorities to whom we can turn—whether that is scripture interpreted together, church leaders whom we can trust, or our listening to one another and for the Holy Spirit in council. For some, the ecumenical movement is one way in which we might hope to find our common way to trustworthy and trusted voices.

28. The work of another ongoing project within Faith and Order is precisely to address this question of how we might begin to be able to understand each other and to begin initiate conversations on these more difficult matters where our diversity becomes divisive, and often painful, division. The study group “Moral Discernment in the Churches” within the WCC Faith and Order Commission has been commissioned to deepen the knowledge about moral discernment processes in the churches and to identify uniting and dividing

factors. Its projects engaged in listening to and learning from Traditions on how they engage in a moral discernment process, as well as listening to and learning from examples of moral discernment processes that occurred over the course of history.<sup>8</sup> These projects resulted in a study document that offers a tool that can facilitate deepening knowledge about moral discernment processes, thus allowing for engaging in a dialogue on moral issues so that *koinonia* can be built.<sup>9</sup> This work must have a high priority in the years to come.

### **The Church as Local and Universal, Catholic and Contextual**

29. The responses revealed that our churches have begun to learn from each other how vital it is to hold together both the universal and the local as we speak of the Church. There is a growing convergence that a local congregation or church may be “wholly Church, but not the whole Church.” Many of our churches seek to hold together an honouring of the catholicity of the Church (understood in much more than only a geographical sense) while also following Christ faithfully in a local community. There is a heightened sense

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<sup>8</sup> *Churches and Moral Discernment Volume 1: Learning from Traditions*, Faith and Order Paper No. 228 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/churches-and-moral-discernment>; *Churches and Moral Discernment Volume 2: Learning from History*, Faith and Order Paper No. 229 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/churches-and-moral-discernment-ii>

<sup>9</sup> *Churches and Moral Discernment: Facilitating Dialogue to Build Koinonia*, Faith and Order Paper No. 235 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021).

of the need to honour local places and people, while also holding people together in a real sense of being accountable to and part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church—a Church that has a reality across time and space, a Church faithful to the apostolic witness, a Church responding to the lives of people where they are and to the world as it is in all its complexity. There is a strong commitment to the search for a true catholicity that is a radically gospel-shaped alternative to the damaging and exploitative form of globalization that leads to poverty, a catholicity that creates a large space for freedom, justice, and peace for all. Many of the responses demonstrate that churches are concerned to rise to the challenge of expressing their unity beyond the local.

30. There are remaining questions about how the local and universal are best lived, honoured, and made visible, for example, in terms of their expression in lay and ordained ministry. There is scope for further work on how this observable and encouraging ecumenical consensus can be made more evident in terms of witness in a globalized world which desperately needs such a witness.

### **An Ecumenical Theology of Humankind**

31. The responses provide a vivid reminder that questions relating to how we understand our being human before God are sometimes those which may lead us, in these times, to painful division. Our understanding of the significance of our all “being made in the image of God” remains a vital area for ecumenical exploration and for future common work.

32. For example, *TCTCV* makes only one explicit reference to issues about the role of women in the Church, and the responses (perhaps for that reason) often omit to mention this too. Some responses criticize *TCTCV* for its silence on this issue. Some responses also reveal, even if only by implication, that questions about the ordination of women but also much more widely about how we are human beings who are male and female, are among those that are divisive and challenging for the churches.

33. It was evident from some of the responses that questions related to human sexuality also continue to be those that may challenge our unity and that may be difficult for churches to discuss, even within themselves. Some of the references made to the longing for criteria to discern where diversity goes beyond what makes for unity were, it seems very likely, prompted by this concern.

34. Though conversations about these matters seem now, in some places, all but impossible even to begin, it is clear that a vital part of future ecumenical and ecclesiological conversation will need to address profound theological and anthropological questions about humankind, such as these. Here, again, deeper reflection on baptism and its implications may be particularly helpful

### **The Church and Sin**

35. The question of whether the church can sin has been a living and lively one in ecumenical discussions about the Church. The responses suggest that *TCTCV* addressed this question helpfully,

even if it is not quite yet fully resolved. Most of the responses reveal confidence that the Church is both God's design and God's gift to the world, a sign and servant of the mission of God to love each child, woman, and man, and all creation with them. In this sense, as God's creation and gift, the Church can only ever be understood to be holy, and to be made holy, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

36. In addressing this issue, some of the responses recognize that people within the Church remain sinners, even as they are being sanctified, and that many shameful abuses and wrongs can be done by those who belong to the Church. It is also evident that many of those who responded recognize that the structures of human organizations may also be mired in sin and may draw people into sin as they are part of them. Insofar as institutions and structures may be affected by sin, sin is made present and those individual persons who are part of them have to remain accountable for this, to seek forgiveness and to change.

37. In its essence, the Church can never be other than holy, since it is the body of Christ: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Even so, structures and institutions can be affected by sin. The responses reveal that the churches have begun to find common ground in this once apparently intractable difference. A way forward may be to find ways to focus on systemic sin within the church in ways that do not compromise the Church's fundamental and irrevocable holiness.

## **Further Work**

38. *TCTCV* and the responses to it reflect the churches' deep faith in the triune God revealed in scripture and lived out in the churches' traditions; their reliance on word and sacrament; their longing for communion that is visible, practical and faithful; their renewed emphasis on mission as foundational for the Church; and their search for wisdom and faithfulness in responding to the most demanding needs of the world. As outlined above, there are some clear and hopeful indications of how we are moving forward on the pilgrim way of unity. There is a strong commitment to visible unity, much grace expressed in commitment to continue on the journey, and vision for new ways of responding to Christ's prayer that we may be one. There is so much on which we now converge: that unity must be visible; that the Church is the people (*laos*) of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit; that the Church is servant and sign of God's mission to the world; that our communion is founded in the communion of the Holy Trinity; that diversity may be creative and fruitful while celebrated and bounded in unity; that both local and universal are vital characteristics of the Church, and that the Holy Spirit is present in the Church; that the world's needs demand our faithful service and that the good news of God's love for all creation should be spoken by all together with one voice.

39. The responses, when taken together, also reveal significant areas for further work and future directions. *TCTCV* has been one step on a journey

that must continue, and there are some pointers for the way ahead.

40. Churches are asking for more work on what “visible unity” might mean and in what ways it might be defined. There is more work to be done on “mutual recognition” in order to see whether any steps forward might be possible so that it becomes more possible to “see” the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church in each other. There is more work to be done on the understanding of communion (*koinonia*) as a model for the unity of the Church, to explore other models such as “covenant,” and to understand those who would suggest that “*koinonia* ecclesiology” is not the most fruitful starting point. There needs to be further work to find ways in which we can affirm what is common and agreed, while also not allowing complacency to deny the goal of “full visible unity.”

41. It is evident that many of the churches would welcome going forward on the ecumenical journey with much more emphasis on a focus on the mission of God to the world and of service in the kingdom of God. In whatever ways the path of unity is encouraged in the future, they will need to be those that are much more alive to the pressing needs of creation and its people.

42. There is much potential to explore together a “baptismal ecclesiology”—one that begins with the understanding of the Church as the assembly of the baptized in a particular time and place. Many of the responses affirm *TCTCV*’s statement that by virtue of their baptism, all the faithful share

in Christ’s royal priesthood and become the presence of Christ in the world (*TCTCV* §41). This local community gathers together, praises God, offers prayers on behalf of all, experiences God’s presence, and then goes forth to bring that presence out into the world. A baptismal ecclesiology may offer potential ways forward in ecumenical and ecclesiological conversation, and new ways to address divisions on issues such as ministry, conciliarity and synodality, primacy, and, perhaps most significantly, Christian anthropology.

43. There is evidently more to be done on the theological understanding of the human person and of humankind (Christian anthropology), and it is here that some of the most difficult and painful conversations are happening, particularly in relation to ethics and moral theology. Here, above all, the cry for some ways of helping each other to places where conversation can begin, and begin to be fruitful, is heard. There will likely be no easy answers, but it is vital that respectful conversation begins to replace the awkward and painful silence that sometimes prevails today.

44. Whatever the subjects of future discussion, a very profound need is to broaden the table around which the discussion takes place. Seeking a common vision of the Church has to include many more than have been involved so far—people from places and traditions who are only now being asked to contribute or whose voices are now being heard. The WCC Faith and Order Commission provides a very broad, perhaps the broadest, theological forum in the world. But the conversation

needs to include still more voices, in new styles and with new vocabulary, while also honouring those who have laboured long at this table.

## Conclusion

45. The responses to *TCTCV* reveal that the ecumenical conversation of which *BEM* was a vital and inspiring part continues to have vitality and significance. Ecumenical convergence may seem now less remarkable than it was in the period leading up to the publication of *BEM* in 1982, *precisely because* so much of that convergence has now become normal. We now agree on so very much more than we disagree. We share so much of our life together—our traditions, our ways of worship, and the insights of our theologians, teachers, poets, and artists—that we take this now for granted where once it seemed amazing. It is time to be amazed and enthralled again, while we also look for the next steps.

46. The churches still believe in that original vocation to call one another to unity. On the basis of our long experience together, that unity might now be envisaged in different ways (more informal, more open to diversity, and more focused on the needs of the world than the shape of the church). In the spirit of communion, churches are finding ways to share their life, their prayers, and their ministry and mission with other churches alongside or on the margins of official church dialogues. Some of the responses to *TCTCV* were much more positive in tone and approach than even the responses to *BEM*. Many demonstrated a willingness to continue on the journey and even to face the most difficult issues in an open and loving

spirit. There really is to be found in many places a newly positive and charitable, while also realistic and grounded, spirit of ecumenism at work. There is a shift to a renewed passion for mission, both in the sense of transforming injustice and of proclaiming the gospel, and this shift represents a new emphasis within the pilgrimage of unity.

47. The Commission on Faith and Order is committed to continuing to reflect in the future on what it is to be the Church as we walk together on the ecumenical journey. A renewed, more relational kind of ecumenism, a commitment to that “in-between space” of spirituality and prayer, an ecclesiology rooted in baptism, and renewed passions for mission and evangelism—all of these will, significantly, make wider conversations with global Christianity much more possible and fruitful.

48. There are many challenges, not least in the areas of ethics and of theological anthropology. But there are also many profound and widespread signs that God is with God’s people in the Church, still calling us to “recognize in one another the ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic’ Church in its fullness.”<sup>10</sup> The time is right for the churches to challenge one another, as they continue to receive *TCTCV*, to ask what more they can do to deepen and broaden their fellowship and to make more visible the communion that is a gift from God and the promise of hope for the world.

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10 *The Unity of the Church: Gift and Calling*. The Canberra Statement. (Geneva: WCC, 1991) 2.1; <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-unity-of-the-church-gift-and-calling-the-canberra-statement>

This report was developed by the WCC Commission on Faith and Order as part of an ongoing conversation by churches about the Church that has included various elements. Following the publication of the two volumes of *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, this text provides an accessible summary of the findings of a process that took years of intense and hope-filled listening. It provides some highlights and impressions of what those who have listened have discerned what they heard.

The Commission on Faith and Order hope that readers will find this short text fascinating, challenging, and significant and that it will encourage the churches to take stock of the theological unity made evident here.

Religion



World Council  
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