

Common Threads

Key Themes from
Responses to **The Church:
Towards a Common Vision**

Faith and Order Paper No 233



EDITED BY
Ellen Wondra
Stephanie Dietrich
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Production: Lyn van Rooyen, coordinator WCC Publications

Photo Credit: Alba_alioth/Shutterstock.com

Cover design: Beth Oberholtzer

Book design and typesetting: Beth Oberholtzer

ISBN: 978-2-8254-1776-8

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Official documents of the Commission on Faith and Order may be found at

- <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/faith-and-order-papers-digital-edition>.

Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision (CRTC) may be found at

- Vol. 1 <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/churches-respond-to-the-church-towards-a-common-vision-volume-i>.
- Vol. 2 <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/churches-respond-to-the-church-towards-a-common-vision-volume-ii>.

BEM	<i>Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry.</i> Faith and Order Paper No. 111
BEM 25	<i>BEM at 25: Critical Insights into a Continuing Legacy.</i> Faith and Order Paper No. 205
BEM 82-90	<i>Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982–1990: Report on the Process and Responses.</i> Faith and Order Paper No. 149
CPTA	<i>Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology: A Faith and Order Study Document.</i> Faith and Order Paper No. 199
CMD	<i>Churches and Moral Discernment, vol 3: Facilitating Dialogue to Build Koinonia.</i> Faith and Order Papers No. 235
CRBEM	<i>Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” text, vols. 1-6.</i> Faith and Order Papers Nos.129, 132, 135, 137, 143, 144
CRTC 1	<i>Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision, Vol. 1,.</i> Faith and Order Paper No. 231

- CRTC 2 *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Vol. 2. Faith and Order Paper No. 232
- GA2 *Growth in Agreement II. Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations at World Level 1982–1998*. Faith and Order Paper No.
- GA3 *Growth in Agreement III: International Dialogue Text and Agreed Statements 1998-2005*. Faith and Order Paper No. 204
- JDDJ *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* by Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, 1999.
- MDC *Moral Discernment in the Churches*. Faith and Order Paper No. 215
- NMC *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*. Faith and Order Paper No. 198
- NPC *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*. Faith and Order Paper No. 181
- OWFK *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*. Faith and Order Paper No. 166
- OB *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition*. Faith and Order Paper No. 210
- SA 1 *Sources of Authority, volume 1: The Early Church*. Faith and Order Paper Nos. 217.
- SA 2 *Sources of Authority, volume 2: Contemporary Churches*. Faith and Order Paper No. 218.
- TCTCV *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. Faith and Order Paper No. 214
- TR *Three Reports of the Forum on Bilateral Conversations*. Faith and Order Paper 107
- TEV *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: An Instrument for an Ecumenical Reflection on Hermeneutics*. Faith and Order Paper No. 182

Introduction

The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV) is the second convergence document published by the World Council of Churches (WCC) Commission on Faith and Order.¹ The commission invited churches, ecumenical organizations and groups, and others to respond to TCTCV, and between 2013 and 2020, received 78 responses which have now been published.² These responses are largely positive, agreeing on many points of convergence, suggesting areas where more work is needed, and constructively criticizing the work done. Taken together, the responses, like TCTCV, indicate that the churches agree more than they disagree on key areas of ecclesiology and theology.

This is good news indeed in a world that is as broken and fragmented as it ever was. High- and low-intensity conflict between nations, peoples, and groups continues to be widespread and all too often deadly. Poverty, oppression, marginalization, injustice, and inequity persist, and in some places are increasing, at high cost to the entire human family and to the earth itself. The COVID-19 pandemic continues, with over five million deaths worldwide and ongoing disruption and damage to peoples, societies, and economies locally, regionally, and globally. These circumstances and more raise significant questions about what is required for human community and well-being, and what it means to carry out the mission of the church. More, these circumstances cry out for witness, worship, and service that manifest the love of God for all and the desire of God to draw all together into communion and unity with each other and with God.

1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/The_Church_Towards_a_common_vision.pdf. Henceforth, TCTCV.

2. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards A Common Vision*, vol. 1, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, Faith and Order Paper No. 231 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/Churches_Respond_Church_vol1_WEB.pdf; and *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards A Common Vision*, vol. 2, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, Faith and Order Paper No. 232 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/Churches_Respond_Church_vol2_WEB.pdf. Henceforth, CRTCV 1 and CRTCV 2.

When the churches can witness, worship, and work together—when they share a common vision and a common mission, even in the midst of ongoing disagreement on certain matters—the mission of God to reconcile and fulfill all things is more evident, more compelling, and more consoling.

Since 2015, the ecclesiology study group of the WCC's Commission on Faith and Order has been meeting regularly to read, analyze, and discuss the responses to *TCTCV*.³ A first step was the recognition that two directions needed to be followed at the same time. The study group formed two sub-groups, one focusing on the responses to *TCTCV*, and the other on broadening the conversation on ecclesiology to include ecclesiological perspectives from regions and from ecclesial families that have not been adequately present in Faith and Order deliberations. The study group on *TCTCV* has already published the responses from the churches and others. We now present here 16 essays on key themes and issues that emerge in the responses.

The study group on broadening the conversation has held consultations with scholars and leaders in these groups and will publish the fruits of their work in 2022. These volumes are yet another part of the reception of *TCTCV* and the discernment of and work toward fuller communion.

In the remainder of this introduction, the *TCTCV* study group presents the chapters in this volume, which focus on 16 key themes or issues identified in the responses. The book concludes with the report of the whole commission entitled, *What Are the Churches Saying about the Church?*⁴

How Our Work Unfolded

From its outset, the mission of the WCC's Commission on Faith and Order has included work with the churches "to seek together convergence and greater consensus on the ecclesiological issues that yet divide them: What is the Church? What is the Church's role in God's cosmic design of recapitulation of all things in Jesus Christ?"⁵ This search has always included conversations among the churches and with the commission, venturing analyses and proposals in hopes

3. In this same period, the Commission has had two other study groups, one on the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace and a proposal for Conference on Faith and Order, and the other on the churches and moral discernment.

4. *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 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/what-are-the-churches-saying-about-the-church>.

5. *TCTCV*, "Historical Note," 41. See 41–6 for greater detail concerning what follows, and for many helpful references.

of stating where convergences seem to exist and inviting the churches to further consideration of those convergences and of ways to address remaining issues that continue to be divisive. The various assemblies of the WCC have made statements on the need for church unity; conferences on faith and order have developed studies and issued reports and statements; and the Commission on Faith and Order has offered studies and convergence statements for the churches' consideration and response. This highly collaborative process over the course of many years—the process of ecumenical study, conversation, and reception—is always ongoing. It is a process involving both appreciative and critical inquiry, along with mutual learning and response.

Faith and Order's first convergence document, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (BEM)* issued in 1982, is the fruit of this process.⁶ It included an invitation to the churches and others to respond, suggesting questions that might frame such response. In turn, the responses were collated, analyzed, and published,⁷ leading to further study to discern and formulate areas of convergence and to articulate more adequately areas of disagreement. The responses to *BEM* made it clear that study and conversation focused on the nature and mission of the church might further the journey to fuller communion. Subsequently, the commission has engaged in broader and deeper study, reflection, and conversation together with the churches and various ecumenical groups. This has involved many meetings, conferences, and consultations, work that has often been published in order to make the discussions more accessible and participatory.⁸ Two documents were published to mark significant “stage[s] on the way to a common statement.”⁹ Churches, ecumenical groups, and others engaged these documents and offered comments and criticisms, which were received and studied by the commission, leading to important revisions. Finally, in 2013, the Commission on Faith and Order offered its second convergence statement, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.

Since 2015, the commission's study group on ecclesiology has been study-

6. *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982). Henceforth, *BEM*.

7. *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” text*, vols. 1–6. Faith and Order Papers Nos. 129, 132, 135, 137, 143, 144 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986–1988).

8. The documents of the Commission on Faith and Order may be found at <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/faith-and-order-papers-digital-edition>.

9. *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 181 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998); *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 198 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005). Henceforth, *NPC* and *NMC*.

ing the responses in order both to test the extent and depth of convergence and to discover how the conversation on ecclesiology might most fruitfully move forward. The subgroup focusing on the responses to *TCTCV* has met twice a year for prayer, conversation, and fellowship. As a group we have discussed each of the responses on its own, noting particular insights, criticisms, and suggestions. We have also identified major themes in the responses taken together. This has helped in discerning possibilities for future study and conversation that might deepen evident convergences and lead to greater mutual learning, understanding, and further convergence on remaining and emerging matters where there is disagreement and, in some cases, ongoing division. The responses have now been published,¹⁰ in the hopes that as churches and groups listen to each other through them, they will find renewed enthusiasm and impetus to continue the journey toward the unity of the Church. The commission's report, *What Are the Churches Saying about the Church*, gives an overview of the responses, identifying where convergence is recognized in the responses, along with the wide range of understandings that contribute to a complex view of the Church and its mission.

Of the 78 responses to *TCTCV*, 45 come from churches, and 13 come from World Communions, national or regional councils of churches, and ecumenical organizations. Twenty come from other groups and individuals. Of these, 10 have a global presence. Responses that are regional come predominantly from Europe (43) and North America (13), with 5 from the Pacific, 4 from Eastern Europe, 2 from the Caribbean, and 1 from Asia. There were no responses from either Latin American or African contexts.

In other words, a large proportion of world Christianity is not represented in the responses: churches in the global South, and churches and Christian movements around the world that are growing the most rapidly through evangelism, mission, and service. The absence of these voices is of great concern to the commission, and a subgroup has been actively working to broaden the conversation. This is a need that is identified in *TCTCV* and in many of the studies and reports leading up to it. It is explicitly stated in many of the responses, as well as in the work of the larger commission.

The subgroup focusing on these concerns has addressed the need for broader conversation by designing, participating in, and following up on consultations with leaders and scholars. These bring perspectives from particular regions (especially from Asia, Africa, and Latin America) and from particular denominational families (such as evangelical, Pentecostal, charismatic, and

10. *CRTC 1* and *CRTC 2*.

independent churches), and modes of being church (ecclesial movements, new forms of monasticism, and online churches, for example) that have not always been clearly or strongly part of discussions of ecclesiology and of the larger work on faith and order. The subgroup has held consultations in Africa and in South and North America, with an online consultation focusing on Asia. These consultations have included worship, presentations, and discussions of focused materials, informal conversation, and fellowship. Group members have worked with representatives of these perspectives to analyze bilateral and other ecumenical dialogues and to receive the insights offered. Further, the study group has identified ten key areas where the fruits of these consultations may be harvested to advance and deepen the ecclesiological conversation. Papers from these consultations and on these themes will be published in 2022. These publications reflect major global developments in the multilateral dialogue on ecclesiology, representing another milestone in the journey toward communion and unity.

At the same time, the subgroup on responses to *TCTCV* identified 16 key themes or issues found across the responses, prepared and discussed papers on each of the themes, and revised the papers in light of these discussions. Throughout this process, we have been deeply grateful for and appreciative of all the responses. We have found in them significant evidence that the churches agree more than they disagree on key issues in ecclesiology and theology: that the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic; that it is called and graced to participate in the mission of God for the salvation, healing, and fulfillment of the entirety of creation; that the church carries out this mission in worship, in witness, in service, and in mission; and that, difficult as the remaining issues are, God gives the churches the gifts needed to address them together. The essays take stock of the responses from churches and others, analyze them, and suggest areas where further work is needed. In addition, the report that concludes this volume, *What Are the Churches Saying about the Church?*, summarizes key findings from the responses taken as a whole, including areas where convergence both is and is not evident. In this way, this volume is yet another part of the reception of *TCTCV* and the discernment of and work toward fuller communion.

Taken together, the efforts of the Faith and Order study group on ecclesiology and each of its subgroups further the process of discerning and receiving ecumenical ecclesiology. We are grateful for the growing convergence on issues that have been divisive, a convergence ably summarized throughout these chapters and the report. We continue to listen carefully to the churches and to respond with insights and proposals for further work. We invite the churches to continue this important work by asking themselves and each other how they

may move closer together in light of *TCTCV* and the responses to it, and in Faith and Order's consideration of them.

The Themes Explored in this Volume

The chapters in this volume consider key themes that have emerged from the responses to *TCTCV* and our analysis and discussion of them. In developing and discussing each theme, we have asked: What has emerged from ongoing consideration of each theme? What do we (a subgroup of the Commission on Faith and Order) want to highlight for local churches about their growing fellowship? What at this moment do we, together with the churches, see as future work that may contribute to growing communion among the churches?

These chapters consider in detail what the various responses say about each theme. In some cases, they consider how a particular theme has developed since *BEM*. In some cases, they comment on the extent to which a theme appears—or does not appear—in the responses taken as a whole.

It should be noted that the report *What Are the Churches Saying about the Church?* comments on why some themes may appear more frequently than others. As it suggests, there are many reasons that some responses do not address certain themes. Some may not comment because they believe a consensus, convergence, or general agreement may exist on a particular theme. A particular theme may not be significant or problematic in certain contexts, especially in relation to other, more controversial issues. Some responses focus on constructive proposals beyond *TCTCV*. In any case, the report focuses more fully than the chapters do on the responses taken together. The report considers some of the themes explicitly, but it does so in light of the body of the responses, and not only those that address the theme directly.

In the following chapter summaries, we introduce each of the 16 themes considered here, and suggest what may now be its status in the current ecumenical conversation. Each chapter was written by a member of the subgroup. The chapters were then presented, discussed in detail by the group, and subsequently revised. While each chapter is the work of a commissioner formed in a particular tradition, they all reflect the insights, constructive criticisms, and vision of the entire subgroup. Every chapter also indicates which responses address its theme; we encourage readers to refer to *TCTCV* and to the individual responses for greater understanding.¹¹

11. *TCTCV*, *CRTC 1*, and *CRTC 2*.

Chapter One: Visible Unity and Mutual Recognition

The ecumenical goal of unity, the understanding of visible unity, and the related idea of mutual recognition are addressed by many of the responses to *TCTCV*. This chapter outlines the history of the idea of visible unity from 1948 until *TCTCV*, as reflected in WCC documents. The chapter discusses the way *TCTCV* treats the theme and the broad range of responses addressing it. The author observes, “It is evident, perhaps surprisingly to some, that the responses to *TCTCV* reveal, among the churches, a strong and resolute commitment to the visible unity of the Church.”

The responses to *TCTCV* reveal that the churches remain almost unanimously convinced that unity is 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. There are changes from the time of *BEM* in how that visibility might be understood. There is a recognition that the kind of institutional unity that was once the dominant model is now not often sought. The responses show a strong preference for models of unity that embrace the active and the relational, emphasizing that unity is made visible through common action. There remains a strong commitment to the *koinonia* (communion) for which we pray to be in every sense visible, tangible, and vivid enough to shape the life of the world.

Chapter Two: Communion and *Koinonia*

This chapter explores the interrelated notions of mission (*missio*) and communion (*koinonia*) in the search of unity of the Church. Over the ages, scripture, theology, ecclesiology, liturgy, and pastoral practice have seen *koinonia* as central to Christian faith, life, and the church. The chapter traces the development of communion ecclesiology from *BEM* and responses to it through the WCC assembly in Canberra (1991) and the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostela (1993), which focused on *koinonia* as the form of unity which the churches are given and to which they are called. *NMC* and then *TCTCV* recast communion by emphasizing the mission of the Church as participation in the design of God. *TCTCV* presents communion as a gift of God and a challenge to the Church for its life and witness. Communion is “manifested in three interrelated ways: unity in faith, unity in sacramental life, and unity in service (in all its forms, including ministry and mission).”¹²

Almost all the responding churches and groups value the communion ecclesiology of *TCTCV* and find it helpful to growth in mission and unity both

12. *TCTCV*, §67.

internally and with other Christians. Yet there is significant diversity in how the notion of communion is understood theologically, ecclesiology, and ecclesially. Responses to *TCTCV* suggest changes to the method of Faith and Order in relation to communion.

The chapter ends by highlighting some challenges for Faith and Order. The most pressing of these may be broadening the bases of the work of Faith and Order to include more fully the Free, evangelical, Pentecostal, and “newer” churches, many of which are part of the global South, a significantly under-represented area in the responses to *TCTCV*.

Chapter Three: Apostolic Faith

This chapter summarizes how *TCTCV* treats the issues of historic episcopate, authority, and primacy (especially in *TCTCV* chapter 3), pointing to the interwovenness of these themes. Regarding the relationship between apostolic faith and the historic episcopate, the key lies in the understanding of apostolic succession.

The responses indicate that apostolic succession can be understood in many ways, depending on the respective traditions’ own understanding and structure. *TCTCV* stresses the notion of conciliarity at all levels of church life. This chapter outlines different understandings of conciliarity: local, regional, and universal. It points to the need for further exploration of what it means to be the “local church,” especially in relation to an increased emphasis on the role of all faithful that appears in many responses. “It is significant that even those churches with a strong episcopal emphasis now place increased importance on the role of the faithful at all levels of church life,” the author notes. How the responses enter into the discussion on primacy and universal primacy shows an increasing openness to consider this difficult theme jointly, though the churches are still far from consensus on this issue. One point, raised in several responses, is that in taking a rather high church or sacramental approach, *TCTCV* tends to have an overly institutional ecclesiology. What seems to be missing is the element of spirituality and holiness.

Chapter Four: The Role and Authority of the Laity

This chapter demonstrates that the issue of the role and authority of the laity in *TCTCV* has been identified throughout the work of Faith and Order as a potentially church-dividing issue that requires attention on the road toward visible unity. Here, this theme is traced in *BEM* and the responses to it, as well as in selected dialogues between and among churches. *TCTCV*’s treatment of the laity is examined to see how the conversation on the laity has been advanced from *BEM*.

The dialogue on the laity in *BEM* is located in the broader debate on the ministry of the Church. It is built on an understanding that ministry is a function and calling of the whole people of God. All Christians, the entire community of the faithful, are related to the priesthood of Christ and the priesthood of the Church. *BEM* further counsels that “both women and men must discover together their contribution to the service of Christ in the church.”¹³ Like *BEM*, *NMC* agreed that “Christians are constituted a royal priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices and indeed their very selves as living sacrifice.”¹⁴ In *TCTCV*, discussion of the role of the laity is located in a broader discussion on the call and vocation of the whole people of God. All authority is founded in Jesus Christ. His authority is shared with those in the ministry of leadership.¹⁵ The particular role of the laity is raised more explicitly by *TCTCV* §§17–20. The responses to *TCTCV* reveal perspectives similar to the post-*BEM* developments. Some responses identify an urgent need for more study on how the priestly, prophetic, and royal ministry of the whole people of God is related to that of the ordained ministry.

Chapter Five: The Threefold Ministry

This chapter outlines the discussion about the threefold ministry from *BEM* to *TCTCV*. *TCTCV* states that almost all Christian communities today have a formal structure of ministry. Frequently this structure is diversified and reflects explicitly the threefold pattern of *episkopos-presbyteros-diakonos*.¹⁶ The main challenge to unity that *TCTCV* identifies is the question of the historic episcopate.

Some churches believe that the threefold ministry is a sign of continuing faithfulness to the gospel. Others, however, do not view fidelity to the gospel as closely bound to this concept. Some are wary of the historic episcopate because they see it as vulnerable to abuse and thus potentially harmful to the well-being of the community. Among the churches issuing out of the Reformation there is considerable diversity.

The chapter emphasizes that the fact that “only about 25 percent of the responses even address the question of threefold ministry is itself significant. It is evident that, largely as a consequence of *BEM*, the issue has become far less divisive and is no longer high on the ecumenical agenda. All churches agree on the necessity of ministry and forms of oversight (*episkopé*). Mutual recognition of ministries remains elusive, though it has come to pass in a number of bilateral and multilateral agreements in recent decades.”

13. *BEM*, “Ministry,” §19.

14. *NMC*, §84.

15. *TCTCV*, §51.

16. *TCTCV*, §47.

Chapter Six: The Relationship between the Local and Universal Church

TCTCV thematizes the relationship between the local and universal Church. Local churches are in communion with all churches in time and space.¹⁷ A key formulation says that every local church “is wholly Church, but not the whole Church.”¹⁸ Still, the theme is divisive, since there is no agreement about how local, regional and universal levels of ecclesial order relate to one another.¹⁹

This chapter gives an overview of the responses to *TCTCV* related to the relation between the local and the universal. It shows how confessional families and traditions have different understandings of “local and universal church.” The author observes that “the responses to *TCTCV* show a general appreciation of the dictum that the local church is ‘wholly Church, but not the whole Church.’ There is general agreement that the local and universal levels of Church life are interdependent, and that local churches can be enriched when they pay attention to the universal perspective.”

Chapter Seven: Ecumenical Councils

When referring to the authority of ecumenical councils and of synodality in conjunction with primacy, *TCTCV* emphasizes the concept of conciliarity at all levels of church life as an exercise of oversight (*episkopé*).²⁰ *TCTCV* sees an ecumenical council or synod as “one representing the whole Christian world.” Regarding the authority of ecumenical councils, *TCTCV* says: “While most churches accept the doctrinal definitions of the early Ecumenical Councils as expressive of the teaching of the New Testament, some maintain that all post-biblical doctrinal decisions are open to revision, while others consider some doctrinal definitions to be normative and therefore irreformable expressions of the faith.”²¹

Chapter Seven outlines the responses to *TCTCV* related to ecumenical councils and conciliarity. In a concluding remark, it underlines the significance of conciliarity for the future of the churches: “If the Church currently misses a balanced primacy-conciliarity narrative—if the passage from authoritarian rhetoric on ‘primacy’ to eucharistic-pastoral care for all the churches requires something beyond the Western medieval framework—it is at least possible that primacy might find a concrete realization within modern eucharistic ecclesiol-

17. *TCTCV*, §29.

18. *TCTCV*, §31.

19. *TCTCV*, §32.

20. *TCTCV*, §53, §54.

21. *TCTCV*, §53.

ogy. If a eucharistically-based primacy is not an illusion, and if simultaneity is possible, then the theology of synodality gives some promising suggestions for the 21st century, a potential ‘century of conciliarity.’”

Chapter Eight: Experience in the Life of the Church

TCTCV does not say much explicitly about experience in the life of the Church. The concept experience is used in *TCTCV* to emphasize the role of the whole people of God (laity, theologians, and ordained) as constitutive for church life and for the interpretation of the contemporary meaning of the word of God.²² Experience is also mentioned in *TCTCV* in relation to worship.²³

The responses to *TCTCV* show that several churches from different traditions perceive the ecclesiology of *TCTCV* as abstract. They see the text as lacking awareness of the role of experience in church life. Many responses call for a more comprehensive ecclesiological vision that must not simply be accepted in principle, but also to a certain extent experienced and felt. The chapter calls for further attention to “experienced unity” in addition to “agreed unity.”

Chapter Nine: Ecumenical Reception

This chapter discusses the development of the understanding of reception from *BEM* to *TCTCV*, and the continuing reception of Faith and Order texts as studied by the commission. Reception is an ongoing process within the body of the Church. Reception describes the churches’ critical appropriation of the agreements reached in ecumenical encounter and discussion. It is necessary to distinguish between reception and recognition, though the two are closely related

TCTCV does not explore reception broadly, but mentions it in referring the text to the churches for response. Twenty-five of the responses to *TCTCV* mention reception. Most of these responses see reception as a crucial part of the ecumenical task, although challenging and full of ambiguities. The chapter explores different aspects of ecumenical reception as “a dynamic and dialogical spiritual process within the body of the church that occurs in each generation.” Reception pertains “to both the renewal of the churches and their unity,” requiring the participation of all members of the Church, and the exercise of authority. The chapter also looks into the challenges of ecumenical reception, pointing especially to the lack of evidence of reception of Faith and Order documents by churches in the global South.

22. *TCTCV*, §39.

23. *TCTCV*, §67.

Chapter Ten: The Church and Mission

This chapter highlights the importance of the theme of mission from *BEM* through *NPC* and *NMC*, in which Faith and Order responded to the call to strengthen the missional content of the text. The chapter refers as well to other texts produced by the Faith and Order Commission and to reports from selected bilateral dialogues. The aim is to identify what the churches are saying together on the mission of the Church, to identify the differences that still exist, and to discern the way forward in the quest toward visible unity.

The chapter concludes with a summary of missiological ecumenical affirmations from the Commission on Faith and Order: “There is both an appreciation of the urgency of mission to the whole world and a caution for the exercise of contextual and cultural sensitivity as the Church engaged in mission in various places.” Even so, “despite the broad agreement on many issues, many of the responses express disappointment that a stronger focus on mission is not embedded in the text of *TCTCV*. They suggest that churches working together in the mission of God may be the most viable route to visible unity.”

Chapter Eleven: The Church in and for the World

This chapter highlights the importance of *TCTCV* chapter 4 while also emphasizing “the need for further work on this way of doing ecclesiology.” It suggests broadening the focus beyond doctrinal aspects of the Church’s internal life (for example, sacraments, Church as communion, or the Church’s ordering of ministries). The author notes that many responses comment on *TCTCV* chapter 4. Some responses underscore the importance of the Church’s mission and service to its fundamental being. Numerous responses strongly welcome the topic of chapter 4 and some ask for its further exploration within the context of Faith and Order’s ecclesiological studies. Several responses ask for a closer connection between chapters 1–3 and chapter 4 in *TCTCV*. Some make specific suggestions for deepening this discussion in the future.

A few responses are explicitly critical of *TCTCV* and its treatment of the role of the Church in the world. Some responses comment indirectly by criticizing *TCTCV* for not being grounded in lived reality; *TCTCV* is thus more or less irrelevant for them. Overall, the responses see work on “the church in and for the world” as essential to common vision of the Church. Moreover, the responses emphasize the importance of integrating the topics of mission and the relation of the church to the world with classical ecclesiological topics. Overall, most responses do not understand *TCTCV* chapter 4 as a sufficient attempt to include this experiential dimension of being church in Faith and Order’s work on ecclesiology.

Chapter Twelve: Sacraments and Sacramentality of the Church

This chapter notes that, according to *TCTCV*, sacramentality is a basic feature of the Church. *TCTCV* lays out the three essential elements required for communion: faith, sacraments, and ministry.²⁴

In the responses, however, some churches note that there is a need for a definition of what sacrament means. For example, should sacramentality be limited to seven sacraments? Or should the term *sacrament* be reserved to describe baptism and the Lord's supper alone? Many responses affirm that the Church, as a redeemed and redeeming fellowship, is "'sacramental' in nature." Saluting the synthesis offered by *TCTCV*, numerous responses appreciate that viewing the Church as sacrament serves "to emphasize its effectiveness for salvation through the Church." At the same time, some responses recognize that the notion of Church as sacrament "is foreign to some Christians and . . . the understanding of what a sacrament is varies among Christians." The chapter highlights as well the healing dimension of the sacraments through the Holy Spirit. *TCTCV* makes contemporary theology more conscious of the importance of pneumatology for theology. Everything that the Spirit touches becomes a sacramental reality.

All traditions know of ethics, and most of them know of sacrament. Some of them use the sacraments in order to qualify ethics, whereas others use ethics in order to qualify the sacrament. In any event, sacramentality has social implications.

Chapter Thirteen: Legitimate Diversity

The topic of legitimate diversity is taken up in many of the responses to *TCTCV*. This chapter first summarizes what *TCTCV* says on the topic: legitimate diversity is as a "gift from the Lord," something not only positive, but even sacred and essential for the life of the community on all levels and in all aspects.²⁵ Working with the legitimate diversity in the Church is identified as one of the crucial aspects for the future of the ecumenical movement.²⁶ The chapter notes that the bond between unity and diversity was an important concern during the time of the New Testament and subsequently. While opting for diversity as a condition of the Church's communion, *TCTCV* affirms that there are legitimate limits to diversity: "when it goes beyond acceptable limits it can be

24. *TCTCV*, §§37–57.

25. *TCTCV*, §28.

26. See *TCTCV*, §44.

destructive of the gift of unity.”²⁷ This means that not all forms of diversity are compatible with the life of communion within one Church. There are types of diversity that cause division and cannot be admitted.

The second part of the chapter offers an analytical synthesis of the responses to *TCTCV* on the topic of legitimate diversity. Most of the responses address the issue, offering insights from various confessional traditions. All these responses welcome the fact that *TCTCV* emphasizes the theme. They agree that diversity is a genuine aspect of the Church’s life and mission that belongs to its very nature. The Church is not to be conceived as a monolithic reality that tends to uniformity in all aspects of its life and on all levels. Rather, the Church should be seen as a “reconciled diversity” of cultures, rites, doctrinal views, spiritualities, and structures that exist in enriching interaction. While there is a general agreement that the gospel needs to be proclaimed in ways appropriate to diverse cultural, historical, socio-political, and economic contexts, there is also a general conviction that there are legitimate limits to diversity. It is commonly acknowledged in the responses that the visible unity of the Church is the ultimate limit of the legitimacy of any given diversity. There is need for common criteria to discern the legitimate limits of diversity in various aspects of the churches’ life and teaching.

Chapter Fourteen: Authority

Questions of authority have always been at the heart of the ecumenical movement. Throughout the history of the church, particular sources, texts, traditions, offices, and practices have been perceived as authoritative. However, how authority is understood and practiced has varied according to cultural context, thereby keeping the question of authority to the fore.

Many of the responses to *TCTCV* ask for the development of common criteria to tackle the issues that are most painfully divisive right now. For some, the responses to difficult questions (whether doctrinal, ethical, or moral) are made plain in the traditions of the church (though the pastoral responses to those questions may be nuanced and varied). For others, responses to such questions (and particularly ecumenically-agreed-upon responses) seem very hard indeed to find. Also desired is finding ways of facilitating respectful and fruitful dialogue and of navigating, peaceably, the most difficult questions.

This chapter sets these very vivid present-day issues within the context of the longer ecumenical conversation about authority and discernment. The chapter refers to several ecumenical conferences and consultations since 1998

27. *TCTCV*, §30; see also §12.

that dealt with the authority of scripture and the different hermeneutical keys that may open the scriptures. The sensitive question of authority is seen as well in the first and second Faith and Order convergence documents, *BEM* and *TCTCV*. Finally, the chapter examines at length the responses to *TCTCV* to analyze the questions raised in regard to authority, and offers some suggestions for future directions for the work on this topic.

Chapter Fifteen: The Role of Women in the Church

This chapter is a significant summary of Faith and Order's work over decades on women and men in the church. It summarizes the discussion during the 1961 assembly in New Delhi; the consultation on the same matter in 1963; the responses to *BEM*; the discussion and recommendations from the Faith and Order World Conference in 1993 in Santiago de Compostela; the reflection during the Busan assembly in 2013; and the conference on the Role of Women in the Churches at the Monastery of Bose in October 2017.

The chapter then focuses on the theme as discussed in *TCTCV* and in its responses. The significant highlight is that *TCTCV* is largely silent about the role of women in the Church. Consequently, although some responses reflect on this issue, many do not. It is apparent that in many ecumenical dialogues, questions of the role of women in the churches are much less visible now than they once were, and seem to be more difficult to engage. Nevertheless, these questions are still pressing within and between the churches.

Chapter Sixteen: The Theme of Sin in Relation to the Church as Such

This chapter gives an outline of *TCTCV*'s treatment of the theme of sin in relation to the Church as such. It addresses the ongoing discussion of whether churches, understood as the body of Christ, can themselves be sinful in ways distinguishable from the sin of the members. The chapter asks how the notion of collective or corporate sin is to be described adequately within ecumenical ecclesiology. All churches acknowledge the fact of sin among believers, "and for this reason all of them recognize the continual need for Christian self-examination, penitence, conversion (*metanoia*), reconciliation, and renewal. In other words, holiness and sin relate to the life of the Church in different and unequal ways."

A thorough analysis of the responses to *TCTCV* shows that most respondents believe that the Church can sin and has sinned during history. Five responses point to the need "to make a clear distinction between the members of the Church subject to sin and the Church as the body of Christ which, in her onto-

logical nature, remains holy and irreproachable.” The author points to the need for the Faith and Order Commission to undertake further study of this issue.

Conclusion

The chapters that follow show the depth and breadth of ongoing ecumenical conversation on these sixteen key themes. It is noteworthy that within each topic, there is much that can be said together, even on those issues that continue to be divisive. The chapters also give a sense that *TCTCV* has, thus far, been received with significant appreciation. In most cases, criticisms are both pertinent and constructive; that is, there is among the churches considerable common vision of the Church. This assessment is given in greater detail in the report that concludes this volume. There is much here for which to be grateful and hopeful.

There is also, clearly, much more work to be done in coming to a common vision of the Church. The responses are helpful and inspiring in suggesting what may be needed for greater convergence. The chapters in this volume bring these suggestions together in relation to specific themes and issues. The closing report, *What Are the Churches Saying about the Church?*, points to future directions as well. It is our sense that we have reached a milestone in ecumenical ecclesiology, and that further conversation can build from this point.

Further study and conversation on ecclesiology will continue within and between the churches. The commission’s purpose is to assist this conversation through its work, and to invite churches, ecumenical organizations and groups at every level, and others to continue the very important journey toward fuller communion and visible unity.

The commission is also committed to broadening the conversation on ecclesiology so that its work is much more representative and reflective of all regions of the world, and of all ecclesial traditions. Many of the responses to *TCTCV* underscore the importance of this, as do some of the theme chapters. Notably, the current commission’s subgroup on broadening the conversation will soon publish its work for use by churches, ecumenical bodies and organizations, and others who share the commission’s commitment to the visible unity of *all* the churches. This material provides perhaps unfamiliar insights into particular aspects of the nature and mission of the church. Some of these insights are reflected in the report that concludes this volume: greater focus on experience, spirituality, and mission and evangelism; clearer and stronger connections between ecclesiology, moral discernment, and mission; broader participation in

discussions of faith and order; and so on. Considering these forthcoming publications in relation to *TCTCV*, the responses to it, the theme chapters, and the report will help us all discern future directions more clearly, and pursue them with greater energy and hope. The need to broaden and deepen the conversation has long been recognized as being of great importance. And it is work that must and will be continued.

The report *What Are the Churches Saying about the Church?* that concludes this volume (and is also available separately)²⁸ is a reflection on all the responses to *TCTCV*. The report notes that the responses to *TCTCV* are largely and significantly positive and appreciative. It also identifies areas where convergence may not be as great as it appears, and areas in which more work must be done. It is evident that the desire and the prospects for greater mutual recognition, fuller communion, and aspects of visible unity are strong and hopeful. The report underscores what is clear in the responses: “*we, the churches, now agree more than we disagree* on many characteristics of the Church.”²⁹

Highly significant is the churches’ agreement on the imperative of mission, which is “a sign both of a significant renewal (or desire for it) and a striking expression unity among us.”³⁰ Here all the churches have received much from the churches in the global South, whose focus on mission has inspired clearer and greater emphasis on mission in contexts where Christianity has been declining in influence. *TCTCV* itself begins with the mission of God and the churches’ participation in it. Yet, as the responses note, there is much more work needed here, perhaps especially in understanding together how to evaluate and build on the diversity of beliefs and practices that spring from differing contexts and traditions.

The responses agree that diversity is enriching in many important ways, but also that diversity has limits. What is not adequately clear is how those limits are to be discerned, on what bases, and by whom. In recent years, it is perhaps the diversity of moral teachings that has seemed to be most challenging within and among the churches. Here, the responses indicate, there is need for further work not only on specific moral issues, but also on how the churches understand being human before God.³¹ The work of Faith and Order’s study group on moral discernment in the churches provides resources for understanding

28. See n. 4.

29. *What Are the Churches Saying*, §§3–4, 45.

30. *What Are the Churches Saying*, §23.

31. *What Are the Churches Saying*, §§31–34.

how and why different traditions engage in moral discernment,³² and for facilitating dialogue.³³ It is important to keep in the foreground that the churches now agree more than they disagree on the foundations of moral discernment in the beliefs, worship, teaching, and ministry of the Church.

The responses, the theme chapters, and the report, taken together, indicate that *TCTCV* has indeed specified many areas where the churches have reached convergence. This is a significant milestone, given the importance of mutual understanding and learning on the nature and mission of the church as key to further work on remaining issues. Overall, the responses to *TCTCV* are positive and appreciative of the work on ecclesiology done this far. In most cases, criticism of *TCTCV* is offered within the general ecclesiological framework developed since *BEM*. We are grateful to all respondents for helping to make this fact clear.

And we are most grateful for all the individuals and groups that have contributed to reaching this milestone. This company includes church leaders around the world, scholars, lay and ordained, and others who serve the gospel and the church in so many ways. We are hopeful that, as the churches, ecumenical groups, and others read and reflect on the responses, the themes addressed here, and the report, they too will be heartened by the extent of convergence and inspired to take up ongoing issues with energy and hope. We want, too, to thank the Commission on Faith and Order as a whole, the study group on ecclesiology, and the editorial team named below. We also thank the Secretariat on Faith and Order, which has so ably guided and supported our work. A special thank you to Mr Alexander Freeman, whose careful editing of the responses and the theme chapters has contributed greatly to their accessibility and clarity.

Above all, we are grateful to God, who so faithfully and richly gives us the grace to engage in our common search for and reception of the unity of the Church: a unity which we glimpse even now, and look forward to in hope and confidence that what God has promised will come to be. We invite Christians

32. *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 1: Learning from Traditions*, ed. Myriam Wijlens and Vladimir Shmaliy, 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*, ed. Myriam Wijlens, Vladimir Schmalii, and Simone Sinn, Faith and Order Paper No. 229 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/churches-and-moral-discernment-ii>.

33. *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 3: Facilitating Dialogue to Build Koinonia*, Faith and Order Paper No. 235 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021).

everywhere, the churches, ecumenical groups and organizations, and others to consider anew what they can now do to deepen fellowship, collaboration, and fuller and deeper, if still imperfect, communion.

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CHAPTER ONE

Visible Unity and Mutual Recognition

Susan Durber

Introduction

From its founding in Amsterdam in 1948, the World Council of Churches (WCC) has expressed its vision and goal in terms of “visible unity” (sometimes even “*full* visible unity”). The adjective *visible* has carried enormous significance since it was first used, but its meaning has sometimes been questioned, misunderstood, erased, or forgotten. Drawing on evidence from the responses to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*,¹ this chapter seeks to identify how the word *visible*, and its partnering with the idea of mutual recognition (also a metaphor for visibility), is faring in the ecumenical movement today

As will be shown below, the responses to *TCTCV* reveal that the churches remain almost unanimously convinced that unity is the gift of God; that the unity for which we pray and search must be *visible* unity; and that such unity demands mutual recognition of one another as belonging to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. There are changes, from the time of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*,² in how that visibility might be understood; there is a recognition that the kind of institutional unity that was once the dominant model is now not often sought; and there is a strong preference for models of unity that embrace the active and the relational. *Koinonia* may have replaced unity as the way in which many now understand what God is gifting

1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Henceforth, *TCTCV*.

2. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982). Henceforth, *BEM*.

us and what we are seeking; it is more relational and dynamic, and it embraces a wider range of understandings of unity.³ But there remains a strong commitment to the principle that the *koinonia* for which we pray should be in every sense visible, tangible, and vivid enough to shape the life of the world.

The History of “Visible Unity” in the WCC

The constitution of the WCC says that “the primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.”⁴

In 1950, following the formation of the WCC, the Toronto statement sought to clarify that the churches of the WCC find their unity in Christ, that this unity is always a gift of God, and that they are called to search for the expression of that unity.⁵ The statement affirmed that there was no thought of developing a single institutional church structure or of promoting any particular model of unity. It emphasized that being a member of the WCC does not imply acceptance or rejection of the doctrine that the unity of the church consists in the unity of the *invisible* Church, but it also affirmed that there cannot ever be a purely spiritualized concept of unity.

Right from the beginning of the WCC, churches had different understandings of the weight of the word *visible* when applied to the unity of the Church. It was, however, always stressed that unity cannot be so abstract that it is invisible, and that it has to be made evident. The principles that unity is God’s gift and that it should be visible have been twin pillars of the ecumenical movement. However, what precisely would make for visibility has not always been either clear or agreed upon. Sometimes, the assumption has been that visible unity means institutional unity (sometimes confusingly referred to as organic

3. See Ellen K. Wondra, “Communion and *Koinonia* in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*,” chapter 2 of this volume, 17–32.

4. Constitution and Rules of the World Council of Churches (as amended by the central committee of the WCC in Geneva, Switzerland, 2018), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/constitution-and-rules-of-the-world-council-of-churches>.

5. “The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches: The Ecclesiological Significance of the World Council of Churches,” received by the Central Committee at Toronto in 1950 and commended for study and comment in the Churches, Toronto, Canada, 8–15 July 1950, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/toronto-statement>.

unity), but this was never understood to be the case within statements from the WCC. Visible unity has always been followed by words giving some sense of what it might mean, but always in phrases such as “in one faith and one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, in order that the world might believe.”⁶

Unity statements produced by WCC assemblies have in their turn reflected on visible unity and each has added something to the discourse. The best-remembered of such statements was made at the New Delhi assembly in 1961, where this paragraph won praise:

We believe that the unity which is both God’s will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Savior are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people.⁷

The phrase “all in each place” implied an understanding that unity should be evident (visible) in each local context (perhaps in the way it was envisaged in the united churches in North and South India, though not exclusively). It recognizes, however, that unity may also be made visible “in all places” (globally and in terms of catholicity) and in “all ages” (across time as well as space). And visible unity as defined here referred to committed fellowship, to the one apostolic faith, to the breaking of the one bread, to prayer and common life, witness, and service. It envisaged that ministry and members are “accepted by all” (mutual recognition) and that acting and speaking can be done together. This was not a vision of unity that was solely, if at all, about institutional union, but it was certainly unity that was not abstract or spiritualized; rather, it was, evident, tangible, and visible.

There have been different emphases in the various unity statements. The statement produced at Uppsala in 1968 stressed more fully the need to seek

6. By-Laws, Faith and Order Commission, as quoted in *BEM*, 1.

7. “New Delhi Statement on Unity,” 3rd Assembly of the WCC, New Delhi, 1961, para. 2, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/new-delhi-statement-on-unity>

catholicity, or *global* unity.⁸ It also moved to understand the unity of the Church as being at the service of the unity of humankind. It emphasized that the Church has a proper commitment to the common life of all humankind, since that very life is the object of God's divine love. In Vancouver, there was a reminder that visible unity has three marks: firstly, unity in apostolic faith; secondly, unity in the mutual recognition of baptism, eucharist, and ministry; and thirdly, unity in common decision-making and teaching with authority.⁹ In Canberra, there was a plea that the unity of the Church should reflect the visible diversity (cultural and ethnic, for example) of the faithful. At the same time, there was also a continuing call for churches to "recognise in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness,"¹⁰ and further still, to move beyond mutual *recognition* toward mutual *reconciliation*. Statements at later assemblies (Porto Alegre and Busan) placed even more emphasis on the unity of the Church as a sign and servant of God's reconciling of all humankind, and, indeed, of the whole of creation itself.

Visible Unity and Mutual Recognition in The Church: Towards a Common Vision

TVTCV affirms in its preface that the primary purpose of the Commission on Faith and Order is "to serve the churches as they call one another to visible unity,"¹¹ and this visible unity is described as being of one faith, one eucharistic fellowship, worship, common life, witness, and service to the world, in order that the world may believe. The preface makes clear that visible unity entails mutual recognition of each other as churches, as true expressions of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, celebrating the eucharist together, and participating in God's mission together for the transformation of the world. Thus, right from the start, *TCTCV* understands unity as *visible* unity. It assumes,

8. *The Uppsala Report 1968: Official Report of the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Uppsala, July 4–20, 1968*, ed. Norman Goodall (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1968). This and other official documents of the Commission on Faith and Order may be found at <https://archive.org/details/faithandorderpapersdigitaledge/sort=titlesorter>.

9. *Gathered for Life: Official Report, 6th Assembly World Council of Churches, Vancouver, Canada, 24 July–10 August 1983*, ed. David Gill (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1983).

10. "The Unity of the Church: Gift and Calling – The Canberra Statement," 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Canberra, Australia, 1991, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-unity-of-the-church-gift-and-calling-the-canberra-statement>. Henceforth, referred to as TUC.

11. *TCTCV*, vii.

however, that unity can be made visible in several significant ways, and certainly not only in certain forms of institutional union.

In chapter 1, *TCTCV* emphasizes that God's work is about healing a broken world and that God calls the Church to offer the gift of communion to a wounded humanity. There is a clear statement that visible unity requires churches to recognize in one another the authentic presence of the Church. However, it also acknowledges that for some, this may depend on changes in doctrine, practice, and ministry.

In chapter 2, there is a statement that some might find ambiguous. It says that "the Church enjoys a spiritual, transcendent quality which cannot be grasped simply by looking at its visible appearance. The earthly and spiritual dimensions of the Church cannot be separated."¹²

Nonetheless, this statement does emphasize that the earthly (visible) dimension of the Church must always be in view. This chapter builds on previous statements about unity, emphasizing that mutual accountability is vital, and that each local church may contain within itself the fullness of Church, but should also be seen to be in dynamic relationship with other local churches. It refers to the way that, since New Testament times, the catholicity of the Church has been expressed in tangible (visible) expressions of relationship—such as letters, visits, and hospitality—and not merely through geographical extension.

TCTCV Chapter 3 emphasizes that the Church is an eschatological reality, anticipating the kingdom of God. This reality, though, is always made plain in visible signs: in apostolic faith, in baptism, and in eucharist, as well as in common service. In this chapter the essential elements of communion are outlined: faith, sacraments, ministry (mutually recognized and reconciled), as well as common decision-making and witnessing together. There is recognition that some significant and key differences remain, and that the hidden action of the Holy Spirit is needed as we seek to resolve these differences in ways that will be visible, not hidden. There is an affirmation that unity has a charismatic as well as an institutional shape, but there is never any suggestion that unity can be other than visible.

Chapter 4 includes the affirmation that unity must embrace not only those things already named, but also shared common moral values. *TCTCV* stands in the tradition of affirming that God calls the churches to seek *visible* unity, while reflecting on the different and several ways in which that visibility may be made plain.

12. *TCTCV*, §26.

The Responses to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*

In relation to the theme of visible unity, the responses to *TCTCV* are, understandably, very diverse indeed. The response of the Roman Catholic Church, for example, makes clear a continued and resolute commitment to full visible unity as “the essential goal of the ecumenical movement.”¹³ It refers to “the urgency of the visible unity of Christians” for the sake of a credible and convincing mission to the world, arguing that it can never be right for us to acquiesce in the multiplicity of churches.¹⁴ Some responses, by contrast, such as the one from the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, argue that *TCTCV* seems to have only a vague sense of what unity is, mixed with a bias against plurality; the response wishes to affirm a lively diversity more strongly.¹⁵ Some responses make no reference at all to the specific ideas of visible unity or mutual recognition, so that analysis has to proceed in part from silence. Many of the responses make clear that the churches are wrestling with what it means to speak of unity and what language might be most appropriate for these discussions. Some reflect on the ways in which the ecumenical movement has changed, such that organic union (the dominant model, as traditionally envisaged, until the 1970s) no longer seems to be strongly advocated. Some imply further that this means that visible unity is no longer the goal. However, *TCTCV* and the ecumenical movement have never made a specific kind of union the one defining measure of visible unity.

Many responses urge that unity needs to be made visible in these times through shared common service, action, or witness, or a more simple “shared understanding of the gospel,” rather than through doctrinal agreement.¹⁶ The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe suggests that mutual recognition in a “reconciled diversity” is a much clearer and more possible goal, one that honors diverse traditions without trying to fit them into a monistic unity.¹⁷ It could be argued that shared witness is not itself a new idea in the ecumenical movement and does not need to be seen as an alternative to an older model focused only on doctrinal agreement. It is helpful to recall that shared common witness has always been part of the understanding within the WCC of the

13. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 2, Faith and Order Paper No. 232, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 170. Henceforth, *CRTC* 2.

14. *CRTC* 2, 167.

15. *CRTC* 2, 277.

16. *CRTC* 2, 269.

17. *CRTC* 2, 275.

meaning of visible unity. Some responses suggest that mutual recognition is enough, without visible unity. And mutual recognition has, from the beginning of the ecumenical movement, been seen as *part* of visible unity, not as an alternative to it, or as the point of arrival.

Undoubtedly, the responses, when read together, reflect a change of emphasis within church life. In many places, this is expressed by a concern for embodied and contextual expressions of unity. In others, this is evidenced by an increased affirmation of diversity and plurality, a plea for unity that can take visible steps forward even if it cannot yet be full, along with a longing for expressions that can serve God's mission to the world. None of these necessarily implies a move away from visible unity itself, but they demand a clearer understanding of the breadth of the ways in which that visible unity might be expressed.

Visible/invisible

Some of the responses demonstrate firmly a suspicion of any model of unity that is too abstract or that resorts to the invisible. The Church of Scotland, for example, says that *TCTCV* seems to place “too much emphasis on unity based around an invisible concept” and wonders what the Church with a capital C refers to in the text—perhaps, the invisible church? They call for clear, common, and visible criteria for what it would mean to recognize within each other the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.¹⁸ Other responses also stress, in the strongest terms, that unity has to be visible and concrete. The Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church says that there can be no vision of the Church outside of particular, living expressions of Church, and we will achieve nothing by reducing unity to a common life with a theological minimum.¹⁹ The Anglican Church of Canada affirms that ecclesial communion cannot refer to an invisible or spiritual reality alone, and that unity requires visible marks: they name scripture, the ecumenical creeds, the sacraments, and locally adopted forms of the historic episcopate.²⁰ Orthodox responses repeatedly emphasize that it is to *visible* unity that we call one another, and this is always interpreted not as organic (in the sense of institutional) union, but as visible unity in such areas as apostolic faith, sacraments, and faithfulness in succession to the apostles.

The Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, in a sole contrary voice, prefers a model of “invisible unity in Christ” and describes unity in this sense as an

18. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 1, Faith and Order Paper No. 231, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 4. Henceforth, *CRTC 1*.

19. *CRTC 1*, 133.

20. *CRTC 1*, 3.

eschatological hope. They also refer, with approval, to a model of unity as “reconciled diversity,” suggesting that unity does not need to be visible, but can undergird visible diversity.²¹

Some respond that *TCTCV* is unclear about what it means by visible unity, or by unity at all, and that more fundamental reflection is needed. The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe reflects that, on the key issue of shaping the visible unity of the churches, *TCTCV* just repeats the well-known open questions about it and offers no real progress.²² The Roman Catholic Church responds that Catholic ecclesiology fully shares the conviction that full visible unity must be the goal, but what this means needs to be explored in a much more complete and adequate way than in *TCTCV*. This response does highlight that *TCTCV*’s emphasis on the three essential elements of the church’s life as faith, sacramental life, and service to the world marks a major step forward.²³

The National Council of Churches in Denmark asks whether visible unity is still the ecumenical vision, or whether it should be supplanted or replaced by a model of unity in common witness and service.²⁴ The Union of Welsh Independent Churches says that they “question the degree to which visible unity is central to the Church’s mission and believe that a clearer definition of ‘visible unity’ may be needed.” They argue that some may still believe that visible unity means organic union, while others understand it to be about recognizing in one another that we are partners in the gospel.²⁵ Other responses still prefer the language of “real yet imperfect communion,” expressing the hope that we might be able to speak of growing into visible unity even while we are not yet there. They ask whether there can be steps on the way. The Uniting Church in Australia would like to see the idea of visible unity developed and explained more fully with examples and models that could cover a range of expressions of unity from organic union to arrangements based on recognition.²⁶ The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe pleads for much more specific recommendations about a model of unity and, in particular, advocates for a model of “reconciled diversity”—a unity in which a plurality of diverse churches might mutually recognize one another.²⁷ And the Jamaica Baptist

21. *CRTC 1*, 151.

22. *CRTC 2*, 275.

23. *CRTC 2*, 163.

24. *CRTC 2*, 248.

25. *CRTC 1*, 176.

26. *CRTC 2*, 99.

27. *CRTC 2*, 268.

Union argues that visible unity must emerge from grassroots ecumenism and working together.²⁸

What emerges from the responses is, mostly, a commitment to unity that is visible in the sense of being concrete (not abstract or invisible), expressed in real and tangible relationships and agreements. There are several expressions of commitment to an understanding of unity that is relational (*koinonia*) rather than in any sense institutional. What also emerges is that visible unity is often associated with one particular model of union, whereas this has never been the understanding in the WCC. The responses reveal that unity is still understood as the gift of God (rather than something which we must win ourselves), but also that it must be visible, tangible, concrete, and embodied. That many of the responses often place *visible unity* in inverted commas reveals that there remains ambiguity and uncertainty about to what precisely it refers, though there remains a strong sense of its importance. There is a longing among many for more clarity about what commonly held things would make unity more visible.

Unity made visible through common action

A common thread through many of the responses is a desire to make unity visible through common *mission*, expressed by speaking together for justice and peace or acting together in service to the world. Finding common cause together is affirmed by many as an important way in which unity is deepened among us and made more visible to those around us. The Scottish Episcopal Church affirms this, as does the Baptist World Alliance.²⁹ The National Council of Churches in Denmark suggests that visible unity should be supplanted or replaced by common witness and service. (They reflect in relation to this that it has proved impossible to reach agreement on ministry and sacraments.³⁰) The response of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches emphasizes that “practical co-operation” has priority and that unity should not be an end in itself, but rather a sign of peace and reconciliation for the world.³¹ The Episcopal Church affirms that the unity of the Church is made visible in shared life, work, and mission.³² The Church of Sweden argues that doctrine is less important now and that the search for unity through dialogue should be supplemented by

28. *CRTC* 2, 158.

29. *CRTC* 1, 31; *CRTC* 2, 293.

30. *CRTC* 2, 248.

31. *CRTC* 1, 157.

32. *CRTC* 1, 162.

unity through action.³³ The Christian Council of Sweden argues that every kind of diversity does not have to be reconciled before churches can act together on a pilgrimage of justice and peace.³⁴ The Anglican Church of Canada says that common witness and service should be recognized as “equally significant” with the traditional marks of unity, and encourages a reorientation and renewal of the ecumenical movement away from chiefly theological dialogue toward unity expressed as common mission.³⁵ The Presbyterian Church in Canada reflects that “our bond of union is our service to the one Lord”; and the International Ecumenical Fellowship pleads for “action rather than words, service rather than beliefs.”³⁶ The Salvation Army says that as churches work together on alleviating human needs, “they begin to demonstrate the unity they are seeking.”³⁷ A response from the International Old Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Union of Utrecht, in collaboration with representatives of the Philippine Independent Church, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar, the Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church, and the Old Catholic Church of the Mariavites, argues that it would be good to move “beyond mere formal recognition to speaking out together in society and practically working together in the service of the world.”³⁸ The Jamaica Baptist Union also reflects that we need a new sense of unity through mission and crisis. The liturgy of the eucharist may be important; but we need a greater focus still on *koinonia* and unity in service, partly because in this area the Church more quickly finds greater consensus and unity can become more readily visible.³⁹

There are several voices (such as that of the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council), who say that *TCTCV*, and *BEM* before it, deal with European and North American issues and do not address the concerns of most of the world.⁴⁰ The theological style and method of *BEM* have become normative for ecumenical theology, but many in the churches now have little appetite for theological dialogue and are much more concerned about mission, justice, and peace, as well as finding a post-colonial way of working together. The weight of discussion and concern about unity has shifted, some argue, in such a way that the energy and imperative is with the kind of unity that can be seen as churches

33. *CRTC 1*, 110–1.

34. *CRTC 2*, 295.

35. *CRTC 2*, 50.

36. *CRTC 1*, 66; *CRTC 1*, 31.

37. *CRTC 1*, 80.

38. *CRTC 1*, 215.

39. *CRTC 2*, 160.

40. *CRTC 1*, 229.

work together to serve God's mission to heal the brokenness of the world. The Methodist Church in Ireland, for example, argues that mission now takes precedence over the inherited structures of the past. Unity can no longer be only about theological affirmations, but must involve contrition, forgiveness, and healing in very concrete and specific ways.⁴¹ The North American Academy of Ecumenists notes that there is now more emphasis on the experience of faith than on doctrine, and that the search for unity needs to reflect this.⁴²

This is a striking theme in the responses: that unity becomes visible as churches act together. There has certainly been a key shift toward recognizing that a journey to visible unity must always be grounded in fellowship, common action, and common prayer, and not reduced to finding the ambiguity of key terms in texts. This is often presented as an alternative to the notion of visible unity as organic union or as theological dialogue. There is certainly a shift of emphasis among many of the churches. However, it is striking that from the beginning of the WCC, common witness and service, along with common prayer and fellowship, have always been named as part of what visible unity entails.

Mutual recognition

The language of the ecumenical movement about visibility has long implied 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 (that is, recognize) in each other. The Evangelical Church of Greece, for example, in its response to *TCTCV*, shares the long-held understanding that visible unity requires that the churches are able (in many instances) to recognize *in one another* the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.⁴³ However, the varied responses to *TCTCV* indicate that, in this area of mutual recognition, there are very wide differences of understanding.

For some, like the National Council of Churches in Denmark, "mutual recognition in love" is suggested as achievable and preferable to agreement on matters of doctrine or ministry.⁴⁴ For the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, the mutual recognition of diverse churches, with fellowship of "table and pulpit," is a model of unity (in "reconciled diversity") that they have celebrated, and which they affirm for the wider church.⁴⁵ The Religious Society of

41. *CRTC 1*, 142.

42. *CRTC 1*, 320–1.

43. *CRTC 2*, 77.

44. *CRTC 2*, 248.

45. *CRTC 2*, 267.

Friends (Quakers) in Britain sees mutual recognition as a joyful acceptance of difference: “Quakers try hard to recognize and affirm one another’s gifts.”⁴⁶ They suggest that growth in unity happens as we recognize one another “in the Spirit,” and have no issue with recognizing other churches as visible signs of God at work in the world.⁴⁷ Mennonites also believe that the Church of Christ is there in all communities “that present a convincing claim to be Christian.”⁴⁸ Some would recognize as churches all who profess faith in Jesus Christ. The Methodist Church in Britain is one church that would recognize as churches all communities of the faithful in which the word of God is preached, and the sacraments administered—irrespective, for example, of how ordained ministry is structured.⁴⁹ Many of the responses make clear that for these bodies, there is no impediment to recognizing other Christians as church.

Some responses remind us that there is not everywhere a consensus about whether it is possible to describe other Christian communities as church, let alone as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. For some this remains “an open question,” and the issue of the “boundaries of church” is an important one. The Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation, for example, reflects that we cannot assume that all recognize one another as churches.⁵⁰ The response of the Roman Catholic Church, significantly, indicates that the boundaries of the Roman Catholic Church are not coterminous with the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. However, in this view there is a distinction to be drawn between those to whom the term *church* applies and those who have not preserved “the valid episcopacy and eucharist” and are called *ecclesial communities*.⁵¹ The unity of the Church is not visible in this sense even among the different member churches of the WCC or of Faith and Order.

For some, it is hard to understand why full interchangeability of ministries and full communion seem elusive, even when mutual recognition seems to be present. If we really do recognize one another as churches, and are able (in many instances) to recognize each other’s baptism, for example, then why is recognition of ministry so hard to realize? For some, it seems that the criteria named for mutual recognition to be real may be fulfilled, but still this does not necessarily lead to unity. Some responses express disappointment with, and sometimes criticism of, the “present state of ecumenism,” wondering why it is that ecumenical

46. *CRTC* 2, 97.

47. *CRTC* 1, 97.

48. *CRTC* 2, 252.

49. *CRTC* 2, 18.

50. *CRTC* 2, 19.

51. *CRTC* 2, 175.

cooperation can sometimes be profound and far-reaching, but that declared mutual recognition is not forthcoming. Some voices say how much it would mean to them if only other churches would truly recognize them as churches. The Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches suggests that full mutual recognition of baptism would be a significant step forward.⁵²

In the discussions of mutual recognition, it becomes clear that this, for some, is a commendable and evident way forward. Other responses, however, indicate that we are far from seeing one other as Church. And yet, it is also evident that the presence of the one, holy, catholic Church is seen by some in churches other than their own, even when many substantial differences remain. Recognition, in the sense of visible unity, often seems to be clear as churches work together for justice and peace, but this is not always, in every place, clear in terms of doctrine, shared faith, common decision-making, or ministry. Some plead for us to build on the visible unity we have in witness and service in order to move closer together in terms of sacraments and ministry. Others warn that common working together in and of itself does not mean that we have found mutual recognition of each other as Church.

A unity that embraces plurality

Some of the responses reflect a growing tendency in some contexts to defend and to advocate for plurality as part of unity. There seems to be a growing sense that visible unity must never homogenize the Church, but leave room always for difference. There is, however, much wrestling with the limits of that difference. The Roman Catholic response speaks of the “complex beauty” of a diverse Church.⁵³ And in this they are at one with the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, which asks why diversity should ever, in itself, be a problem.⁵⁴ For the North American Academy of Ecumenists, it is vital that we affirm “unity in diversity” and that we impose no greater burden than is necessary for the recognition of unity in faith.⁵⁵ A report from the Anglican-Pentecostal Consultation asks why we need to order the diversity that flows from the Holy Spirit.⁵⁶ The Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches argues that diversity is part of unity and that unity must never be reduced to uniformity; they recognize, though, the risk that a celebration of diversity might simply sustain the

52. *CRTC 1*, 150.

53. *CRTC 2*, 178.

54. *CRTC 2*, 269.

55. *CRTC 1*, 220.

56. *CRTC 1*, 384.

status quo.⁵⁷ The Church of England advocates “embracing plurality whilst seeking unity of purpose,” and taking a minimalist view of the essentials of Church, leaving room for a more local expression of diversity.⁵⁸ The Christian Council of Sweden argues that not all diversity needs to be reconciled, in the sense of “sorted out” or eradicated; we should not, however, allow some differences, such as the division into church families, to appear as permanent.⁵⁹ The United Methodist Church urges that we cannot simply be content to “agree to disagree.” It also argues that it is not our differences (or diversity) that might be reconciled, but it is *we* who are being reconciled to God (together) despite our differences.⁶⁰ Some voices warn that there are limits to what kind of plurality might be embraced by visible unity, and that unity is actually becoming more difficult because of radical changes in doctrine and practice in some church communities. The response from the Church of England urges that though some kinds of difference (about moral issues) seem now to threaten our unity, there is no reason why they could not be held within a unity that can embrace difference, since the Church has been able in its history to embrace profound difference on what might have been considered even more fundamental questions.⁶¹ The issue of how unity and diversity can be held together, as we search for visible unity, remains a pressing and difficult one, and many of the responses wrestle with this.

What kind of unity?

There is some measure of difference among the responses as they ask what kind of unity we might be searching for, or what unity it is that God is bringing. There is some frustration expressed that *TCTCV* does not offer more in terms of specific and clear models for unity, that unity remains vague and undefined. There is also some criticism—for example, from the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe—of the failure of the WCC to “act as a motor for the actualization of church unity.”⁶² For some, like the Uniting Church in Sweden, the unity of the Church alone is too narrow a goal, and the unity we pray for and long for must be no less than the unity of humankind and of all creation.⁶³ For others, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, the focus

57. *CRTC 1*, 150.

58. *CRTC 1*, 45.

59. *CRTC 2*, 235, 233.

60. *CRTC 2*, 132, n. 16.

61. *CRTC 1*, 44.

62. *CRTC 2*, 278.

63. *CRTC 2*, 28.

should be on the apostolic faith, the sacraments and the ministry of the Church, and a search among the churches for a “broader unanimity.”⁶⁴ They plead for more than a “minimal consensus”⁶⁵—although we should not forget the gains made. Some of the responses suggest ways in which churches might move forward in relation to present unresolved differences. Others argue that we need to take steps in the direction of positive reconciliation in terms of the healing of wounds of division in history. The Roman Catholic response urges the need to ask for pardon for divisions.⁶⁶ For the Orthodox Church of Finland, “it is difficult to denote positive forms of durable unity without eucharistic communion.” They state that the present division of the Church can never be properly described as “legitimate diversity in unity.”⁶⁷ And, as has been noted, many advocate a model of visible unity that builds on working together in witness and service to the world.

However, while there are differences in the understandings of what the unity of the Church might mean and how that might become visible, there *is* agreement that there is an imperative to search, pray, and work toward that visible unity. The Roman Catholic response encourages us to continue trusting that what unites us is stronger than what divides us, that in our shared experience of martyrdom (the “ecumenism of blood”), we see a true kind of unity.⁶⁸ Many are profoundly frustrated with the slow pace of progress; some look for progress in areas other than doctrine or ministry; and some look beyond the churches to the humankind and creation they serve. But all are searching for a path of obedience to Jesus Christ who prayed “that they may all be one” (John 17:21). From the beginning of its life, the WCC has always sketched visible unity in broad and plural terms: in faith, communion, ministry, decision-making, witness, and service. New decades provoke new emphases and sometimes accuse past saints of forgetting a vital sign of unity. But though none of us see clearly, all of us may acknowledge that unity may become and must become visible in all these ways.

Conclusion

It is evident, perhaps surprisingly to some, that the responses to *TCTCV* reveal a strong and resolute commitment among the churches to the visible unity of the Church. There are differences among them in relation to what makes unity

64. *CRTC 1*, 126.

65. *CRTC 1*, 118.

66. *CRTC 2*, 174.

67. *CRTC 1*, 146–7.

68. *CRTC 2*, 205.

visible and what constitutes mutual recognition. There is more of a tendency now (than, for example, at the time of *BEM*), across many of the churches, to focus much more on unity becoming visible through common mission and speaking out for justice and peace. This is partly because of frustration about the slowness of progress of faith, sacraments, and ministry, and partly because of the pressing demands of the needs of the world. There is a stronger affirmation of diversity as part of unity among and within the churches (and in the wider world), and a deeper sense that catholicity can, and indeed naturally will, embrace diversity. There is, among many, a greater sense that a visibly united Church can cope with a certain kind of unresolved mess or, as some might put it, “temporary anomalies,” for the sake of overcoming the principal anomaly of disunity. The Church in Wales, for example, refers back to the 1998 Lambeth Conference in this vein.⁶⁹ 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 dying; that the Church in some places is waiting for a kind of rebirth; 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: through sharing worship (even if we cannot yet share the eucharist); in common Bible study; in keeping together the World Day of Prayer for Creation; in prophetic and visible gestures by our church leaders; and in sharing and deepening ecumenical spirituality. A response from the South Australian Dialogue of the Roman Catholics and the Uniting Churches simply says what many other responses echo: “We can live in unity without common answers to all our questions.”⁷⁰ We certainly do not have common answers to all our questions. But in response to Christ’s prayer, there is still, among the churches, a lively hope that we shall find the gift of unity.

69. *CRTC 1*, 59.

70. *CRTC 2*, 342.

CHAPTER TWO

Communion and *Koinonia*

Ellen K. Wondra

Introduction

The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)¹ uses two interrelated notions to explore the unity of the Church: mission (*missio*) and communion (*koinonia*). Both of these terms have a rich and complex surplus of meanings. The term *mission* encompasses God's activity and intention to save and transform all creation (in which the Church participates); witness to the gospel in a wide variety of ways (including martyrdom); proclamation and evangelism; administration of the sacraments; and loving service of many sorts. The term *communion* encompasses understandings of the Church as body of Christ; temple of the Holy Spirit; community called into covenant with God; communion of local churches; sign and servant of God's design (including as sacrament); and as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.² Together these images convey the dynamism and direction of the unity of the Church: creaturely and human communion with God is part of God's design and central to God's mission. The Church receives communion as a gift from God, and as a challenge to participate in the divine mission as both sign and instrument. For the communion of the Church truly to be an image of the communion of God, it must go beyond itself in mission. The elaboration of this constellation of images and insights in the

1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), §§1–20, 58–69. Henceforth, *TCTCV*. Also see Glenroy Lalor, “The Church and Mission in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*,” chapter 10 of this volume, 108–118.

2. *TCTCV*, §§18–32.

ecclesiology of communion provides a unifying connection between God, the Church, and the world.³ Almost all the churches and groups that have responded to *TCTCV* agree that the understanding of Church as communion is helpful and generative, particularly as it connects communion and mission.

Koinonia and communion are complex concepts with strong biblical roots. The word *koinonia* is used in many texts: Acts 2:42; Romans 15:26; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 10:16; 2 Corinthians 6:14; 8:4; 9:13; 13:13; Galatians 2:9; Philippians 1:5; 2:1; 3:10; Philemon 6; Hebrews 13:16; and 1 John 1:3; 6; 7. The concept also incorporates the sense of being *en Christo*, in Christ (found in the letters of St Paul and elsewhere), as well as the sense of being one with God in Christ and therefore with each other and the world (found in the Gospel of John). In scripture, communion encompasses all of human life with God and in creation, from being rooted in trust in God and participating in the sacraments, to service, evangelism, and mission, caring for the whole of God's creation, and living in eschatological hope.⁴

Over the ages, theology, ecclesiology, liturgy, and pastoral practice have seen *koinonia*, or communion, as central to Christian faith, life, and the church. Even before *koinonia* ecclesiology became an ecumenical focal point in the late 20th century, the notion of the Church as communion was already embedded in the recognition that churches at the local and regional level, as well as churches across denominational traditions, already share a certain fellowship that is analogous to the fellowship of the disciples with Jesus and with each other.⁵ Renewing that fellowship in today's Church is required for the churches' "full visible unity." In turn, such unity is necessary for the churches' effective participation in the mission of God to bring the whole of creation into communion with God.

3. In a 1995 paper, Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas sees the concept of *koinonia* as providing "us with a key to deal with almost every ecumenical issue in a theological way" because it interrelates the central theological topics and ecclesiological and ecumenical issues "in an organic way Thus, the potential of such a concept for the Ecumenical Movement can be almost inexhaustible" (John Zizioulas, "Faith and Order Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," Faith and Order consultation with younger theologians, 3–11 August 1995, para. 9, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/fait-and-order/xii-essays/fait-and-order-yesterday-today-and-tomorrow>).

4. *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness: A Discussion Paper*, Faith and Order Paper No. 161 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993), §§21–44.

5. *TCTCV*, "Historical Note," 41–46. Among the factors stimulating this development are Vatican II, the revival of eucharistic piety in the Orthodox churches, and widespread liturgical renewal in many church families. The WCC is itself a community of churches praying and pressing for ever fuller communion among communions.

As a convergence document, *TCTCV* offers this communion ecclesiology to the churches for continuing reception. The lengthy work leading to *TCTCV* has involved dialogue, consultation, testing of ideas, response, and revision. This complex and lengthy process has led to actual convergence on ecclesiology, although as *TCTCV* and the responses to it indicate, that convergence is not yet full agreement. That is, *TCTCV* is itself an expression of the real yet imperfect communion that the churches already share.

From *BEM* to *TCTCV*

*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*⁶ gives a preliminary account of the notion that the Church's unity is best understood and lived out as communion in faith, life, and witness. Ecclesial communion is grounded in the triune God and is a gift of the Spirit (iv–v); it is a matter of “living in communion with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.”⁷ Therefore, “all members of the Church are called to confess their faith and to give account of their hope. They are to identify with the joys and sufferings of all people as they seek to witness in caring love.”⁸ Eucharistic communion with Christ is the source and basis of communion within the Church, the body of Christ. Communion with Christ prompts the active participation of the churches and of believers in the “ongoing restoration of the world's situation and the human condition.”⁹

In WCC's work on ecclesiology, the responses to *BEM* are taken to identify this approach to ecclesiology as one way to come to “a convergent vision on ecclesiology.” From this point it is possible to develop “basic ecclesiological principles, which could provide common perspectives for the churches' different ecclesiologies and serve as a framework for their convergence.”¹⁰ In addition to the core vision of communion, four other conceptions of the Church “could contribute in a complementary way” to this ecclesiology: Church as gift of the word of God; as mystery or sacrament of God's love for the world; as the pilgrim people of God; and as servant and prophetic sign of the kingdom.¹¹

6. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982). Henceforth, *BEM*.

7. *BEM*, “Ministry,” §1.

8. *BEM*, “Ministry,” §4.

9. *BEM*, “Eucharist,” §§19–21.

10. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982–1990: Report on the Process and Responses*, Faith and Order Paper No. 149 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), V.C. §4. Henceforth, *BEM 82–90*.

11. *BEM 82–90*, V.C. §§11–16.

Faith and Order's focus on the ecclesiology of communion is given shape by the statement on unity of the 1991 WCC assembly in Canberra. "The Unity of the Church: Gift and Calling"¹² begins by saying that "the purpose of God according to Holy Scripture is to gather the whole of creation under the Lordship of Jesus Christ in whom, by the power of the Holy Spirit, all are brought into communion with God (Eph. 1). The Church is the foretaste of this communion with God and with one another." The purpose, or mission, of the Church is to manifest communion in order to point to "the fullness of communion with God, humanity and the whole creation in the glory of the kingdom."¹³ The Canberra statement presents unity in a new way: it is "a *koinonia* given and expressed in the common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognized and reconciled; and a common mission witnessing to all people to the gospel of God's grace and serving the whole of creation."¹⁴

The 5th World Conference on Faith and Order in 1993 (Santiago de Compostela) focused on *koinonia* as the form of unity which the churches are given and to which they are called.¹⁵ The discussion paper prepared for the conference elaborates on Canberra's new understanding of unity, beginning with the theological insight that the biblical view of humanity is fundamentally relational. The discussion paper presents the key elements of the communion ecclesiology that are developed in subsequent work and presented as a significant grounding element of the convergences identified in *TCTCV*. In what follows, I have identified the major theological, sacramental, missional, and ecclesiological elements, using the order in which they appear in *TCTCV*, and noting where they are

12. "The Unity of the Church: Gift and Calling – The Canberra Statement," 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Canberra, Australia, 1991, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-unity-of-the-church-gift-and-calling-the-canberra-statement>. Henceforth, TUC.

13. TUC, 1.1.

14. TUC, 2.1.

15. See *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*, Faith and Order Paper No. 166, ed. Thomas F. Best and Gunther Gassmann (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993). Henceforth, *OWFK*. This report includes presentations on the scriptural, theological, and spiritual aspects of *koinonia* as well as discussion papers and reports, sermons, and the study paper prepared for the conference, *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*.

found in the other major documents.¹⁶ These elements are inextricably intertwined, regardless of the sequence in which they may be presented in each document. At least 65 of the of 78 responses to *TCTCV* discuss koinonia ecclesiology to some extent.¹⁷ Some of these responses are critical of certain elements, discussed later in this chapter. Four responses reject this approach to ecclesiology.¹⁸ Five responses are silent on it, focusing instead on other matters.¹⁹

It is also important to note the major shift in emphasis between *BEM* and *TCTCV*. From *BEM* through *The Nature and Purpose of the Church (NPC)*, the focus is on the nature of the Church, which, as a gift of God, is fundamentally given (not humanly devised) and, presumably, fixed with certain essential characteristics and elements. The life and mission of the Church are enactments of this nature. Diversity and change are integral parts of the Church's nature, but only up to the point that they contribute to and do not deny, diminish, or detract from the core elements that constitute the Church as a gift of God, as creature of the word, and as community and sign of communion with God. Yet, focus on the nature of the Church can be taken to indicate an entity that is essentially static, abstracted from the realities of human history, and unchanging in significant ways.

The Nature and Mission of the Church (NMC) and *TCTCV* take a different approach in beginning from and thus emphasizing the mission of the Church

16. The documents cited here are: *OWFK*; "The Church: Local and Universal," in *Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches: Sixth Report* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990 (henceforth, *JWG*); *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 181 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), henceforth, *NPC*; *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 198 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), henceforth, *NMC*; and *TCTCV*. See "Historical Note" in *TCTCV*, 41–46, as well as the other historical accounts given in brief in many of the responses.

17. The response of the Roman Catholic Church finds the roots of this ecclesiology in Vatican II. See *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 2, Faith and Order Paper No. 232, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), henceforth *CRTC 2*.

18. (1) : Moscow Patriarchate, Russian Orthodox Church, (*CRTC 1*, 133–136); (2) The Holy Council of the Polish Orthodox Church (*Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 1, Faith and Order Paper No. 231, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi [Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021], 190, henceforth, *CRTC 1*); (3) The Association of Mennonite Congregations in Germany (*CRTC 2*, 3–4); (4) The, Armenian Apostolic Church, Holy Mother See of Etchmiadzin, (*CRTC 2*, 64).

19. Presbyterian Church of Canada (*CRTC 1*, 65–67); United Protestant Church of France (*CRTC 1*, 68–74); Ecumenical Meeting Ain-Savoie-Haute Savoie (*CRTC 1*, 338–9); Council of Churches in the Netherlands (*CRTC 2*, 237–242).

as participation in the design of God to reconcile the world to the divine being. This is a dynamic design that unfolds in the particularities of Christian communities in widely varying times and circumstances. God's unchanging desire is for the restoration of communion between God and creation; how God carries out this work is accommodated to circumstances. The Church, as "sign and instrument of God's intention and plan for the whole world," "points beyond itself to the purpose of all creation," the communion with the divine, which is the kingdom of God.²⁰ The diversity of the local churches (who in communion with each other are the universal Church) is testimony to the dynamic aspect of the Church. Diversity and adaptability are key components of communion; without them, the Church cannot participate in the dynamic mission of God.

The central claim of communion ecclesiology is that "Communion, whose source is the very life of the Holy Trinity, is both the gift by which the Church lives and, at the same time, the gift that God calls the Church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity in hope of reconciliation and healing."²¹ In the celebration of the holy eucharist, God gives the gift of communion and empowers the Church to manifest and witness to this gift in the world.²² Communion, then, is both gift and challenge.

This view of communion has extensive and deep scriptural roots, most fully presented in the Canberra study document "Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness." These are presented in condensed form throughout *TCTCV*.²³ *Koinonia* has a complex meaning, encompassing such relational elements as "to have something in common," "to share," "to participate," "to have part in," "to act together" or "to be in a contractual relationship involving obligations of mutual accountability."²⁴ That is, *koinonia* involves a tightly interwoven relationship of faith, common life (including worship), mission and witness, and church order. This understanding of communion, fellowship, or *koinonia* is variously expressed in the traditions and theologies of all Christian churches.²⁵

The fact that communion springs from the very being of God and is a gift of God means that "the Church belongs to God and does not exist for itself."²⁶

20. *TCTCV*, §43, drawing on *OWFK*, 14; compare *NPC*, §§34, 41; *NMC*, §§14–17.

21. *TCTCV*, §1; *JWG*, 1, 5–11. The various elements of this statement are also present but dispersed throughout both *NMC* and *NPC*.

22. *TCTCV*, §§42–43; cf. *NPC*, §§56, 68, 79–80; *NMC*, §§32, 67, 79–81.

23. See especially *TCTCV*, §§13–27.

24. *NMC*, §23; *NPC*, §52.

25. John Zizioulas, "The Church as Communion: A Presentation on the World Conference Theme," in *OWFK*, 103.

26. *TCTCV*, §13; compare *NPC*, §§8, 9, 26, 111; *NMC*, §§8, 9, 37, 43–44.

As “both a divine and a human reality,”²⁷ the Church exists to participate in God’s mission to reconcile all creation in communion with God and among its interwoven and multifaceted parts.²⁸ The diversity and interdependence of creation are part of God’s design, and “legitimate diversity” and interdependence are permanent aspects of communion in creation and in the Church.²⁹ Local churches differ one from another, reflecting the gifts and needs of their particular contexts, and leading to particular approaches to mission, service, and worship. The local church is emphasized in *JWG*, *NPC* III.B, and *NMC* §§16–17, the sections discussing unity and diversity.³⁰

In the Church, unity is expressed through each local church’s being in communion with all other local churches across time and space.³¹ The universal Church is the communion of all local churches such that “all of them together are the same Church present and acting in this world.”³² The diversity of local churches that are in communion with each other is a prime example of what is meant by “legitimate diversity.” “The ecclesial elements required for full communion within a visibly united church—the goal of the ecumenical movement—are communion in the fullness of apostolic faith; in sacramental life; in a truly one and mutually recognized ministry; in structures of conciliar relations and decision-making; and in common witness and service in the world.”³³

The churches already share a great degree of communion that is both real and imperfect. The goal of full communion is always in some measure eschatological, both “already” and “not yet,”³⁴ awaiting its fullness as a gift and promise of God. *Koinonia* entails shared moral values as well as confession of one faith.³⁵ It entails ongoing reform and renewal in the Church, in which all the baptized have a “place and proper responsibility.”³⁶ The purpose of structures of the Church (including authority and *episkopé*) is to serve and build up the churches’ *koinonia*, to foster and maintain communion both within and beyond the Church.³⁷

27. *TCTCV*, §23; compare *NMC*, §13; *NPC*, §13.

28. *TCTCV*, §§1, 59; compare *NPC*, §§8, 32, 47, 57, 112; *NMC*, §§8, 33, 40, 47, 111.

29. *TCTCV*, §§28, 31; compare *NMC*, §§61–64; *NPC*, §§16, 21, 60–63, 64.

30. See *TCTCV*, “Historical Note,” 41–46.

31. *TCTCV*, §29; compare *JWG*, §13; *NPC*, §§63, 66.

32. *TCTCV*, §31; compare *JWG*, §19.

33. *TCTCV*, §37; compare *TUC*, 2.1; *JWG*, §25; *NPC*, §67; *NMC*, §66.

34. *TCTCV*, §34; *NPC*, §§35–37; *NMC*, §§48–50.

35. *TCTCV*, §62; compare *NPC*, §116; *NMC*, §116.

36. *TCTCV*, §53; compare *NPC*, §§83, 99; *NMC*, §§83–85.

37. *TCTCV*, §53; *NPC*, §90; *NMC*, §90.

TCTCV may use *koinonia* as the focal vision of the Church, yet it strengthens and deepens this central view with a number of other views of the Church (as recommended by *BEM*). As *koinonia*, the Church is the prophetic, priestly, and royal people of God.³⁸ It is the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit;³⁹ it is sign and servant of God's design for the world, and in this way, a sacrament.⁴⁰

In sum, *TCTCV* presents communion/*koinonia* as a gift of God and a challenge to the Church for its life and witness. Communion is "manifested in three interrelated ways: unity in faith, unity in sacramental life, and unity in service (in all its forms, including ministry and mission)."⁴¹ Such manifestations are evident already in various aspects of the Church at local and universal levels. Yet they will be more fully manifest in the full visible unity of the churches, which is yet to come.

Responses from the Churches

Almost all of the responding churches and groups value the model of communion ecclesiology used in *TCTCV* and find it helpful to growth in mission and unity both internally and with other Christians. A significant majority of the responses affirm that a consensus has been reached on the church as communion. Yet there is significant diversity in how the notion of communion/*koinonia* is understood theologically, ecclesiologically, and ecclesially. Such diversity is legitimate, up to some unspecified point; and it need not be divisive.⁴² There remain, however, actual barriers and necessary further work as part of the process of the mutual recognition that is necessary for full communion.

Theological diversity

TCTCV and many of the responses view *koinonia* as the preferred image for the relationship between God and creation, including the Church. However, a number of responses suggest that the image or model of *covenant* is more helpful because it has a more extensive biblical basis (including in the Old Testament). Further, covenant focuses on God's call and creation's response, thereby keeping clear the distinction between God and the Church that the image of *koinonia* may blur or obscure.⁴³ The communion model may also lead to an

38. *TCTCV*, §§17–20; compare *NPC*, §§18, 83; *NMC*, §19.

39. *TCTCV*, §21; compare *NPC*, §§19–25; *NMC*, §§20–23.

40. *TCTCV* §§25–27; compare *NMC*, §47; *NPC*, §48.

41. *TCTCV* §67; compare *TUC*, 2.1; *NPC*, §121; *NMC*, §122.

42. Vermont Ecumenical Council and Bible Study (*CRTC 1*, 223) and elsewhere.

43. Church of Scotland (*CRTC 1*, 2), Church of England (*CRTC 1*, 51), Baptist World Alliance (*CRTC 2*, 287–8, 294).

underestimation of human failings and sin;⁴⁴ or even to an exaggerated divinization of the Church.⁴⁵ Preference for a covenant model is expressed in Reformed Protestant responses.⁴⁶

Some responses cast *koinonia* in more Christocentric terms than does *TCTCV*, noting that ecclesiology needs to begin from the cross.⁴⁷ A more Christocentric approach underscores the importance of Christ's self-emptying for salvation and Christian life. Such self-emptying is an integral part of the *koinonia* that is God and that characterizes God's relation to the world.

Where *TCTCV* and some responses view the eucharist as central to communion with God and other Christians, other responses think the emphasis on the eucharist is too great,⁴⁸ so that it overshadows the fundamental missional character of communion,⁴⁹ beginning with the divine life itself.⁵⁰ This critique challenges *TCTCV* and some churches' understanding of the Church as sacrament. A number of responses cast the Church as *creatura verbi Divini*⁵¹ or *creatura evangelii*,⁵² a typically Protestant emphasis that focuses on the importance of the gospel rather than the sacraments as the foundation of the Church.

The conviction that *koinonia* centered in the eucharist is a credible understanding of communion is called into question by the fact that it is precisely in the eucharist that the churches are most visibly and obdurately divided.⁵³

Ecclesiological diversity

The ecclesiology of communion is seen as helpful in a number of ways. Perhaps most important is its emphasis on legitimate diversity as integral to unity, which

44. Methodist Church in Ireland (*CRTC 1*, 141).

45. Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (*CRTC 2*, 272).

46. For example: Mr Peter H. Rempel (*CRTC 1*, 253); National Council of Churches in Denmark (*CRTC 2*, 246); Baptist World Alliance (*CRTC 2*, 288). The response of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe notes that the emphasis on *koinonia* ecclesiology postdates its foundational documents and agreements, including the Leuenberg Agreement, 1973 (*CRTC 2*, 272).

47. Christian Council of Sweden (*CRTC 2*, 234).

48. Christian Council of Norway (*CRTC 1*, 236).

49. International Ecumenical Fellowship (*CRTC 1*, 311–312).

50. Compare *TCTCV*, Introduction, §§13, 16, 37.

51. Evangelical Church in the Rhineland (*CRTC 1*, 88), Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (*CRTC 1*, 146), Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia (*CRTC 1*, 192).

52. Evangelical Church in Germany (*CRTC 2*, 114).

53. Church of Scotland (*CRTC 1*, 8, 12), Canadian Council of Churches (*CRTC 1*, 233), United Reformed Church (*CRTC 2*, 209).

is too easily taken to mean uniformity.⁵⁴ (Many responses request further discussion and clarification of the notion of legitimate diversity, and especially of its limits.) Communion is relational and therefore “dynamic and processual,”⁵⁵ whereas unity is too easily viewed as static and primarily dogmatic. *Koinonia* highlights the interdependence of the churches, an interdependence that is enriching.⁵⁶ The emphasis on communion in *TCTCV* assists churches to recognize that other churches are, indeed, part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, already in real if imperfect communion.⁵⁷

Another helpful element of *TCTCV*'s view of communion is that it includes *koinonia* in moral values.⁵⁸ Yet the meaning of this claim is far from clear, especially in light of the idea of legitimate diversity.

A number of responses find communion ecclesiology flawed in important ways. For example, it is overly abstract and outside of lived church traditions rooted in scripture and tradition.⁵⁹ It is utopian and unrealistic.⁶⁰ It does not give adequate attention to the reality and significance of conflict and suffering.⁶¹ The Church's *being* as communion cannot exist apart from the Church's *doing*.⁶² The legitimacy of *koinonia* ecclesiology is linked to its concrete manifestation in mission beyond the local church.⁶³

As presented in *TCTCV*, the meaning of the Church “as a reflection of the communion of the Triune God” is unclear⁶⁴ and misleading⁶⁵—an observation related to the theological concern about distinguishing between the church and God noted above.

54. Church in Wales (*CRTC 1*, 63), North American Academy of Ecumenists (*CRTC 1*, 317), Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (*CRTC 1*, 151), Roman Catholic Church (*CRTC 2*, 169). See Andrzej Choromanski, Legitimate Diversity in *TCTCV* and the Responses,” in this volume, 153–170.

55. Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (*CRTC 1*, 149).

56. Joint Commission on Doctrine, Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church (*CRTC 2*, 375).

57. North Carolina Council of Churches (*CRTC 2*, 260).

58. Vermont Ecumenical Council and Bible Society (*CRTC 1*, 224–5); Evangelical Church of Greece (*CRTC 2*, 76); Roman Catholic Church (*CRTC 2*, 202–4); Baptist World Alliance (*CRTC 2*, 294–5); and others.

59. Christian Law Panel of Experts (*CRTC 2*, 271); Moscow Patriarchate, Russian Orthodox Church (*CRTC 1*, 133).

60. French Informal Ecumenical Group (*CRTC 1*, 329).

61. Church of England (*CRTC 1*, 51–2); Church in Wales (*CRTC 1*, 62–3).

62. Church of Sweden (*CRTC 1*, 113).

63. Evangelical Church in Germany (*CRTC 2*, 114); Baptist World Alliance (*CRTC 2*, 288).

64. Church of England (*CRTC 1*, 42).

65. Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia (*CRTC 1*, 193).

Some Orthodox responses note that the *koinonia* ecclesiology in *TCTCV* and other WCC work is not accepted by all Orthodox churches.⁶⁶ Accepting the ecumenical version would cause serious theological difficulties for these churches.

Numerous Protestant responses suggest that *koinonia* ecclesiology must at the least be balanced and perhaps replaced by an ecclesiology that highlights covenant (as above), and/or locates unity in “the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments”⁶⁷—but not also in church structures and offices of ministry and oversight.⁶⁸

Other responses suggest ecclesiology should be rooted not in *koinonia* but in the *missio dei*,⁶⁹ in which the Church is better understood as *ekklesia*, called out for God’s mission.⁷⁰ Still other responses think that more attention to these images is needed to balance the focus on *koinonia*. Others focus on the Church as *creatura verbi Divini*, noting that all churches already agree that Christ is the bringer of salvation, so that a more explicitly Christocentric ecclesiology better reflects the convergence that exists.⁷¹

Ecclesial diversity

The range of views of what it means for the churches to live in unity or communion is vast and indicates the limits of convergence.⁷² As noted above, *TCTCV* states that “the ecclesial elements required for full communion within a visibly united church—the goal of the ecumenical movement—are communion in the fullness of apostolic faith; in sacramental life; in a truly one and mutually recognized ministry; in structures of conciliar relations and decision-making; and in common witness and service in the world.” This statement may express a

66. Moscow Patriarchate, Russian Orthodox Church (*CRTC 1*, 133); Armenian Apostolic Church, Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin (*CRTC 2*, 64).

67. Evangelical Church in the Rhineland (*CRTC 1*, 87); Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia (*CRTC 1*, 191); United Reformed Church (*CRTC 1*, 197); and others. In some cases, there is explicit use of or reference to *Confessio Augustana 7*.

68. Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (*CRTC 1*, 147).

69. International Ecumenical Fellowship (*CRTC 1*, 312); Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (*CRTC 1*, 148); Union of Welsh Independent Churches (*CRTC 1*, 186); Evangelical Church of Greece (*CRTC 2*, 73–4); National Council of Churches in Denmark (*CRTC 2*, 246).

70. Christian Council of Norway (*CRTC 1*, 238).

71. For example, Finnish Ecumenical Council (*CRTC 2*, 225).

72. See Susan Durber, “Visible Unity and Mutual Recognition,” chapter 1 of this volume, 1–16.

convergence, but it does not express agreement. It does not go far enough for some churches because it does not include the episcopate and its succession.⁷³ For others it goes too far in various ways: the emphasis on sacraments rather than the faith of the believer or the *missio dei*; the suggestion that the threefold ministry is the normative pattern; the insistence on structural unity when unity in word and sacraments is sufficient; and so on.

Some responses question whether communion must entail unity, let alone full visible unity.⁷⁴ Because communion includes legitimate diversity, mutual recognition with sharing of ministry, membership, witness, and/or service may be a more appropriate goal.⁷⁵ Mutual recognition can be based on agreement on the gospel and the administration of the sacraments,⁷⁶ without entailing unity of structure or practice. In addition to the Augsburg Confession, the Bonn Agreement,⁷⁷ the Leuenberg Agreement,⁷⁸ the agreements and practices of many United/Uniting churches,⁷⁹ Methodist connexionalism,⁸⁰ and the observance of the motto of the *Unitas Fratrum*⁸¹ are all suggested as models of how churches may live in communion with each other. “Full visible unity” ought not to be seen as the immediate or proximate goal. Many responses express a desire for churches to extend greater mutual recognition to each other as churches. Mutual recognition is at least a stage on the way to communion—and numerous responses suggest that approaching communion in stages is helpful, hopeful, and realistic at this point.

73. For example, Roman Catholic Church (*CRTC* 2, 175, 191, 210).

74. Evangelical Church in the Rhineland (*CRTC* 1, 91); French Informal Ecumenical Group (*CRTC* 1, 327); Union of Welsh Independent Churches (*CRTC* 1, 176, 179).

75. Union of Welsh Independent Churches (*CRTC* 1, 176); National Council of Churches in Denmark (*CRTC* 2, 248).

76. Evangelical Church in the Rhineland (*CRTC* 1, 88–9), Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia (*CRTC* 1, 192–3); United Reformed Church (*CRTC* 1, 197).

77. International Ecumenical Fellowship (*CRTC* 1, 311).

78. Evangelical Church in the Rhineland (*CRTC* 1, 86–7); Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (*CRTC* 1, 146); Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (*CRTC* 2, 266).

79. Uniting Church in Sweden (*CRTC* 2, 26); Evangelical Church of Westphalia (*CRTC* 2, 66); Uniting Church in Australia (*CRTC* 2, 93).

80. Methodist Church in Ireland (*CRTC* 1, 139).

81. Moravian Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands (*CRTC* 1, 128–32); Episcopal Church (*CRTC* 1, 166).

Communion and Ecumenical Methodology

Responses to *TCTCV* contain many observations and suggestions about the method used by Faith and Order, as it touches on questions of communion/*koinonia*. The two most frequent—greater attention to the views of evangelical and “new” churches; and greater integration of theology with life and mission—are already on the current agenda of Faith and Order, so I will not elaborate further on them here.

Also important are the observations and suggestions about more fully incorporating a Reformed Protestant point of view through, for example:

- balancing “communion” with “covenant”⁸² and the notion of church as *creatura verbi Divini*⁸³
- being clearer about the primacy of scripture and methods of interpretation
- focusing on agreement on doctrine and sacraments while allowing diversity in “human traditions” such as rites, ceremonies, and structures⁸⁴
- shifting the basis of communion from *koinonia* to mission⁸⁵
- putting more emphasis on personhood and spirituality as a balance to the emphasis on the corporate and especially the structural
- adopting a more thoroughgoing eschatological approach⁸⁶

The responses that note a need for greater consideration of Reformed Protestant thought ask for balance and inclusion, without directly suggesting that the more sacramental approaches of others is mistaken.

82. Church in Wales (*CRTC 1*, 56); North American Academy of Ecumenists (*CRTC 1*, 318); Paul S. Fiddes (*CRTC 2*, 298–301).

83. Evangelical Church in the Rhineland (*CRTC 1*, 88); Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (*CRTC 1*, 146); Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia (*CRTC 1*, 192–3).

84. Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (*CRTC 1*, 146–7), National Council of Churches in Denmark (*CRTC 2*, 248); compare Augsburg Confession 7.

85. International Ecumenical Fellowship (*CRTC 1*, 310); Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (*CRTC 1*, 144–5); Christian Council of Norway (*CRTC 1*, 238); Evangelical Church of Greece (*CRTC 2*, 73); National Council of Churches in Denmark (*CRTC 2*, 249).

86. Christian Council of Norway (*CRTC 1*, 239).

As noted, some responses suggest that focusing on communion rather than unity (especially understood as uniformity) shifts ecumenical methodology toward embrace of communion as necessarily including “legitimate diversity”—a term which most responses agree needs further elaboration and clarification. At the same time, various responses indicate clearly what some of the limits of that range are for them,⁸⁷ making it clear that further clarification will be a deeply challenging process for all the churches.

Part of the methodological shift may include some process of identifying both the areas of agreement⁸⁸ and those of disagreement, so that the latter can be more fully and directly engaged, specifically with an eye toward identifying the range of “legitimate diversity.”⁸⁹ I think this approach is different from earlier “comparative ecclesiologies” in two ways. First, it makes clear that the churches’ areas of agreement or communion are much greater, more extensive, and more significant than their areas of disagreement. Second, it raises the question of which differences need be divisive, and which are, rather, enriching or acceptable. It also makes it possible to address what I consider a very important matter: shifting the question from “Can or does my church believe or do X?” to “Can my church be in communion with those who believe or do X?”

Another important shift is suggested by the “receptive ecumenism”⁹⁰ approach, which suggests that the fundamental method needs to be that of learning from the other, so that churches can seek answers together rather than seeking common answers. This would entail greater practice among the churches of self-examination, repentance, and humility. It fits well with the fundamental notion that differences among the churches may be cast as complementary rather than necessarily divisive.⁹¹

87. International Old Catholic Bishops Conference (*CRTC 1*, 216); Evangelical Church in the Rhineland (*CRTC 1*, 86); Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (*CRTC 1*, 147); Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia (*CRTC 1*, 192–3); United Reformed Church (*CRTC 1*, 197–8, 203, 205–6); Evangelical Church of Greece (*CRTC 2*, 74); Roman Catholic Church (*CRTC 2*, 164, 188–9, 218–9).

88. See, for example, *Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry and Eucharist* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), an agreement of the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, <https://www.elca.org/declaration-on-the-way>.

89. See Andrzej Choromanski, “Legitimate Diversity in *TCTCV* and the Responses,” chapter 13 of this volume, 153–170. At least one response (United Methodist Church) suggests the use of the term “reconciled diversity,” especially in light of Pope Francis’ use of this phrase in *Evangelii gaudium* and elsewhere (*CRTC 2*, 132).

90. South Australia Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches (*CRTC 2*, 340–348); Roman Catholic Church (*CRTC 2*, 164, 215).

91. *TCTCV*, §28.

Challenges for Faith and Order

The need to broaden the bases of the work of Faith and Order to include more fully the Reformed, Free, evangelical/Pentecostal and “newer” churches—many of whom are part of the global South, a significantly under-represented area in the responses to *TCTCV*—may be the most pressing of the challenges identified, both explicitly in the responses received, and perhaps more eloquently in the absence of responses from these churches, especially in the global South. No one image of the Church is sufficient. Further development of images of church as *ecclesia*, covenant community, and communion of local churches is needed to give a more nearly adequate sense of the fullness of the Church.

TCTCV concludes: “There is a growing consensus that *koinonia*, as communion with the Holy Trinity, is manifested in three interrelated ways: unity in faith, unity in sacramental life, and unity in service (in all its forms, including ministry and mission).”⁹² Almost all of the responses to *TCTCV* affirm this consensus in at least a theological and/or abstract way, with many emphasizing one or more particular aspects (for example, covenanted community). At the same time, many of them ask for more concrete and realistic elaboration of these three aspects of unity. What does each of these types of unity entail? What falls within the range of “legitimate diversity” in each? How is each manifested now among the churches? What further possibilities are available, and how are they related to the ultimate, eschatological goal of full visible unity?

Among the concrete expressions of this *koinonia*, mutual recognition by and of churches is a recurrent theme, something that is considered possible and even realistic in many responses. Indeed, this mutual recognition has been achieved by full communion agreement between churches, and by the formation of united and uniting churches and of communities of churches. One of the challenges for Faith and Order is to assess the possibility of greater and more extensive mutual recognition—especially in light of bilateral and multilateral dialogues and agreements worldwide—and to discover how mutual recognition and full visible unity are integrally related. For example, to what extent does mutual recognition now revive the vision of full visible unity?

A principal challenge to mutual recognition, as well as to communion and full visible unity, continues to be the ministry. Faith and Order has said for decades that structures and forms of ministry and mission are “personal, collegial, and communal,” to which it appears all churches agree, albeit with different emphases. Yet it may be that the “personal” aspect of ministry is the most

92. *TCTCV*, §67.

problematic, to the extent that “personal” is taken to concern which particular persons may or may not be viewed as ministers of various sorts—for example, women, men, divorced, married, celibate, and LGBTQI persons.⁹³ The response of the French Informal Ecumenical Group suggests that perhaps we need to take one step back on the “personal,” and look at the ways in which ministries entail personhood as such (in terms of charisms, dispositions, and habits, for example), rather than who particular ministers may be (for example, men but not women). The suggested method may highlight greater agreement than is apparent in the typical approach to determining ministerial qualification. (Of course, all this pertains to discussions of authority, another obdurate challenge.)

The idea of “legitimate diversity” clearly needs further elaboration so that it is more concrete. *TCTCV*’s suggestion that there need to be common criteria and mutually recognized structures for working with legitimate diversity⁹⁴ may help Faith and Order engage this idea. One possible approach is for church “families” to study the range and limits of diversity among their own local churches which are in communion with each other—with the caveat that it is not legitimate to ask for a greater degree of unity from one’s partner churches than one expects from one’s own.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is to discover ways to understand communion when so much actual division continues to exist within and among churches. The rather abstract notion of unity can function as something of a placeholder inviting the Church to define and revise it *in via*. At the same time, many responses suggest that the WCC’s goal of full visible unity is problematic. It may not be the vision the churches need now. Perhaps it is so far removed from present reality as to be not an inspiration but a discouragement. Further attention to mutual recognition may open ways to greater degrees of communion. Can Faith and Order and the WCC keep the vision of full visible unity alive, while also cultivating the real but imperfect communion into which we are attempting to live?

93. LGBTQI is an initialism that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning of personal sexual identity), and intersex.

94. See *TCTCV*, §30.

CHAPTER THREE

Apostolic Faith in Relation to the Historic Episcopate, Authority, and Primacy

Paul Meyendorff

*The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*¹ lays out the issues of historic episcopate, authority, and primacy in a careful but laconic way in chapter 3. The chapter begins by defining the Church in eschatological and pneumatological terms, as a community that is “in, but not of” the world (though the precise term is not used).² It then lays out the three essential elements required for communion: faith, sacraments, ministry.³ Only following the section on ordained ministry,⁴ which is based largely on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*,⁵ does *TCTCV* turn to issues of authority in general,⁶ and finally to *episkopé* (oversight).⁷ The chapter concludes with a section on primacy.⁸

The text recognizes that *episkopé* “is a requirement of fundamental importance for the Church’s life and mission,”⁹ but that the structures of oversight have varied in history. This ministry of oversight needs to be fully integrated in all aspects of church life; and, quoting both Lausanne and *BEM*, *TCTCV*

1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013.) Henceforth, *TCTCV*.

2. *TCTCV*, §§33–36.

3. *TCTCV*, §§37–57.

4. *TCTCV*, §§45–47.

5. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982). Henceforth, *BEM*.

6. *TCTCV*, §§48–51.

7. *TCTCV*, §§52–53.

8. *TCTCV*, §§54–57.

9. *TCTCV*, §52.

affirms that it “needs to be exercised in personal, collegial and communal ways.”¹⁰ Paragraph 53 then goes on to stress that such oversight is synodal or conciliar, because “the whole Church is synodal/conciliar at all levels of ecclesial life: local, regional and universal.” The question of the authority of ecumenical councils is raised at this point, noting that some churches still have difficulties accepting their doctrinal formulations as normative.¹¹

The following paragraphs touch on the sensitive issue of primacy, though it is carefully situated in the context of synodality, with specific reference to Apostolic Canon 34.¹² The section concludes by gently raising the question of a universal primacy, something that will obviously require a great deal more reflection, as there is no agreement even about its necessity, much less how it might be configured.

The text of *TCTCV* is very dense, and, as the above summary indicates, questions of apostolic faith, order, synodality, and primacy are so closely intertwined that it is impossible to separate or untangle them. Further, as a number of the responses indicate either directly or indirectly, the text is grounded in a high church, sacramental theology (similar in many respects to *BEM*), which tends to alienate churches issuing from the radical Reformation, including Pentecostals.

The Responses

Apostolic succession

Regarding the relationship between apostolic faith and the historic episcopate, the key lies in the understanding of apostolic succession. However, as both *TCTCV* and the responses indicate, apostolic succession can be understood in several ways, each of which has broad ecclesiological implications. *TCTCV* implies that apostolic succession is not simply something that is mechanically transmitted through ordination, but has to do also with confessing the apostolic faith. One finds broad agreement in the responses with the latter understanding. For churches that accept a threefold ministry, and especially the episcopacy, the two simply go hand in hand. For churches with *episkopé* but not a clearly-defined

10. *Reports of the World Conference on Faith and Order. Lausanne, Switzerland, August 3-21, 1927* (Boston, Mass: Secretariat of Faith and Order, 1927), 14; *TCTCV*, §52, <https://archive.org/details/wccfops1.065>.

11. *TCTCV*, §54). See also Bishop Maxim (Vasiljević), “Ecumenical Councils” chapter 7 of this volume, 69–83.

12. *TCTCV*, §§55–57. See also *The Apostolic Canons*, Fathers of the Church, New Advent, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3820.htm>.

episcopate, the emphasis is not on ordained ministry; it is, rather, on the role of all the faithful to defend and maintain the apostolic faith, and therefore themselves exercise *episkopé*. Furthermore, even those churches that strongly emphasize the episcopacy (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, for example) also stress, to a greater or lesser extent, the role of all the faithful in maintaining the apostolic faith through a process of reception.

TCTCV certainly moves in the direction of this broader understanding of apostolic succession; however, as the response of the Church of England indicates, further work is needed to clarify the connection between the apostolic character of the Church and apostolic succession.¹³ The North American Academy of Ecumenists, in a very thoughtful response, stresses that the whole Church is apostolic and that the ordained ministry is intended to serve the apostolicity of the whole Church—and that this should have been emphasized more strongly.¹⁴ But it should also be noted that for the Roman Catholic Church, apostolic succession, understood primarily through the lens of episcopal succession, is an essential mark of the Church. Thus, the Roman Catholic Church can recognize as Church only those who have preserved the historic episcopate.¹⁵ This points to the need for further common reflection on the meaning of apostolic succession, and whether it might be possible to speak of a dynamic equivalence in the way that different churches exercise *episkopé*.

Conciliarity

TCTCV emphatically stresses the notion of conciliarity at all levels of church life. This approach draws from several distinct sources that are not clearly identified in the text, but which are highly significant, since they lead to important convergence on the question. We should note from the start that conciliarity takes different forms at different levels:

1. At the level of the local church, conciliarity is expressed in the local, eucharistic community, led by its (typically ordained) leaders, in which all the faithful play an active role. A clear expression of this can be found in the clas-

13. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 1, Faith and Order Paper No. 231, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 38. Henceforth, *CRTC 1*.

14. *CRTC 1*, 318.

15. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 2, Faith and Order Paper No. 232, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 175. Henceforth, *CRTC 2*.

sical eucharistic prayers, Eastern and Western alike. In these, the presider says the prayer using the first-person plural, thus reflecting the fact that it is the prayer of the entire assembly, and the assembly expresses its assent by saying “Amen”—as seen already in the *First Apology* of Justin Martyr in the 2nd century.¹⁶

2. At the regional level, conciliarity is typically expressed in assemblies of *episkopoi* (overseers), usually bishops in those churches that have an episcopate; or of persons tasked with a supervisory role, who therefore function much like bishops, even if they do not bear the name. The aim of these gatherings is to address common concerns and to maintain unity among the local communities. It should be noted that nearly all churches have such regional organizations. Lay participation at regional gatherings varies widely, with some bodies having only episcopal synods, while others give representation and voice to lay representatives as well.

3. At the universal level, the situation is varied. Some churches, such as the Roman Catholic, hold regular councils; others, such as the Eastern Orthodox, do so only occasionally. Some of the churches issuing from the Reformation similarly have regular or occasional global gatherings as well; while others reject such structures out of hand, seeing them as “Constantinian.”¹⁷

Thus, while nearly all the responses endorse the notion of conciliarity, how they understand it varies broadly, depending on whether the focus is placed on the local, regional, or universal. Several responses note that, in general, *TCTCV* is rather ambiguous in its use of the term “church,” and at many points, it is difficult for the reader to understand whether the text is referring to the local, regional, or universal church. In particular, as the North American Academy of Ecumenists and a French informal ecumenical group composed of Lutherans and Roman Catholics propose, a clearer definition is needed of the *local* church, as that is how most people empirically experience church.¹⁸ This would then lead to the question of the interdependence of local churches and the need for expressions of regional and global reality. Yet there are those, such as the United Protestant Church of France, who would emphasize that only the “gathered community” is the local church (rather than “where the bishop is, there is the

16. *The First Apology*, Fathers of the Church, New Advent, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm>.

17. International Ecumenical Fellowship (*CRTC 1*, 311).

18. North American Academy of Ecumenists (*CRTC 2*, 319–320); French ecumenical group (*CRTC 1*, 327).

local church”).¹⁹ Consequently, they do not really see themselves reflected in *TCTCV*. Clearly, more reflection in common is needed.

As the discussion on conciliarity has broadened in recent decades, not least in *TCTCV*, the question of the participation of all the baptized in the conciliar process has come to the fore. It is significant that even those churches with a strong episcopal emphasis now place increased emphasis on the role of the faithful at all levels of church life. This reflects significant convergence and makes possible further reflection on how conciliarity finds expression in the life of the churches, and how it relates to primacy. Of note here is the strong commitment expressed in the Roman Catholic response to live in more conciliar fashion.²⁰ Because it is the largest Christian church, such a development will affect all.

Also in relation to conciliarity, there is need for further study of the notions of “personal, collegial, and communal,” as suggested by the Methodist Church in Britain.²¹ This, I believe, is a profound statement, for conciliarity/synodality implies a certain vision of the human person who, through baptism, enters into the Church, which, as the Body of Christ (one of the primary images of the Church articulated in scripture and *TCTCV*), is a *corporate* entity. In short, it reflects a particular anthropological vision that certainly requires further development. Some work on this has already been done in the Faith and Order statement on Christian anthropology,²² but it clearly needs further development, not only in relation to conciliarity and authority—for example, on the question of the authority of all the faithful and their role in decision-making—but also to help the churches deal with the many divisive issues surrounding gender, sexuality, and morality.

Primacy

TCTCV, not surprisingly, approaches the topic of primacy very cautiously at the conclusion of chapter 3. It situates primacy in the context of conciliarity and synodality, as a function of presiding, for example, at a regional or ecumenical council, and as maintaining unity. In speaking of primacy at the universal level, the Christian Law Panel of Experts simply says that someone needs to preside.²³ The text of *TCTCV* carefully points out that primacy developed in particular historical contexts and was not without its problems. Perhaps because

19. *CRTC 1*, 70.

20. *CRTC 2*, 213.

21. *CRTC 1*, 24.

22. *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology: A Faith and Order Study Document*, Faith and Order Paper No. 199 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005).

23. *CRTC 1*, 287.

of this, a number of responses express the need for more work on the church in history,²⁴ or simply on *episkopé* and primacy.²⁵

In general, the responses can be broken down along the usual church family lines:

1. Churches issuing from the radical Reformation tend to reject any primacy, especially at the universal level. For example, the Vermont Ecumenical Council and Bible Society reflects that unity has nothing to do with church structure.²⁶ The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain similarly has an ecclesiology that focuses not on structure, but on holiness; while the Canadian Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) argues that church structures vary and are not normative.²⁷ The Evangelical Church of Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia rejects any notion of primacy out of hand.²⁸ And the Union of Waldensian and Methodist Churches in Italy says that any discussion of primacy is premature and dangerous and specifically raises the issue that *Ut unum sint*²⁹ (mentioned in *TCTCV*) presupposes the acknowledgment of specifically Roman primacy. Obviously, historical memory remains a challenge in this regard.

2. Churches of Lutheran and Anglican provenance tend to be more receptive to primacy as a servant of the universal unity of the Church, as does, for example, the Methodist Church in Britain.³⁰

3. The responses of the Orthodox churches, which have a primatial system already, nevertheless stress the need for careful study of the development of primacy; there are clearly different views of primacy in different Orthodox churches, as can be seen, for example, in the response from the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church.³¹ The Roman Catholic Church strongly emphasizes the role of the Bishop of Rome as the universal primate,

24. National Council of Churches in Australia (*CRTC 1*, 220–221); the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church (*CRTC 1*, 85); the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (*CRTC 1*, 126); the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation (*CRTC 1*, 21–22).

25. Episcopal Church (*CRTC 1*, 165).

26. *CRTC 1*, 224.

27. *CRTC 2*, 105; *CRTC 1*, 34.

28. *CRTC 2*, 194.

29. *CRTC 2*, 3; John Paul II, *Ut unum sint*, 25 May 1995, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html.

30. *CRTC 1*, 24.

31. *CRTC 1*, 134.

but, helpfully, situates primacy within the context of conciliarity.³² This clearly makes possible further dialogue about the ways in which a universal primacy can be exercised. This approach, first expressed in *Ut unum sint*, is strongly re-affirmed in the Roman Catholic response.

Since the issue of universal primacy, in particular, has been so neuralgic, whether in the schism between East and West or in the centuries following the Protestant Reformation, a careful approach to the subject is certainly warranted. The very fact that it is being discussed today is a remarkable sign of progress: one could not imagine such a conversation only a few decades ago.

Conclusion

TCTCV certainly reflects the significant ecumenical progress that has been made in recent decades. It also suggests some issues that still need further development, as noted above. One point, raised in some of the responses, is that in taking a rather high church, sacramental approach, the document tends to have an overly institutional ecclesiology. What seems to be missing is the element of spirituality and holiness. What of the prophetic witness and authority of the saints, who at times in history have stood against the hierarchical authorities? What of the Christian martyrs down to our own time? A balanced ecclesiology must leave room for this charismatic dimension, without which the Church can be reduced to a mere institution.

The above analysis offered here can only be partial, as some important voices are missing, especially from the global South, from which we have little response. More ways must be found to engage this part of the world, where Christianity is spreading faster than anywhere else, but which seems to be alienated from the classical Faith and Order discourse characteristic of *TCTCV*.

32. *CRTC* 2, 214.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Role and Authority of the Laity

Glenroy Lalor

Introduction

The role and authority of the laity has been identified as a potentially church-dividing issue that requires attention on the road toward visible unity. This chapter traces this theme, which emerged in a number of the responses to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (TCTCV),¹ from *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM)² through selected responses of the churches to BEM, as well as through selected dialogues between and among churches. TCTCV's treatment of the laity is examined to see how the conversation on the laity has been advanced from BEM.

The Place of the Laity in BEM

In *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the role and authority of the laity was discussed under the umbrella of ministry and, particularly, the ordained ministry. BEM founds the ministry of the Church on the calling of the “whole people of God.” This position insists on the interrelatedness of clergy and laity. Building from this foundation, BEM offers an image or a model of the Church, describing it as a whole, as the “royal and prophetic priesthood of the baptized”—a priesthood derived from Jesus Christ, the unique priest of the new covenant. As priests, all members of the Church are called to make an offering of self, the whole being, as a “living sacrifice” to God as well as to engage in intercession for

1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Henceforth, TCTCV.

2. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982). Henceforth, BEM.

the Church and the salvation of the world.³ All Christians, the entire community of the faithful, are related to the priesthood of Christ and the priesthood of the Church. *BEM* further counsels that “both women and men must discover together their contribution to the service of Christ in the church.”⁴

The priesthood of the community of faith is further amplified in the commentary on §17 in *BEM*’s section on ministry. Here the argument presented is that the word translated as *priest* in the New Testament never refers to ordination or the ordained ministry. Instead, it is a reference reserved for the unique priesthood of Christ and “the royal and prophetic priesthood of all baptized.”⁵ The application of priesthood to the ordained ministry emerged in the early church as the concept of priesthood became related to presiding at the eucharist.

BEM holds in creative tension two previously contrasting views of the ordained ministry. Both views accept that the priestly ministry of the ordained person is derivative. One perspective sees ordained ministry as derived from the common priesthood of all believers: that which is the function of the whole is delegated to the few. In the other model, the ascription of *priest* to the ministry of the ordained person is directly derived from the unique priesthood of Christ.⁶ Within this context, *BEM* acknowledges the corporate priesthood of believers while differentiating it from the priesthood of the ordained ministry, the “sacificial system of the Old Testament and the unique priesthood of Christ.”⁷

In *BEM*, the priesthood of the laity and the priesthood conferred by ordination are interrelated.

All members of the believing community ordained and lay, are interrelated. On one hand, the community needs ordained ministers. . . . On the other hand, the ordained minister has no existence apart from the community. Ordained ministers can fulfill their calling only in and for the community. They cannot dispense with the recognition, the support and the encouragement of the community.⁸

The authority of the ordained minister is derived from the authority of the community of faith, the whole people of God.

3. *BEM*, “Ministry,” §17.

4. *BEM*, “Ministry,” §19.

5. *BEM* “Ministry,” Commentary on §17.

6. *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” Text*, vol. 3, Faith and Order Paper No. 135, ed. Max Thurian (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987), Church of England, 23. Henceforth, *CRBEM* 3.

7. For a fuller discussion see *BEM*, “Ministry,” §17.

8. *BEM*, “Ministry,” §12.

Responses to *BEM*: Setting the Agenda for TCTCV

BEM's foundational assertion is that the ministry of the Church is the calling and function of the whole people of God. This premise garnered unanimous support and appreciation in the responses of the churches to *BEM*.⁹ It appears that there is consensus on the idea that the ministry of the Church is the calling and function of the whole people of God.

There was, however, dissatisfaction from numerous responses with what was seen as a failure to offer a fuller, more developed treatment of the role and authority of the laity in the document. This was the view of the Anglican Church of Australia, which wanted a "fuller treatment" of the laity.¹⁰ Similarly, the Anglican Church of Canada offered a passionate plea: "Please develop the role of the laity more fully, not only in regard to ministry but also on matters of authority."¹¹ These sentiments were also echoed by the Church of South India, which observed that "the document is silent on any special dimension and concrete form of the ministry of the laity."¹² The American Lutheran Church lamented the manner in which *BEM* neglected the role of the laity, noting that the document "did not adequately develop the ministry of the whole people of God as the framework within which to take up the discussion of the ordained ministry."¹³ This perspective was also shared by the Methodist Church of the United Kingdom, among others.¹⁴ The responses to *BEM* called for a fuller treatment of the role and authority of the laity in the ministry and the authority of the people of the whole people of God, as well as providing the parameters for a discussion on the ordained ministry.

BEM's assertion of the interrelatedness of the priesthood of the whole people of God and the ordained priest elicited contrasting responses from some churches. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church was unhappy "with the numerous phrases which painted a picture of equality between the ministry of the ordained priesthood and the ministry of the royal priesthood of all baptized." In their view this equality was without biblical warrant and was potentially church-dividing.¹⁵

9. A survey of the six volumes of official responses reveals consensus on this issue.

10. *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" Text*, vol. 2, Faith and Order Paper No. 132, ed. Max Thurian (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986), 35. Henceforth, *CRBEM* 2.

11. *CRBEM* 2, 46.

12. *CRBEM* 2, 78.

13. *CRBEM* 2, 83.

14. *CRBEM* 2, 217.

15. *CRBEM* 2, 35.

On the other hand, the Methodist Church of the United Kingdom was concerned “that the text appears to allow a distinction of kind between the priestly service of the ordained and the priestliness of the laity.” They were of the view that there existed ample evidence of convergence on this matter and expressed regret that a distinction remained. They also cautioned that this view could negatively impact relationships between churches.¹⁶

In their contribution, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar suggested that the issue of the distinction between the ministry of the ordained and the ministry of the people of God identified in the document was the result of different perspectives held by Protestants and Roman Catholics. They suggested that the Protestant tradition has generally held that the distinction is functional, and that the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions have made ontological distinctions between the laity and the ordained. *BEM*, they suggested, tried to represent both views.¹⁷

The dialogue on the laity in *BEM* is located in the broader debate on the ministry of the Church. It is built on an acceptance that ministry is a function and calling of the whole people of God. It affirms the corporate priesthood of all believers. This was for some only a prologue to discussion on the ordained ministry, indicating that it is an issue of enough importance to warrant a fuller discussion. The general impression gleaned from the responses to *BEM* suggests the need for greater clarity on matters such as the priestliness of the laity; elaboration on the whole people of God and the mission entrusted to the Church; lay and clergy interrelatedness; and on the question of authority, specifically, the authority of the laity in relation to the ordained ministry. The perceived deficit in the treatment of these themes presented the matters in need of fuller treatment after *BEM*. The discussion on the laity and related themes continued in the further work by Faith and Order on ecclesiology, specifically in *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* and in the more developed work, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*.¹⁸

16. *CRBEM* 2, 225–226.

17. *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” Text*, vol. 4, Faith and Order Paper No. 137, ed. Max Thurian (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987), 11. Henceforth, *CRBEM* 4.

18. *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* Faith and Order Paper No. 181 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), henceforth, *NPC*; *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 198 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005). Henceforth, *NMC*.

The Nature and Mission of the Church

Published by the Faith and Order Commission in 2005, *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (NMC) represented a continuation of the conversation on ecclesiology after *BEM*. It sought to build on previous work while meeting new concerns raised and new themes identified. *NMC* claims to have harvested the perspectives gained “largely as a result of the bilateral and multilateral discussions of the past fifty years and of the changed relationships between the churches in this period.”¹⁹ It repeated the conversation on the laity located in *BEM* which was continued in *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (NPC). *NMC* repeated the basic assertion that “every member participates in the priesthood of the whole church.” That priesthood is always exercised in relation to Christ and other members of the body.²⁰ All are called by God, equipped by the Spirit and entrusted with the responsibility to offer service in the name of Christ.²¹ Like *BEM*, *NMC* agreed that “Christians are constituted a royal priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices and indeed their very selves as a living sacrifice.”²² This calling is the basis for the Church’s “costly witness to justice and the duty of intercession.” In a manner similar to *BEM*, *NMC* then embarked on a fuller discussion of the ordained ministry, highlighting the interrelatedness of ordained and lay members of the church. The strengthening of the worship life and witness of the whole people of God is identified as the primary function of the ordained. In this regard, the ordained cannot be disconnected from the community: “They may not dispense with the ongoing support and encouragement of the community for whom they are chosen, and for whom they are empowered by the Holy Spirit to act as representative persons.”²³ To separate the two would render the ministry of the ordained invalid and lacking in any authority. The authority of the ordained is affirmed in both the action of the ordaining minister and the assent of the community of the faithful.

The role and responsibility of the laity in the maintenance of the apostolicity of the Church was also proffered in the text of *NMC*.

All the baptized share a responsibility for the apostolic faith and witness of the whole church. The communal dimension of the church’s life refers to the involvement of the whole body of the faithful in common consulta-

19. *NMC*, Introduction, 10.

20. *NMC*, §19.

21. *NMC*, §83.

22. *NMC*, §84.

23. *NMC*, §96.

tion, sometimes through representation and constitutional structures over the well-being of the church and their common involvement in the service of God's witness in the world.²⁴

The initial articulation of a baptismal ecclesiology in *NMC* receives fuller treatment in the Faith and Order study text *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition (OB)*.²⁵ The starting point of a baptismal ecclesiology is an appreciation that the Church is the community of the baptized. "The Spirit brings Christians into Christ and into a bond of unity with one another."²⁶ "In baptism we are baptized into the one body and we become members of one another. The Church is both the body of Christ and the people of God. Baptism in Christ and in the Spirit is inseparable from Christian life in community."²⁷

As members of the body of Christ and of the "royal priestly and prophetic" community, members exercise the "gifts with which they have been endowed for service in the church and the world."²⁸ All baptized believers are one, with some called from among the people to exercise leadership and oversight—an authority derived from the assent of the community. The distinction between members is one of function and not of being or essence.

The dissatisfaction expressed by some churches concerning the absence of proportionality in *BEM*'s discussion on the laity and the ordained ministry can also be levelled at *NMC*. The latter did not significantly advance the conversation for those asking for more precise statements and a wider and fuller discussion on matters such as the laity and the ordained ministry, as well as the matter of oversight. *NMC* continued and in some ways extended the conversation on ecclesiology in general and the role of the laity in particular. *OB* then took the discussion on the laity in the direction of a baptismal ecclesiology.

Selected Bilateral Dialogues

The discussion on the laity continued and in some situations was extended in the reports of the bilateral dialogues in which churches participated. A survey of selected dialogues reveals affirmation of the positions articulated from *BEM* to *TCTCV*.

24. *NMC*, §96.

25. *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition*, Faith and Order Paper No. 210 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2011). Henceforth, *OB*.

26. *OB*, §56.

27. *OB*, §57.

28. *OB*, §48.

The bilateral dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion conducted by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission offered a more extensive treatment on the role and authority of the laity than that in *NMC*.²⁹ It is of interest that the discussion on the laity was located in the round of the dialogue that dealt with the gift of authority. The report of the dialogue explains the position:

In every Christian who is seeking to be faithful to Christ and is fully incorporated into the life of the Church, there is a *sensus fidei*. This *sensus fidei* may be described as an active capacity for spiritual discernment, an intuition that is formed by worshipping and living in communion as a faithful member of the church. When this capacity is exercised in concert by the body of the faithful we may speak of the exercise of *sensus fidelium*. . . . The exercise of *sensus fidei* by each member of the church contributes to the formation of the *sensus fidelium* through which the church as a whole remains faithful to Christ. By the *sensus fidelium* the whole body contributes to, receives from and treasures the ministry of those within the community who exercise *episcopate*, watching over the living memory of the church. The “Amen” of the individual believer is thus incorporated within the “Amen” of the whole Church.³⁰

They further concluded, “Those who exercise *episcopate* in the body of Christ must not be separated from the ‘symphony’ of the whole people of God in which they have a part to play.”³¹ There is a sense in which the perceived dispute between the role of the laity and the ordained ministry is about the nature and exercise of authority. The correlation between *sensus fidei* and *sensus fidelium* is an attempt to bridge the divide and locate authority and ministry in and by the whole people of God.³²

The emphasis on the interrelatedness and interdependence of the whole people of God, the shared nature of authority and the reluctance to separate those who exercise *episkopé* from the “symphony of the whole people of God” extended the argument on the laity contained in the responses to *BEM* and in the text of *NMC*.

29. Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Gift of Authority (Authority in the Church III)*, Palazzola, Italy, 3 September 1998), in *Growth in Agreement III: International Dialogue Text and Agreed Statements 1998–2005*, Faith and Order Paper No. 204 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007), 60–81. Henceforth, *GA*.

30. *GA*, §29.

31. *GA*, §30.

32. *GA*, §31.

This perspective also emerged in the 2014 report of the Methodist-Anglican dialogue, which made the observation that the historic episcopacy is exercised as an interplay with the whole people of God. The reception of authority by the whole people of God is crucial to its efficacy. Authority is therefore both collegial and communal. The communal expression of authority is often through structures such as synods and conventions, places where there is full participation and involvement of the laity.³³

The identical perspective was expressed as a joint position by participants in the Roman Catholic-Baptist dialogue.³⁴ “*Episkope* is exercised in personal, collegial and communal ways in the church. These ways are not exclusive to one another but bound together in a network of dynamic relationships which together make up the overall *episkope* of the church.”³⁵ Communal *episkopé* is understood by Baptists to be the whole community watching over one another in love. Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance agreed that *episkopé* is a gift of God to the Church for the benefit of the whole people of God. “*Episkope* (oversight) is a gift of Christ to the Church to enable the ministry of the whole people of God. Christ calls the whole people of God to share in his ministry as prophet, priest and king. The *episkope* of some is a gift of Christ to enable and equip the body of Christ as a whole (Eph. 4:11–13).”³⁶ The Roman Catholic Church, however, differentiates “ministerial priesthood” from the “priesthood of the faithful.” Baptists regard the Church as a whole as priesthood to God offering sacrifice and thanksgiving. For Roman Catholics, “ordained ministry was intended by Christ to serve the entire priestly people of God (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9). Thus, . . . although the ministerial priesthood differs essentially and not only in degree from the common priesthood of the faithful, nevertheless, each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ.”³⁷

33. *Into All the World: Being and Becoming Apostolic Churches*. A report to the Anglican Consultative Council and the World Methodist Council by the Anglican-Methodist International Commission for Unity in Mission (2014), §84, <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/102827/into-all-the-world-amicum-report-2014.pdf>.

34. *The Word of God in the Life of the Church: A Report of International Conversations between The Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance, 2006–2010*, <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/it/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/alleanza-battista-mondiale/dialogo-internazionale-tra-la-chiesa-cattolica-e-l-alleanza-battista/documenti-di-dialogo/2010-la-parola-di-dio-nella-vita-della-chiesa/testo-del-documento-in-inglese.html>.

35. *Word of God*, §173.

36. *Word of God*, §165.

37. *Word of God*, §166.

Despite the acknowledgement of the interplay and interdependence between the clergy and the laity articulated by some Christian communions, the suggestion of difference and distinction exists in others. The question of whether this is a church-dividing issue needs to be explored.

The fifth phase of the international dialogue between the Disciples of Christ and the Catholic Church (which focused on the eucharist) provides another illustration of the coexistence of the two perspectives. In juxtaposing the understanding of the Roman Catholic Church and the Disciples of Christ, the report affirmed the participation of the whole people of God in the eucharist. A point of distinction is in presidency at the eucharist. In the case of the Disciples, either ordained clergy or a commissioned lay person may preside at the eucharist. For the Roman Catholic Church, only a priest or bishop may be the celebrant.

The Disciples stress the importance of the participation of the whole people of God in the eucharistic celebration. Ultimately “. . . it is not presiding officers of the ceremony but the whole people of God who, in response to the sacrifice of Christ, offer up our own sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving, a giving of ourselves to God who brings good news to sinners.” Thus in addition to duly ordained clergy, who typically preside at the service, duly commissioned elders and deacons also have appropriate roles. For Catholics the Eucharist is a celebration of the whole Church. The celebrant (priest or bishop) leads the faithful in making their offering, proclaiming Christ’s great deeds, and joining in his sacrifice.³⁸

We have gleaned from the sampling of selected bilateral dialogues an established consensus on the place of the laity, and on the necessary interplay and interdependence of the laity and clergy in ministry and authority. There is an understanding of *episkopé* as being both personal and communal. Its communal expression is through structures and institutions in which there is lay involvement and in some cases leadership.

TCTCV on the Role and Authority of the Laity

In dealing with the gift and authority of the ministry of Christ, *TCTCV* offers views that are similar to those expressed in the Anglican-Roman Catholic Inter-

38. *Do This in Memory of Me: Christians Formed and Transformed by the Eucharist*. Report of the Fifth Phase of the International Commission for Dialogue between the Disciples of Christ and the Catholic Church, 2014–2018 (Indianapolis: DECC-Disciples of Christ World Communion, n.d.), §§43–44, <https://www.disciplescuim.org/publications/do-this-in-memory-of-me-christians-formed-and-transformed-by-the-eucharist/>.

national Commission's *Gift of Authority* agreed statement. *TCTCV* locates authority in Jesus Christ that is shared with those in the ministry of leadership:

It is a gift of the Holy Spirit destined for service (*diakonia*) of the Church in love. Its exercise includes the participation of the whole community whose sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) contributes to the overall understanding of God's word and whose reception of the guidance and teaching of the ordained ministers testifies to the authenticity of the leadership.³⁹

The role and authority of the community of faith is related to reception, which comes through the discernment of the community. "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."⁴⁰

The particular role of the laity is raised more explicitly by *TCTCV* §§17–20. The role of the laity is located in a broader discussion on the call and vocation of the whole people of God. This is essentially a recapitulation of what was stated in *BEM* and reiterated in *NMC*. The responses from the churches on the specific theme of the role and authority of the laity are similar to the post-*BEM* responses.

The Church of Scotland and the North American Academy of Ecumenists both criticize *TCTCV* for its sparse treatment of the role of the laity in the ministry of the Church. The Church of Scotland laments the absence of a section in the text dealing with the role of the laity: "We were amazed and saddened that there is no section here on *laos* as the whole people of God (cf. Vatican II and *NPC* and *NMC*). Here the text goes straight into ordained ministry. . . . It would have been good to have had a statement pointing to the whole people of God in the mission of the church."⁴¹

Similar sentiments are expressed in the Roman Catholic response, which posits that a fuller "vision of the people of God" would have given more substance to chapter 2 of *TCTCV*. The response argues for an emphasis on believers' participating in the life and mission of the Church.⁴²

39. *TCTCV*, §51.

40. *TCTCV*, §51.

41. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 1, Faith and Order Paper No. 231, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 4. Henceforth, *CRTC 1*.

42. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 2, Faith and Order Paper No. 232, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 183. Henceforth, *CRTC 2*.

The North American Academy of Ecumenists add their voice to the chorus. While expressing appreciation of *TCTCV*, their response also emphasize their dissatisfaction with the limited treatment of the role of the laity. They argue for a greater validation of the role and function of laypeople: "The role of the laity is not an ecumenically church-dividing issue, but one that has evolved across denominational lines in North America. There are lay persons in official, sometimes paid, 'ordered' ministries, both in 'secular' and 'religious' Christian communities. As a result, we need to reflect further on 'laity' in ministry. What are the boundaries between lay and ordered ministry? Who decides?"⁴³

The position of the North American Academy of Ecumenists is consistent with a Methodist understanding as articulated by the Methodist Church in Great Britain, which in its response reacts sharply to *TCTCV*'s presenting lay ministry as a feeder to ordained ministry. The response states plainly, "For Methodists, 'the participation of the whole community' requires that lay people, and not just ordained ministers, actively participate in the actual structures of authority in the Church."⁴⁴ This view is also shared in the Roman Catholic response, which affirms that "the royal priesthood and the whole people of God and a special ordained ministry are both important aspects of the church and are not to be seen as mutually exclusive alternatives."⁴⁵

Support for this understanding was also given by the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe in expressing agreement with *TCTCV* §20. "The Church sees in Jesus Christ the fulfillment of the priesthood of the people of God, in which all believers have a part. The churches of the CPCE also share the conviction . . . that the 'royal priesthood of the whole people of God (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9) and a special ordained ministry' must not be played off against each other, but are interdependent."⁴⁶

The National Council of Churches in Australia, while not as definitive in its formulation, expresses the unease of some of its members with references to the laity in *TCTCV*. They identify "an urgent need to study further the section of the text on the priestly, prophetic and royal people of God with a view to addressing the role of the laity in the church and their place in decision-making and discernment on matters of faith and morals."⁴⁷

Mr Peter H. Rempel, a North American Mennonite, understands *TCTCV* §19 to indicate an interdependence between the laity and ordained ministry. In

43. *CRTC* 1, 321.

44. *CRTC* 1, 23.

45. *CRTC* 2, 183.

46. *CRTC* 2, 273.

47. *CRTC* 1, 221.

this understanding, ultimate authority in the churches resides with the members. In some Mennonite churches, lay members are a majority in the governing councils, and ordained ministers are accountable to the laity. According to this response, disagreement on the role of the laity could be a barrier to church unity: “The difference between the insistence by Mennonites and other church communities on a democratic, and hence lay-dominated, decision-making in the Church and the exclusion or limitation of laity from formal decision-making in other churches may well be the most significant obstacle to full unity even after differences over doctrinal issues are resolved.”⁴⁸

The Church of England argues for greater lay participation in synods and regrets that the role of the laity in synods was not addressed by *TCTCV*. “Lay participation in synods is something which Anglicans would want to stress. Thus, while *TCTCV* talks about synodality (like *The Gift of Authority*), it does not explore the importance of lay participation in synods—which for Anglicans is an issue of importance. It merely says, ‘The churches currently have different views and practices about the participation and role of the laity in synods.’”⁴⁹

The response of the Roman Catholic Church is not at variance with the position expressed by the Church of England. Their response articulates an understanding of the shared nature of the exercise of authority between the laity and clergy: “The quality of the ministry of oversight is manifested in synodality and conciliarity . . . this practice involves the entire people of God at different levels.”⁵⁰

In commenting on the *episkopé* in *TCTCV* §52, the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe offers a definitive position on lay leadership and authority. The response complains of a lack of attention given “to the fact that in the Protestant churches, the synods and presbyteries or parish councils—in which laypersons comprise the majority—are the bearers of church authority.” An argument is then made for the “separation of powers” as it relates to the participation of the laity in synods. The response, however, commends “the placing of the question of primacy within the context of *episkopé*, so that not only its personal, but also its communal and collegial dimensions can be noticed.”⁵¹

48. *CRTC* 1, 254.

49. *CRTC* 1, 43.

50. *CRTC* 2, 198.

51. *CRTC* 2, 276.

Conclusion

The role and authority of the laity has been a part of the ecumenical discourse in search of visible unity from *BEM* to *TCTCV* and beyond. Many of the responses suggest that this discussion has been tangential to other issues. They suggest the need for a full-focused conversation with the whole people of God as the primary subject. There are a number of issues related to this theme around which consensus seems to be emerging. These include the ministry of the Church as the responsibility of the whole people of God; the interdependence of clergy and laity; the exercise of authority as both collegial and communal; and the gift of oversight (*episkopê*) for the benefit of the whole people of God.

The possible correlation between the role and authority of laity and that of women needs exploration as well, given that the majority of the members of churches are women. *TCTCV* has been criticized for being silent on the role of women.⁵² This lack is also reflected in the responses of the churches to *TCTCV*. This raises questions. For example, are concerns about the role and authority of lay members influenced by the sex of the majority of those members? Are churches where women are not eligible for ordination less likely to promote the authority of the laity? Can consensus be achieved on the role and authority of the laity apart from resolving gender concerns? These are questions that may require further exploration.

Despite the emerging consensus in some related areas, many of the responses of the churches to *TCTCV* call for further work and a clearer articulation on some issues that are divisive and potentially church-dividing. Among the issues are an understanding of synodality that will take into account the participation and involvement of the laity in the formal decision-making structures of the Church. Some responses identified an urgent need for more study on how the priestly, prophetic, and royal ministry of the whole people of God is related to that of the ordained ministry. These are areas where differences exist among churches; they could benefit from more deliberate and careful study. The role and authority of the laity is an area where the churches can say some things together. As such, it holds promise in the march toward visible unity.

52. See Susan Durber, "The Role of Women in the Church: The Faith and Order Conversation in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* and the Responses to It," chapter 15 of this volume, 187-199.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Threefold Ministry

Paul Meyendorff

*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*¹ affirms that the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter, and deacon may serve today as an expression of the unity we seek and as a means for achieving it. Among the gifts of the Holy Spirit that constitute the Church, a ministry of oversight (*episkopé*) is necessary to express and safeguard the unity of the body.²

BEM states that it is important to be aware of the changes the threefold ministry has undergone in the history of the Church. In the earliest instances, the bishop was the leader of a local eucharistic community and was surrounded by a college of presbyters and by deacons who assisted in his tasks. In this local context, the bishop's ministry was a focus of unity within the whole community. Soon bishops began to exercise *episkopé* over several local communities at the same time.³

BEM states further that the traditional threefold pattern raises questions for all the churches. Churches maintaining the threefold pattern will need to ask how its potential can be fully developed for the most effective witness of the Church in this world. Churches not having the threefold pattern should also participate in this task. They will further need to ask themselves whether the threefold pattern as developed has a powerful claim to be accepted by them.⁴

1. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982). Henceforth, *BEM*.

2. *BEM*, "Ministry," §23.

3. *BEM*, "Ministry," §21.

4. *BEM*, "Ministry," §53.

The Church: Towards a Common Vision

The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)⁵ states that almost all Christian communities today have a formal structure of ministry. Frequently this structure is diversified and reflects a more or less explicit threefold pattern of *episkopos-presbyteros-diakonos*.⁶ The challenge to unity that TCTCV identifies is the question of the “historic episcopate.” Some churches believe that the threefold ministry is a sign of continuing faithfulness to the gospel. Others, however, do not view faithfulness to the gospel as closely bound to this concept. Some are wary of the historic episcopate because they see it as vulnerable to abuse and thus potentially harmful to the well-being of the community. Building on *BEM*, TCTCV asks the churches if they, given the signs of growing agreement about the place of ordained ministry in the Church, can achieve a consensus as to whether the threefold ministry is part of God’s will for the Church in its realization of the unity which God wills.

The Responses

Only about 20 of the responses to TCTCV given to the Commission on Faith and Order discuss the question of the threefold ministry. None of them discusses the issue at length. There is a wide spectrum of reactions. The response of the Roman Catholic Church affirms the essential aspect of the threefold ministry and stresses that TCTCV goes beyond *BEM*. Whereas *BEM* §22 only affirmed that the threefold ministry “may serve as an expression of the unity we seek,” TCTCV poses the challenge more directly in the italicized text following §47: “Given the signs of growing agreement about the place of ordained ministry in the Church, we are led to ask if the churches can achieve a consensus as to whether or not the threefold ministry is part of God’s will for the Church in its realization of the unity which God wills.” While the Roman Catholic Church’s response stresses the essential role of the threefold ministry, it situates this ministry within a baptismal ecclesiology that recognizes the priestly, prophetic, and royal road of all the baptized. Thus, it emphasizes the complementary dimensions of lay and ordained ministry. With regard to the episcopate, the response stresses its conciliar nature at all levels in the life of the Church.⁷

5. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Henceforth, *TCTNV*.

6. TCTCV, §47.

7. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 2, Faith and Order Paper No. 232, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 196–7. Henceforth, *CRTC* 2.

The Orthodox responses similarly stress the essential character of the threefold ministry and emphasize its personal character: there can be no *episkopé* without the *episkopos*.⁸ While their responses do not develop this further, it is evident that they would also find themselves in agreement with a baptismal ecclesiology that recognizes the priesthood of the faithful, and would stress the notion of conciliarity that has been at the heart of bilateral dialogues between Orthodox and Catholics.

Among the churches issuing out of the Reformation there is considerable diversity. The Methodist Church in Britain “would willingly receive the sign of episcopal succession on the understanding that ecumenical partners sharing this sign with the Methodist Church (a) acknowledge that the latter has been and is part of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church and (b) accept that different interpretations of the precise significance of the sign exist.”⁹ The Church of Sweden has more clearly adopted the threefold order of ordained ministry with bishops, priests, and deacons through the Church Ordinance of 2000.¹⁰

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland writes that it is appropriate to underline that “all authority in the church should serve the core function of the church, the gospel and its expression, in accordance with a normative interpretation of the revelation and the doctrine of the church.”¹¹ On the question of ordained ministry, this makes it possible to make progress in ecumenical dialogues. This question is also related to the way we address a ministry of universal unity.

The Scottish Episcopal Church has found it helpful to recognize that “all ministry incorporates diaconal, presbyteral, and episcopal functions, and that all forms of ordained ministry are (as *BEM* found) exercised in personal, communal, and collegial ways.”¹²

The United Reformed Church has a different understanding of ordination. Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacraments are not held as a separate order but are simply recognized and set apart to serve as ministers. The use of the word *minister* reflects the role of servant of the church, following Christ’s example of

8. For example, Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation (*CRTC* 2, 23); Orthodox Church of Finland (*CRTC* 2, 146).

9. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 1, Faith and Order Paper No. 231, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 23. Henceforth, *CRTC* 1.

10. *CRTC* 1, 115.

11. *CRTC* 1, 123.

12. *CRTC* 1, 30.

servant leadership. Ministers serve alongside elders and are led by decisions of the local Church Meeting rather than having authority and power over a local pastorate. The United Reformed Church does not normally use the language of threefold ministry. In a sense, it has a fourfold ministry of a particular sort:

1. Synod moderators, while in office, have a role somewhat like bishops, having oversight of ministers; but they hold no special status among ministers once their period of service as a moderator is ended.

2. Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacraments “are not held as a separate order but are simply recognized and set apart to serve as ministers. The use of the word ‘minister’ reflects the role as servant of the church, following Christ’s example of servant leadership.”

3. Church Related Community Workers are commissioned and “have the role of supporting local churches with their communities.”

4. Elders share in the pastoral oversight and leadership of the local church with the minister, and “work in teams with each other to provide pastoral care.”¹³

The Church of England prefers the language of a “succession of bishops in and of churches” rather than the more traditional language, “the succession of bishops.” This reflects the integral position of a bishop in a church as well as the role of other members of the people of God in the church: lay participation in synods is something which Anglicans would want to stress.¹⁴

The Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches writes that “all authority in the Church comes from Christ. It stands under the eschatological promise of the Church’s consummation in the reign of heaven. However, the Church’s authority is always a humble service and does not refer to power over others.”¹⁵ They further argue that, from a Protestant perspective, the authority tied to ministry does not hinge on ministry per se, but is related to the theological competence and mandate with which the ministers interpret the word of God, and which is the foundation of the Church. *TCTCV*’s statements on *episkopé* do not sufficiently take into account that in Protestant churches, synod members, and thus officers of the *episkopé*, are frequently persons who have not been ordained to the service of word and sacrament. The Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches acknowledges that a starting point for considering what “unity

13. *CRTC 1*, 206–7.

14. *CRTC 1*, 43.

15. *CRTC 1*, 152.

in legitimate diversity” means for the question of ministry is when it is said that “unity in service” has various forms, “including ministry and mission.”¹⁶

The Uniting Church in Australia writes that “the threefold ministry of deacon, priest and bishop may be considered as normative by many churches; but the Uniting Church in Australia accepts this pattern of ministry as an ecumenical challenge rather than as a clear and self-explanatory norm.”¹⁷ Although they do not have a ministry of bishop, they see their expression of *episkopé* through their councils of congregation, presbytery, synod, and assembly as the focus for the ministry of oversight in their church. They argue that the discussion as to how *episkopé* is best exercised could be significant and useful. This would involve the threefold interplay between the personal, collegial, and conciliar. They emphasize the collegial and conciliar aspects of *episkopé* more than the personal component. “A further elaboration of different aspects of *episkopé* and their inter-relationship, together with more discussion on authority and its relationship to power, could be valuable.”¹⁸

Mr Peter H. Rempel states that “for Mennonites a significant consideration in restoring an episcopal office and submitting to its oversight would be how and by whom bishops would be chosen and then how they would work with and be held accountable to the membership of the Church.”¹⁹

The International Ecumenical Fellowship writes that “the overwhelming and unavoidable impression is that the differences have not been diminished so far, or at least not diminished substantially.”²⁰ This raises the question of whether overcoming these differences is desirable, and they note that in this regard the position of the document is rather ambiguous. They write that it “is unclear, whether the desired aim is to overcome all differences, or just the most serious and divisive ones, and which ones are the most divisive.”²¹ The question of which differences are legitimate and which need to be overcome remains ambiguous in *TCTCV*, where it is stated that “there is no single pattern of ministry in the New Testament,” which leads them to ask whether there must be a single pattern in understanding most of the divisive ecclesiological questions in Christian churches today.²²

16. *CRTC 1*, 153.

17. *TCTCV*, §46; *CRTC 2*, 97.

18. *CRTC 2*, 100.

19. *CRTC 1*, 259.

20. *CRTC 1*, 310.

21. *CRTC 1*, 310.

22. *TCTCV*, §46; *CRTC 1*, 311.

The North American Academy of Ecumenists agrees that the italicized portion of §47 poses the wrong question: a discussion on the threefold ministry “should not begin with an affirmation of the threefold ministry, but with an exploration of the underlying theologies of such a ministry.”²³

The Evangelical Church of Greece states, “While we acknowledge that the threefold ministry was the norm for a significant part of church history, and that today it is certainly more widespread than other forms of ministry, nevertheless this does not make it by itself the universal default standard; and it is certainly not the standard that numerous churches throughout the world follow, including our own.” They go on to ask “whether this would be an interesting way of seeking ecumenical convergence on the topic of oversight based not on the presence of ordained bishops, but on the reality that every denomination recognizes the need for a ministry of oversight that goes beyond the boundaries of a local congregation.”²⁴

The Way Forward

The fact that only about a quarter of the responses even address the question of threefold ministry is itself significant. It is evident that, largely as a consequence of *BEM*, the issue has become far less divisive and is no longer high on the ecumenical agenda. All churches agree on the necessity of ministry and forms of oversight (*episkopé*). Mutual recognition of ministries remains elusive, though it has come to pass in a number of bilateral and multilateral agreements in recent decades.

Among the achievements of *BEM* and subsequent developments is an acknowledgement that ministry has historically taken multiple forms, and that oversight has and is being exercised in different ways in different churches. Sometimes this is by ordained individuals; at other times it is by conciliar groups variably consisting of both lay and ordained. It thus becomes possible to discern a principle of dynamic equivalence at work in the exercise of oversight. Even churches with no formal episcopate do in fact have structures, whether individual or collegial, that exercise that ministry. Further reflection on the ways in which the churches actually exercise ministry and oversight may help to ease the path toward the mutual recognition of ministries.

The responses also reflect developments that have occurred in recent years among the churches as they have reflected together on the implications of baptism. This was encouraged by the work of Faith and Order resulting in the

23. *CRTC* 1, 321.

24. *CRTC* 2, 74.

release of the Faith and Order Commission's study document *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition*.²⁵ The work on baptismal theology leads the churches to consider the place of the baptized laity in all aspects of the life of the Church, including in the sharing of ministry and in the exercise of authority. Common reflection on the role of the baptized (a "baptismal ecclesiology") could, for example, help to ease tensions between clergy and laity in individual churches. And in the context of the ecumenical enterprise, focusing on baptismal identity could help to overcome what is sometimes perceived as an overly institutional and clerical approach to ecclesiology.

25. *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition*, Faith and Order Paper No. 210 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2011).

CHAPTER SIX

The Relationship between the Local and Universal Church

Maria Munkholt Christensen

Introduction

The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV) has a great deal to say about the relationship between the local and universal church.¹ A main point is that local churches are in communion with all churches in time and space. A key formulation says that every local church “is wholly Church, but not the whole Church.”² However, *TCTCV* makes it clear that we are dealing with a thorny issue here. First, there are different opinions about how to define a local church. On the one hand, “some churches are convinced that the bishop, as a successor to the apostles, is essential to the structure and reality of the local church.” On the other hand, for some churches, “the local church is simply the congregation of believers gathered in one place to hear the Word and celebrate the Sacraments.”³ Second, *TCTCV* says, “there is not yet agreement about how local, regional and universal levels of ecclesial order relate to one another.”⁴ *TCTCV* could have underlined these issues even further, since they touch on essential ecclesiological differences that need further ecumenical attention. The responses to *TCTCV* contain numerous comments on these topics, showing us that there are still major differences between the churches as to how they use the words and understand the concepts of “local” and “universal” church.

1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Henceforth, *TCTCV*. See especially subsections “Communion in Unity and Diversity,” §§28–30, and “Communion of Local Churches,” §§31–32.

2. *TCTCV*, §31.

3. *TCTCV*, §32.

4. *TCTCV*, §32.

Responses to *TCTCV*: An Overview

In general, *TCTCV*'s treatment of this issue is embraced by the churches and groups responding to it, and most responses explicitly acknowledge the truth of the formulation that the local church "is wholly Church, but not the whole Church."⁵ While many responses quote this formulation verbatim, the response from the Roman Catholic Church mentions another formulation: "The Church is a communion of wholes."⁶ In the Roman Catholic response, this is followed by a closer definition of the local expression of the Roman Catholic Church, which is not only the congregation, but also the diocese. Each congregation is part of a diocese, led by a bishop who has been "sacramentally incorporated into the worldwide episcopal college headed by the Bishop of Rome."⁷ The Roman Catholic response expresses appreciation that "the universal Church" is seen in *TCTCV* as "the communion of all local churches united in faith and worship around the world."⁸ Nonetheless, there is not a complete accord between *TCTCV* and the Roman Catholic response in this regard.

Many churches make positive comments regarding how the local and universal church are described in *TCTCV*. For instance, the response from the Anglican Church of Canada sees the treatment of "the relationship between the universal and the local aspects of Church" as one of the two most important ecclesiological undercurrents in *TCTCV*.⁹ As Anglicans, they feel a commitment to the universality of the Church that is described in *TCTCV*. They understand their own Anglican church as mostly oriented toward the local and

5. Responses are contained in two works: *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 1, Faith and Order Paper No. 231, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), henceforth *CRTC 1*; and *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 2, Faith and Order Paper No. 232, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), henceforth, *CRTC 2*. The relationship between the church local and universal is discussed in responses from (for example) the International Old Catholic Bishops' Conference (*CRTC 1*, 215); the Uniting Church in Australia (*CRTC 2*, 98); the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church (*CRTC 1*, 83–4); the Union of Welsh Independent Churches (*CRTC 1*, 178); the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland (*CRTC 1*, 90–1); the South Australia Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches (*CRTC 1*, 543–4); the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (*CRTC 1*, 12); the Jamaica Baptist Union (*CRTC 2*, 155); the Church of Ireland (*CRTC 2*, 143); the Baptist World Alliance (*CRTC 2*, 284 n. 18, 288).

6. *CRTC 2*, 189.

7. *CRTC 2*, 190.

8. *TCTCV*, §31.

9. *CRTC 2*, 47–8.

regional levels, with “a strong emphasis on the authority of local bishops and local or regional synods.”¹⁰ The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland likewise affirms the view of the local and universal church expressed in *TCTCV*. They appreciate the trinitarian aspect of *TCTCV*’s ecclesiology and the idea of the church as a spiritual community.¹¹ However, they also state that this ideal relationship of local churches within the universal Church is not yet a reality. Already at this point, we can note that the word *universal* is understood differently: in the Anglican response it is seen as an existing reality, and in the Lutheran response it is viewed as a future goal. The Roman Catholic response mentions both meanings.

Most responses acknowledge the universal Church as a communion of local churches. For instance, the International Old Catholic Bishops’ Conference welcomes a definition of the universal Church as a conciliar communion of communions.¹² The Church of Norway finds that the universal Church is rightly understood as a “fellowship of local churches.”¹³ While most responses support the idea that local churches partake in the universal Church, some churches ask for a more concrete description of this ideal: What does it mean to be a local church? What consequences does it have? The response from United Reformed Church requests that churches seek more precise mutual understanding and agreement in this area. They look to a shared and common ministry as a way to realize unity.¹⁴

Interestingly, many churches from different church families express frustration that *TCTCV* does not deal more concretely with local churches.¹⁵ The United Protestant Church of France would have liked more emphasis on the gathered congregation instead of theological abstraction on this issue.¹⁶ The North American Academy of Ecumenists requests that the experience of the local churches be put to the forefront.¹⁷ The French Informal Ecumenical

10. *CRTC* 2, 47.

11. From the response from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland: “The model is clearly anchored in trinitarian faith and in the church as a spiritual community. Its definition of the church’s mutual fellowship resonates with a variety of traditions” (*CRTC* 1, 122). The response from the Joint Commission on Doctrine of the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church says, “The sense of interdependence . . . is enriching. A local church that is isolated is diminished. The spirituality of the fullness of life has to be about relating within the context of a Trinitarian theology” (*CRTC* 2, 375).

12. *CRTC* 1, 215.

13. *CRTC* 2, 37.

14. *CRTC* 1, 208-9.

15. For example, the response from Church of England (*CRTC* 1, 40).

16. *CRTC* 1, 72.

17. *CRTC* 1, 322.

Group asks for a better definition of “local church.”¹⁸ The Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church is openly critical of a perceived neglect of local traditions in *TCTCV*. They understand the ecclesiology of *TCTCV* as a construct, and they find that the implementation of such an ecclesiology would betray local traditions.¹⁹ The Conference of European Churches–Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe expresses the veneration for the local Church in a positive way when they write: “The universal Church is not compiled of incomplete part-churches, but exists as a community of equally valid local churches, without any overriding importance or subordination of any of these churches. The local church is supplied with all the marks of the nature of the Church, which enable the salvation of human beings.”²⁰

Although these comments on the local church are very important, it is obvious that they are influenced by existing divisions and traditions concerning the definition of the Church. Only a few responses directly express a wish to bring the universal and local together in a new way. For instance, the response from South Australia Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches suggests that the church in either form should have a broader vision: “Receptive ecumenism and learning invites the local and universal church to repent and acknowledge our imperfections. We need conversion to this broader vision, rather than denominationalism.”²¹

The idea that churches must and can repent and move together is also expressed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. They believe that

18. *CRTC 1*, 327.

19. *CRTC 1*, 133.

20. *CRTC 2*, 368.

21. *CRTC 1*, 346. Compare to a quotation from the response from the Ecumenical Forum for Catholicity: “Catholicity is primarily a theological quality of the local church as the smallest unity in which the fullness of the church is present. This is based on a trinitarian-soteriological self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. In principle, this also implies the solidarity of local churches, or, as the case may be, faith communities, and their fundamental unity. A church is catholic when it exists in unity and solidarity with other churches. It is this openness that determines the quantitative aspect of the catholicity of a church. Even though the Church as such is focused on a transcendent reality, and points to it, it is present only as the concrete form of the Church in its diversity, brokenness, and yearning for unity” (*CRTC 2*, 352). The Orthodox Church of Finland adds a similar view: “Self-criticism is called for also on a broader inter-Orthodox level. Are we Orthodox as eucharistic in our practices as we claim our theology to be? Do local Orthodox realities around the world always truthfully reflect and thus proclaim the life of the triune God? In many places the local situation contradicts basic Orthodox convictions of one church in one place under the ministry of one bishop, i.e., the vision also brought forth by the document [*TCTCV*]” (*CRTC 2*, 148).

the body of Christ with its different levels can walk together.²² Rev. Prof. Paul S. Fiddes interprets *koinonia* as encompassing many relationships, including “the relation between the local and the great church universal.”²³ Responses such as these seem to understand this relationship more in terms of a movement toward harmony and fellowship (including repentance and conversion on all sides) than as an illustration of current structures of authority or autonomy.

Protestant Voices

The establishment of Protestant world communions, such as the Lutheran World Federation, has already shown a growing Protestant awareness of the importance of a universal or, at least, fellowship-oriented perspective.²⁴ This is also expressed in the responses to *TCTCV*. For instance, the Evangelical Church in Germany stresses that no single church can be recognized as the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church” in its entirety. “This insight,” they find, “follows on from a distinction between the local church and the universal Church, as described in the convergence text, according to which every local church is wholly Church, but it is not the whole Church.”²⁵ In other words, they recognize that the universal perspective is essential for the Church as such. The response from the Evangelical Theological Faculty, Leuven, Belgium, acknowledges that the universal perspective can benefit evangelical churches and help them to avoid individualistic tendencies.²⁶ A similar sentiment is

22. *CRTC* 1, 14.

23. *CRTC* 2, 301.

24. The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe mentions the principle behind Protestant church fellowships: “Unity in reconciled diversity” (*CRTC* 2, 268).

25. *CRTC* 2, 114.

26. The response says: “Defining the Church from above has a tendency to emphasize questions of structure and authority, to start from the ideal (and to idealize the Church), and to prefer unity over plurality. Defining the Church from below has a tendency to focus on the individual believer and his/her place in the church, to start from the phenomenological (and to banalize the church) and to prefer diversity over uniformity. We learn from the text to question our evangelical tendency to virtually define the believer in individual isolation. We feel uncomfortable with the text, however, when it seems to start from an essentialist understanding of the Church and to underestimate the diversity and sinfulness of her historical reality” (*CRTC* 2, 388). See also the Baptist World Alliance: “Serious consideration of the *koinonia* ecclesiology of *TCTCV* will remind Baptists that while ‘the local church is wholly church, it is not the whole church’ and that there is therefore something intrinsically deficient about the local church when it is not living into the fullest possible extension of its interdependence with the whole church” (*CRTC* 2, 292).

expressed by the Catholic Association for Ecumenism and Ecumenical Forum for Catholicity: "We need to be more involved with the Church spelled with a capital letter."²⁷

However, along with these engaging comments, Protestant responses also highlight the validity and autonomy of the local level. The National Council of Churches in Denmark expresses this quite radically in writing: "From a Lutheran point of view, '*koinonia*' might be identified as a fellowship in local congregations; but above the local level, no overall leadership or common voice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church exists."²⁸ This approach is, however, softened by an acknowledgement that the "invitation to move beyond a 'confessionalistic' and geographically limited outlook is a much needed and appreciated quality of [TCTCV]."²⁹

Protestant responses tend to define local and universal levels of church with direct reference to the lordship of Jesus Christ.³⁰ For instance, the Jamaica Baptist Union writes, "As Baptists we continue to affirm that the local church is autonomous under the authority of Jesus Christ and that authority resides within the collective voice under the lordship of Jesus Christ."³¹ This is the premise for its understanding and ordering of ministry. The autonomy of the local church does not preclude it from participating in the wider communion. Each local church must see itself and its mission as part of the universal *koinonia*/Church of Jesus Christ dispersed in various places and forms.

Likewise, the response from the Evangelical Church of Greece acknowledges that "every particular church throughout the world which professes this faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to Him as divine Lord and Savior" participates in the

27. *CRTC 1*, 266. See also the response from the Jamaica Baptist Union: "The paper both affirms and challenges the local church in her self-understanding. It calls the Church to see and embrace the fullness of her being the people of God scattered throughout the world, diverse in structure and expression yet one in her faith and mission" (*CRTC 2*, 158). The Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches also sees potential in the ideas in *TCTCV*, since the emphasis on universality might help their church to grasp its responsibility beyond its regional context (*CRTC 1*, 147).

28. *CRTC 2*, 252.

29. *CRTC 2*, 246.

30. The response from the Baptist World Alliance mentions the "Baptist ecclesiological principle of congregational freedom to follow the leadership of the Spirit in discerning the mind of Christ about what it will mean for the congregation to be the body of Christ in its particular context" (*CRTC 2*, 283).

31. *CRTC 2*, 155.

universal Church.³² The Canadian Yearly Meeting (Society of Friends) presents “the universal ministry of Jesus” as the unifying element between Christians, “expressed in care and joyful acceptance of difference.”³³

The Christian Council of Norway insists on seeing something positive in the many expressions of the one Church, arguing that already now, it is one Church, albeit with many facets. The many expressions of the Church are God’s way of communicating the gospel in a variety of ways.³⁴

Orthodox Voices

Whereas some Protestant responses affirm the legitimacy of a large degree of variation among local churches, Orthodox responses define the local church in a more uniform way. Not all Orthodox responses express comfort with the formulations of *TCTCV* on this issue. The Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation states outright that “the understanding of local church [in *TCTCV*] does not correspond to Orthodox ecclesiology.”³⁵

The Theological Committee of the Church of Greece recognizes *TCTCV*’s emphasis on sacramentality and the ecclesiology of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed as defining elements of local churches. From their perspective, “the visible unity among the local churches depends on the unity of the faith and the *koinonia* in the sacraments, in order that the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church is manifested, according [to] the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.” In those cases where there is correspondence in the understanding that what constitutes a “local church” is its being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, there is an opportunity for community. They write: “This certain fact allows the Orthodox Church to recognize elements of ecclesiality beyond her limits.”³⁶ This response also adds to the definition of local church “with regard to the issue of who is in charge for making the final decisions inside the church: According to the Orthodox ecclesiology, it is the synod of the bishops who represent the *pleroma* (clergy and laity)

32. *CRTC* 2, 77. The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe says, “Protestant theology has traditionally harbored sympathies for the ancient Church’s understanding of catholicity, insofar as ‘catholic’ means that which is held in common in a variety of manifestations. Based on the Protestant definition of the Church in the multiplicity of churches, this is the presence of the Triune God and particularly Jesus Christ as the head of the Church, in word and sacrament at every Christian service celebrated in the name of the Triune God” (*CRTC* 2, 274).

33. *CRTC* 2, 34.

34. *CRTC* 1, 238.

35. *CRTC* 2, 21.

36. *CRTC* 2, 311.

of all the local Orthodox churches.”³⁷ According to this Orthodox approach, the unity of the Church at a universal level is thus safeguarded by the synodical system.

Further Perspectives

The responses to *TCTCV* show a general appreciation of the dictum that the local church “is wholly Church, but not the whole Church.” There is general agreement that the local and universal levels of Church life are interdependent, and that local churches can be enriched when they pay attention to the universal perspective and come to understand themselves as part of a communion, a communion of communions.

However, just beneath the surface, there are several serious issues and significant differences both in *TCTCV* itself and in the responses. One issue is how to come to a common understanding of the meaning of *universal*. Some traditions envision their church as already representing the universal Church, while other traditions understand the term *universal* as denoting a not-yet-realized ideal for the Church, maybe even an eschatological ideal.

Another major issue is related to the definition of *local church*. When is a local church part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church? Who decides? Which forms of ministry and oversight must be present on the local level? The question of how to define a local or universal church intersects with the issue of ministry, as was noted in the paragraphs on ministry in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.³⁸ It seems that most churches have an interest in defining *local church* and *universal church* as these terms underline already existing church structures. Questions about the definition of local and universal church are also questions about autonomy and authority within church institutions. Existing ways of defining church life often end up moving the focus away from the Church as *koinonia*.

The ecumenical issues related to the Church local and universal have been dealt with before, for instance in the publication “The Church: Local and Universal.”³⁹ This document was the result of the dialogue of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of

37. *CRTC* 2, 312.

38. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982–1990: Report on the Process and Responses*, Faith and Order Paper No. 149 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990). See, for example, “Eucharist,” § 29; “Ministry,” §§ 20–21, 27.

39. “The Church: Local and Universal,” in *Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches: Sixth Report* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990).

Churches. Its conclusion aligns with the Orthodox responses to *TCTCV* inasmuch as it sets forth similar criteria for defining local churches. If all churches are to come together in visible unity, “there must be an acceptance of the basic ecclesial elements of communion: common profession of the same apostolic faith; proclamation of the word of God; mutual recognition of the sacraments, especially baptism and eucharist; and agreement of the nature and exercise of pastoral leadership.”⁴⁰ It might be that today, 30 years after the publication of “The Church: Local and Universal,” the question about (pastoral) leadership is the most general hindrance for acknowledging local churches across confessional boundaries.

Also worth mentioning is the agreed statement of the Third Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC III), *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to be the Church—Local, Regional, Universal*. The Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church consider themselves to be in a “real but impaired communion.”⁴¹ They agree on several definitions, including the definition of the local church as the diocese. They agree to a large degree on the role of the bishop. The question is how to continue the dialogue, engaging churches with very different ideas about these issues.

40. *The Notion of “Hierarchy of Truths.” An Ecumenical Interpretation and The Church: Local and Universal. Two studies by the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and WCC*, Faith and Order Paper No. 150 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), 48.

41. *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to Be the Church—Local, Regional, Universal. An Agreed Statement of the Third Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission* (ARCIC III) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2018), iii.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ecumenical Councils

Bishop Maxim (Vasiljević)

Introduction

Conciliarity is a vital feature of the Church according to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*.¹ For this reason, this chapter frequently refers to ecumenical councils and synodality. *TCTCV* emphasizes conciliarity at all levels of church life: as an exercise of oversight when referring to the authority of ecumenical councils, and as one of synodality in conjunction with primacy.² In §53 we read that “one such exercise of oversight reflects that quality of the Church which might be termed ‘synodality’ or ‘conciliarity.’ . . . Both synodality and conciliarity signify that ‘each member of the Body of Christ, by virtue of baptism, has his or her place and proper responsibility’ in the communion of the church. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the whole Church is synodal/conciliar, at all levels of ecclesial life: local, regional and universal.”

TCTCV §53 further points out that:

The quality of synodality or conciliarity reflects the mystery of the trinitarian life of God, and the structures of the Church express this quality so as to actualize the community’s life as a communion. In the local eucharistic community, this quality is experienced in the profound unity in love and truth between the members and their presiding minister. In crucial situations synods have come together to discern the apostolic faith in response to doctrinal or moral dangers or heresies, trusting in the

1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Henceforth, *TCTCV*.

2. *TCTCV*, §53; §54.

guidance of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised to send after his return to the Father (cf. John 16:7.12–14).

For this reason, “Ecumenical synods enjoyed the participation of leaders from the entire Church; their decisions were received by all as an acknowledgment of the important service they played in fostering and maintaining communion throughout the Church as a whole.”

Today, however, “the churches currently have different views and practices about the participation and role of the laity in synods.” *TCTCV* defines an ecumenical council or synod as “one representing the whole Christian world.” Regarding the authority of ecumenical councils, *TCTCV* proposes this formulation: “While most churches accept the doctrinal definitions of the early Ecumenical Councils as expressive of the teaching of the New Testament, some maintain that all post-biblical doctrinal decisions are open to revision, while others consider some doctrinal definitions to be normative and therefore irreformable expressions of the faith.”³

As Paul Meyendorff notes in his chapter on apostolic faith, conciliarity takes different forms at different levels:

1. At the level of the local church, conciliarity is expressed in the local, eucharistic community, led by its (typically ordained) leaders, in which all the faithful play an active role. A clear expression of this can be found in the classical eucharistic prayers, Eastern and Western alike. In these, the presider says the prayer using the first-person plural, thus reflecting the fact that it is the prayer of the entire assembly, and the assembly expresses its assent by saying “Amen”. . . .

2. At the regional level, conciliarity is typically expressed in assemblies of *episkopoi* (overseers), usually bishops in those churches that have an episcopate; or of persons tasked with a supervisory role, who therefore function much like bishops, even if they do not bear the name. The aim of these gatherings is to address common concerns and to maintain unity among the local communities. It should be noted that nearly all churches have such regional organization. Lay participation at regional gatherings varies widely, with some bodies having only episcopal synods, while others give representation and voice to lay representatives as well.

3. *TCTCV*, §53.

3. At the universal level, the situation is varied. Some churches, such as the Roman Catholic, hold regular councils; others, such as the Eastern Orthodox, do so only occasionally. Some of the churches issuing from the Reformation similarly have regular or occasional global gatherings as well; while others reject such structures out of hand, seeing them as “Constantinian.”⁴

In order to understand the conciliar phenomenon, most of the churches look to the past, because the past illumines the meaning of conciliarity in the Church and the variety of forms it has taken through time. At the same time, the past teaches us that we need to turn our sight away from it and look toward the future, since “it is not enough to consider councils and synods primarily or even exclusively as isolated historical events.”⁵

General Acceptance and Major Reservations

A number of responses describe the importance of the concept and practice of conciliarity and the corresponding necessity of ecumenical councils. One of the areas in which the concept of *koinonia* appears to have considerable potential for ecumenical progress is that of tackling questions of church structure and authority. Yet the meaning of synodality in some responses appears to be linked to static, legalistic, and formal criteria. Conciliarity as an expression of the unity of the local churches in one Church constitutes a fundamental condition for the eucharist. This links the question of the ecclesiological presuppositions of the eucharist closely with another aspect of ecclesiology, namely, conciliarity.

Conciliarity is closely connected with eucharistic communion—both in its theory and its practice—and with its presuppositions. The Roman Catholic response stresses that

Synodality is not solely a style of exercising authority, service and collaboration in the formal structures of the Church but is also an ecclesial attitude which can be adopted by all Christians, whatever their responsibility, even at the grassroots. The Catholic Church commits itself to facilitate this two-way process within its own life. This takes place centripetally, from the local churches to the centre, as well as centrifugally from the

4. Paul Meyendorff, “Apostolic Faith in Relation to the Historic Episcopate, Authority, and Primacy,” chapter 3 of this volume, 35–36. The International Ecumenical Fellowship is the source of the comment on “Constantinian” structures (*CRTC I*, 311).

5. *Councils, Conciliarity and a Genuinely Universal Council*, Faith and Order Paper No. 70 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1974), 5.

centre to the peripheries. This ecclesial transformation marks a shift in behaviour and in the way of doing things, but, more profoundly, it signals a radical change in attitude. Regarding synodality at the grassroots level within the Catholic Church, it will seek to promote a more inclusive attitude in its structures wherever this is either absent or weak—as in diocesan and parish pastoral councils of consultation and collaboration.⁶

The idea of collegiality can only make sense if it is applied to the concept of a communion of local churches and of their heads, expressing and continuing their unity across space and time through synods or councils of a regional or universal character. As noted, while nearly all the responses endorse the notion of conciliarity, how they understand it varies broadly, depending on whether the focus is placed on the local, regional, or universal. I might add that, in general, *TCTCV* is rather ambiguous in its use of the term *church*, and it is difficult for the reader to understand whether the text is referring to the local, regional, or universal church at many points in the text.

Responses to *TCTCV*

Most of the responses are not meant so much to *criticize* as to *complement* *TCTCV*. The following overview demonstrates how the concept of the conciliarity of the Church is understood in various responses and references to ecumenical councils and conciliarity in the responses to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.⁷

6. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 2, Faith and Order Paper No. 232, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 214. Henceforth, *CRTC* 2.

7. All passages in the table are direct quotations from the sources cited.

Responses affirming or supplementing <i>TCTCV</i>	Responses critical of <i>TCTCV</i>
Church in Wales	Church of Scotland
<p>12. The Church in Wales sees itself as autocephalous, and therefore as a self-governing church within the Anglican Communion. . . . There is much in <i>TCTCV</i> which offers itself as a rich resource for further reflection on the tension between autonomy and interdependence, such as §53⁸ on synodality and conciliarity. The point is well made in §53 that the “quality of synodality or conciliarity reflects the mystery of the trinitarian life of God, and the structures of the Church express this quality so as to actualize the community’s life as a communion.” The sometimes fractious life of the Anglican Communion in recent decades makes this comment a very searching one for Anglicans (<i>CRTC 1</i>, 57).⁹</p>	<p>The italicized section on the authority of Ecumenical Councils (§§53ff.) comes out of the blue. . . . Conciliarity is an essential aspect of full communion (<i>CRTC 1</i>, 5).</p>
Christian Law Panel of Experts	Methodist Church in Britain
<p>Discussion paper: “Beyond Theology: the Ecumenical Value of Comparative Church Law” [by Norman Doe]: Interpreting the Word involves the experience of the whole people of God, insights of theologians, and discernment of ordained ministers. The challenge is for churches to agree on how these factors work together (§39), reach “a normative expression of its faith,” reconcile differences as to “an authoritative interpretation of revelation,” consider how teaching authority</p>	<p>29. <i>TCTCV</i> associates the ordained ministry with the “gift of authority,” though much of what it says about the nature and exercise of authority in the Church is abstract and idealistic. . . . For Methodists, it is essential that structures of authority are representative of the people of God and that discernment involves the active participation of lay people alongside ordained ministers. A common vision of the Church requires a common vision of “synodality” and “conciliarity” (§53) as communal means of authoritative discernment in the Church (<i>CRTC 1</i>, 23).</p>

8. All section numbers (§) within these responses refer to sections within *TCTCV*.

9. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 1, Faith and Order Paper No. 231, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021). Henceforth, *CRTC 1*.

Responses affirming or supplementing <i>TCTCV</i>	Responses critical of <i>TCTCV</i>
<p>is recognized/exercised (§51) and reflect on the importance of the doctrinal definitions of the early Ecumenical Councils (§53) (<i>CRTC 1</i>, 291).</p>	
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland	United Methodist Church
<p>The discussion about the normativity of the church's teaching is connected with the question concerning the authority of the ecumenical councils. With good reason, the document expresses the hope that an evaluation of the normativity of the councils of the early church be undertaken together. This would at least serve to clarify the discussion, and would help to identify problematic issues requiring further elaboration. Indeed, there is growing interest in patristic research and teaching in the emerging spiritual traditions. The question concerning conciliar authority is linked with the discussion regarding ministry, which is meant to "foster and promote the unity of the Church at the universal level" (§57) (<i>CRTC 1</i>, 123).</p>	<p>At another place in the text, in the course of a very helpful discussion of conciliarity as a means of decision-making and oversight, the text claims that "ecumenical synods enjoyed the participation of leaders from the entire Church; their decisions were received by all as an acknowledgment of the important service they played in fostering and maintaining communion throughout the Church as a whole" (§53). Many present-day historians (as well as some in earlier eras) would view this as an idealistic portrayal in several respects, overlooking the realities of conflict, coercion, and exclusion that also marked the emergence of what we regard as the mainstream Christian tradition, just as they have marked more recent centuries (<i>CRTC 2</i>, 127).</p>
Canadian Council of Churches	Scottish Episcopal Church
<p>The following are some of the themes raised during our discussion, as well as some of the comments shared: . . . <i>Authority in the Church</i>: It was proposed that the concept of synodality may point a way forward in navigating this complex and controverted problem (cf. §53). . . . Tradition and Ecumenical Councils: Appreciation was expressed for references to the first two Ecumenical Councils, although some found it disappointing that the document did not include specific references</p>	<p>Finally, <i>TCTCV</i> might challenge the SEC to consider more carefully the place of synods in leading the church, and particularly in helping it to come to a common mind. It may be necessary to move away from adversarial forms of debate towards more conversational, consultative decision-making processes with a view to achieving consensus (<i>CRTC 1</i>, 33).</p>

Responses affirming or supplementing TCTCV	Responses critical of TCTCV
<p>to any later councils. It was noted that, while many Christian Churches appreciated the emphasis on Tradition in the document, others may not be comfortable with this (CRTC 1, 234).</p>	
<p>United Reformed Church (URC)</p> <p>4.5.2 The URC recognized the early ecumenical councils as being normative for the Christian Church, but it would be open to holding further ecumenical councils according to the Statement of the Nature, Faith and Order of the URC: “but we affirm our right and readiness, if the need arises, to make new statements of faith in ever new obedience to the living Christ.” There is recognition in the URC that each culture, social class, gender and generation of churches may interpret the scriptures in different ways; the Christian faith is an incarnational faith that is expressed slightly differently in different places and times. Definitions of orthodoxy need to be discerned by each generation and place, acknowledging that there is a breadth of understanding (CRTC 1, 208).</p>	
<p>South Australia Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches</p> <p>Chapter 3 details the diversity between denominations in all aspects of the Church. In wrestling with this diversity, our relationship and communion with our trinitarian God should be our primary focus. One of the issues identified is the way power is exercised in the Church. The document needs to further develop this theme. The focus could be to encourage modes of power that reflect the way Christ used his power in imitation of God,</p>	<p>Church of England, General Synod</p> <p>7. This is because of the integral position of a bishop in a church and of the role of other members of the people of God in the church: lay participation in synods is something which Anglicans would want to stress. Thus while TCTCV talks about synodality (like <i>The Gift of Authority</i>), it does not explore the importance of lay participation in synods—which for Anglicans is an issue of importance. It merely says, “The churches currently</p>

Responses affirming or supplementing TCTCV	Responses critical of TCTCV
<p>not in a manner that reflected “power-over.” Rightfully, the relationship between power and authority is identified, but these are inadequately defined. How these both relate to the episkopé is a critical issue for the churches. “Synodality,” implemented differently by denominations, also relates to the exercise of power at every level, in all decision-making councils internationally, nationally, regionally and locally. If we are to grow towards “collegiality and communion” within and between denominations, the exercise of power and our structures for decision-making may teach our people and the general community in ways that often contradict what we say about the God we believe in. Form follows function, and the form or structure itself teaches. Therefore denominations may need to re-consider their power structures and decision-making processes in relation to how they nurture collegiality and communion. We affirm the emphasis Pope Francis has given to encouraging synodality. We also affirm the principle of subsidiarity, important in the Roman Catholic Church. We see that synodality and the principle of subsidiarity are essential gifts in the consideration of receptive ecumenism. We attach a diagram and commentary setting out a possible continuum of power modes and how these relate to theology and ecclesiology as a possible approach to the discussion of power. . . . Power needs to be exercised in ways that ensure full participation in decisions that are synodal and conciliatory, rather than in a manner that is “top-down” or “power-over.” The issue then is, How can we help this to be a reality? How do we reflect the trinitarian nature of God in the ways we structure</p>	<p>have different views and practices about the participation and role of the laity in synods” (§53). 19. There is also a clear challenge here for us to renew our use of synodical governance—how it can be not a politicized or partisan process, but a means of upholding unity in diversity through the patient discernment of ways to walk together and build up trust. Work in this area is already in progress but there are important theological perspectives for the task in the statement (<i>CRTC 1</i>, 43, 47).</p>

Responses affirming or supplementing TCTCV	Responses critical of TCTCV
<p>our organization and exercise power? . . . There is need of ongoing conversation about how local churches will relate to synodal structures and regional and universal levels of ecclesial order. Local and national dialogues have been an important instrument of movement in this area. The presence of Christ in the local gathering impels the local church to be in communion with “the whole Church” (CRTC 1, 345).</p>	
Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation	Response of Mr Peter H. Rempel
<p>24. The crucial point for us is the historical identity of the Orthodox Church with the Church instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ, the Church of the Apostles, the Church of Ecumenical Councils, and the validity of apostolic succession expressed in and safeguarded by the historic episcopate which “teaches correctly” (cf. D. Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom). . . . 31. We support the statement of TCTCV that “authority in the Church in its various forms and levels, must be distinguished from mere power” (§50). We appreciate the reference in the text to the authority in the Church, which is to be understood as a service of love (<i>diakonia</i>) for the growth of church <i>koinonia</i> in faith, love and witness (<i>martyria</i>) (§49), and also the recognition of the sources of authority (Holy Scripture, Tradition, worship, Ecumenical Councils and local synods), as well as the reference to the lives of saints and the witness of monasticism during the historical course of the Church (§50). The communion of believers or any similar formula is not the appropriate definition of the Church. We agree with what the text affirms</p>	<p>Mennonite acceptance of “the doctrinal definitions of the early ecumenical councils as expressive of the teaching of the New Testament” is tempered by their view that the adoption/imposition by Emperor Constantine of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire compromised the Church’s faithfulness to Jesus Christ and the apostolic Church. Thus their doctrinal decisions would be open to scrutiny and could be superseded by later deliberations guided by the Holy Spirit and in continuity with the scriptures. However, Mennonites would probably not give priority to revising the wording of these decisions and statements. . . . The need and expectations regarding the presiding over gatherings of the Church (§54) are well-stated and applicable to any ecclesial gatherings (CRTC 1, 261).</p>

Responses affirming or supplementing TCTCV	Responses critical of TCTCV
<p>elsewhere: witness, sacraments and <i>dia-konia</i> (service) are main aspects of being a church. WCC member churches should seek a common understanding of the normativity of the ecumenical councils, based on the work already done by the WCC Faith and Order Commission. . . . 34. Commenting on §55 regarding primacy, synodality and conciliarity in the first millennium, we have reservations concerning the historical description of these issues (CRTC 2, 22, 23).</p>	
<p>The Theological Committee of the Church of Greece</p>	<p>First Church of Christ, Scientist</p>
<p>The reply of the Orthodox Church to the question posed in the section following §32 is that she brings forward synodality as the normative principle for the relationship among the different levels of life (local, regional, universal) of the Church. Synodality is an expression of the exercise of authority inside the Church. Primacy—as is very well noted in the text based on the 34th canon of the Holy Apostles—is closely related to synodality (see §55) (CRTC 2, 313).</p>	<p>More distant from Christian Scientists’ understanding are the assumptions in TCTCV on church polity, tradition, and authority. Like any number of movements which trace their heritage to the Reformation, we look to original or “primitive Christianity” as normative. Humbling as this ideal is, it is explicit in our church’s founding purpose and still grounds our practice, values, and understanding of the nature and spirit of Christ’s Church. This perspective naturally influences our view of the early ecumenical councils and post-biblical structures of governance (CRTC 2, 85).</p>
<p>Uniting Church in Australia</p>	
<p>Although we do not have a Ministry of Bishop, we see our expression of episkopé through our councils of congregation, presbytery, synod and assembly as the focus for the ministry of oversight in our church. In practice, the authority of our councils is exercised in personal, collegial and conciliar forms dedicated to</p>	

Responses affirming or supplementing TCTCV	Responses critical of TCTCV
<p>"maintaining continuity in apostolic faith and unity of life." The conciliar and collegial dimensions of the ministry of oversight in our church are strongly expressed, with the move to consensus decision-making a consequence of our commitment to these dimensions of our practice (CRTC 2, 97).</p>	
Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD)	Salvation Army
<p>... the convergence text thus heads towards the controversial question of a universal, personal office of unity and the collegial and synodal implications of its integration into church structures. ... The important statements regarding the synodality or conciliarity of the Church and of church life at local, regional and universal level made in this context (§53), are, in the view of the Advisory Commission, essential for an understanding and realization of the apostolicity of the Church (CRTC 2, 121).</p>	<p>... by exploring issues relating to primacy, synodality and collegiality (§52) we may gain further insight into our own structure of leadership and governance (CRTC 1, 81).</p>
Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches	North American Academy of Ecumenists
<p>From the statement that all authority comes from Christ and that the Church participates in his ministry, the Reformed churches deduce that the Church's authority and ministry fundamentally lie with the congregation, which executes them through synodical structures. ... Regarding the concept of episkopé, the text correctly states that it must be exercised in personal, collegial and communal ways (§52). For Reformed Christians in particular, synodical leadership is of special significance in this context. The text's statements on the episkopé do</p>	<p>We affirm TCTCV's emphasis on the recovery of synodical decision-making processes (variously structured), and the participation of the baptized faithful—the <i>sensus fidei</i>—that must be part of the exercise of authority (§50). This affirmation implies a strengthening and clarifying the relationship of the differing levels of ecclesial life: local, regional, and universal. ... Most of our churches agree that our relationship of communion in Christ is expressed in a structured synodality where the personal, collegial, and communal dimensions of the church are</p>

Responses affirming or supplementing TCTCV	Responses critical of TCTCV
<p>not sufficiently take into account that in Protestant churches, synod members and thus officers of <i>episkopé</i> are frequently persons who have not been ordained to the service of word and sacrament, yet take responsibility for congregational and church leadership (CRTC 1, 153).</p>	<p>held in balance. Nonetheless, there are important differences today regarding the adequate expression of these realities in structures of communion, discernment and oversight. The emergence of new disagreements on a host of recent decisions relating to human sexuality has contributed to mistrust and disagreement with regard to what constitutes adequate processes or structures for discernment in communion. The practice of synodality cannot be reduced to either a parliamentary democracy or to governance by <i>diktat</i> (CRTC 1, 324).</p>
Episcopal Church (TEC)	French Informal Ecumenical Group
<p>All churches need a ministry of oversight (<i>episkopé</i>) that is “exercised in personal, collegial and communal ways” (§29). TEC affirms that the exercise of <i>episkopé</i> does entail the “quality of synodality or conciliarity” that “reflects the mystery of the trinitarian life of God” (§30). The decision-making and other governance structures and processes of TEC are already personal, collegial, and communal, in that TEC is structured to require synodality and conciliarity at every level. We would hope that all churches may affirm the importance of the synodal as well as conciliar aspects of <i>episkopé</i>. . . . The relationship of the movement of the Holy Spirit to institutional structure and ministerial order, and thus the extent to which these may be changed. This is a crucial aspect of the discussion as to Christ’s intention for the church in regard to <i>episkopé</i> and the inextricably related qualities of synodality and conciliarity. TEC believes that the historic episcopate is intended by Christ for the coming united</p>	<p>“The whole Church is synodical/conciliar, at all levels of ecclesial life.” It should become so. Even Pope Francis recognizes that the Catholic Church is still wide of the mark. The normativity of the ecumenical councils: The truth may lie in a middle way. They are authoritative in what they wished to affirm within their historical context, but one council can reinterpret another, and it is always possible to re-express what it said in another language. But how far can we go in interpretation (up to saying the opposite of a previous council?)?. . . “The early ecumenical councils”—what exactly does this mean? Which ones are we talking about? The first four, the first seven?” (CRTC 1, 330–1).</p>

Responses affirming or supplementing <i>TCTCV</i>	Responses critical of <i>TCTCV</i>
<p>Church, at the same time that many Episcopalians and Anglicans would say that this does not invalidate other forms of <i>episkopé</i> in the past or the present. We suspect that making it clear that apostolic faith is more fundamental than and prior to apostolic succession would advance greater understanding and agreement in ecclesiology as well as theology. We find that the Orthodox churches' approach to different types of apostolicity is very helpful. . . . We recognize that much work is needed in the particular churches for further agreement to emerge on the following: . . . Governance and decision-making, including the synodal/conciliar aspects that accompany the exercise of <i>episkopé</i> and other forms of authority. TEC, along with other Anglican churches, affirms that <i>episkopé</i> implies synodality/conciliarity, and vice versa. Further, we are convinced that an adequate account of reception must include the principles of subsidiarity and of mutual, widespread consultation that influences decisions (<i>CRTC 1</i>, 169).</p>	
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	International Ecumenical Fellowship
<p>Lutherans do not teach that the office of bishop is essential to the structure and reality of the local church (in this case, the synod), and yet we affirm the need for oversight and the connective role that bishops can play in unifying the church in these three expressions. . . . We commend for further study <i>TCTCV</i>'s recognition that the body of Christ, "under the guidance of the Holy Spirit" walks together as a synod/as conciliar in its "local, regional and universal" manifestations in order create and increase faith throughout the</p>	<p>1. . . . the text reflects ideas from Canberra and Santiago. Thus, the Church's communion, already present among Christians, reflects the life of the Trinity and is grounded in the one baptism. . . . Communion justifies diversity; catholicity itself is valued as a quantitative reality, and challenges all churches to recognize in each other the one, true Church of Jesus Christ. However, in order that diversity will not be divisive, authority and conciliarity safeguard the unity of the Church. Hierarchy is secondary to faith</p>

Responses affirming or supplementing <i>TCTCV</i>	Responses critical of <i>TCTCV</i>
whole church (§53). This ecumenical order reflects how the ELCA understands itself as the three expressions of the church: congregation, synod, and church-wide office together as the “assembly of all” (<i>CRTC</i> 2, 12).	and the Gospel, because apostolic succession is subordinated to apostolic faith and not correlated to it (<i>CRTC</i> 1, 310).
Finnish Ecumenical Council	
“On a more general note it was pointed out that the theological approach of the document and the questions chosen for discussion most probably appeal more to the so-called traditional churches. For example, the description of episcopacy and the threefold structure of the ministry reflects a view that is normative for some, acceptable to others, but for some churches only relatively possible” (<i>CRTC</i> 2, 225).	

The Significance of Conciliarity for the Future

In an ecclesiology of communion, neither synodality nor primacy can be understood as implying structures or ministries standing *above* the ecclesial community or communities. Synodality and primacy can only be realities of communion through a structure or a ministry that involves the community of each local church.

With regard to the institutional aspect of the Church, perhaps most notable from an ecumenical point of view is *TCTCV*’s resolute defense of the idea that conciliarity is intrinsic to the Church, essentially in correlation with synodality. In relation to synodality there is need for further study of the notions of “personal, collegial, and communal,” as suggested by the Methodist Church in Britain.¹⁰ All church councils—episcopal, local, and ecumenical—are neither

10. *CRTC* 1, 24.

above nor against but always *in* the Church, dependent always on the *ecclesial reception* of the councils' decisions by the entire body. This simple idea captures the core insight of ecclesial synodality.

Until recently most churches were unaware of the importance of councils. The modern ecumenical movement is frequently being interpreted as a kind of "conciliar renaissance." As stated in *Councils, Conciliarity and a Genuinely Universal Council*, "a reactivation of the conciliar dimension, which has always been an indispensable part of the Church's being, may be seen as a means and a help to this end [unity]. For the Orthodox Church especially, such a reactivation has actually become a reality in modern times."¹¹ *TCTCV* has aroused curiosity about the vital importance of the *structure* of the Church. A council, as a feast, a criterion, and an event of the Church, is an opportunity for all to refresh and update the charismatic and dogmatic experience of the Church. A Church that acts in a synodal way has to do with the human, and not with an ideological movement.

If the Church currently misses a balanced primacy-conciliarity narrative—if the passage from authoritarian rhetoric on "primacy" to eucharistic-pastoral care for all the churches requires something beyond the Western medieval framework—it is at least possible that primacy might find a concrete realization within modern eucharistic ecclesiology. If a eucharistically-based primacy is not an illusion, and if simultaneity is possible, then the theology of synodality gives some promising suggestions for the 21st century, a potential "century of conciliarity."

11. *Councils, Conciliarity and a Genuinely Universal Council*, 3.

CHAPTER EIGHT

'Experience' in the Life of the Church

Maria Munkholt Christensen

Introduction

*The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*¹ does not say much explicitly about “experience” in the life of the Church. The concept as such seems to have fallen outside of the scope of the convergence text, which is focused on ecclesial questions of a more theoretical character. The responses to *TCTCV* show that several churches from different traditions perceive the ecclesiology of *TCTCV* as “abstract” and the text as lacking awareness of the role of experience in church life.

There are a few direct references to experience in *TCTCV*. In one instance, the “faith experience” of believers is mentioned as a legitimate source of interpretation, among other sources: “Many bilateral dialogues have acknowledged that ecclesial interpretation of the contemporary meaning of the Word of God involves the *faith experience* of the whole people, the insights of theologians, and the discernment of the ordained ministry.”² It could seem that the “*faith experience* of the whole people” echoes the Roman Catholic concept *sensus fidei*, which is also explicitly mentioned in the response from the Roman Catholic Church. The concept of experience is thus used in *TCTCV* to emphasize the role of the “whole people” as constitutive of church life. However, the meaning of experience is not described further. From the context, we might infer that the experience called for from the whole people—as a parallel to insight and discernment—is to be understood as a cognitive endeavor.

1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Henceforth, *TCTCV*.

2. *TCTCV*, §39. Italics added.

Experience is also mentioned in *TCTCV* in relation to worship. For instance, in the conclusion, it says: "In the liturgy, the people of God *experience* communion with God and fellowship with Christians of all times and places."³ In the context of worship we thus meet another kind of experience, that is, experience as a feeling, a sense of belonging.

The Responses Concerning "Experience" in *TCTCV*

From the responses to *TCTCV*, it becomes abundantly clear that many churches agree that different kinds of experience are relevant and can enrich church life. Many responses call for more attention to experience. In this context, experience is understood either as a feeling or sense of faith and communion that deserves to be taken seriously, or as lessons learned in individual churches, which ought to be shared.

Some responses directly mention *TCTCV*'s lack of attention to experience. For instance, the Methodist Church in Ireland criticizes *TCTCV* for having limited grounding in experience, stating that "there is a danger that the language of *TCTCV* may be too abstract and idealistic, insufficiently grounded in the practical experience of historical churches and their social contexts."⁴ In like manner, the North American Academy of Ecumenists also asks for more focus on experience: "We would like to see more experiential language in describing Christian faith."⁵ They ask for more consideration of local experience. "The weekly experience of most Christians is focused on the life of the congregation, where they hear the proclamation of the Word and take part in the celebration of the sacraments. We urge that this empirical reality be taken more seriously as we reflect together on the theological understanding of the church."⁶ They skeptically observe that *Faith and Order* focuses too much on order, too little on faith.

Feeling, faith, and communion

Several churches express the opinion that successful church unity should result not only in formal unity, but in an experience of unity as well. The response from the Focolare Movement, for instance, expresses a longing for a more holis-

3. *TCTCV*, §67; compare §53. Italics added.

4. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 1, Faith and Order Paper No. 231, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 6. Henceforth, *CRTC 1*.

5. *CRTC 1*, 321.

6. *CRTC 1*, 19.

tic approach to ecumenical work; they emphasize the spiritual and affective dimensions of church life more than the institutional and rational aspects.⁷

Several responses describe faith as an experience with transforming potential. Even though some traditions emphasize that faith is necessarily experienced by the individual, all agree that faith has a widespread impact. The United Reformed Church in the UK mentions that “the Christian faith is always experienced in person. It is not a set of propositional truths, but a relationship with the living God which is lived in a particular culture and society and generation.”⁸ In the Church, faith experience might take on further significance: “The Church will evolve as it seeks to live out the will of God in bringing peace and justice and wholeness to all.”⁹

The United Reformed Church in the UK also points to the possibility that local ecumenical partnerships may “be experienced as organic unions which represent a challenge to the parent denominations as to how this can be both acknowledged and a source of fruitful dialogue.”¹⁰ In other words, partnerships between churches on a local level may, for the involved believers, actually feel like united churches. The experience of unity in a local context thus occasionally supersedes formal divisions, and it can be felt so strongly that it might lead to deep and helpful conversations at the denominational level. The Finnish Ecumenical Council has the same experience: fellowship among Christians in their local context is already so strong that trust has developed in a way that makes it possible to discuss difficult themes. They welcome *TCTCV*’s discourse on unity as communion: “Our experience and our understanding of communion is so strong that we should not need to be afraid to discuss the limits of diversity.”¹¹

7. *CRTC 1*, 249.

8. *CRTC 1*, 202. The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe mentions as a fundamental element in Protestant ecclesiology the “new experience of the power of the Gospel to liberate and assure” (Leuenberg Agreement, 4, quoted in *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 2, Faith and Order Paper No. 232, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi [Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021], 269–270. Henceforth, *CRTC 2*.) They note that sometimes this “experience” of the gospel will be contrary to certain traditions of church institutions.

9. *CRTC 1*, 203. Compare to the response from Uniting Church in Sweden, which focuses on concrete unity over dogmatic questions and the “epistemological aspect of Christian faith” (*CRTC 2*, 27). See also the response from the Canadian Yearly Meeting (Society of Friends): “In the British Quaker document *A Spirit-led Church*, the answer to the question ‘What is the Church’ is ‘. . . a gathered community of mind and heart, where each soul journeys into the love of God.’ Canadian Quakers would agree. It has also been our experience” (*CRTC 2*, 34).

10. *CRTC 1*, 199.

11. *CRTC 2*, 225.

Some responses point to the eucharist as *the* event where the communion of the Church can be experienced and ask for a further emphasis on this in *TCTCV*. The Roman Catholic response says, "The presentation of the Christian liturgy as a living experience which truly animates the daily life of those participating could have been developed further."¹² The response from the Theological Committee of the Church of Greece requests further attention to the "eucharist experience of the eschatological anticipation of new heavens and new earth, where justice will prevail." From this experience of communion with God in Christ arises a passion for the transformation of the world: "that is why, the position of the Church towards social problems should be founded on an indisputable theological background and the living experience of the Church."¹³ In fact, these comments fit the vision and explicit goal of the World Council of Churches (WCC) of working toward visible unity among churches. This vision implies shared eucharist. Seen in this way, being church is essentially always concrete and something that can be experienced and shared.

The Anglican Church of Canada states that even if the common eucharist has not yet been achieved, the work towards this goal has led to a certain "experience" of what the eucharist is: "Though we do not as yet share a common eucharist, greater convergence on the meaning of this sacrament, including the liturgical renewal it has fostered in many traditions, has allowed us to experience more fully the ecclesiological role of the eucharist."¹⁴ They ask for this work to be carried further. In this way, they acknowledge that ecumenical progress leads to a more authentic experience of the Church.

Lessons learned from experience and shared for the sake of unity

The responses express a wish also to share another kind of experience—namely, concrete experiences about how to be church in different challenging situations. There is agreement that all churches can and should learn from each other's

12. *CRTC* 2, 208. The response from the Joint Commission on Doctrine of the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church says: "The relationship between baptism and eucharist highlights the *epiclesis*—a moment which is not just about the water, bread and wine but also the people being filled with the Holy Spirit and, in the Reformed tradition, refers also to the prayer at the Word before the sermon or the readings" (*CRTC* 2, 375). The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe agrees that reconciliation among people and churches is experienced in the eucharist, and they call for its shared celebration, "provided that there is a shared understanding of the gospel" (*CRTC* 2, 277).

13. *CRTC* 2, 315.

14. *CRTC* 2, 50.

experiences, and several responses ask Faith and Order to focus on the experience of local churches and their advice. For example, the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church explicitly offers perspectives and experiences from the point of view of a minority church.¹⁵ The National Council of Churches in Denmark expresses a wish to relate to and interact with churches from the global South, “often rich in experience and healings.”¹⁶ They want to learn from the experiences of the global South, and at the same time wish to share experiences from their own historical experience in Denmark. They write: “In our Danish context, historically speaking, the experience is that rights of freedom and religious liberty unites.”¹⁷

The United Reformed Church in the UK mentions shared ministry as something positive in creating unity because it gives ministers valuable experience.¹⁸ The United Reformed Church offers to share their experience with the ordination of women.¹⁹ The United Methodist Church, too, mentions their experience of women in ministerial leadership, sharing among other insights that “we have significant insight and testimony from our own experience to offer in the ecumenical forum.”²⁰ In the same breath they add: “But there can be no doubt that we also have things to learn from the experience of others.” They mention in particular that they “wish to be attentive to the witness and experience of churches that find themselves in serious tension with the account of the Church in *TCTCV*.”²¹

Some responses show awareness that the sharing of experiences can be an ecumenical method in its own right, called “receptive learning” or “receptive ecumenism.” Thus the Roman Catholic response states: “The Catholic Church commits itself to the new paths opened by receptive ecumenism. In addition to Pope John Paul II’s description in *Ut unum sint* of ecumenism as an exchange of gifts, receptive ecumenism emphasizes in a special way the importance of being open to learn from others.”²²

The South Australia Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches asks that churches be open for “receptive learning”: “We suggest that a mutual process of learning from each other becomes more truly what we are

15. *CRTC 1*, 84–85.

16. *CRTC 2*, 248.

17. *CRTC 2*, 252.

18. *CRTC 1*, 204.

19. *CRTC 1*, 206.

20. *CRTC 2*, 137.

21. *CRTC 2*, 139.

22. *CRTC 2*, 215.

meant to be in imitation of Christ.”²³ The Christian Council of Sweden advocates “mutual learning from one another’s ways not only of understanding, but also of living the life of the Church.” They also share the sentiment that ecumenical documents do not effect as much change as the experience of worshipping together does: “We are rarely equally inspired by reading one another’s church documents and doctrines as by sharing one another’s living experiences of worship.”²⁴ Theology cannot be only an exercise of thought, taking place in seclusion. Rather, “theology must always become embodied, in this case through real encounters. There is a continued need to develop ways to exchange experience and a shared life.”²⁵ Signs of solidarity and compassion can also be gifts among churches.

The exchange of experiences could contribute to awareness that our experiences are necessarily partial, limited, and biased. Experience is necessarily contextual and must be mediated and engaged thoughtfully. The humble attitude of acknowledging the partiality of their own experiences is taken by the Salvation Army when they say, “[*TCTCV*] is a reminder that any Christian community is part of the whole; that God’s church is broader and more diverse than our personal experience of it. There is much to learn from other traditions, and to celebrate within our own.”²⁶

Perspectives

In the process of analyzing the responses to *TCTCV*, we have come to realize in our working group that there are formally united churches whose members have no actual experience of this unity. Faith and Order should invite churches not only to “agreed unity,” but also to “experienced unity.” Faith and Order should consider how churches can be helped to experience unity and benefit from each other’s concrete experiences. Receptive ecumenism should be included in Faith and Order’s further work on ecumenical method.

It is peculiar how little room the experience of faith and the different experiences of church life are given in *TCTCV*. Maybe this can be explained simply by the fact that there has not been a tradition of emphasizing “experience” in Faith and Order work. Among the latest Faith and Order publications, only one article about experience can be found: Susan Durber’s “Experience as a

23. *CRTC 1*, 346.

24. *CRTC 2*, 234.

25. *CRTC 2*, 235.

26. *CRTC 1*, 80.

Source of Authority for Faith.”²⁷ In this article, Durber mentions both possibilities and dangers in letting experience play a role in the search for knowledge of God and theology. Now, when the theme is ecclesiology, we must ask again, like Durber, about the possibilities and dangers of experience. We must, as she states, acknowledge the varied and multiple experiences of church members, pastors, and others, and be aware that men, women, children, young, and elderly all have different experiences.

Sharing of experiences and testimonies has not played a central role in Faith and Order, but it has found a place in other ecumenical groups, such as the Global Christian Forum. However, it should be noted that the theological, affective, and practical elements of ecclesiology should not be kept too separate. Many responses call for a more comprehensive ecclesiological vision that cannot only be agreed on, but to a certain extent be *felt*.

27. Susan Durber, “Experience as a Source of Authority for Faith,” in *Sources of Authority, Volume 1: The Early Church*, ed. Tamara Grdzeliidze, Faith and Order Paper No. 217 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014).

CHAPTER NINE

Ecumenical Reception

Ellen K. Wondra

Overview

A new process of ecumenical reception was initiated when *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (*BEM*) was referred to the churches for their response.¹ One commentator on *BEM* said, “Merely to ask the question of the reception of our document is to assume the principle that a church can receive the results of a common search for unity achieved by its own theologians in cooperation with other Christians who are not—or not yet—in full communion with this church.”² A response to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (*TCTCV*)³ notes that churches’ reception of each other is such that “ecumenical commitment is now part of the tradition of the church. It should, correspondingly, shape the life and authoritative documents of the churches.”⁴

BEM posed four questions to provide guidance for churches’ responses in this new situation. It requested official responses from the churches “at the highest appropriate level of authority,” concerning “the extent to which your church can recognize in this text the faith of the Church through the ages; the

1. Preface, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982). Henceforth, *BEM*.

2. Emmanuel Lanne, “The Problem of ‘Reception,’” in *Towards Visible Unity*, Commission on Faith and Order, Lima, 1982, Vol. 1: Minutes and Addresses, ed. Michael Kinnamon, Faith and Order Paper No. 112 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982), 48.

3. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Henceforth, *TCTCV*.

4. Joint Commission on Doctrine (Church of Scotland-Roman Catholic Church) in *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 2, Faith and Order Paper No. 232, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021). Henceforth, *CRTC 2*.

consequences your church can draw from this text for its relations and dialogues with other churches[;] . . . the guidance your church can take from this text” in its everyday life and work; and suggestions for Faith and Order’s ongoing work on “its long-range research project ‘Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today.’” The commission pledged to study churches’ responses and publish them, as well as to analyze them for implications for further work.⁵ These questions and the similar ones posed in later documents such as *The Nature and Purpose of the Church (NPC)*,⁶ *The Nature and Mission of the Church (NMC)*,⁷ and *TCTCV* indicate that the process of preparing responses to ecumenical documents is itself a part of reception, one that leads to the more difficult process of effectively appropriating what is received at the local level.

The idea of reception in *BEM* was not new. Just prior to *BEM*, an approach to reception had been developed by the Third Forum on International Bilateral Conversations, which said that “the initial agreement of two communions to enter into dialogue implies an acceptance of each other. It implies, too, that they acknowledge their responsibility to seek actively the fullness of communion and to begin, as far as possible, to engage in a common witness.”⁸ *BEM* said that ecumenical dialogue itself is a stage of reception, as is the development of statements of agreement, consensus, and convergence. *BEM*’s fourth question indicates that reception is a dialogical process through which the churches inform and guide the ecumenical movement at large and the Commission on Faith and Order in particular.

The next stage of reception (or non-reception) is the churches’ response to ecumenical statements, a response that has two elements. One is an evaluation or assessment of the extent of agreement, consensus, and/or convergence, made “at the highest appropriate level of authority.” The extent of reception of an ecumenical document and its import (and, concomitantly, of non-reception) can be discerned to some extent by considering the official responses of churches during a particular period. New formulations of shared understanding and of

5. Preface, *BEM*.

6. *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (NPC), Faith and Order Paper No. 181 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999). Henceforth, *NPC*.

7. *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 198 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005). Henceforth, *NMC*.

8. *The Three Reports of the Forum on Bilateral Conversations*, Faith and Order Paper No. 107 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1981), 38. Henceforth, *TR*.

convergences may then emerge as ecumenical groups such as Faith and Order analyze and learn from churches' responses. This stage was undertaken in the development and offering of *NPC* in 1998 and *NMC* in 2005, each of which posed questions designed to contribute to the further development of shared understandings of ecclesiology.⁹ Churches' responses also significantly informed the second Faith and Order convergence statement, *TCTCV*, in 2013. This stage of reception continues through the responses of the churches and other groups to *TCTCV*, the study of those responses, and discernment of future work in ecclesiology and in other areas. The essays in this volume are a contribution to this stage.

Thus, reception may stimulate new ecumenical efforts, as has been the case with the reception of *BEM*. A further stage of reception is manifest as those not party to agreed statements "seek to adopt and/or be incorporated into the terms and/or implications of such agreements."¹⁰ An example here is the decision of the World Methodist Council, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and the Anglican Consultative Council to align their global churches with the Lutheran-Roman Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.¹¹

The other element of response "includes all phases and aspects of the process by which a church makes the results of such a dialogue its own."¹² Reception in this sense takes place in complex ways at "the very heart of ecclesial life."¹³ The extent of reception is to be discerned not only in a church's statements but throughout its life, in worship, in teaching, in mission, and in service.

Reception, then, is a dynamic and dialogical spiritual process within the body of the Church that occurs in each generation.¹⁴ It is not an end in itself. Reception is a step on the way toward full visible unity and "a foreshadowing of the synodality (conciliarity) of the Church."¹⁵

9. *NPC*, §7; *NMC*, §8.

10. *Eighth Forum on Bilateral Dialogues: The Implications of Regional Bilateral Agreements for the International Dialogues of Christian World Communions*, Faith and Order Paper No. 190 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), II.1. See also *The Dar es Salaam Report: Tenth Forum on Bilateral Dialogues: "International Dialogues in Dialogue: Context and Reception,"* Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 8–14 March 2012, World Council of Churches, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/international-dialogues-in-dialogue-context-and-reception-tenth-forum-on-bilateral-dialogues-2012>.

11. Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, 1999.

12. *TR*, 38.

13. Lanne, "Problem of 'Reception,'" 45.

14. *TR*, 43.

15. *NMC*, §100.

Reception from *BEM* through *TCTCV*

Between the invitation to the churches offered by *BEM* and the analysis of the churches' responses to *TCTCV*, Faith and Order and related groups devoted considerable time and energy to developing the notion of ecumenical reception. *BEM* marked a "decisive new phase in the ecumenical movement" in that it asked the churches to take "deliberate steps toward a fuller fellowship with other churches."¹⁶ With this "new kind of reception, . . . the churches need to appropriate critically the agreements reached in ecumenical encounter and discussion." This entails "receiving afresh our own tradition while at the same time transcending its limitations [so] that we are able to recognize the common faith of the whole church in the ecumenical consensus achieved."¹⁷

BEM and the reception process that followed suggested that ecumenical reception entails

the churches declaring whether they recognize in the Lima document "the faith of the church through the ages," and whether they agree to use it as a basis or framework for their ecumenical dialogues and to include the elements of this document in their theological and catechetical teaching, in their liturgical groups, in their reflections on Christian faith and life in our time and world, and so on. . . . The basic underlying purpose . . . [is] the renewal of all Christians in the faith, in prayer and in a responsible Christian life in this world. . . . It is . . . a question of discovering whether, with the diversity of our legitimate and enriching confessional traditions and in the confession of the one fundamental faith of our common Creed, we are able and willing to work together for the renewal and unity of the churches.¹⁸

Progress toward full visible unity is concretely evident in the churches' engagement in processes of ecumenical reception that point toward "mutual recognition, or at least towards the recognition of Christian faith and life

16. Anton Houtepen, "Reception, Tradition and Communion," in Max Thurian, ed., *Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 116 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1983), 141.

17. Houtepen, "Reception," 142 n.8. The quotation is from *Towards an Ecumenical Consensus on Baptism, the Eucharist and Ministry: A Response to the Churches*, Faith and Order Paper No. 84 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1977), 5.

18. "Progress Report on *BEM*, 1982–1985" in Thomas F. Best, ed., *Faith and Order Renewal: Reports and Documents of the Commission on Faith and Order, August 1985, Stavanger, Norway*, Faith and Order Paper No. 131 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1985), 74. See also *Fourth Forum on Bilateral Conversations*, Faith and Order Paper No. 125 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1985), Report, III.E.9.

beyond their preconceived boundaries as they formally understand them to be.”¹⁹

The reception process initiated with *BEM* draws on the classical understanding of the reception of ecumenical councils, but also differs significantly from it.²⁰ Classical and ecumenical understandings of reception have in common the fact that reception is the culmination of one process and the beginning of a new one.

At the same time, ecumenical reception differs significantly from classical reception because the churches are now separated. Therefore, ecumenical work does not lead directly to doctrinal decisions. The goal of ecumenical texts “is a consensus which expresses the common conviction without either desiring or requiring the elimination of a legitimate doctrinal diversity between the churches.” Thus, ecumenical reception builds bridges between “ecclesial identities.” The goal is reciprocal recognition of churches, which is a step on the way to reconciliation and life together.²¹

It is vital to maintain a distinction between reception and recognition (as in churches’ mutual recognition of each other as churches):

[Recognition] stresses more strongly the special character of the other in its independence, an independence capable of fellowship. “Reception” emphasizes more strongly the special character of the other as containing elements to be adopted and integrated into a church’s own life and thinking and into its fellowship with the other church. “Recognition” and “reception” must go hand in hand and complement each other in efforts for church fellowship. There can be no “reception” without recognition of the legitimacy and authenticity of the other.²²

19. *NPC*, §119.

20. See Gennadios Limouris and Nomikos Michael Vapouris, eds., *Orthodox Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 128 (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1985), especially Nikos A. Nissiotis, “The Meaning of Reception in Relation to the Results of Ecumenical Dialogue on the Basis of the Faith and Order Document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*,” 47–76, and Theodore Stylianopoulos, “The Question of the Reception of *BEM* in the Orthodox Church in the Light of its Ecumenical Commitment,” 105–128.

21. André Birmelé, “Reception as Ecumenical Requirement: The Example of the Theological Dialogues between Christian Churches,” in Alan Falconer, ed., *Faith and Order in Moshi: The 1996 Commission Meeting*, Faith and Order Paper No. 177 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 64–67.

22. “Facing Unity,” Rome, Italy, 3 March 1984, in *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level 1982–1998*, ed. Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer, and William G. Rusch (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 478–9. Henceforth, *Growth in Agreement II* is referred to as *GA2*.

In 1991, the Canberra statement said, “‘The goal of the search for full communion is realized when all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness’ and express this in a reconciled common life.”²³ In 2001, the Eighth Forum on Bilateral Dialogues affirmed this understanding, noting further that reception “challenge[s] separated Christians to recognize in one another’s expression of faith the common apostolic faith grounded in scripture and Tradition. . . . Reception is a long ongoing process of a deep spiritual nature.”²⁴ Because of the length of any process of reception, the churches are faced with an additional challenge: how churches behave both within themselves and in relation to each other in the (often lengthy) interim before visible unity.²⁵ These questions come to the fore when the still-separated churches discern new directions and callings that are not accepted by ecumenical partners, as has manifestly been the case in matters of ethics and moral theology.

The Nature and Purpose of the Church elaborated the necessity of the whole Church’s involvement in processes of reception. It stated that the Church’s development of a *sensus fidei* is a matter of receiving the indwelling Holy Spirit “by which baptised believers are enabled to recognize what is, or is not, an authentic echo of the voice of Christ in the teaching of the community; what is, or is not, in harmony with the truth of the gospel. The *sensus fidelium*—the expression of this *sensus fidei* by all the members—is an essential element in the discernment, reception and articulation of Christian faith.” This involves all members of the church in “a foreshadowing of the synodality (conciliarity) of the Church.”²⁶ Ecumenical reception entails the interplay of all members of the church with duly constituted authority.

The Nature and Mission of the Church (NMC) incorporated responses to *NPC*, affirming the role of both leaders and the whole Church in the processes of discernment and decision-making that are part of reception. *NMC* §100 states that part of what makes a synod ecumenical is the reception of its teaching by the whole Church.²⁷ Paragraph 106 underscores the “relational and interdependent” character of authority and notes that “the ecclesiological theme

23. *NPC*, §121.

24. *Eighth Forum on Bilateral Dialogues*, II.1.

25. Thomas F. Best, ed., *Faith and Order at the Crossroads: Kuala Lumpur 2004. The Plenary Commission Meeting*, Faith and Order Paper No. 196 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), 87.

26. *NPC*, §99–100.

27. *NMC*, §100.

of reception highlights the relation between authority and communion (cf. John 1:1-12).” And *NMC* poses questions to the churches that are designed to test the claim that a convergence in ecclesiology has emerged, and that all “significant matters” have been addressed.²⁸

The Church: Towards a Common Vision mentions reception only seven times, perhaps because the understanding and practice of ecumenical reception has become widely accepted in the years after *BEM*. *TCTCV* first mentions reception in its referral of the text to the churches for response. Here the text states that “the process of reception that follows the publication of a convergence text can prove to be just as important as that which led to its production.”²⁹ Responses from the churches and other groups (considered below) may be read as indicating the extent to which shared understandings of ecclesiology are being received.

Reception in Responses to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*

Twenty-five of the responses to *TCTCV* mention reception.³⁰ Most of these responses see reception as a crucial part of the ecumenical task.³¹ One response reiterates the definition of reception and identifies it as an increasingly important topic for ecumenism.³² As *TCTCV* says, the process of reception is as important as the process leading to ecumenical texts.³³ A number of responses refer to the importance of the process of reception initiated by *BEM* and continuing thereafter.³⁴

28. *NMC*, §12.

29. *TCTCV*, 2–3.

30. Of these, one is Old Catholic, one is Roman Catholic, six are Anglican, eight Reformed, two Free or other church, one Orthodox. Three individuals responded, as did three national councils of churches. Fifteen of the responses are from churches in Europe, two from Australia, and eight from North America.

31. For example, the Anglican Church of Canada (*CRTC* 2, 45, 48).

32. National Council of Churches in Denmark along with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (*CRTC* 2, 244).

33. Uniting Church in Australia (*CRTC* 2, 101).

34. Church of England, in *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 1, Faith and Order Paper No. 231, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 40. Also, Methodist Church in Britain (*CRTC* 1, 122); International Old Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Union of Utrecht (*CRTC* 1, 215); Scottish Episcopal Church (*CRTC* 1, 29); and Roman Catholic Church (*CRTC* 2, 168).

At the same time, the process of reception is a challenge. Some churches spend little time in considering ecumenism or the global Church.³⁵ Others may find it necessary to change their confessional statements on the mission of the Church.³⁶

Some responses note the ambiguities of the reception process. That is, churches use their own processes and particular language,³⁷ so it may be difficult to understand the important decisions of other churches. How to assess the extent of reception is unclear.³⁸

Even so, reception of *TCTCV* and other ecumenical texts could “forge unexpected connections” among the churches,³⁹ including Pentecostal and “newer” churches.⁴⁰ For this to happen, it is necessary “that serious disagreement is actually faced: One set of participants in theological dialogue may want to tell another that they believe them to be mistaken about fundamental Christian teaching and therefore urge them to reconsider their views. Dialogue needs to have space for that to happen and for such a message to be received with respect.”⁴¹ One response expresses gratitude for the prompting of the Spirit and the desire for reception and unity.⁴²

A number of responses refer to the connection of reception and the authority of both church leaders and of the Church as a whole.⁴³ As *TCTCV* states, the Spirit resolves the ambiguities of decision-making.⁴⁴ At the same time, some “regulatory instruments” may be needed to provide “concrete evidence” of reception.⁴⁵

Some note that the response of churches to *TCTCV* is itself a stage of reception.⁴⁶ Particular churches may develop methods and materials for furthering the

35. Edmund J. Rybarczyk (*CRTC* 2, 335).

36. United Methodist Church (*CRTC* 2, 139).

37. Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council (*CRTC* 1, 230); Finnish Ecumenical Council (*CRTC* 2, 226).

38. The Episcopal Church (*CRTC* 1, 166).

39. International Old Catholic Bishop's Conference of the Union of Utrecht (*CRTC* 1, 215).

40. Church of England (*CRTC* 1, 40).

41. Report on Anglican-Pentecostal Consultation (*CRTC* 2, 386).

42. First Church of Christ, Scientist (*CRTC* 1, 83).

43. Scottish Episcopal Church (*CRTC* 1, 30), Methodist Church in Britain (*CRTC* 1, 23), Mr Peter H. Rempel (*CRTC* 1, 260).

44. *TCTCV*, §51.

45. Christian Law Panel of Experts (*CRTC* 1, 284). Compare to The Episcopal Church (*CRTC* 1, 166).

46. National Council of Churches in Australia (*CRTC* 1, 222), Focolare Movement (*CRTC* 1, 242).

process of reception in the particular churches.⁴⁷ The process of reception is furthered by the churches' posing to ecumenical groups both questions and possibilities for further work.⁴⁸ To this end, and in response to the final questions posed to the churches by *TCTCV*, some concrete criticism and areas where further work is needed are given.⁴⁹

It is notable that none of the responses challenges the idea of reception or its importance in ecumenical endeavor. Rather, most of them give positive views of the process of reception from *BEM* forward, and find value in engaging in it. It seems likely that at least some of the responses that do not mention reception hold similar views. Some responses, however, indicate non-reception of *TCTCV*.

Characteristics of Ecumenical Reception

The challenge of ecumenical reception has been taken up by the churches. Its meaning and practice have developed significantly in the period between *BEM* and *TCTCV* (1982–2013), and are largely confirmed by the responses to *TCTCV*. Four central aspects of ecumenical reception have come to the fore in the last 40 years.

First, the idea of reception has a solid biblical and theological basis. It refers most fundamentally to the fact that all that is, is received first and foremost from God, an insight retrieved and recast from the earliest church.⁵⁰ Creation itself is a gift of God, which creatures constantly receive. The Son receives his mission of incarnation and redemption from the Father, and the Father receives redeemed creation from the Son in the fullness of time. Human beings receive their very being, their faith, their salvation, and the many manifestations of divine grace from God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Church receives its being and its mission from God.⁵¹ Reception is fundamentally

47. Church of England (*CRTC 1*, 40).

48. National Council of Churches in Denmark (*CRTC 2*, 244).

49. Finnish Ecumenical Council (*CRTC 2*, 226); Church of Ireland (*CRTC 2*, 144); Orthodox Church of Finland (*CRTC 2*, 151–2).

50. See Houtepen, "Reception," 149–150. Key passages include (but are by no means limited to) Matthew 7:8 and parallels, John 1:12, Acts 2:38, Romans 1:5, Galatians 3:14, and Hebrews 9:15. See also William G. Rusch, *Ecumenical Reception: Its Challenge and Opportunity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), chapter 1.

51. Gennadios of Sassima, "Memory Against Forgetting: the *BEM* Document after Twenty-Five Years," in *BEM at 25: Critical Insights into a Continuing Legacy*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Tamara Grdzeliidze, Faith and Order Paper No. 205 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007), 169. Henceforth, *BEM at 25* is referred to as *BEM 25*.

spiritual, involving recognition of and participation in the work of the Holy Spirit. And reception is part of the Church's mission and evangelism. Church participants become members of the Church through their reception of the sacrament of baptism, and their lives in Christ are nurtured and strengthened as they receive the sacrament of the eucharist.⁵²

Ecclesialogically, the idea of reception pertains to how the Church, through the Holy Spirit, receives testimony and witness to the gospel, as well as doctrine and authoritative teaching, such as the teachings of the ecumenical councils. It also refers to the work of the Spirit in guiding the people of God in discernment and embrace of the truth of doctrine and teaching. Reception is possible only if the churches have a strong conciliar consciousness that opens them to conversion. The true authority of definitive statements is confirmed by their appropriation at all levels of the Church.⁵³

It has been necessary to distinguish "the 'classical' concept of receiving dogmatic decisions of a council. . . from a broader concept of a reception process which involves discussion, evaluation and change at all levels of church life leading up to official decisions."⁵⁴ Because they are separated, churches have had to figure out "how far they are able to 'receive' a document which does not emanate from their own church tradition."⁵⁵ Entering into dialogue with other churches is itself an act of reception in that it presupposes that some degree of mutual recognition and even communion already exist. The existence of texts that are the results of dialogues is also an indication of mutual reception to some degree.⁵⁶ Reception in this sense takes place in complex ways at "the very heart of ecclesial life" in "a church acting on the basis of its being as the Church of God. What is involved is a step which overflows its inner life in the present and simultaneously includes its relation to the tradition received from the apostles, its relation to the other churches in all places, and, finally, its relation to the world around it. Far from it being a purely administrative or intellectual step, therefore, reception concerns the apostolicity and catholicity of the Church."⁵⁷

52. Some free churches view baptism somewhat differently. William Henn, "Reflections on Ecumenical Reception," in *Faith and Order in Moshi*, 79. Compare to Yves Congar, "La 'réception' comme réalité ecclésiologique," *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 56 (1972), 370.

53. Birmelé, "Reception as Ecumenical Requirement," 58–59.

54. Report, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990: Report on the Process and Responses* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), 19.

55. Gennadios, "Memory Against Forgetting," 164.

56. Henn, "Reflections on Ecumenical Reception," 81.

57. Lanne, "Problem of 'Reception,'" 45.

So reception “includes all phases and aspects of the process by which a church makes the results of such a dialogue its own.”⁵⁸ The extent of reception is to be discerned not only in a church’s statements but throughout its life, in worship, in teaching, in mission, and in service. The four questions posed to the churches by *BEM* are offered to guide the churches in both aspects of reception. The fourth question also indicates that reception is a dialogical process through which the churches inform and guide the ecumenical movement at large, and in this instance, the Commission on Faith and Order in particular.

Reception, then, is a dynamic and dialogical spiritual process within the body of the church that occurs in each generation.⁵⁹ It is not an end in itself. Reception is a step on the way toward full visible unity and “a foreshadowing of the synodality (conciliarity) of the Church.”⁶⁰

Secondly, ecumenical reception is related both to the renewal of the churches and to their unity. As indicated above, even entering a process of reception requires some degree of recognition that churches other than one’s own share some essential characteristics of the apostolic faith and are thereby in some sense participants in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church (though there remain divisive differences to be resolved). Ecumenical engagement is part of church reform in that it entails discernment of what aspects of one’s own church’s life and its relations with other churches may require some degree of renewal—a fundamental element of the movement toward full visible unity.⁶¹

Reception entails varying degrees of mutual recognition throughout, and this comes about through mutual and transformative ecumenical learning. Such learning happens both among and within the churches. The process of reception inaugurated by *BEM* entails a pattern of statement, response, restatement, and (it is hoped) finally agreement and incorporation into the renewal of the churches. The questions posed in studies from *BEM* through the responses to *TCTCV* invite just such interaction. Mutual learning must take place at all levels and in all aspects of the Church, not only through study and discussion of texts and theological attention to areas of historic or current division, but also through appropriation of ecumenical learning in all areas of the Church—including worship, life and witness, mission and evangelism, and decision-making and implementation. The Lund Principle captures the practical process of

58. *TR*, 38.

59. *TR*, 43.

60. *NMC*, §100.

61. *International Bilateral Dialogues 1965–1991. Fifth Forum on Bilateral Conversations Report*, comp. Günther Gassmann Faith and Order Paper No. 156 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), 49.

ecumenical reception in the churches: Churches “should act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately.”⁶²

Thirdly, reception requires the participation of all as part of the development of a *sensus fidei*, expressed in a *sensus fidelium* that is “an essential element in the discernment, reception and articulation of Christian faith.” All members of the Church have a part to play in this process: laity, scholars, and various church leaders as well as bishops, participants in ecumenical engagement at every level, and members of official dialogues and councils of churches. *NPC* casts this as “a foreshadowing of the synodality (conciliarity) of the Church.” The process of reception is lengthy, and discernment of the extent to which reception has and has not taken place must take place to some extent in retrospect, through patient, wise, and careful assessment of the extent to which ecumenical insights have been expressed in the actual practices of the churches.

Fourthly, reception entails exercising authority in certain ways. The idea of reception is closely linked with how the churches understand authority, not only in relation to “ministries of leadership” but also in relation to the role of the whole community in coming to a *sensus fidei*.⁶³ Yet the nature and exercise of authority in the churches continues to be a controverted and even divisive matter. Reception entails a strong synodal or conciliar consciousness on the part of the churches, a recognition that authority is in certain ways interactive, that those in authority exercise that authority within and not separate from the whole people of God. Both *TCTCV* and the responses to it make it clear that authority and conciliarity/synodality are areas that require a great deal of further work and discussion. The complex network of ideas and practices that comprise ecumenical reception must develop further.

Challenges and Problems

Ecumenical reception has turned out to be more of a challenge than had been anticipated in 1982.⁶⁴ In 2007, the 25th anniversary of *BEM* occasioned further consideration of the reception process and its challenges for the World Council

62. *Report of the Third World Conference on Faith and Order*, Lund, Sweden: 15–28 August, 1952, Faith and Order Paper No. 15 (London: John Roberts Press Ltd., 1952), 6.

63. *TCTCV*, §51.

64. GA2, xvi. See also the report of Group III in *International Bilateral Dialogues 1992–1994. List of Commissions, Meetings, Themes and Reports. Sixth Forum on Bilateral Dialogues*, comp. Günther Gassmann, Faith and Order Paper No. 168 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995).

of Churches (WCC) itself. The reception process was flawed by “a failure” within WCC “to make effective links and transitions from grand ecumenical conferences, commitments and confessions to local congregations in the member churches of the WCC.” While there had been many official responses, *BEM* seemed to have little effect at the most local levels. Further, there had been “a retrenchment and re-confessionalization in many churches, not least the ancient churches” that had slowed the movement toward visible unity.⁶⁵

Both *BEM* and the reception process suffered from major limitations imposed by the over-emphasis on North Atlantic churches and their particular concerns and perspectives, to the marginalization and even exclusion of churches, concerns, and insights of the global South.⁶⁶ Indeed, the ecumenical movement as a whole continues to face challenges concerning the relevance of dialogues and texts outside Europe and North America, and among marginalized racial, ethnic, and gender groups in those contexts. It is often unclear how—or if—ecumenical texts are related to ecclesial anti-racism efforts,⁶⁷ as well as to efforts related to the status and participation of women in church and society. It continues to be the case that churches of the global South are not adequately represented in traditional ecumenical dialogues, either in formulating or in responding to theological and ecclesiological texts. Traditional ecumenism presumes a particular sort of ecclesial self-definition which new, emerging, non-denominational, and Pentecostal, charismatic, and fundamentalist churches often do not hold. These deficits have been addressed to some extent by Faith and Order in the shift of emphasis from the purpose of the church to its mission found in *NMC*; and in greater interaction with WCC’s Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, and with programs and groups focused on particular aspects of justice and inclusion. Since *TCTCV*, this has been a major focus of the Commission on Faith and Order. This is particularly true of the commission’s work to encourage greater participation by evangelical, Pentecostal, post-denominational, and indigenous churches in general; also in its ongoing discussion of ecclesiology; and in its work on ethics and moral theology and the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. Yet there is much more to be done, and it is a matter of urgency.

65. Michael Northcott, “*BEM* and the Struggle for the Liturgical Soul of the Emergent Church,” *BEM* 25, 98.

66. Jesse N. K. Mugambi, “Some Problems of Authority and Credibility in the Drafting and Reception Processes of the *BEM* Document”; and Valério Guilherme Schaper and Rudolf von Sinner, “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry and the Church in Latin America,” in *BEM* 25, 185–202, 203–228.

67. “Progress Report on *BEM*, 1982–1985,” in Best, *Faith and Order Renewal*, 94.

Reception also requires new structures and processes of evaluation and decision-making. Following *BEM*, it became clear that engaging in processes of reception requires deliberate planning, allocation of resources, and action. Churches must plan for making a suitable response that may or may not involve binding decisions, but certainly entails activity other than decision-making. As they do their work, ecumenical dialogues have to think about reception and reception processes. Church leaders must engage in consultation as part of reception, both within and beyond their particular churches, and they must foster relations of trust and confidence with others that make reception possible.⁶⁸ Such consultation may take place in regional and local conciliar groups; it is not, however, always clear how consultation in fact shapes a particular church's response. Consultation beyond particular churches' formal response fosters recognition of the apostolic faith and its appropriation (reception) throughout the whole life of the Church.⁶⁹

Further, reception requires a kind of creativity many churches don't have. Churches are challenged to move beyond the rhetoric and practices of division to develop rhetoric and practices of mutual learning, mutual recognition of various sorts, and reconciliation. And because reception and recognition are matters that develop over time while the separated churches are still, rightly, pursuing their own lives and missions, it is necessary to develop dispositions and practices of mutual consultation and accountability.

If we are indeed called together on an elongated journey of mutual welcome and reception, a journey preparatory to fuller, more visible unity, then what are the guidelines for our interim behaviour? Or to put it differently: if "receiving one another" means "to take the stranger alongside oneself," then how do I behave appropriately and sensitively towards my fellow travellers, as together we encounter new circumstances and participate in different ritual events?⁷⁰

68. International Bilateral Group I.I–I.III. "Other persons" here includes the entire staff of WCC. See Commission on Faith and Order, *Minutes of the Meeting of the Standing Commission 1984*, Crete, Greece, 6–14 April 1984, Faith and Order Paper No. 121 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1984), 25.

69. *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: An Instrument for an Ecumenical Reflection on Hermeneutics*, Faith and Order Paper No. 182 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 65.

70. *Faith and Order at the Crossroads: Kuala Lumpur 2004, The Plenary Commission Meeting*, ed. Thomas F. Best, Faith and Order Paper No. 196 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), 87.

Ecumenical reception and visible unity may well require common structures of “the authentic exercise of authority” to serve conciliar communion. Agreement, convergence, and/or consensus on such doctrinal matters as baptism, eucharist, ministry, and the Church is most likely not sufficient to support full visible unity.⁷¹ It is evident that the churches need to strive for a greater mutual understanding of the scope and limits of “legitimate diversity.” At the same time the experience of united/uniting churches and of bilateral dialogues and communion agreements offer strong and concrete guidance for reception processes that move churches beyond division to greater expressions of the real but imperfect communion the churches already share.

Reception is only possible where churches are motivated ecumenically at every level, including the most local. And within churches there are always tensions between levels. There are frequent problems of communication and interpretation, especially in making texts available to the whole church. The texts to be received are the fruits of dialogical processes. They invite ecumenical dialogue, but such ecumenical dialogue is usually not involved in particular churches’ reception processes.⁷² In some churches, the invitation to receive ecumenical texts has caused considerable turmoil because the process involves churches considering the extent to which they can receive what comes from outside their own tradition.⁷³ For all churches, the process of reception raises questions of authority pertaining to the extent to which ecumenical documents may or may not carry authority; also to the way in which each church understands and practices the relationship between the formally conferred authority of leadership and the authority of the whole body of believers.⁷⁴

Conclusion

The idea and practices of reception continue to be an important topic for the Commission on Faith and Order. It appears that the idea of reception as it has developed between *BEM* and *TCTCV* has itself been largely received by the

71. *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life, and Witness: A Discussion Paper*, Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela 1993, Faith and Order Paper No. 161 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993), 61.

72. Birmelé, “Reception as Ecumenical Requirement,” 67.

73. Gennadios, “Memory Against Forgetting,” *BEM* 25, 164–8.

74. *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission, 4–11 January 1994, Crêt-Bérard, Switzerland*, Faith and Order Paper No. 167 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 63.

churches. It would appear that even those responses to *TCTCV* that do not mention reception have used to greater and lesser extent the process of reception that continues from *BEM*. However, there is much room for developing the practical aspects of reception, and Faith and Order has a significant part to play in this.

Firstly, as has been the case all along, Faith and Order has a key role in facilitating ecumenical reception in particular churches, through continuing to refer documents and guide reception with carefully stated questions that prompt not only official and formal response, but also reception at all levels within and among the churches. Faith and Order also furthers reception by receiving and analyzing the responses of churches as groups, as it has done with *TCTCV*. Close attention to the reports of the Forum on Bilateral Conversations and to the individual international bilaterals is an important aspect of Faith and Order's reception of insights from the churches.

A particular challenge facing Faith and Order, widely and often noted, is to evaluate its own methods so that reception may be facilitated in the global South and among new, emerging, non-denominational, and Pentecostal, charismatic, and fundamentalist churches. A major difficulty here is the method and content of ecumenical texts, which often do not seem to focus on the concerns of these churches. Their issues may not be primarily theological or ecumenical, but may instead center on mission, justice, and interreligious relations. Hearing more clearly and urgently the voices of the global South and of other churches is an imperative, and it must be reflected in representation on Faith and Order, in the production and content of Faith and Order texts, and in the processes of eliciting responses from the churches. Consultations such as those undertaken by the current commission may continue to be an important part of the reception of ecumenical work on ecclesiology and mission.

Faith and Order also has a role in facilitating reception at every level of the churches, though the primary responsibility lies with the churches themselves. Insofar as Faith and Order is able to produce and distribute study materials in a wide range of media, and to make concrete suggestions to churches as to what processes of study and conversation may facilitate reception, ecumenical reception may be advanced. Of course, Faith and Order, like the particular churches, may continue to have limited resources in these areas.

It also seems to be time for Faith and Order to develop further the idea of reception, through additional work on what mutual recognition of churches may involve short of full visible unity, and what concrete steps are needed to encourage such limited mutual recognition. For example, Faith and Order could consider what degrees of consensus and agreement are required on what

matters at which stage. Developing means by which the churches can mutually discern the extent of consensus and the importance of continuing differences would be of great assistance. This would include further discernment of the legitimacy or acceptability of diversity in theology, ecclesiology, and now, ethics, something *TCTCV* itself commends. Further explication of the stages toward full visible unity is also necessary, especially insofar as the churches' attention to mutual recognition may be seen as a step toward full visible unity.

It is clear that the churches have been and are receiving the fruits of ecumenical engagement, and that such reception has been and is contributing to the renewal of the churches. The idea and process of reception initiated with *BEM* has stimulated the churches' growth in real but imperfect communion. How reception has been facilitated up to now points the way to further and deepening reception and the important part Faith and Order has to play in this work.

CHAPTER TEN

The Church and Mission

Glenroy Lalor

Introduction

The mission of the Church is one of the many themes that emerged from the responses of the churches and ecclesial communities to the text of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*.¹ This paper explores that theme, beginning with the first convergence text produced by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*,² and ending with the responses to the second convergence text, *TCTCV*. The journey will include an assessment of the theme in other texts produced by the Faith and Order Commission as well as reports from selected bilateral dialogues. The aim is to identify what the churches are saying together on the mission of the Church, to identify the differences that still exist, and to discern the way forward in the quest toward visible unity.

BEM to TCTCV

In *BEM*, the mission of the Church is rooted in God's call to all humanity to be God's people. To accomplish this purpose, God called Israel and later spoke in a decisive and unique way in Christ, in whom God made the cause of humanity God's own. The Holy Spirit unites those who follow Christ and sends them as witnesses into the world.³ "Through Christ, people are enabled to turn in

1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Henceforth, *TCTCV*.

2. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982). Henceforth, *BEM*.

3. *BEM*, "Ministry," §1.

praise to God and in service to their neighbour.”⁴ Mission is the manifestation of God’s benevolent intention toward humanity and the created order. It is accomplished through the Church, the community of those called by God and enabled by the Holy Spirit to follow Christ in bearing witness to and serving the world.

The Church is a prefiguring of the kingdom of God, where Christ’s victory will be manifest and all things made new. All members of the community of the faithful are called to bear witness, that is, to confess this faith and give an account of their hope. This hope empowers the members of Christ’s body to “struggle with the oppressed towards that freedom and dignity promised with the coming of the kingdom.”⁵ In working toward the establishment of the reign of God, the people who are incorporated into Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit seek to engage faithfully in forms of witness and service in each situation. In so doing, they bring to the world a foretaste of the joy and the glory of God’s kingdom.⁶

This mission as articulated in *BEM* is the calling and vocation of the whole people of God. The Church as a whole is, therefore, priestly; and this priestly nature is derived from Jesus Christ, the “unique priest.” As a community of priests, “all members are called to offer their being ‘as a living sacrifice’” with a “mandate to intercede for the church and for the salvation of the world.”⁷

BEM established a nexus between baptism, eucharist, ministry, and mission. Its preface enunciated this integrated intent:

As the churches grow into unity, they are asking how their understandings and practices in baptism, Eucharist and ministry relate to their mission in and for the renewal of human community as they seek to promote justice, peace and reconciliation. Therefore, our understanding of this cannot be divorced from the redemptive and liberating mission of Christ through the churches of the modern world.⁸

This correlation is further explicated in various sections of the text. In the discussion on the eucharist, for example, every celebration of the eucharist is understood to be an instance of the churches’ participation in God’s mission in the world. This mission is manifested daily in proclamation, service, and faithful

4. *BEM*, “Ministry,” §2.

5. *BEM*, “Ministry,” §4.

6. *BEM*, “Ministry,” §§3, 5.

7. *BEM*, “Ministry,” §17.

8. *BEM*, Preface, vi.

presence in the world.⁹ Similarly, the confident invocation of the Spirit in the eucharistic celebration by the community of faith enables the participation of the Church in God's mission.¹⁰ As a consequence, "the Holy Spirit bestows on the community of faith diverse and complementary gifts . . . for the common good of the whole people."¹¹

Responses to *BEM*

The correlation between the sacraments and mission was positively affirmed in the responses to *BEM* and emerged as a potential point of agreement. In its response, the Roman Catholic Church affirmed the correlation between eucharist and mission: "The text recalls how the eschatological dimension of the Eucharist grounds the mission of the church. The link between Eucharist and mission is integral to Catholic explication of the connection between Eucharist and life. Through the Eucharist the church relives its mission to extend Christ's salvation to the world."¹²

The Disciples of Christ affirmed the insight of the Church being nurtured for mission engagement through the eucharist and they accepted, with appreciation, the challenge to the churches issued by *BEM* on the relationship between mission and worship. This acknowledgement enabled a broader missional outlook. "Disciples have seen the Lord's Supper either as only a personal act of worship or as an internal activity of the church (worship separated from mission). *BEM* challenges us to an understanding as both sacramental and in mission."¹³

The Church of Wales also viewed positively the "widespread agreement on sacrament and mission" and regarded it as beneficial to the Church. Unity is in the service of mission. "The Church of Wales is challenged to take seriously the fact that the unity of the Church in its sacramental and ministerial life can never be an end in itself but has to be bound up in the church's mission."¹⁴

9. *BEM*, "Eucharist," §25.

10. *BEM*, "Eucharist," §17.

11. *BEM*, "Ministry," §5.

12. *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" Text*, vol. 6, ed. Max Thurian, Faith and Order Paper No. 144 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1988), 24. Henceforth, *CRBEM* 6.

13. *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" Text*, vol. 1, ed. Max Thurian, Faith and Order Paper No. 129 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986), 117. Henceforth, *CRBEM* 1.

14. *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" Text*, vol. 3, ed. Max Thurian, Faith and Order Paper No. 135 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987), 80–95. Henceforth, *CRBEM* 3.

The Church of England is part of the chorus of appreciation for the perspective that highlighted the relationship between mission and the eucharist. However, they bemoaned the muting of the missiological facet in the discussion on baptism, and consequently identified the need for a stronger emphasis on this facet of baptism.¹⁵

Although it appears that there was an emerging and fairly broad consensus on the correlation and inseparability of the sacraments and mission arising from *BEM*, some churches expressed some concerns. The United Church of Christ USA, for example, desired a more full-throated articulation of the correlation and requested that the relationship be stated more “convincingly.” They expressed the need for a clearer and fuller statement in the document on the twin foci of mission and unity, as the equal urgency of mission and unity was not apparent to them in their reading of the text.¹⁶

The American Lutheran Church criticized *BEM* for being an “inward directed rather than mission oriented” document. They did not see the ecclesial issues as being placed in the context of God’s mission through the Church. “The subtle encouragement given by the document to sacerdotalism, clericalism and an inward-looking church could be avoided by a clearer articulation of the servant character of the church which stands under the Lord who has come not to be served but to serve.”¹⁷

These objections can be understood as a request for a fuller and more comprehensive statement on the mission of the Church by the Faith and Order Commission. Inherent to the criticisms is the need for a more complete discussion on the relationship between mission and unity.

However, despite some objections, there seems to have been an emerging consensus on the interrelatedness of the sacraments in the understanding of the mission of the Church and the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom of God. The Church is nurtured through the sacraments to be engaged in God’s mission in the world. The focus of *BEM* is on the unity of the Church through baptism, eucharist, and ministry. In light of this focus, one can appreciate the observation from some churches that the mission of the Church was not sufficiently accented.

This appreciation contributed to the initiation of the project on the nature and purpose of the Church.

15. *CRBEM* 3, 41.

16. *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” Text*, vol. 2, ed. Max Thurian, Faith and Order Paper No. 132 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986), 327. Henceforth, *CRBEM* 2.

17. *CRBEM* 2, 81.

The Nature and Purpose of the Church

The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the way to a Common Statement (NPC) offered a further contribution to the theme of church and mission. An important reinforcement gleaned from this text was the emphasis on mission as belonging to the very being of the Church as opposed to a functional understanding of the engagement of the Church with the world. The function flows from the being of the Church; the goal is the transformation of the world to the glory of God. “Christians are called to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed. They are to address those who have not heard as well as those who are no longer in living contact with the Gospel, the good news of the reign of God. They are called to live its values and be a foretaste of that reign in the world.”¹⁸

NPC also argued that the division of the Church is a hindrance to its mission. The goal of mission, it emphasized, is *koinonia*, the communion of all. Mission belongs to the very being of the Church as *koinonia*.¹⁹ *NPC* offered a definitive position on the integral nature of unity and mission. Unity is the goal of mission.

The Nature and Mission of the Church

The Nature and Purpose of the Church gave way to *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement (NMC)*.²⁰ In *NMC*, Faith and Order responded to the call to strengthen the missional content of the text. This is reflected in the changed name of the text, replacing “purpose” with “mission.” This emphasis sought to reorient an understanding of mission as flowing from the nature of the Church.

The theology of mission outlined in *NMC* is that it is God’s design to gather all of creation under the Lordship of Christ, that is, to bring humanity and all creation into communion. The Church, in serving this purpose and in pursuing this goal, is an instrument in the hands of God.²¹ *NMC* also introduced a cluster of other metaphors to describe the Church engaged in God’s mission. These include gift, sign, and servant, given to the world so that the world might believe. Mission belongs to the very being of the Church. The four major attributes or marks of the Church—oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity—“relate both to the nature of God’s own being and to the practical

18. *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 181 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), §27. Henceforth, *NPC*.

19. *NPC*, §27.

20. *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 198 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005). Henceforth, *NMC*.

21. *NMC*, §109.

demands of authentic mission. If any of them is impaired, then the mission of the church is compromised.”²²

NMC advanced the understanding of mission from *Nature and Purpose*. It also underlined the growing consensus around the inseparability of the mission of the Church and the goal of unity.

Mission and the Church in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*

From the very first paragraph, *TCTCV* sought to harvest the insights that emerged in *NMC* by locating the mission of the Church in “God’s design for all creation.” The mission of the Church was affirmed as *missio dei*,²³ the initiative of the sending God. The Church is an instrument of God and as such is integral to the divine mission.

Echoes of *koinonia* as the goal of mission resonate from *BEM* to *TCTCV*.²⁴ Communion is understood as a gift of God that is given to the world through the Church, which embodies this act of grace:

The church as the body of Christ acts by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue his life-giving mission in prophetic and compassionate ministry and so participates in God’s work of healing a broken world. Communion, whose source is the very life of the Holy Trinity, is both the gift by which the church lives and, at the same time, the gift that God calls the church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity in hope of reconciliation and healing.²⁵

The Church engaged in God’s mission is called and commissioned to model in its life the communion that God intends for all creation; the Church is sign and servant of God’s design.²⁶

As sign and servant of God’s design, the Church reflects the communion of the triune God, called and commissioned to serve the objective of gathering all humanity and creation under the triune God. In pursuit of this mission, the

22. *NMC*, §§34–35.

23. *Missio dei* as a concept that emerged in the ecumenical movement at the International Missionary Conference in Willingen, Germany, in 1952. See Norman Goodall, ed., *Missions under the Cross: Addresses Delivered at the Enlarged Meeting of the International Missionary Council at Willingen in Germany, 1952, with Statements Issued by the Meeting* (London: International Missionary Council, 1953).

24. See Ellen K. Wondra, “Communion and *Koinonia* in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*,” chapter 2 of this volume, 17–32.

25. *TCTCV*, §1.

26. *TCTCV*, §13; §25.

Church lives out its directive to manifest the mercy of God to all humanity, with the intention of helping humanity achieve God's intended purpose for all creation. This mission mandate entrusted to the Church is carried out through the members' bearing witness to God through their lives as well as by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. The focus of mission is for all people, because it is the will of God that all are saved. This inclusive mission seeks to embrace those who are not "explicit members of the church in ways that may not be immediately evident to human eyes. While respecting the elements of truth and goodness that can be found in other religions and among those of no religion, the mission of the church remains that of inviting, through witness and testimony, all men and women to come to know and love Christ Jesus."²⁷

TCTCV's summary of mission is this: "The Church embodying in its own life the mystery of salvation and the transfiguration of humanity, participates in mission of Christ to reconcile all things to God and to one another through Christ."²⁸

Responses to *TCTCV*

Church in God's design/*missio dei*

TCTCV's location of the mission of the Church in God's design, the understanding of the Church as sign and servant of God, and the mandate given to the Church to call all humanity to the intended purpose of God, are generally appreciated by the churches responding to *TCTCV* and reveal an emerging consensus.

The Doctrine Commission of the Anglican Church of Australia aptly summarizes what is a common thread in many of the responses to *TCTCV*:

A significant feature of the WCC paper is that the exploration of ecclesiology has been set within the overarching context of God's plan to reconcile all things to himself, and in particular, that "mission" is not merely an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. We view this movement towards a "missional ecclesiology" as a very welcome development, and a fruitful way to understand the mission of the church as activity of God in the Trinity.²⁹

27. *TCTCV*, §25.

28. *TCTCV*, §26.

29. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 1, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, Faith and Order Paper No. 231 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 35. Henceforth, *CRTC 1*.

The International Old Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Union of Utrecht values the challenge provided by the perspective contained in *TCTCV*. However, they argue for the need for "a broader sense and understanding of mission (proclaiming the gospel in a multicultural and multi-religious society) and of the Church as a moral/ethical communion."³⁰

The Baptist World Alliance sees *TCTCV* as an advance on earlier works and welcomes the evolution in the understanding of the mission of the Church:

Whereas the title of the earlier text on "The Nature and Mission of the Church" suggested that one could somehow differentiate the church's nature and the church's mission, *TCTCV* now conceives of mission as essential to the nature of the church—a strengthening of a long-developing trajectory in ecclesiology and ecumenical theology that appropriates the missiological concept of the *missio dei* in which the church participates and becomes more fully the church whenever it does so.³¹

TCTCV presupposed the insight gleaned from *NMC* regarding mission as flowing from the nature of the Church. This, however, was not discerned in the text by the Canadian Council of Churches, who also expressed a desire for a broader understanding of mission. They observe that, at times, the Church's nature and mission were presented in *TCTCV* as too distinct.³²

Interrelation of mission and communion

The Church of England finds very helpful the combination of two themes: God's gift of communion and the missionary calling of the Church.³³ That "mission and unity are both at the heart of how we see the calling of God's people" is a source of joy for the Methodist Church of Ireland: "So we rejoice that the World Council of Churches has, through its Faith and Order Commission, produced a statement that brings these two themes together and invites Christians everywhere to rediscover their vision of what it is to be the Church."³⁴

Similarly, the Salvation Army and the Roman Catholic Church find resonance between this assertion in *TCTCV* and their own ecclesiological understanding. In their response, the Roman Catholic Church indicates that

30. *CRTC 1*, 215.

31. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 2, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, Faith and Order Paper No. 232 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 287. Henceforth, *CRTC 2*.

32. *CRTC 1*, 233.

33. *CRTC 1*, 41.

34. *CRTC 1*, 138.

“*Koinonia* is the source of the life and mission of the Church; it impels Christians to be a sign of such *koinonia* for the world.”³⁵

The Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council affirms what they describe as “the strong emphasis on the mission of the church.” They agree that “Christian unity is an imperative of faith in the service of more effective mission to God’s reconciling love. We see mission as most effective when it is carried out locally, and beyond, as practically as possible; this often results in working jointly with other churches.”³⁶

The Baptist World Alliance sees as a “second notable advance [of *TCTCV*] beyond *BEM* is the way *TCTCV* roots the unity of the church in the unity of the Triune God.”³⁷

Evangelization/evangelism

The Roman Catholic Church urges that evangelization be understood as involving “a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. To evangelize is to shape a personal, intimate discipleship with the Lord. Encountering Christ, and being transformed by His love, will enable his disciples to authentically encounter their neighbours in their hope and needs and to offer credible witness to the world in justice, solidarity and charity.”³⁸

This perspective is shared by the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation, which expresses appreciation for the mission emphasis of the text and observes, “We affirm the emphasis throughout the text on the responsibility of the Church to follow Christ’s command to make disciples of all nations (cf. Mt. 28:19). The proclamation of the Gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ through restored communion with God, other human beings and the creation is a joyful privilege.” The Orthodox churches argue that “the evangelization of God’s people, but also of those who do not believe in Christ, constitutes the supreme duty of the Church.” They cautioned, however that, “this duty must not be fulfilled in an aggressive manner” or through proselytism, but with respect for each person and their cultural particularity. They felt “challenged by this document to be faithful to [their] own missionary theology and heritage.”³⁹

The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) warns against conflating the Church and the kingdom of God because the Church, which is

35. *CRTC* 2, 172.

36. *CRTC* 1, 226.

37. *CRTC* 2, 287.

38. *CRTC* 2, 276.

39. *CRTC* 2, 18.

itself a venue for God's mission, will also be subject to judgment when the kingdom comes. The CPCE argues for stronger articulation of partnership in mission. It criticizes *TCTCV* for lacking constructive references to social actors and social systems.⁴⁰

Bilateral dialogues

The 2014 Report of the Anglican-Methodist Dialogue reflects themes similar to those in *TCTCV*. The interrelatedness of mission and unity is amply considered in the report. Both communions regard visible unity in a common mission as the goal: "The churches of the Anglican and the Methodist world communions are both fully committed to the twin biblical imperatives of mission and unity. Both communions recognize that these two imperatives cannot be separated, but must be held together. In adopting this approach, both of our communions are acknowledging that there is an inseparable connection between unity and mission in biblical theology."⁴¹

The Report on the Baptist-Catholic Dialogue shares a similar conviction.

The universal communion of the church of Jesus Christ may be aptly called "catholic." Catholicity, deriving from a Greek word meaning "wholeness" or "inclusiveness," is to be understood both as the fullness of God's self-manifestation in Christ and as the final destination of the gospel message in reaching and transforming all people. Catholicity is thus not a static possession of the church but is actively sought in the mission of evangelization, which aims at the proclamation and reception of the fullness of the gospel throughout time and space.⁴²

Conclusion

A number of missiological ecumenical affirmations have emerged in the Faith and Order Commission's engagement with the theological theme of mission, beginning with *BEM* in 1982 and continuing to *TCTCV* in 2013 and beyond. Among these is the rootedness of the mission of the Church in the God's design for the world. The Church's mission is the mission of God, issuing from the love

40. *CRTC* 2, 270.

41. *Into All the World: Being and Becoming Apostolic Churches: A Report to the Anglican Consultative Council and the World Methodist Council by the Anglican-Methodist International Commission for Unity in Mission* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 2014).

42. "The Word of God in the Life of the Church: A Report of International Conversations between The Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance, 2006–2010," *American Baptist Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2012), 28–122.

and concern of God for the whole world. Mission is the primary imperative in the life of the Church, which is sign and servant of God's mission to the world. Mission flows from the nature of the Church and is not merely one task among many entrusted to the Church. *Koinonia* is both the mission and the goal of the Church, that is, a unity among and between churches which reflects the nature of the triune God. Through participation in the sacraments, the Church is nurtured for mission and is enabled to relive its mission to extend Christ's salvation to the world.

A consensus has emerged around an understanding of mission as service to the world by demonstrating mercy and transforming unjust economic, social, and political structures, as well as by proclaiming the gospel for the purposes of evangelism. There is both an appreciation of the urgency of mission to the whole world and a caution for the exercise of contextual and cultural sensitivity as the Church engages in mission in various places. That task is the responsibility of the whole people of God, who have been equipped and empowered by the Holy Spirit at baptism for mission engagement.

Despite the broad agreement on many issues, many of the responses express disappointment that a stronger focus on mission is not embedded in the text of *TCTCV*. They suggest that churches working together in the mission of God may be the most viable route to visible unity. That call may account for the loud cry coming from many of the responses for further work and greater elaboration of chapter 4 of *TCTCV*.

Coalescing around the theme of mission has emerged as a viable approach toward visible unity, one in which the churches are prepared to engage in respectful dialogue. Highlighting this theme may well be a task of Faith and Order, as the relationship between unity and mission is further considered and elaborated.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Church: In and for the World

Stephanie Dietrich

Introduction

Traditionally, ecclesiological study documents from the Commission on Faith and Order have focused above all on doctrinal aspects of the Church's internal life—the sacraments, the Church as *communio sanctorum* or *koinonia*, and the Church's ordering of ministries. These questions are of great importance when pursuing our ecumenical vision and goal, the unity of the body of Christ. Simultaneously, Faith and Order is concerned about the question of how this unity in faith and order is embodied in the life of the churches and the people, how it is practiced, how it is constituted, and what it implies. How can the search for unity be a source of renewal for both the Christian Church and the whole creation? What does our work related to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation teach us about the nature of the Church? What does the theological perception of the Church teach us about our life in the world?

An important development in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (TCTCV)¹ is the inclusion of chapter 4, “The Church: In and for the World.” This concluding chapter reflects the growing awareness that the Church's heavenly and earthly body and its presence in *and* beyond human life need to be contemplated in reciprocity and inseparability. As TCTCV's conclusion states: “There is a growing consensus that *koinonia*, as communion with the Holy Trinity, is manifested in three interrelated ways: unity in faith, unity in sacramental life, and unity in service (in all its forms, including ministry and

1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Henceforth, TCTCV.

mission).”² This paragraph also quotes John Chrysostom who “spoke about two altars: one in the church and the other among the poor, the suffering and those in distress.”

“The Church: In and for the World” emphasizes that the development of ecclesiology does not just involve application of ecclesiological reflections to the concrete life of the Church. Rather, the life of the Church in the world is interwoven with the life of the Church as *koinonia* in word and sacrament, based in the triune God’s own identity as divine love, and in God’s plan for the transformation of the whole creation. The Church is called to serve because God has served the world through God’s own Son, his incarnation and service, his death and resurrection. By serving the world and human beings, the Church fulfills its task of bearing witness to God’s reconciliation, healing, and transformation of the cosmos.

The chapter begins by highlighting that “service (*diakonia*) belongs to the very being of the church.”³ It emphasizes that God is love, and that God’s primary attitude to the world is love toward every human being and the whole creation. Based on this emphasis on God’s very identity as love, it states: “The Church was intended by God, not for its own sake, but to serve the divine plan for transformation of the world.”⁴ Our theology about the Church must be shaped by the way we seek to live out the gospel toward our fellow human beings, in our societies and in the world. The promotion of justice and peace is understood as a constitutive aspect of evangelization. Chapter 4 also mentions religious pluralism, the moral challenge of the gospel, and the role of the Church in society.

“The Church: In and for the World” is the least developed chapter in *TCTCV*. It is only the beginning of a reflection within Faith and Order on the mutual reciprocity of the Church’s faith and her life as indivisible and mutually enriching aspects. Many responses to *TCTCV* underline the importance of this chapter, but also the need for further work on this way of doing ecclesiology.

Earlier Work within Faith and Order on Ethics and Ecclesiology

The theme of “the church in and for the world” is not new within the framework of Faith and Order. Within the context of the WCC, the program on

2. *TCTCV*, §67.

3. *TCTCV*, §58.

4. *TCTCV*, §58.

ecclesiology and ethics, mounted in the 1990s, is ongoing. The key texts of earlier stages make clear that ecclesiology and ethics are inseparable, because Christian ethical engagement and the nature and purpose of the Church are mutually and integrally interrelated.⁵ The Church is, according to these reports, a site of moral formation and discernment. The texts see our ethical formation and the Christian's life in the world as rooted in our baptismal union with the death and resurrection of Christ. At its heart, the Christian life is grounded in the celebration of the eucharist, where we are conformed to God's pattern of salvation in Jesus Christ and share the life in the Spirit. Responsible involvement and engagement with the civil societies in which we live is a consequence of the Church's call to be a moral community. This work continues in Faith and Order's working group on ethics and moral discernment presented in *Churches and Moral Discernment: Facilitating Dialogue to Build Koinonia*.⁶

These WCC documents are significant attempts to provide arguments for holding together the Faith and Order movement and the Life and Work movement, two central orientations of what the Church is or is intended to be. These reports do not explore in which ways ecclesiology as elaborated by Faith and Order might more fully include the Church's role in the world. They do clearly point to a need to do so. *TCTCV's* Chapter 4 is thus an attempt to follow this call to develop an understanding of the Church as it is situated in and for the world. The theme "Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace" has shaped the work of the WCC since the last assembly in Busan, South Korea, in 2013, as it moves toward the next assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany. The term *pilgrimage* makes an integral link between the ecclesial character and work of the WCC and Faith and Order on the one hand, and the work for justice and peace as an essential part of the ecumenical endeavor on the other.

5. *Koinonia and Justice, Peace and Creation: Costly Unity*, Presentations and Reports from the World Council of Churches' Consultation in Rønne, Denmark, February 1993, ed. Thomas F. Best and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993); *Costly Commitment: Ecclesiology and Ethics*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), and *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).

6. See the recent studies: *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document*, Faith and Order Paper No. 215 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013); *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 3: Facilitating Dialogue to Build Koinonia*, Faith and Order Paper No. 235 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021); *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 1: Learning from Traditions*, Faith and Order Paper No. 228, ed. Myriam Wijlens and Vladimir Shmaliy (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021); *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 2: Learning from History*, ed. Myriam Wijlens, Vladimir Shmaliy, and Simone Sinn, Faith and Order Paper No. 229 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021).

Responses to *TCTCV*

Many, but far from all, responses comment on chapter 4. Some consider it explicitly, underscoring the importance of the Church's mission and service to its fundamental being. Some responses comment indirectly on the chapter by criticizing *TCTCV* for not being grounded in lived reality and thus more or less irrelevant for them. Overall, most responses do not understand the chapter as a sufficient effort to include this experiential dimension of being church in our ecclesiological work.

In the following, I will comment on several of the responses that explicitly address chapter 4 or the chapter's overarching theme.

Responses strongly welcoming chapter 4, with some requests for further exploration within the context of Faith and Order's ecclesiological studies

The Focolare Movement, concerned about the "dialogue of life" as a mark of its identity, points to the utmost importance of the chapter, while at the same time calling out its shortcomings. They note the importance to ecclesiology of a fully reciprocal relationship between lived experience and ecclesiological insights: "The Christian presence in society is not limited just to *diakonia*, to service, to overcoming the innumerable forms of poverty and of exclusion, to promoting peace, justice and the care of creation, but also (almost by an osmosis process) . . . it introduces into society the potential for communion, mutuality and sharing that could animate and renew all the dimensions of everyday living."⁷ In the view of Focolare, a "dialogue of life" as a lifestyle could lead toward greater reception of the gift of full visible unity even while the churches struggle with the "not yet" of full communion.⁸ The response from the Focolare Movement, like the response from the Ecumenical Meeting Ain-Savoie-Haute-Savoie, suggests that chapter 4 could be both the basis and an instrument of the churches' move toward unity.⁹

The Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation notes positively that *TCTCV* connects mission and unity: this is a specific Orthodox concern. The consultation emphasizes the importance of service

7. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 1, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, Faith and Order Paper No. 231 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 245. Henceforth, *CRTC 1*.

8. *CRTC 1*, 246.

9. *CRTC 1*, 338–9.

(*diakonia*) in mission and calls for deeper theological reflection on *diakonia*, lest the Christian Church be reduced to a diaconal organization.¹⁰

The response of the International Old Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Union of Utrecht particularly welcomes "the document's underlining of the church's mission and service in the world, understanding the church as 'sign and servant' of God's kingdom," as well as *TCTCV*'s attempt to stress the contextuality of ecclesiological approaches.¹¹ This response suggests that "the possibility of speaking out together in society and practically working together in the service for the world" might represent a basis for growth in unity among the churches beyond formal recognition of doctrinal convergence and agreement. The response underlines the need for this church to relate its ecclesiology more strongly to contemporary challenges.¹²

In the same way, the Association of Mennonite Congregations in Germany states: "For us, this service of the church(es) in the world is not only a consequence of faith, but belongs to the essence of the Church. Thus, for us shared witness in ethical questions is just as relevant for, and is perhaps a more important sign of, the unity of the church as the mutual recognition of ministries."¹³

The Salvation Army affirms strongly *TCTCV*'s emphasis on the role of the Church in and for the world. They find this chapter very much in accordance with their basic principle: "The responsibility of the Church to proclaim words of hope and comfort stands alongside an obligation to offer practical assistance, and to become a voice for the voiceless, to stand in solidarity with those who suffer, and to care for the marginalized."¹⁴ Thus, an emphasis on the Church's life in and for the world can also serve as an instrument of church unity among churches and traditions which still fundamentally disagree on issues of ecclesial faith and order. The theology and tradition of the Salvation Army focuses on *koinonia* resting upon service and proclamation rather than on the sacraments.¹⁵

The Methodist Church in Britain expresses their fundamental agreement with chapter 4, deepening and applying its understanding of challenges related

10. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 2, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, Faith and Order Paper No. 232, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 24. Henceforth, *CRTC* 2.

11. *CRTC* 1, 215.

12. *CRTC* 1, 216.

13. *CRTC* 2, 4.

14. *CRTC* 1, 79–80.

15. *CRTC* 1, 81.

to religious pluralism and moral questions in relation to their own context. They find *TCTCV*'s understanding of the Church's role in society in basic agreement with their own: "We recognize in this brief description of the church's role in society many of the same emphases that John Wesley summed up in terms of Methodism's vocation to scriptural holiness and reform of the nation."¹⁶

The Scottish Episcopal Church (SEC) "particularly welcomes the emphasis on shared mission articulated in *TCTCV*, and the recognition that shared mission and theological conversation are essentially related and that both can contribute to a deepening of communion."¹⁷ The SEC positively acknowledges *TCTCV*'s emphasis on mission as *missio dei* and chapter 4's exploration of the role of the Church in and for the world. The unity of the Church is, according to the SEC, revealed both when churches work together in their mission and ministry, and when they engage in theological work relating to questions of faith and order.¹⁸

The Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church expresses appreciation for this chapter by underlining the importance of a contextual and local presence of the Church. "The church moves toward fuller, richer and wholesome human and ecological experiences and values by working in relationship with other religious communities." Dialogue with other religious traditions is thus decisive when addressing local challenges and struggles, through exploring "ways of relating faith and reality leading to praxis. . . . The *ecclesia* . . . needs to transform its own life as it engages in the transformation of the local spaces in the eager anticipation of the reign of God. What are the transforming positions which the *ecclesia* has to make for itself and local spaces, and what is the relation between human struggles, issues of life and *ecclesia*?"¹⁹

Affirmation of chapter 4 can also be found in the responses by the United Protestant Church of France, the Vermont Ecumenical Council and Bible Society, the International Ecumenical Fellowship, the North American Academy of Ecumenists, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, the Church of Sweden, the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council, the Union of Welsh Independent Churches, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the Christian Council of Sweden, the Faculty of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Waterloo, Canada, and the Uniting Church in Australia.²⁰

16. *TCTCV*, §§64–66; *CRTC 1*, 26.

17. *CRTC 1*, 29.

18. *CRTC 1*, 31.

19. *CRTC 1*, 85.

20. *CRTC 1*, 68, 224–5, 313, 323–4, 103–4, 113, 227, 186; *CRTC 2*, 14–5, 232, 323, 96.

Responses asking for a closer connection between TCTCV chapter 4 and chapters 1–3

The Church of Scotland welcomes *TCTCV*'s "trinitarian flow," which supports the "holding together God's work and God's relationship with the world and all creation."²¹ Their main criticism of *TCTCV* is that the reality of the Church in the world, as addressed in chapter 4, is not integrated in *TCTCV* right from the beginning. In their view, *TCTCV* does not sufficiently recognize that the Church is a body *in via*: "There is too much emphasis on unity based around an invisible concept."²² This response argues that separating Church and society makes it more possible to marginalize the Church in secular society.²³

Responses with specific suggestions for further deepening of chapter 4 themes

The Standing Commission of the Church in Wales acknowledges the importance of chapter 4, especially its reference to the needy and marginalized. They ask for further reflection on antisemitism and on the relation between ecclesial life and ethics.²⁴ The main challenge to the WCC is to relate environmental issues explicitly to the doctrine of the Church. "There has of course been study by the WCC on eco-justice, but it is important that this substantial ethical work is incorporated into the ecumenical discussion of ecclesiology, and related to the doctrine of salvation." A specific challenge lies in relating sacramental theology to environmental ethics.²⁵

The response of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) highlights the coherence between Lutheran ecclesiology—with its emphasis on word and sacrament and the interconnectedness between faith and love in Christ—and *TCTCV* chapter 4. "Thus, *diakonia* and mission belong to the essence of the church as the body of Christ."²⁶ The ELCF emphasizes specifically that Faith and Order ecclesiology and *TCTCV* would have gained from articulating more clearly the essential place that the integrity of creation has in the concept of *koinonia*.²⁷ The ELCF also stresses that new experiences in Finnish society, such as welcoming migrants and migrant churches, call the church to a new way of ecclesiological thinking. Changing circumstances in society

21. *CRTC* 1, 2.

22. *CRTC* 1, 4.

23. *CRTC* 1, 8.

24. *CRTC* 1, 62, 63–64.

25. *CRTC* 1, 63.

26. *CRTC* 1, 119.

27. *CRTC* 1, 123–4.

demand new approaches to theology and ecclesiology. This church asks Faith and Order to discern new ways of ecumenical work where global interaction is an integral part of a more multiform ecumenical methodology.²⁸ This is underlined similarly in the response of the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom.²⁹

The Methodist Church in Ireland underscores the necessity of reflecting on the role of culture in ecumenical ecclesiology, thereby avoiding an ecclesiology which is “too abstract and idealistic, insufficiently grounded in the practical experience of historical churches and their social context.”³⁰ They highlight contrition, forgiveness and healing within and between communities as a decisive part of the effort to seek Church unity, in addition to working toward theological affirmations.³¹

The Church of Norway highlights the importance of chapter 4, but complains that it is not integrated into the whole document. “The Synod would have liked to see a stronger coherence between chapter 4 and the previous chapters, hoping that this is a challenge that the Commission on Faith and Order can take up, clearly bringing in perspectives from the global South.”³²

The Christian Council of Norway is concerned about the churches and voices which are not present in *TCTCV*, pointing to the growing church reality outside the traditional church families dominant in the work of Faith and Order.³³ The Council’s Norwegian Theological Dialogue Forum asks how these voices can be included in Faith and Order’s work as equal participants: “How can the church in the best way possible be a voice for the voiceless in a world that bears so many wounds? At this point, it is vital that the church describe itself accurately. The church can never be a *we*, who are going to help *them* (the poor). The poor, voiceless, and marginalized. . . are a part of the *we* of the church.”³⁴

The Uniting Church in Sweden calls for an integration of chapters 1–3 and chapter 4 so that mission and service is “chapter one in the ecumenical movement’s search for a common vision of the Church of Jesus Christ.”³⁵ Asking for

28. *CRTC 1*, 127.

29. *CRTC 1*, 201.

30. *CRTC 1*, 141.

31. *CRTC 1*, 142.

32. *CRTC 2*, 43.

33. *CRTC 1*, 236–7.

34. *CRTC 1*, 238.

35. *CRTC 2*, 30.

a new and radically kenotic ecclesiology, they exclaim: "If we are to reach a common vision of the church, an ecumenical ecclesiology, then we need to focus upon our poor and suffering Savior. He has been on the side of the poor and those we call the marginalized. If we are somewhere else, he is asking us why we are not where he is."³⁶

In his response to *TCTCV*, the Baptist theological scholar Paul S. Fiddes urges greater focus on *koinonia* not only as a core concept for doctrinal discourse, but also as an all-encompassing concept, which might help to solve the disagreements noted in chapter 4.³⁷

Responses explicitly critical of *TCTCV* and its treatment of the role of the Church in the world

The Theological Committee of the Church of Greece notes that in *TCTCV* the approach to "the relation of the Church with the world and the contemporary problems of the human being . . . is very limited and its theological background is insufficient." They ask for an integration of the "eucharistic vision of Lima" into the considerations on the Church's role in and for the world.³⁸

The Evangelical Theological Faculty, Leuven, Belgium, finds chapter 4 to be a disappointment. "We dare to challenge the Faith and Order Commission to broaden its team when the time is ripe to reconsider the final chapter. We believe that an ecumenical examination of the role of the church in society would profit enormously if not only theologians and clergy, but also Christian economists, sociologists, and entrepreneurs were actively involved in the discussions and the writing process."³⁹

The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) appreciates the inclusion of chapter 4 in principle, but finds it insufficient in that the statements there are "vague and undifferentiated. . . . [They] not only have little substance, but are downright counterproductive." Further, the chapter "lack[s] a constructive reference to other social actors (or social systems), for example the sciences or politics."⁴⁰ The understanding of Church and society should "encourag[e] Christians to actively and constructively participate in developing and deepening participatory social conditions based on the rule of law, and to assume social and political responsibility" in solidarity with other elements of

36. *CRTC* 2, 28.

37. *CRTC* 2, 301–2.

38. *CRTC* 2, 314.

39. *CRTC* 2, 343.

40. *CRTC* 2, 271.

society.⁴¹ This approach is supported by the response of the Evangelical Church in Baden.⁴²

The Roman Catholic Church comments on the chapter through the lens of its doctrinal sources, and finds it to be too brief.⁴³ At the same time, it affirms the profoundly “positive approach towards the world in which the Church finds itself,” emphasizing *gaudium* (joy) as an adequate starting point for the discussion of the Church’s role in the world.⁴⁴ Jesus’s message about the kingdom is the framework for Christian social involvement.⁴⁵ The mission of the Church should be seen as holistic and multidimensional, including a necessary interaction of *diakonia* (service), *martyria* (witness) and *leitourgia* (worship and liturgy).⁴⁶ The Roman Catholic Church basically agrees with the chapter on the need for the Church to serve the dignity, well-being, and happiness of human beings as integral to the Church’s identity.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Based on the responses, there seems to be a need for further reflection on how the relation of Church and world impacts our understanding and interpretation of classical ecclesiological themes such as ordained ministry, sacramental theology, *koinonia*/communion ecclesiology, and, reciprocally, how these themes impact our view of the doctrinal understanding of the Church. This also means taking fuller account of more experientially-oriented theological approaches, as well as those that emphasize the normative and decisive role of tradition.

The churches clearly find the topics of *TCTCV* chapter 4 to be essential to a common vision of the Church. They ask for a greater integration with classical ecclesiological topics, and for a more central importance of the important topics of mission and the relation of the church to the world.

41. *CRTC* 2, 271.

42. *CRTC* 2, 109–110.

43. *CRTC* 2, 206.

44. *CRTC* 2, 200.

45. *CRTC* 2, 201.

46. *CRTC* 2, 208.

47. *CRTC* 2, 207.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sacraments and Sacramentality of the Church

Bishop Maxim (Vasiljević)

Introduction

Sacramentality is one of the basic features of the Church, according to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*.¹ In chapter 3, “The Church: Growing in Communion,” *TCTCV* places the sacraments in section B.² There are numerous references to sacraments and sacramentality there. This section lays out the three essential elements required for communion: faith, sacraments, ministry. Sacraments are treated methodically in §§40–44.³ *TCTCV* clarifies that “the word *sacrament* (a translation of the Greek word *mysterion*) indicates that God’s saving work is communicated in the action of the rite, whilst the term *ordinance* emphasizes that the action of the rite is performed in obedience to Christ’s word and example. These two positions have often been seen as mutually opposed.”⁴

1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Henceforth, *TCTCV*.

2. *TCTCV*, §§37–57.

3. Interestingly, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland holds that “the chapter dealing with sacraments adds nothing essential to the progress already articulated in the document *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* [Faith and Order Paper No. 111], (1982), the compilation *Harvesting the Fruits* [Cardinal Walter Kasper, comp., Continuum International Publishing Group], (2009) and the document *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition* [Faith and Order Paper No. 210], (2011).” *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 1, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, Faith and Order Paper No. 231 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 122. Henceforth, CRTC 1.

4. *TCTCV*, §44. The English word *sacrament* is derived indirectly from the ecclesiastical Latin *sacramentum*, from Latin *sacrō* (“hallow, consecrate”), from *sacer* (“sacred, holy”). This, in turn, is derived from the Greek New Testament word *mysterion* (hence, “sacred mystery,” or Святые Тайны in Slavonic).

It is a shared Christian perspective that the Church must be conceived as the place where human beings can get a taste of their eternal eschatological destiny, which is communion in God's very life. It is God's design to "gather humanity and all of creation into communion under the Lordship of Jesus Christ," and the Church is meant to serve this goal and help people attain it.⁵ If we accept the Church as the sacrament that intends to offer this taste, then we must recognize the same thing in the particular sacraments and, furthermore, relate them to the requirements of the trinitarian way of existence. That the Church is a sacrament is evident from the sentence which sees it as an effective sign and instrument of "the communion of human beings with one another through their communion in the Triune God."⁶ Therefore, the whole of the so-called sacramental life of the Church, revolving around the eucharist, has that purpose in view: to place the human being in an existential, ontological relationship with God, with other people, and with the material world.

Consequently, it is important to see how churches all over the world understand the concept of the sacramentality of the Church.

Acceptance; Reservations

Saluting the synthesis offered by *TCTCV*, an appreciation is expressed by some for the idea of the Church as sacrament, "while recognizing that such terminology is foreign to some Christians and that the understanding of what a sacrament is varies among Christians."⁷ As the responses indicate, sacramentality is

5. *TCTCV*, §25.

6. *TCTCV*, §27.

7. Canadian Council of Churches, in *CCRTC 1*. Also, the Church of Sweden states: "The text can serve as an invitation to study the meaning of expressions that are experienced as unfamiliar, such as the understanding of the church as a sacrament. Such a study could lead to the conclusion that a new concept expresses a consensus" (*CRTC 1*, 112). Note, too, the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council's response: "Many Disciples are unfamiliar with the concept of the church as 'sacrament.' . . . There is much food for thought in the challenge to consider this language of 'church as sacrament' as we think about, and teach about, baptism and the Lord's supper, and to continue to explore the riches of God's work in us as we take part in these acts of worship and obedience" (*CRTC 1*, 266). The North Carolina Council of Churches holds that "the commission offers what is an essential image of Church for many Roman Catholics while it remains problematic for some denominations. . . . In the very paragraph in which we see both areas of convergence as well as divergent views on the notion of the Church as Sacrament, we see that the commission calls for the Church to reach out to those who are not explicitly members of the Church" (*Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 2, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, Faith and Order Paper No. 232 [Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021], 260–1, henceforth *CRTC 2*).

welcomed among the three essential elements of the Church (faith, sacraments, ministry). “Liturgical renewal emerging from ecumenical dialogue about the sacraments resonated with us,” declares the Joint Commission on Doctrine of the Church of Scotland–Roman Catholic Church.⁸ “We respond positively to the balanced way in which the use or non-use of the term ‘the church as sacrament’ is explained and the reassurances that open up the possibility of finding legitimate differences of formulation compatible and mutually acceptable.”⁹ Some responses indicate that churches expect “to see more discussion on sacraments and sacramentality.” The Methodist Church in Ireland believes that the word and sacraments are both of central importance in the life of the Church; yet the emphasis in its life and worship has more often been on the word: “This text reminds us of the sacramental nature of the Church and the way in which sacraments bind us together with Christ and with each other.”¹⁰

TCTCV affirms the biblical and creedal foundation and the sacramental life of the churches as fundamental to their existence.¹¹ The Scottish Episcopal Church welcomes this, especially “the way that *TCTCV* seeks to articulate the underlying issues, for instance the discussion as to whether sacraments are instrumental or expressive.”¹² It is obvious, as the Council of Churches in the Netherlands suggests, that “not all traditions celebrate the sacraments.”¹³ A number of responses suggest that “the underlying theology of the document is what we would call ‘high church’, sacramental theology.”¹⁴ Some churches would identify with this, but some would not. (This happens even within a particular church, such as the Church of Scotland.)¹⁵

8. *CRTC* 2, 375.

9. Church of Scotland (*CRTC* 1, 7).

10. *CRTC* 1, 140.

11. See, for example, *TCTCV*, §§5, 11–12, 22, 39, 40–44.

12. *CRTC* 1, 31–2.

13. *CRTC* 2, 241. The response clarifies, “Whereas, for instance, sacraments are pivotal within the Orthodox tradition, other traditions (including part of the Evangelical Movement) show a quite spiritualistic character. But even where the immediate experience of the Holy Spirit is central, believers participate in acts and rites in which people can experience God’s presence. The question is to what extent sacramental ecclesiology can provide space to all manifestations of God’s presence” (*CRTC* 2, 241).

14. *CRTC* 1, 4.

15. “In our Reformed tradition we have inherited the high sacramental theology of the Reformers. While the divine presence is acknowledged in all parts of our worship service, this is not always highlighted in our tradition. Acknowledgement of that presence in services where the sacrament is not celebrated was set out well in the eucharist section of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* and we are pleased to see it reiterated here (§16)” (*CRTC* 1, 7).

The Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation appreciates “the use of biblical language for the Church as people of God, Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit, as well as the fundamental criteria of faith and sacraments of initiation to become members of this Body.”¹⁶ However, they also state that “not enough emphasis is given to the fact that the unity of the Church is achieved and maintained through the confession of one and the same apostolic faith, participation in the sacraments, and apostolic succession.”¹⁷

The Church of Ireland states that the expression “Church as sacrament” should be used with ecumenical sensitivity: “We understand what is meant—that is, that the Church is an effective sign of God’s presence in the world—but we can also see that for various reasons others may find difficulty with the expression.”¹⁸ The International Ecumenical Fellowship “considers it important to bring to attention some shortcomings of the document. The reader is confronted over and over again with passages that acknowledge the remaining differences between the churches in very many important questions,” among them, “that the Church as a sacrament is not universally accepted (§27).”¹⁹ Some point out “the heavy sacramental tone of *TCTCV* along formal ecclesial lines.”²⁰ The Christian Council of Norway remarks that “at many points in the document, other formulations would have served to provide a broader representation of the churches and their various ways of expressing ecclesiology. It is our impression that the mainline churches, with their focus on the sacraments, have influenced the document in such a way that the broader spectrum of churches (that NTSF [the Norwegian Theological Dialogue Forum] represents) have difficulty in seeing the documents as fully representative or relevant.”²¹ According to the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, “based on the Protestant definition of the Church in the multiplicity of churches, this [catholicity] is the presence of the triune God and particularly Jesus Christ as the head

16. It should be noted that the Moscow Patriarchate, Russian Orthodox Church, in a separate response, expressed many concerns. See *CRTC 1*, 133–6.

17. *CRTC 2*, 20.

18. *CRTC 2*, 143. Encompassing both the practice and function is important for the French informal ecumenical group, which offers another echo from its discussions: “It does not seem that the problem has to do with the sacramental function of the Church (it is a fact in its practice and function). But the subject becomes thornier when one rushes to define the Church’s being as sacramental, because then it makes salvation not what the Church can offer, but what it fundamentally is. It is not clear here if what is at issue is only a difference in formulation, as the paragraph in italics ‘The expression, “the Church as sacrament” would suggest’ (*CRTC 1*, 328).

19. *CRTC 1*, 309.

20. Dr Prof. Edmund J. Rybarczyk (*CRTC 1*, 333).

21. *CRTC 1*, 236.

of the Church, in word and sacrament at every Christian service celebrated in the name of the triune God.”²²

It is noticed by some that “there is variation between the churches in their desire to express the Church as being sacrament. Those who do, see the Church as an effective sign and means (*instrument*) of communion with each other and with the triune God. This is a potential area for further exploration and learning as churches learn from each other.”²³ The Finnish Ecumenical Council indicates that “the document exemplifies a particular kind of ecumenical ecclesiology that is more recognizable to those more experienced in the ecumenical movement than for those who have joined in more recently (for example, the Pentecostal movement, free churches etc.).”²⁴ It seems that some responses were fruits of a meticulous work: the Vermont Ecumenical Council and Bible Society, for example, noted that “our committee worked through this document over the course of six months.”²⁵ For the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, the question of the Church’s sacramentality is not compatible with Protestant ecclesiology “which emphasizes Christ as the center from which all else unfolds.”²⁶ The insistence of certain responses on a clear-cut distinction between Christ and the Church represents a problem for the traditional churches: it presupposes an individualistic understanding of Christ. Yet, Christ is not the spiritual being who incorporates all in himself, if he is not the First-born among many brothers or of creation, of whom Colossians and Ephesians speak. Therefore the “one” (Christ) without the “many” (Church) would be an individual who is not touched by the Spirit of communion.

TCTCV bridges successfully various theological discourses. A good example of this is the discussion on sacraments and ordinances. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America states, “We appreciate the inclusion of divergent views of ‘sacraments’ and ‘ordinances,’ and a recognition that the *sacrament* ‘indicates God’s saving work’ (§44),” since “this resonates with our own tradition and understanding of God’s word as a visible ‘sign’ in Article XIII of the Augsburg Confession.”²⁷ All this bears particular significance for the understanding of the Church as a visible sign of God’s grace. “Canadian Anglicans

22. *CRTC* 2, 274.

23. South Australia Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches (*CRTC* 1, 343).

24. *CRTC* 2, 225.

25. *CRTC* 1, 223.

26. *CRTC* 1, 145.

27. *CRTC* 2, 13. Note that all section numbers, e.g., §44 above, refer to *TCTCV* unless a citation indicates otherwise.

also strongly agree with the conviction expressed in *TCTCV* that ecclesial communion cannot refer to an invisible or spiritual reality alone; it is something that requires *visible* marks in order to be recognized.”²⁸ For the Faculty of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary in Canada, “sacraments are central to a Lutheran understanding of the church. . . . A sacrament is a tangible, physical expression of God’s grace. Such an understanding may also provide a useful way of understanding the nature and public ministry of the church.”²⁹

Can the realm of sacrament and mystery enable sacramental and episcopal churches to relate and interact fruitfully with churches that are neither? Such a question comes from the National Council of Churches in Denmark: “In our contemporary situation, where numerous new and dynamic ecclesial fellowships emerge especially in the Global South—often rich in experience and healings, centered around charismatic and prophetic figures—we suggest that our task is *to explore how our sacramental and episcopal churches might relate and interact fruitfully with fellowships and groups*. Rather than formalizing episcopal structures, we suggest an attempt to spell out in concrete ways what it means to be responsible in relation to each other as churches.”³⁰

The idea of healing (that was also attached to baptism from the early times of the Church) reveals the sacramental dimension in connection to human feebleness.³¹

28. *CRTC* 2, 46. See also the view of Faculty of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Waterloo, Ontario: “The Lutheran reformers affirmed that the ‘*Una Sancta*,’ one holy church, was the ‘*communio sanctorum*’ or the “community of saints” of all who believed, and not just of those who were formal members of temporal ecclesiastical organizations. Insofar as this ‘community of saints’ is ‘*corpus Christi*,’ united by faith in Jesus Christ alone through grace, there exists a unity that transcends and precedes that of the ecclesiastical ‘earthen vessels’ of denominational churches. Manifesting the visible proximate unity of this invisible divinely ordained unity is an important and always imperative undertaking” (*CRTC* 2, 318).

29. *CRTC* 2, 323. “Can such a public sacramental theology allow for different perspectives on the nature of “*communio sanctorum*” as sacrament in society? In fact, the Church is called to be a community where worship is a public demonstration of a new order of social relationships, characterized not by friendliness but by respect and a certain expectation of difference” (*CRTC* 2, 324).

30. *CRTC* 2, 248. Italics added.

31. The First Church of Christ, Scientist states: “Healing as Christian Scientists understand it is God’s love experienced. It is as significant for Christian practice as it is prominent in the gospel record. In Jesus’ healing ministry, the spiritual and the practical were indivisible; the Word was ‘made flesh’ in the meeting of human need. In this perspective, the prayer or communion with God that heals is not marginal to Christian life. It is, in the deepest sense, an inner experience of ‘sacrament’ through which the presence and actuality of God are known” (*CRTC* 2, 90).

Some evangelical churches, as indicated in an Evangelical response, have “learnt that as evangelicals *we tend to underestimate in how many ways grace is mediated to us* and how crucial the church and our fellow believers are in that regard. Looking more closely at *the sections in The Church on the sacraments, there was a general appreciation of the paragraphs on baptism*. In our estimation, they are written in unison and quite straightforwardly and they are biblically informed.”³²

On this point, two hopeful signs are emerging ecumenically. First, churches that have sacraments as an essential aspect realize that the question of presidency of the sacraments must take into account charismatic and/or lay ministry in unity with the community.³³ Second, churches that traditionally have rejected sacraments, or see them as not indispensable,³⁴ are considering the need for a ministry of oversight (or *episkopé*) as an essential part of ecclesial unity.³⁵

Mysterion (Mystery) and/or Sacrament: Ambiguity of the Terms

While churches with longer historical traditions see the use of the word sacrament for Church as very fitting, some churches hesitate to view “the church as

32. Evangelical Theological Faculty, Leuven, Belgium (CRTC 2, 338). Italics added.

33. The Uniting Church in Australia notes: “This broad agreement can be a basis for growth in unity, although the questions of who can preside at the church’s sacraments remains a significant barrier to greater unity between churches. We recognize that our practice of allowing, in certain circumstances, lay presidency at the church’s sacraments presents an obstacle to other churches with whom we would seek to be in closer communion. We would observe that the issue of ‘who’ presides at sacraments is tied both to what presiders and people are doing (for example, who calls the Spirit), and the issue of how we describe the ‘local’ church and its relationship to those who provide oversight. We believe that it would be helpful for further work to be done on these inter-related issues” (CRTC 2, 95).

34. The Salvation Army comments: “However, there are also divergences, which mean that aspects of the above are understood differently from other parts of the church, and this understanding and its associated practice, for some, may place The Salvation Army beyond the scope of ‘legitimate diversity.’ For example, the conviction that *sacramental living and the possibility of a holy life do not require the institution of formal sacraments may be seen to be some to be divisive, or disqualifying* [italics added]” (CRTC 1, 77).

35. Ecumenical Forum for Catholicity: “Responsibility for mission on behalf of Christ takes form in ordained ministry within the church. *Ordained ministry may therefore be called sacramental*. In the early church, these ordained ministries guaranteed its authenticity, and the apostolicity of the church was linked to its catholicity in this way” (CRTC 2, 352–3). “Ordained ministry is a sign of unity and connects with both the Church of all ages and the present worldwide Church, and also with the triumphal Church in heaven. The *sacramentality of ordained ministry concerns this representation and not, of course, the person of the minister* [italics added]” (CRTC 2, 355).

sacrament.”³⁶ “For Catholic tradition, the use of the word sacrament for Church is related to the fact that the Latin *sacramentum* translates the word *mysterion* and Catholics want to emphasize the Church as mystery. In calling the church a ‘mystery,’ Catholics treat it not as an eighth sacrament, but simply want to emphasize its effectiveness for salvation through the Church.”³⁷ Some of the Reformed churches struggle with the language of the church as sacrament. The United Reformed Church, however, is more open and understanding toward more sacramental forms of worship than their Protestant forebears.³⁸ The Church of Scotland states: “To say it [the Church] is *mysterion* (§26) does not give a definition. We recognize that for the Orthodox *mysterion* is understood as a sign of the kingdom and, in a sense, we also talk of the church as a sign of the kingdom. There is a danger in taking a term from another tradition and playing with it. You end up with a word that has too many meanings (for example, in relation to the sacraments: the Reformed recognize two, the Roman Catholics, seven, and the Orthodox churches will not be tied down to a specific number).”³⁹ Similarly, “for some, the idea of church as sacrament is not language they use, and they have been suspicious of using such language for the reasons identified in the text (cf. §44).”⁴⁰

It is evident that for some churches vocabulary is an issue: “We find that a key future achievement would be to develop a common language among churches, a ‘vocabulary of appreciation and unity’, rather than continue using the terms well known to divide churches (for example, ‘sacramentality’, ‘ordinances’,

36. *TCTCV*, §27.

37. The Roman Catholic Church also notes that Catholics “would suggest that the Church as a whole has a sacramental nature. The sacramental dimension could help in opening doors towards a sacramentality in rites that we Catholics call sacrament” (*CRTC* 2, 188).

38. United Reformed Church (URC) states: “One of the areas that the URC is challenged to adapt in order to share commonalities with other denominations is in the area of worship. . . . The URC acknowledges that God is mystery and so there is a place for mystery in worship, yet we could continue to learn from more contemplative and Anglo-Catholic styles of worship” (*CRTC* 1, 198).

39. *CRTC* 1, 6. Also, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, like the Orthodox, holds that “Christian commitment cannot be limited to a system of numbered sacraments, nor can our obedience to Christ be measured solely according to formulaic modes of worship. In making this declaration, Quakers find no barren negation, but a drawing closer to the life and substance of Christ’s leadings. As Jesus tells the Samaritan woman by the well: ‘An hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. . . . God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth’ (John 4:23–[4])” (*CRTC* 1, 93).

40. National Council of Churches in Australia (*CRTC* 1, 221).

the 'primacy' of the Bishop of Rome, the idea of a universal ministry etc.). The vocabulary should be as concrete as possible, describing not abstract ideas but actions needed to demonstrate a visible unity. New vocabulary gives rise to new epistemic structures!"⁴¹ Also, the Ecumenical Forum for Catholicity is cautious when stating that "this certainly does not mean that the specific historical form of the Church as an institute or sociological form would become *sacral*. However, the Church [confesses] that *it has a sacramental value* and that God applies this human reality in such a way that his mission is thereby fulfilled through the work of the Spirit."⁴² In the Church of Sweden, *TCTCV's* "discussion of the Church as a sacrament is perceived in different ways," because "in the confessional writings of the Church of Sweden, the sacraments are two (baptism and the eucharist), or three (baptism, the eucharist and confession). *The Church itself is not presented as a sacrament in these documents; rather, the church administers the sacraments*. The Augsburg Confession expresses it thus: the Church is where the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered."⁴³

The Christian Council of Norway feels that "the fellowship in the sacraments is overemphasized. Fellowship is important in all of the churches, but it is not necessarily bound to the sacraments"⁴⁴ So "the representatives of some churches do not find themselves included in the ecclesiology described, especially when the church is described as a sacramental fellowship."⁴⁵ Also, "the radical reformation is not mentioned, neither *how traditions from this epoch contribute to a common ecclesiology*. The perspectives of denominations such as The Salvation Army and the Quakers, that do not practice the traditional sacraments as such, but that do see Christ as the sacrament, and believe in material manifestations of God, are not included in the document."⁴⁶ Therefore, "the description of the church as sacramental is too narrow."⁴⁷

41. National Council of Churches in Denmark (*CRTC* 2, 250).

42. Ecumenical Forum for Catholicity (*CRTC* 2, 354). That the vocabulary presents a challenge is evident from the following statement from The Salvation Army: "*We are a sacramental community because our life, our work, and our celebrations center on Christ, the one true sacrament*. Our life together is sacramental because we live by faith in him and our everyday lives reveal and offer unexpected grace, his undeserved gift, again and again. . . . The call to holiness of life is a call to sacramental living—demonstrating the grace of God in the ordinary. The Salvation Army is a permanent witness to the Church as to the possibility and practicability, of sanctification without formal sacraments" (*CRTC* 1, 78). Italics added.

43. *CRTC* 1, 109. Italics added.

44. *CRTC* 2, 236.

45. *CRTC* 2, 237–8.

46. *CRTC* 2, 236.

47. *CRTC* 2, 238. Italics added.

Is the sacramental quality of the Church *ontological*? The Evangelical Church in Germany's Advisory Commission treats this idea in an interesting way:

In this way, it is possible to guard against an all too narrow understanding which would reduce the way that Jesus Christ makes himself present in the eucharist [simply in] the words of consecration, and *to instead emphasize the significance of the whole of the liturgical context*. In accordance with the New Testament (Eph. 5:32), the convergence text describes the relationship between Christ and the communion of the Church as a “mystery (*mysterion*)” and interprets the relevant statement as an *ontological* utterance concerning the sacramental quality of the Church (§26). The Advisory Commission however, regards the description of the relationship between God and the Church as a “mystery” (*mysterion*) not as an ontological qualification of the Church. Rather it believes that this biblical statement emphasizes that the Church's relationship with God cannot be subordinated to a particular function.⁴⁸

Speaking about the Church as “both a divine and a human reality,” according to the Council of Churches in the Netherlands, “is meant to express that the Church is not merely the sum of individual believers among themselves, but that it is characterized by a holy dimension, an aspect that we also recognize where the report speaks about the two sacraments of baptism and eucharist. In these sacraments, the believers partake of God's presence. It is the sacraments that in a way include and protect this sanctification and this mystery.”⁴⁹

The Need for a Definition of *Sacrament*

Some churches note that there is a need for a definition of what *sacrament* means. Here are a few examples. The Evangelical Church of Greece notes that *TCTCV* “gives significant emphasis on sacramental theology, and particularly on topics like baptism, eucharist, ordained ministry, oversight, primacy etc. In fact, about one quarter of the entire document focuses exclusively on these topics, apart from the numerous other references to them throughout *TCTCV*.” However, “while all of these topics are obviously important and crucial for the

48. *CRTC* 2, 120. Italics added.

49. *CRTC* 2, 239. “Sometimes, the term ‘mystery’ provokes a negative reaction. This could be caused by the fact that people do not want to be involved in something that seems to be mysterious and that only gives access to those that are ready to participate: ‘Is the Church not there for everybody?’ Can this reaction be included in ongoing dialogue on sacramentality?” (*CRTC* 2, 240).

advance of the ecumenical discussion on ecclesiology, nevertheless the proportion given to them will seem foreign to millions of 'low church' Evangelicals around the world who would not approach ecclesiology from a sacramental/liturgical perspective."⁵⁰ The same response adds that "while our church refers to baptism and eucharist in sacramental terms, considering them as means of grace (ECG Statement of Faith, Article 22), it nevertheless has reservations on the use of the term 'sacrament' without the provision of a clear definition of what it means (and what it does not mean). The absence of such a definition (or at least a comparative approach to the various definitions among different churches) for this term is a sad omission of *TCTCV*."⁵¹

A similar observation is offered by the Presbyterian Church in Canada: "There are many terms used in the document without definitions being provided (for example: apostolic succession, chrismation, faith, sacrament). While we may think that these terms do not need definition because we all know what they mean, we may encounter challenges when we discover that different churches understand them differently."⁵²

The Council of Churches in the Netherlands, through the work of its Commission, "is convinced that this question [of the church as sacrament] deserves an unequivocally positive response. We do, indeed, feel that the differences in formulation at stake, as shaped by different traditions, are legitimate, and can be understood in fruitful ecumenical dialogue as 'compatible and mutually acceptable.'"⁵³

Sacramentality, Sign, Foretaste, and Ordinances

Interestingly, in some theological traditions, the term *sacrament* is reserved to describe baptism and the Lord's supper alone.⁵⁴ However, these traditions affirm that the Church, as a redeemed and redeeming fellowship, is "'sacramental' in nature." So, the Methodist Church in Britain states that "the Church, in participating in the mission of Christ, is 'an effective sign and means' (or instrument) of the salvation to which it bears witness through the proclamation of the

50. *CRTC* 2, 7.

51. *CRTC* 2, 74.

52. *CRTC* 1, 67.

53. *CRTC* 2, 239.

54. According to the Scottish Episcopal Church, "the foundation for understanding and recognizing the Church must be . . . the two sacraments ordained by Christ himself—Baptism and the Supper of the Lord—ministered with unfailing use of Christ's words of institution, and of the elements ordained by him" (*CRTC* 1, 29).

Word (§27).⁵⁵ From a Reformed perspective, rather than “the church as sacrament,” some might consider “the church as depository of grace.”⁵⁶ The Church of England elaborates, “Similarly, we appreciated seeing the question of the Church as sacrament raised (§27), following the articulation of this theme at the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen gentium*. It has been adopted by the Church of England and much more widely in ecumenical dialogue through the language of ‘sign, instrument and foretaste’ and represents a theologically creative response to one of the fault lines of western Christianity, namely the mediating role of the Church.”⁵⁷

For the Episcopal Church, “the Church is the sacrament of God’s presence in the world and the sign of the Kingdom for which we hope. That presence and hope are made active and real in the Church and in the individual lives of Christian men and women through the preaching of the Word of God, through the Gospel sacraments of baptism and eucharist, as well as other sacramental rites, and through our apostolate to the world in order that it may become the Kingdom of our God and of his Christ.”⁵⁸ The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain introduces the notion of “the *potential sacramentality* of all aspects of life.”⁵⁹

A Mennonite response notes that “Mennonites do not refer to the ‘church as sacrament’ but in actuality probably regard it as such in accordance with the definition offered, that is, ‘an effective sign and means of the communion of human beings with one another through their communion in the Triune God’ (§27), even though they deny the ‘sacramentality’ of the sacraments, preferring to consider these rites to be ‘ordinances’ instead.”⁶⁰ The National Council of Churches in Australia reported that “our members that do not practice liturgical sacraments appreciated the recognition of their affirmation ‘that they share in the sacramental life of the Church’ (§40).”⁶¹

A number of responses find *sacramental language* very important. These are summarized in the following words:

55. *CRTC 1*, 20.

56. Church of Scotland (*CRTC 1*, 6–7).

57. *CRTC 1*, 50–1.

58. *CRTC 1*, 173.

59. “At the center of our corporate life as Quakers is our practice of silent worship.

By affirming *the potential sacramentality of all aspects of life*, we have found ways of honouring God anew in the very midst of our lives” (*CRTC 1*, 93). Italics added here and above.

60. Mr Peter H. Rempel (*CRTC 1*, 255).

61. *CRTC 1*, 220.

Despite the diversity of ecclesial backgrounds represented at our gathering, participants had no difficulty in recognizing the terms “sacrament” and “sign” as equivalents. This holds when the use of “sacrament” in reference to the Church is properly qualified, and the notion of sign is understood as a truly efficacious reality—as a visible word, not an empty figure. When Paul applies the metaphor “body of Christ” to the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 12:27), repeating the language used to speak of the sacramental “body” of Christ in the Lord’s supper (1 Cor. 11:24), the church is not confused with the body of the Incarnate Word, or his sacramental body in the Eucharist.⁶²

The North American Academy of Ecumenists also states:

We welcome the affirmation that ordained ministers—which some of our churches call “priests”—are chosen from within the priestly people to serve through the ministry of Word and sacrament. While they “remind the community of its dependence on Christ” (§19), it may be helpful to underline more clearly that Christ remains our one “High Priest” (Heb. 5:1–10:18). The ministry of the ordained enables all the baptized to realize the priestly character of their vocation through the “spiritual sacrifice/offering” (Rom. 12:1) of their daily life and witness.⁶³

The United Reformed Church “would agree that the church is a ‘sign’ or ‘foretaste’ of the Kingdom. It is a place of God’s presence and action in the world, but is imperfect and not the Kingdom of God, but supposed to point to it.”⁶⁴ Yet, unlike the Orthodox Church which identifies the Church with God’s grace in the world, “in the URC there is an understanding that God’s love and grace is wider and broader than the Church and so those who are not baptized may, through Christ be accepted and welcomed into the kingdom of God.”⁶⁵

The Church of Sweden offers an important insight drawn from the cosmic vision of salvation.

In its ecclesiological reflection, the Church of Sweden would really speak of the church’s sacramentality in a figurative sense in relation to its mission of living out the gospel and the grace of God in human form. The analogy of the church as sacrament must be seen in relation to the images of the

62. North American Academy of Ecumenists (*CRTC 1*, 319).

63. *CRTC 1*, 318.

64. *CRTC 1*, 202–3.

65. *CRTC 1*, 205. The United Reformed Church “acknowledges the work of the Holy Spirit beyond the church to draw people to God” (*CRTC 1*, 203).

church in the New Testament and other ecclesiological themes, in particular in the Reformation tradition, for example, *Creatura Verbi* (the Creation of the Word). *A broader use of the notion of sacramentality could be anchored in a sacramentality of creation*—that God’s presence is not only beyond the world but also within it. There is a pattern in all that God does: The love of God manifests itself in concrete forms.⁶⁶

Regarding the dilemma concerning the terminology of sacraments vis à vis ordinances, some churches recognize only two sacraments, on the basis that they are instituted by Christ; but for what other churches see as sacraments (such as marriage, funerals, ordination), they use the term *ordinance*, thinking these are not sacraments but are sacramental. Mennonites ordain ministers but do not label them as priests, as this title is associated with a sacramental understanding of the ordinances: namely, that they are effective indefinitely and irrespective of the attitudes and actions of the one undergoing the rite. Instead of celebrating sacraments as a service to the world,⁶⁷ Mennonites emphasize the conducting of ordinances and empowering new churches to continue these ordinances.

Sacraments, Pneumatology, and Eschatology

TCTCV makes contemporary theology more conscious of the importance of pneumatology for theology as a whole. The Church of England, General Synod comments, “While the dominant paradigm of the document is the avowedly trinitarian model of *missio Dei*, some churches remark that there is no question of the Holy Spirit being the ‘silent’ or ‘hidden’ person of the Trinity at work in the Church. Rather, it is under the power of the Spirit, through Spirit-inspired preaching and Spirit-endowed sacraments, that people are incorporated into the body of Christ. This body is in turn a temple of the Holy Spirit (§§12–14, 21).”⁶⁸

66. *CRTC 1*, 109. Italics added.

67. *TCTCV*, §58.

68. *CRTC 1*, 45. Also, the Ecumenical Forum for Catholicity states: “The *missio Dei* comes directly from the essence of God himself, which is a community of Father, Son and Spirit (see *TCTCV*, §1). The sacramentality of the Church is based on this as well” (*CRTC 2*, 354). On the other hand, the Evangelical Church in Germany’s Advisory Commission asks for more precision in this regard: “It remains unclear to the Advisory Commission whether or not a characterization of the Church as ‘a reflection of the communion of the Triune God’ (§§23, 25) as outlined in 1 Cor. 13:12, will emphasize the underlying opacity of this ‘enigmatic’ image or whether it is understood as describing a precise analogy” (*CRTC 2*, 113).

Obviously, everything that the Spirit “touches” becomes a sacramental reality. “The sacramental presence and action of Christ in the eucharist is unique. In an analogous sense, Christ is present and active in and through his Spirit, when through their living witness to the gospel the community of his disciples becomes a sign and agent of his presence in the world,” notes the North American Academy of Ecumenists. They also add: “The notion of the church as a pilgrim people helps us to hold this conviction in tension with the humble recognition that at times, the sinful actions of members of the church—both as individuals and collectively—make the church a counter-sign of God’s presence in the world. No single image or metaphor exhausts our understanding of the mystery of our communion with God in the church.”⁶⁹

Therefore, there is an understanding that the sacrament is based both on assurances deriving from history (for example, the words of institution in the eucharist), but is also conditioned pneumatologically, which means that whatever has been given by Christ in history cannot be a sufficient basis for the ultimate eschatological reality. The sacrament points to the kingdom of God: “The Mar Thoma church in its ecclesiological understanding recognizes that in God’s purpose the church is placed in the larger context of God’s mission uniting everything in the Reign of God. The church is, therefore, the sign and sacrament of the Reign of God.”⁷⁰

Since the Church does not draw her identity only from what she is but also from what she will be, it is interesting to see that parts of the Evangelical movement, among others, focus on the eschatological aspects of sacramentality. The Council of Churches in the Netherlands states: “It is not the act of people/ministers as such that realizes the mystery of God’s presence: Speaking about God’s presence and experiencing it is a wonder that only occurs in an open and anticipating way of watching for God’s kingdom.”⁷¹

It is clear that the churches are ready to operate with the notion of *koinonia* (communion). According to the South Australia Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches, “*Koinonia* is central to a common understanding of the life and unity of the church. *Koinonia*, meaning ‘to have

69. *CRTC 1*, 319. Also, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain states: “The text specifically acknowledges ‘those communities who affirm that their vocation does not include the rites of baptism and the Eucharist, while affirming that they share in the sacramental life of the church’ (§40). British Quakers are one such community. Our understanding of the sacramental activity of the church is grounded in a prayerful openness to the ongoing presence of the Spirit” (*CRTC 1*, 101).

70. Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church (*CRTC 1*, 84).

71. *CRTC 2*, 241.

something in common' reminds us that the Church is a divinely established communion and is by its nature missionary." And *koinonia* implies the sacraments: "Through the sacraments we are incorporated into the body of Christ in which community we hear and proclaim the word of God. It is the Spirit that nourishes and enlivens the body of believers through sacramental communion, the living voice of the preached gospel, and ministries of service."⁷²

Overly Strong Sacramental Theology?

In the light of this sacramental preoccupation, for the Ecumenical Forum for Catholicity, the eucharist lies at the heart of an ecclesiology of sacraments: "Since the *missio dei* is fulfilled in the eucharist, it cannot be otherwise than that the eucharist, as the communion of Christ with his congregation, is also the heart of the Church. This view *liberates the eucharist from an approach whereby its sacramental character is reduced to a memorial rite* which Christians together give form to. In the eucharist, heaven and earth come together."⁷³

Some pointed out a tendency in the document to overemphasize the sacrament of the Lord's supper over the sacrament of baptism, as well as to suggest that worship must always be eucharistic. The Doctrine Commission of the Anglican Church of Australia holds that the emphasis on sacramental theology is very strong:

There were, however, points at which we felt that the document may have overstated the degree of convergence on some issues. For example, there is a strong sacramental theology underpinning the document's approach to the life and practice of the church, and while this focus on the Eucharist and Baptism was appreciated by some members of the Doctrine Commission, it was recognized that this was not a universally held view. . . . The *strong sacramental theology* underpinning the report and these occasional overstatements on the extent of convergence on this issue combine to result in what some members of the Commission see as an overemphasis on the significance of the sacraments in the life and mission of the church.⁷⁴

As Ellen Wondra notes, "a number of responses cast the church as *creatura verbi Divini* or *creatura evangelii*, a typically Protestant emphasis that focuses on the importance of the gospel rather than the sacraments as the foundation of the

72. CRTC 1, 343.

73. CRTC 2, 355. Italics added.

74. CRTC 1, 35–36. Italics added.

church.”⁷⁵ They see sacramentalism as a challenge. “Mennonites have borrowed the assertion that the Church is a ‘priesthood of all believers’ but in their reaction to sacramentalism and their fear of the exclusive power of priests have minimized the ‘priestliness’ of the members of their church communities.”⁷⁶

According to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF), sacramentality should not be limited to seven sacraments.⁷⁷ For this reason, the Theological Committee of the Church of Greece responds to this question (§44), “concerning the number of sacraments, that this has not been an issue for the Orthodox Church, as there was never the point in her long history, due to the fact that the Church herself is the mystery itself (see Eph. 5:32).” The committee also expressed sensitivity to the validity of sacraments: “Later on, several efforts to frame and limit the sacraments into a certain number are considered to be an influence by scholastic theology. Regarding the issue of the liturgical rite, the Theological Committee estimates that several differentiations at a local level do not influence the validity of the sacraments.”⁷⁸

It is important to note, however, that “approaching the Church as a sacrament means that we confess that God, in his grace, can enter the incomplete, unredeemed form of the church as it is now.”⁷⁹ The ELCF, in describing “ecumenical openness,” makes reference to its “ecumenical strategy, according to which the Lutheran church maintains its closest relationships with churches which . . . ‘like our church, represent and respect *the common legacy of undivided Christendom* and who hold to *the classic interpretation of Christianity and sacramental ecclesiology*.’”⁸⁰

75. Wondra, “Communion and *Koinonia* in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*,” chapter 2 in this volume, 25. Italics added.

76. Mr Peter H. Rempel (*CRTC 1*, 253).

77. “The report of the Roman Catholic–Lutheran Dialogue Group for Sweden and Finland, *Justification in the Life of the Church* [JLC], may serve as a helpful example here. It states: ‘During the first thousand years of the history of the church, there was talk of both sacrament and “mystery” and the number of the sacraments was not fixed’ (JLC, §154). *In Catholic theology it is symbolically important that there are seven sacraments, covering the whole course of human life* [italics added]. The dialogue report states: ‘From a Lutheran point of view, *the old controversy about the number of the sacraments should not necessarily be considered as a church dividing issue* [italics added].’ According to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, which belongs to the Lutheran confessional writings, confession, ordination and marriage might be regarded as sacraments, depending on definition. (JLC §156) A growth towards a common understanding in this area thus seems possible” (*CRTC 1*, 126).

78. *CRTC 2*, 313.

79. Ecumenical Forum for Catholicity (*CRTC 2*, 354).

80. Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (*CRTC 1*, 119). Italics added. See this church’s “Future Report of the Church, 2020” (published by the Bishop’s Conference in 2011), which answers the question “What is the church?”

In any case, *TCTCV* does not contrast sacramental ethics with messianic spirituality.

Sacraments: Social Ethics, Sin, and Environmental Ethics

For traditional churches, the fact that the Christian is a weak and sinful human being must not be confused with the Church itself. The Ecumenical Forum for Catholicity appears to speak on behalf of many when it states that

even though the Church as such is focused on a transcendent reality, and points to it, it is present only as the concrete form of the Church in its diversity, brokenness, and yearning for unity. At the same time, the Church is the conferred reality of the one body of Christ, a reality extending beyond our definitions. It is this conferred reality that constitutes its sacramentality, in its essence and ministry, as the efficacious sign of God's mission for the world.⁸¹

However, in the Reformed tradition, "it is not evident how we could sustain the concept that the Church is without sin because we have not developed any concept of Christ as sacrament or the Church as sacrament."⁸² Maybe for that reason, the United Reformed Church quotes *TCTCV* §27: "those who use the expression 'the Church as sacrament' do not deny the unique 'sacramentality' of the sacraments nor do they deny the frailty of human ministers. Those who reject this expression, on the other hand, do not deny that the Church is an effective sign of God's presence and action."⁸³

In offering a traditional Christian perspective, Presbyterian Nemanja S. Mrdjenovic finds it "difficult to understand" that

calling the Church a sacrament could somehow "obscure the distinction between the Church as a whole and the individual sacraments and that it may lead one to overlook the sinfulness still present among members of the community." For the Orthodox there are no sacraments outside of the Church, and the Church itself is not an abstract concept; the Church is above all an event, the eucharistic event of *koinonia*, not an abstract statement but a concrete experience. . . . Sinfulness of men and women who are

81. *CRTC* 2, 352.

82. Church of Scotland (*CRTC* 1, 7).

83. *CRTC* 1, 202.

members of the Church does not have anything to do with the Holiness of the Church. In the Church as the eucharistic event, the sacraments are distributed as . . . “the holy gifts for the holy ones,[”] not because all members of the congregation are in good moral standing, but because . . . “One is Holy, one is Lord, Jesus Christ[”] and the community is communing with Him, thus becoming His “spiritual body.”⁸⁴

Only a “holistic” ecclesiology and anthropology in which humankind is considered to be forever connected to the rest of creation will bring about a proper handling of the environmental crisis. The Church in Wales refers to §§71 and 79 of the Papal encyclical *Laudato si* which “link environmental ethics to the doctrine of salvation; and in paragraphs 233–6 offers a profound mediation on the doctrine of the sacraments to a concern for the beauty and wellbeing of the environment.”⁸⁵ This church brilliantly points out: “This encyclical is a challenge to the WCC to relate its own study of the sacraments (*TCTCV*, §§40–44) to an environmental ethic.”⁸⁶

All traditions know of ethics, and most of them know of sacrament. Some of them use the sacrament in order to qualify ethics, whereas others use ethics in order to qualify the sacrament. In any event, sacramentality has social implications. For that reason, the Council of Churches in the Netherlands holds that

this requires social ethics. The invitation as implied in the celebration of the sacraments is also the extent to which the significance of the sacrament as celebrated in the Church can be recognized by us and by other believers as determining our ways in the *oikoumene*, in the world we live in. This concerns believers with or without sacraments in their particular tradition that contribute to the significance of the sacraments in different ways. Sanctification is not just a matter of a worship service: it takes place in the *oikoumene* as well. This approach might bring us further on the way of transformation. Cf. §42: “The Lord’s Supper is . . . an invocation of the Holy Spirit to transform both the elements of bread and wine and the participants themselves (*epiclesis*).” For it is important not to stick with the sacraments as such, but to take the road they show us, as a reality. The gospel is not something to cherish, but rather an incentive to go forward.⁸⁷

84. *CRTC* 2, 348–9.

85. *CRTC* 1, 63.

86. *CRTC* 1, 64.

87. *CRTC* 2, 242.

The Significance of the Sacraments for the Future: Full Sacramental Communion

The question of confessional identity is certainly the most difficult problem facing the ecumenical movement. However, since the eucharist and baptism are commonly understood as sacraments, and there is a growing consensus that the eucharist and baptism are the proper context of reception of sacramentality, therefore, unless there is eucharistic communion, ecumenical reception is not complete. So, while there is a great deal of common understanding with regard to the two sacraments of baptism and the eucharist, further work on other rites of the Church would be helpful to the churches in seeking greater unity. "Within the Uniting Church [in Australia], we only regard baptism and the eucharist within our sacramental understanding, but further work on the place of other rites within the churches could be helpful in leading to a fuller level of mutual recognition."⁸⁸

The Orthodox Church does not regard the eucharist as one sacrament among many. It is, rather, the all-encompassing mystery of the Church.⁸⁹ Protestant Christianity must give it a more central place in its life.⁹⁰ Roman Catholic theology should continue to strengthen its efforts to liberate sacramental theology from the notions of historical causality imposed by medieval scholastic theology, so that the eschatological and pneumatological aspects of the eucharist may become more evident. And the Orthodox should try to draw out the ethical implications of the eucharist and see it as a source of life in all respects, not simply as a cultic experience. Sacramental reality encompasses and penetrates all aspects of the Church. The Methodist Church in Ireland wants exactly the sacramental nature of the Church to be in relation to its servanthood within the world: "How is the *koinonia* between Christ and his body reflected in the Church's service within and mission to the world? Methodists have a strong tradition of responding to God's call to serve and transform society. *TCTCV*

88. *CRTC* 2, 100.

89. See Orthodox Church of Finland (*CRTC* 2, 146); Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church (*CRTC* 1, 90; V. Rev. Presbyter Nemanja S. Mrdjenovic (*CRTC* 2, 348); Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation (*CRTC* 2, 20); Armenian Apostolic Church, Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin (*CRTC* 2, 61).

90. A reflection from the Salvation Army is an example of this view: "The document describes a path to unity that looks to both confession of faith and life in the world. It may be that a unity that is expressed in terms of sacramental living, rather than in the Eucharistic fellowship, can be more easily countenanced by churches such as The Salvation Army, whose vocation does not include the rites of baptism and eucharist" (*CRTC* 1, 80).

does affirm this but there is more scope to reflect on how the Church's participation in Christ and its participation in the world are both expressive of the one mission of God."⁹¹ On the other hand, Mr Peter H. Rempel states that his Mennonite tradition recognizes the sacraments of all other Christian churches and might be open to reviewing its beliefs and practices in light of theirs.⁹² The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America agrees that "visible unity requires that the churches be able to recognize in one another the authentic presence of the 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.'"⁹³

What the responses to *TCTCV* indicate is that it is possible for sacramental churches to uphold cooperation with those churches who do not speak in terms of sacramentality.⁹⁴ The Roman Catholic response looks positively at this contribution of *TCTCV*: "It adds elements to its previous definition of the Church. *TCTCV*'s definition of the Church now includes 'the apostolic faith confessed,' and 'a ministry of *episkopé*'—along with 'a community of baptized believers in which the word of God is preached,' and 'the sacraments are celebrated' (§31)."⁹⁵ Therefore, "the work of Faith and Order could profit from further discussion on sacramentality. Christians do not yet have a common understanding of the sacraments and sacramentality. A deeper study of the instrumental and the expressive perspectives is required."⁹⁶

The Armenian Apostolic Church, Holy Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, however, thinks that in §21, the statement "Faith in Christ is fundamental to membership of the body" could not be acceptable for the Armenian Apostolic tradition. The reason for this is that "only the faith expressed in *the sacraments of initiation or reception* (baptism, confirmation and eucharist) is *fundamental to*

91. *CRTC 1*, 142.

92. *CRTC 1*, 258.

93. *CRTC 2*, 10. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America states: "For Lutherans, this presence is visibly marked by the right proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments, the heart of which is the proclamation of the gospel of justification" (*CRTC 2*, 10).

94. In this context, the Finnish Ecumenical Council is compelled to ask "to what degree the sacramentality of the church is generally accepted among the churches and how does one uphold cooperation among those churches who do not speak in terms of sacramentality? Are churches that may, though not actively, choose to use this vocabulary, asked to change their discourse?" (*CRTC 2*, 225).

95. *CRTC 2*, 211.

96. *CRTC 2*, 219. "The Catholic Church affirms that Christ is the principal minister of the sacraments, and that they are both signs and instruments, or causes, of grace. The question of instrumental causality deserves more attention. For Catholics, this is not just a question of terminology, but represents a fundamental belief regarding how Christ is present and active in the Church, namely, by means of efficacious signs" (*CRTC 2*, 219).

*membership of the body.*⁹⁷ The Council of Churches in the Netherlands concludes that “this appreciation of the significance of the sacraments (and, for that matter, sacramental ecclesiology) . . . deepens ecclesiology through a trinitarian approach.” It also “implies an antidote” to what they see as a threat of “‘trivialization’ of church worship within the Dutch context.”⁹⁸ The practical consequences of this clarification are significant. “Mutual recognition of such characteristics between churches could provide a constructive basis for engagement in shared mission and worship although, as noted above in the response to question (ii), further steps would be needed for the Church of England to be able to enter into *full sacramental communion* with that Church involving the *interchangeability of ministry.*”⁹⁹

With regard to ecumenism and the ever-challenging question as to what Christian unity might actually look like, *TCTCV* makes very clear that unity must be visible, eucharistic, and structured in accordance with the life that the eucharist imparts to the Church from its source in God Himself. However, a far-reaching common understanding is not yet reality.¹⁰⁰ As the National Council of Churches in Denmark comments, churches must still deal with this question: “Is visible unity still the ecumenical vision, or should it be supplemented or maybe even replaced by a common witness and service—engagement in social, economic and ecological crises—in acceptance of the impossibility of reaching agreement on sacramental life, ministry and baptism?” They add, “The criteria for full visible unity—common and full apostolic faith, sacramental life, one and mutually recognized ministry, structures of conciliar relations and decision making—can hardly be said to characterize the current state of affairs” among churches.¹⁰¹

Finally, the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation response reminds us that “the restoration of communion between the Orthodox Church and non-Orthodox Christian Churches and Confessions *requires unequivocal and unambiguous agreement* about the fundamental principles

97. *CRTC* 2, 64. Italics added. This passage continues: “Needless to say, this was the practice of the early Church, attested also in the New Testament and the patristic literature of the 1st and 2nd centuries.”

98. *CRTC* 2, 240. They add, “Sometimes we see signs of this ‘trivialization’ in sincere efforts of churches to be understood and to be relevant to our own context: a loss of depth, a loss of the dimension of mystery, and a lack of appreciation of tradition.”

99. *CRTC* 1, 30. Italics added.

100. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland points out that *TCTCV* “names several themes [among them the status of sacraments or ordinances] in which a far-reaching common understanding is not yet reality” (*CRTC* 1, 120).

101. *CRTC* 2, 248, 252.

of the life of the Church”—sacraments included.¹⁰² This, of course, is the difficult goal of the ecumenical movement.¹⁰³ But it is important that it is commonly admitted that the notion of communion (*koinonia*) occupies a central place also in the idea of sacramentality. In describing the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments as the sufficient precondition for the real unity of the Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland notes that Lutheranism “emphasizes that ‘what is sufficient (*satis est*) for Church unity—that is, doctrinal agreement—is also necessary (*necesse est*) to achieve unity.’ We do not support a method of ‘minimal consensus’, which would result in the content of the basic truths of the Christian faith remaining unclear.”¹⁰⁴

Obviously, one billion Christians who are neither high church nor resolutely liturgical/sacramental—Pentecostals, independents, and Evangelicals, who represent some 41 percent of all global believers—is a dynamic challenge for Faith and Order. This challenge is expressed in the response from a member of the Assemblies of God (AG):

That Pentecostals view the Lord’s supper as a memorial and/or ordinance, and not a sacrament, let alone the sacrament, presents a substantial ecumenical and practical challenge. In our AG churches, anyone who confesses Christ as Lord and Savior may receive the elements with us. We do not require someone to have been water baptized or chrismated (or confirmed) in one of our churches in order for a guest or visitor to share in that communal rite with us. That we are prevented from doing so in Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches is no small issue. If the Council of Nicea recognized believers on the basis of their having been baptized in the name of the Triune God, is that not sufficient today for shared sacramental-memorial-ritual worship?¹⁰⁵

This response shows that we have to reflect on the history of the Church since the early centuries. Many referred to this history in their responses, and it will be of decisive importance in any exposition. It is for this reason that the response of the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox

102. *CRTC 2*, 22. Italics added.

103. The International Ecumenical Fellowship states: “Intercommunion does not demand that either of the two communions should adopt all the doctrinal opinions, the forms of sacramental piety, or any liturgical practices proper to the other one but it implies that each one believes that the other one perseveres in what is essential in the Christian Faith” (*CRTC 1*, 312).

104. *CRTC 1*, 118.

105. Dr Prof. Edmund J. Rybarczyk (*CRTC 1*, 335–6).

Consultation states that “the Orthodox accept the historical names of other non-Orthodox Christian churches and confessions that are not in communion with them and believe that *their relations with them should be based on an objective clarification of the whole ecclesiological question*, particularly to the issues related to sacraments, grace, priesthood, and apostolic succession.”¹⁰⁶

In summary, sacramental ecclesiology can help us realize that any manifestation of the Church is only significant in its *referring* function. It can contribute to a new experience of the transforming power of the gospel from the perspective of the coming kingdom of God. True doctrine cannot be an authority without the sacrament: “the true unity of the Church is constituted by a concurrence in the doctrines of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.”¹⁰⁷ In conclusion, “*TCTCV* clearly sets out and respects the heritage of undivided Christendom and the interpretations of the Christian faith compatible with it, and expresses the hope that a sacramental ecclesiology might serve as a possible alternative for the expression of the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit in those traditions in which such terminology is not used.”¹⁰⁸ So we are not surprised by the fact that many responses see *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* as a mature reflection on what it means to be sacramental.

106. *CRTC* 2, 22. Italics added.

107. Evangelical Church in Germany (*CRTC* 2, 116).

108. Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (*CRTC* 1, 125).

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Legitimate Diversity

Andrzej Choromanski

What Does *TCTCV* Say on Diversity in the Church?

During the long process that led to the publication of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*,¹ the questions of how diversity can be harmonized with unity and what makes for legitimate diversity in the Church were raised at several stages. This issue was identified as one of the most crucial for the future of the ecumenical movement.² The final text of the document dedicates an entire section to this topic in chapter 2, and mentions it in several other places.³

In the chapter on the mission of the Church in history, *TCTCV* states that since its origins, the Church has proclaimed the gospel of Christ in various cultural contexts, making use of local beliefs and literature and using various languages. Such diversity within the unity of the one Christian community was understood by early writers as an expression of the beauty and universality of the Christian faith.⁴ Even though Jesus came into the world in a defined historical and cultural context, by his death and resurrection he redeemed the whole of humanity. His gospel is the good news of salvation for all peoples of

1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Henceforth, *TCTCV*.

2. See, for example, *TCTCV*, 44.

3. The word *diversity* is used 20 times in the body of *TCTCV* and 5 times in the footnotes. Occurrences are in Chapter 1: §§6, 12; 9 n. 1; Chapter 2: Section D §§28, 29, 30. This section is entitled “Communion in Unity and Diversity” and deals directly with the topic. The word occurs here 7 times in the body of the text and 5 times in the footnotes (17 n. 14). The section in italics is entitled “Legitimate and divisive diversity” and includes 3 occurrences of the expression *legitimate diversity*. Chapter 3: §37 includes 1 occurrence of the expression *legitimate diversity*, §52 has 2 occurrences, and §54 has 1 occurrence. In the Historical Note there is 1 occurrence (44).

4. *TCTCV*, §6.

all cultures. Diversity is intrinsically linked with the different contexts, languages, and cultures of the people who hear that proclamation of the gospel of Christ. Within this context, *TCTCV* specifies that this diversity includes diversity of confessional traditions, understood to be various forms of the historical transmission of the gospel from generation to generation in and by the Church.⁵ *TCTCV* affirms that such diversity is legitimate and compatible with the unity of the Church. This “legitimate diversity” is “not accidental to the life of the Christian community but is rather an aspect of its catholicity.”⁶ It is due to the incarnational character of salvation and the variety of cultural contexts in which the gospel is proclaimed.

TCTCV understands the Church as communion (*koinonia*). The very concept of communion when applied to the Church implies at the same time unity and diversity.⁷ In this perspective, legitimate diversity is seen by *TCTCV* as a “gift from the Lord,” something not only positive, but even sacred and essential for the life of the community on all levels and in all aspects. Several factors contribute to the rich diversity within the communion of the one Church, in particular the variety of charisms bestowed by the Holy Spirit on the faithful for the common good, the cultural contexts in which the gospel is proclaimed and various historical factors. The leading principle that not only justifies but calls for diversity in the Church is that the “Gospel needs to be proclaimed in languages, symbols, and images that are relevant to particular times and contexts so as to be lived authentically in each time and place.”⁸ Such diversity is “integral to the nature of communion.”⁹ *TCTCV* encourages the churches “to preserve and treasure their legitimate differences of liturgy, custom and law and to foster legitimate diversities of spirituality, theological method and formulation in such a way that they contribute to the unity and catholicity of the Church as a whole.”¹⁰ *TCTCV* also states that this diversity “is compromised whenever Christians consider their own cultural expressions of the Gospel as the only authentic ones, to be imposed upon Christians of other cultures.”¹¹

At the same time, *TCTCV* states that “unity must not be surrendered” and attributes a particular responsibility to “pastoral ministry for the service of unity

5. See *TCTCV*, 9 n. 1.

6. *TCTCV*, §12.

7. See “Communion in Unity and Diversity,” *TCTCV*, §§28–30.

8. *TCTCV*, §28.

9. “The Unity of the Church as *Koinonia*: Gift and Calling – The Canberra Statement,” 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Canberra, Australia, 1991, §2.2, quoted in *TCTCV*, 17 n. 14.

10. *TCTCV*, §30.

11. *TCTCV*, §28.

and the upholding of diversity.”¹² In the section dedicated to the ministry of oversight (*episkopé*), the text says that the “Church, as the body of Christ and the eschatological people of God, is built up by the Holy Spirit through a diversity of gifts or ministries. This diversity calls for a ministry of co-ordination so that these gifts may enrich the whole Church, its unity and mission.”¹³ It is significant that *TCTCV* attributes a particular responsibility to the ministry of *episkopé* in maintaining the balance in the life of the Church between unity, on the one hand, and legitimate diversity, on the other. Similar responsibility is attributed to those who preside over gatherings “whenever the Church comes together to take counsel and make important decisions.” Those who preside are always to be at the service of the community; and their particular duty consists in upholding unity in diversity.¹⁴

TCTCV recalls that the bond between unity and diversity was an important concern during the time of the New Testament, when the early Church “discerned, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, that Gentiles were to be welcomed into communion.”¹⁵ This situation led to some disagreements within the community: some thought that circumcision and the observance of the Mosaic Law was required from the Gentiles for becoming Christians; others disagreed. Facing this dilemma, the Church forged “a fundamental principle governing unity and diversity.” It is included in the letter from the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem to the Christian community in Antioch, composed mainly of Gentiles who embraced the Christian faith. The letter states: “‘For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials’ (Acts 15:28).” Later, the ecumenical councils provided some of these “essentials,” such as apostolic faith, sacraments, and ministry.¹⁶

While opting for diversity as a condition of the Church’s communion (*koinonia*), *TCTCV* affirms that “when it goes beyond acceptable limits it can be destructive of the gift of unity.”¹⁷ This means that not all forms of diversity are compatible with the life of communion within one Church. There are types of diversity that cause division and cannot be admitted. *TCTCV* refers to “heresies and schisms, along with political conflicts and expressions of hatred” as being some factors that resulted in divisions within the Church.¹⁸

12. *TCTCV*, §29.

13. *TCTCV*, §52.

14. *TCTCV*, §54.

15. *TCTCV*, §30.

16. *TCTCV*, §30.

17. *TCTCV*, §30; see also §12.

18. *TCTCV*, §30.

The text in italics at the end of §30 deals with the issue of legitimate and divisive diversity in the context of the ecumenical movement. It states that one of the biggest challenges for the churches in the quest for full visible unity is 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.” Unfortunately, there is no agreement among churches on this aspect: “All churches have their own procedures for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate diversity.” Furthermore, there is no agreement among the churches, and sometimes also within one church body, whether differences on some aspects of faith and order are church-divisive or, instead, part of legitimate diversity. *TCTCV* calls upon churches to discern together “(a) common criteria, or means of discernment, and (b) such mutually recognized structures as are needed to use these effectively.”

What Do the Responses to *TCTCV* Say on Diversity in the Church?

Introduction

The theme of legitimate diversity has received due attention in the responses to *TCTCV*. Most of the texts address the issue, offering insights from various confessional traditions. While some of them dedicate just a few sentences to the topic, others examine it in depth with several paragraphs or even pages. All the responses welcome the fact that *TCTCV* emphasizes the theme. They agree that diversity is a genuine aspect of the Church's life and mission, belonging to its very nature. The Church is not to be conceived as a monolithic reality that tends to uniformity in all aspects of its life and on all levels. Rather, the Church should be seen as a “reconciled diversity” of cultures, rites, doctrinal views, spiritualities, and structures that exist in enriching “osmosis.” To assign a substantial place to diversity within unity is of a particular importance in contemporary church history. As stated in the Report on the Anglican-Pentecostal Consultation in England: “Global Christianity began to burst its European wine skins from the mid-twentieth century onwards, and it was agreed that the diversity that has flowed from that . . . needs to be affirmed.”¹⁹ However, while there is a general agreement that the gospel needs to be proclaimed in ways appropriate to diverse cultural, historical, socio-political or even economic contexts, there is also a general conviction that there are limits to legitimate diversity. It is commonly

19. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 2, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, Faith and Order Paper No. 232 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 384. Henceforth, *CRTC* 2.

acknowledged in the responses that the visible unity of the Church is the ultimate limit of the legitimacy of any given diversity. As stated by the South Australian Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches: “Unity as a goal must not be surrendered in the face of cultural variants.”²⁰ The following pages offer an analytical synthesis of the responses on the theme of legitimate diversity, quoting some of the most relevant texts on specific aspects.

Trinity

The mystery of the Trinity is sometimes recalled as the divine model of the harmonious relationship of diversity to unity. The divinity of God is one and inextricably indivisible, though it exists in three various *hypostases*. Plurality and diversity of divine persons is not contrary to the unicity and unity of God. There is an analogy between the unity and diversity of God on the one hand, and the unity and diversity of the Church on the other hand. The response prepared by the South Australian Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches states that “diversity and unity can exist together, as the Trinity reveals.”²¹ It continues by affirming that diversity “is a gift from God. Disciples are called to be fully united while being respectful and enriched by the diversity across the Church.”

Koinonia

The responses underline that an overarching frame in which the issue of diversity has been addressed in the recent ecumenical dialogue is that of the Church understood as communion (*koinonia*). Since the 5th World Conference on Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostela, Spain (1993), *koinonia* has been a leading ecclesiological category in the ecumenical dialogue. The vast majority of churches acknowledge that *koinonia* expresses the fundamental convergence among Christian traditions regarding the nature, the purpose, and the mission of the Church, as well as its unity in diversity. At the present stage of the dialogue, no other word better conveys the common vision of the Church. The responses speak with appreciation of the fact that the concept of *koinonia* was adopted as the leading paradigm of the Church in *TCTCV*, as it opens a way to a balanced presentation of the relationship between necessary unity and legitimate diversity in the Church. Several responses remark that the conclusion of the document rightly highlights that we already share a deep degree of *koinonia*;

20. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 1, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, Faith and Order Paper No. 231 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 344. Henceforth, *CRTC 1*.

21. *CRTC 1*, 342.

and the conclusion invites the churches to meet the challenge of finding more tangible ways to give expression to this real although still incomplete unity.²² The response from the Baptist World Alliance expresses a conviction included in many others: The “application of the *koinonia* ecclesiology of *TCTCV* helps the churches to imagine the possibility of a form of future visible unity that is neither ecclesial merger nor a movement ‘home to Rome’ (or Constantinople), but rather a communion of communions in which each communion is able to conserve and offer to the whole church its diversity of distinctive ecclesial gifts while having full communion with one another.”²³ As the Roman Catholic response states, the concept of *koinonia* provides an important criterion for mutual recognition.²⁴

Uniformity/catholicity

In conformity with *TCTCV*, all the responses underline that the full visible unity we seek when engaging in the ecumenical movement is not to be confused with uniformity, nor with the “absorption” of any one church by any other church. Unity understood as uniformity and union understood as absorption are unanimously rejected by all the churches. They call to mind that the model of ecclesial communion that emerges from the New Testament witness and the life of the early Christian communities is one of unity in diversity. Unity goes hand in hand with a legitimate diversity, which is not to be seen primarily as a problem to be solved, but as a gift from the Lord and an integral aspect of the Church’s life. Diversity belongs to the Church’s very being as a living community. All the responses agree that diversity cannot be perceived as contrary to unity, but as its integral part and even necessary condition.

Diversity is not accidental to the life of the Christian community. It is rather an essential dimension of its catholicity. “This implies that each church might learn and receive from the insights of other communities, which have shaped their unique expressions of faith, worship, and mission. In this mutual exchange of gifts each church is enriched and the catholicity of the church comes to fuller expression.”²⁵ In line with this vision, the response of the Baptist World Alliance adds that, without the exchange of these gifts, none of the divided churches can become fully catholic, both in the sense of “quantitative catholicity” (belonging of all the faithful with their personal and cultural diversities to the one visibly united community) and of “qualitative catholicity” (possession of all the various

22. *TCTCV*, §§67–68.

23. *CRTC* 2, 290.

24. *CRTC* 2, 179.

25. North American Academy of Ecumenists (*CRTC* 1, 317).

qualities that mark the one church).²⁶ However, the response from the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) observes that within the various confessional families and in different historical contexts, the qualifier “catholic” was used to promote homogeneity in the Church’s theology and pastoral practice. For this reason, it proposes to consider replacing the attribute “catholic” with the expression “all-embracing,” as presented in the ecumenical revision of the German text of the Apostles’ Creed in 1971.²⁷

Areas of diversity

Different responses point out various aspects of diversity in the Church. We can categorize them into two groups. In the first group are the diversities that are due to various external contexts in which the Church lives across the world and throughout history. These are cultural, ethnic, national, economic, social, and political diversities. In the second group are the diversities that are inherent in the Church’s inward life, such as diversity in doctrine (theology), discipline, morals, pastoral practice (custom), worship (liturgy), spirituality, mission, and witness to the world. “Unless diversity infringes the church’s true vocation, diversity helps the church pursue its mission in the widely varied contexts in which it is set.”²⁸

Limits of legitimate diversity

“Unity and diversity have been proclaimed since the early Church, yet there are limits to legitimate diversity. Beyond certain limits diversity can be destructive to the unity to which Christ calls us. We are to work towards overcoming these divisions, but also treasure those variants that contribute to the catholicity of the Church.”²⁹ The vast majority of the responses draw attention to the fact that diversity brings to the Church joy and richness, but it also creates tensions and poses challenges. Some responses recall that great differences, discord, and even struggle can exist within the same denomination for a long time without creating a formal rupture of the bond of unity. However, they generally endorse the point of view of *TCTCV* that there are forms of diversity that may cause divisions. Therefore, a distinction is to be made between a legitimate, valuable, and stimulating diversity, and an illegitimate and destructive diversity that can generate or contribute to maintaining division. Unity and diversity have been

26. *CRTC* 2, 289.

27. *CRTC* 2, 117.

28. Episcopal Church (*CRTC* 1, 166).

29. South Australia Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches (*CRTC* 1, 344).

proclaimed since the early Church, yet there are limits to legitimate diversity. Beyond certain limits, diversity becomes an obstacle to the unity to which Christ calls all his followers from all the times and across the world.

In situations of tension caused by diversity, Christians and Christian communities are called to listen carefully and respectfully to each other's point of view. They are to struggle together as Church to discern, with the help of the Holy Spirit, what is true and right according to God's will, and to protect and preserve unity. Some responses point out that in these situations, holy scripture and the living tradition are normative for the Church. These responses privilege the principle of common accountability toward God. Other responses privilege the principle of mutual accountability as foundational in discerning whether a diversity is legitimate or not. One response questions the use of the adjective *legitimate*, since it is a legal, not a biblical term. This response proposes to replace it with other terms, such as *faithful* or *upbuilding diversity*, which seem more appropriate to express the intention of *TCTCV*.³⁰ One response speaks about the "range" of legitimate diversity. It calls for a broad range of diversity, arguing that all diversity that does not infringe the Church's true vocation helps the Church pursue its mission in the widely varied contexts in which it is set.³¹

Two elements are mentioned as particularly important in maintaining unity within legitimate diversity. The first is pastoral ministry for the service of unity; the second is mutual accountability among the churches.

Faith and theological languages

One aspect of this legitimate diversity consists in the various theological languages of different denominations. The responses generally acknowledge that unity in faith does not necessarily imply unity in doctrinal formulas and theological elaborations. The way in which faith is expressed is distinct from the content of faith. It is commonly recognized that different theological languages have been developed in different confessional traditions. Various responses recognize that many statements affirmed by *TCTCV* can be fully endorsed by their churches in their exact formulations; in other cases they recognize their own faith but would usually use a different vocabulary to express it. For example, since the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church has used the principle of the "hierarchy of truths" in its Magisterium. This response to *TCTCV* asserts that "it can be affirmed that the more substantial aspects of the life and mission of the Church present a significant deep convergence, even

30. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (*CRTC* 2, 12).

31. Episcopal Church (*CRTC* 1, 166).

sometimes consensus, with Catholic theology.”³² The principle of a hierarchy of truths is mentioned also by other responses, which find it a useful tool in overcoming some doctrinal divergences among different theological approaches.

When speaking about the use of various theological languages, several responses reiterate that the same content of faith can be expressed using different doctrinal formulas, but the same doctrinal formula can be understood differently following different theological traditions. This is the case, for example, with the liturgical formula “this is my body” when applied to the eucharistic presence of Jesus. In this context, the response from the Scottish Episcopal Church recalls the concept of *adiaphora* that belongs to the Christian tradition.³³ This term refers to possible legitimate variants of the understanding of an aspect of faith. Here, it is not possible to choose only one and reject the others. However, the North Carolina Council of Churches states that, within the ecumenical context, “the term *adiaphora* has been employed in a reductionist sense as way of arguing in favor of what has often been called a ‘reconciled diversity.’” It then recalls that there are persisting disagreements among churches on what “are the essentials and what is *adiaphora*.” There are also persisting disagreements regarding what can be considered to be an appropriate authority in the Church to make such distinctions, and what can be considered to be commonly recognized criteria.³⁴ Some responses affirm that the concept of the Church as sacrament belongs to a specific theological and linguistic tradition and can be expressed by the use of other words and expressions in such a way as to do justice to what it intends to say in the theological languages of the churches that use it.

Ordained ministry and the ministry of *episkopé*

Regarding the office of ministry, the responses acknowledge the variety of practices in different traditions. Most of the time, this is considered to be legitimate diversity. The responses usually distinguish between two terms used in *TCTCV*. It seems clear that, for some traditions, ordained ministry is distinct from the ministry of *episkopé*; in others, only an ordained minister can assume the ministry of *episkopé* in the Church. Some responses affirm that ordained ministry belongs to the nature of the Church and so needs the Church’s recognition and support. There continues to be disagreement as to who may be recognized and who has authority to make these decisions for the Church. One response stresses

32. *CRTC 2*, 171.

33. *CRTC 1*, 34.

34. North Carolina Council of Churches (*CRTC 2*, 256–7).

that when discussing ordained ministry, *TCTCV* seeks less diversity across denominations and tries to define ground for a common practice.³⁵ However, this seems impossible, given that within modern Christianity, there is still increasing diversity of practices of ordained ministry across the churches.

Some responses underline that there is no one pattern of the ministry of *episkopé* in the New Testament. They call for recognition of the variety of forms of this ministry in the Church of today as they have developed in different traditions throughout the ages. One response addresses the issue of *episkopé* in close relation to the apostolicity of the Church and states that *episkopé*, understood as ordained episcopacy, is a necessary sign of the apostolic continuity of the Church.³⁶ Almost all the responses welcome clarifications on the nature and purpose of *episkopé* in the Church as expressed in *TCTCV* and call for further elaboration of this crucial question for the common vision of the Church. The Roman Catholic response appreciates the affirmation of *TCTCV* that a “pastoral ministry for the service of unity and the upholding of diversity is one of the important means given to the Church.”³⁷ *TCTCV* does not specify the holders of such an office, but states elsewhere that the duty of those who exercise *episkopé* (ministry of oversight) in the community is to “uphold unity in diversity.”³⁸ From the Roman Catholic perspective, this affirmation can be applied not only to those who exercise *episkopé* on the local level but also to the Bishop of Rome who, as universal pontiff, exercises the ministry of oversight in the whole Church, serving at the same time the preservation of an essential unity and a legitimate diversity among all local churches.³⁹ The response underlines that, according to Roman Catholic teaching, the Pope’s mission consists not only in preserving the Church’s unity but also its legitimate diversity. This is explicitly stated by Vatican II: “Within the Church particular churches hold a rightful place; these churches retain their own traditions, without in any way opposing the primacy of the Chair of Peter, which presides over the whole assembly in charity and protects legitimate differences, while at the same time assuring that such differences do not hinder unity, but rather contribute toward it.”⁴⁰ However, no other response directly refers to the specific ministry of the Bishop of

35. South Australian Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches (*CRTC 1*, 346).

36. Church of England (*CRTC 1*, 39).

37. *TCTCV*, §29.

38. *TCTCV*, §54.

39. *CRTC 2*, 188.

40. Pope Paul VI, “*Lumen gentium*” (*LG*), 21 November 1964, para. 13, quoted in *CRTC 2*, 189.

Rome for the safeguarding of legitimate diversity within a visibly united Church.

Moral issues

Several responses address the issue of legitimate diversity in the area of ethics and moral discernment. The majority state that diversity, as an integral part of full and visible unity, also includes diverse approaches to moral issues. They maintain that full unity does not entail the reconciliation of all differences that can coexist within the communion of a visibly united church. Some responses openly reject the position taken by *TCTCV* regarding shared moral values. They affirm that moral values can vary significantly among different people or cultures; for this reason, such values cannot constitute a solid basis for ecclesial *koinonia*. Even within the same culture, it is often the case that what some Christians believe to be moral is diametrically opposed to what other Christians believe. Some responses claim that a broad diversity of contradictory and even conflicting views on moral issues can coexist within one ecclesial communion. The Church of Wales states that, in the context of morality, a legitimate diversity is to be considered “as a gift to be received, and not simply as a problem to be resolved.”⁴¹

Other responses, such as the one from the Roman Catholic Church, argue that Jesus Christ, “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), provides the ultimate answer to the moral questions of human beings. This response asserts that “faith possesses a serious moral imperative: ‘It gives rise to and calls for a consistent life commitment; it entails and brings to perfection the acceptance and observance of God’s commandments.’”⁴² Similarly, the responses from the Orthodox churches generally state that, while legitimate diversity reflects the beauty of the one universal Church and witnesses to a great variety of cultural expressions of the gospel, it is to be excluded when it comes to dogmatic and moral issues.⁴³

Most of the responses recognize that, for some decades now, moral issues have represented a growing point of division both within and among the churches. They invite the churches to address together the question of the limits of legitimate diversity in this area. The most common moral issues that provoke today’s tensions within and between communions are linked to gender issues and human sexuality. Some responses call for respect of different

41. *CRTC 1*, 63.

42. *CRTC 2*, 203.

43. See, for example, Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation (*CRTC 2*, 23).

personal sensitivities and choices regarding moral issues. Others call for elaboration of ecumenical principles of personal and collective morality that would be commonly recognized as being in harmony with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The response from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America recognizes the differences that exist among the churches regarding moral issues, recommending them for further ecumenical dialogues. It affirms that these dialogues should begin not from existing disagreements, but from “the common ground that Christian traditions have identified on matters of first importance. From this starting point, dialogues need to examine not only particular variances in ethical understandings but also the related questions of how divisive such diversities must be considered. They need also to attend to frameworks and considerations that would support continuing diversity in ethical discernment.” While addressing ethical questions, numerous responses affirm that, for the restoration of visible unity, it is necessary to address the arduous issue of determining together the common criteria of discernment between legitimate and illegitimate or divisive diversity.

Religious pluralism

While speaking about diversity, some responses address the question of the relation of the Church to other religions. Most of the time religious pluralism is seen as positive: the life of the Church can be enriched and expanded by interreligious engagements of different kinds. While admitting the theological challenges faced by Christians in these encounters, the responses encourage the churches to expand and deepen interreligious cooperation, and to explore together the theological and ecumenical implications of religious diversity and dialogue. The leading feeling is that Christians should be open to faith communities outside the traditional Christian community, for in our openness we may discern the face of Christ in unfamiliar places. One response openly argues for the idea of a Christian “community that is welcoming and hospitable, where everyone may enter and no one is excluded,” regardless of religious belonging.⁴⁴

Common criteria for discernment

All the responses welcome *TCTCV*’s recognition of a need to elaborate a set of common criteria for discerning what is needed to remain in the communion of the Church—in other words, where the limits of legitimate diversity are. Most

44. Catholic Association for Ecumenism and Ecumenical Forum for Catholicity (*CRTC 1*, 267–8).

of the time churches agree that the holy scripture constitutes the ultimate criterion for defining these limits. However, different Christian traditions have different and sometimes conflicting scriptural hermeneutics.

Some responses, such as the one from the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council, recall in this context a long-standing principle: “in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, diversity; in all things, love.”⁴⁵ Several responses argue that the issue of legitimate diversity needs to be addressed within a context where Christians live side by side while belonging to various denominations and traditions. They claim that the actual range of diversity cannot be decided at a central or worldwide level without direct involvement and approval at the regional and local levels. According to them, the Christianity of the 21st century needs more contextualized norms for diversity in those areas where Christianity is growing most rapidly, especially in the southern hemisphere and traditionally non-Christian environments. In ecumenical dialogue, the churches need to adopt a new theological perspective that will help them recognize a constructive role for the “other” and for “difference” in contributing to a healthier view of “unity in diversity.” As individuals and as churches, we need each other to fully be who we are called to be by God. Several responses call the Faith and Order Commission to continue further studies and develop some common criteria or some common means of discernment to aid churches in their reflections on these questions.

Mutual recognition—a new paradigm for ecumenism

Several responses call for a change of ecumenical paradigm: Instead of looking for a common vision of the Church, we should focus on the search for mutual recognition. In this perspective, while engaging together in the ecumenical movement, churches are called to recognize their respective traditions and ethos as expressions of a legitimate diversity. According to the Methodist Church in Britain, the leading principle in this process is that of “mutual accountability,” a principle largely accepted by the churches engaged in the ecumenical movement.⁴⁶ In this view, convergence does not need to consist of a homogeneity of belief or practice. What is needed is a mutual recognition of different beliefs and practices as being dissimilar but equally valid expressions of the Church’s faith and order. Following this thinking, one response suggests a shift from the historic concept of *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful) or *sensus fidei* (sense of the faith) as a generally recognized criterion of the veracity of belief and ecclesial

45. *CRTC 1*, 226.

46. *CRTC 1*, 21.

practice to a new concept of *consensus fidelium* (consensus/consent of the faithful), as an expression of mutual recognition of one another's ecclesiality regardless of persisting divergences.⁴⁷ This could lead the churches to the recognition of legitimate difference in models or "types" of church. Many churches today are growing in the conviction that mutual recognition in love is a more productive goal of ecumenism than a search for a visible unity based on some doctrinal or moral criteria defined beforehand. While some responses still stress that the unity of the Church calls for structural unity, others privilege spiritual unity, considering various organizational patterns of churches as expressions of legitimate diversity.

Receptive ecumenism

In this context, some responses propose *receptive ecumenism* as an appropriate way to grow in communion. As described by the South Australian Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches, receptive ecumenism implies that each church may learn and receive from insights which have shaped the unique expressions of faith, worship, and mission of other churches. In this mutual exchange of gifts, each church is enriched and the catholicity of the one Church comes to fuller expression. This method could be particularly useful in addressing some still unsettled issues, such as synodality, ministry, and authority. Receptive ecumenism calls for inclusive dialogue and receptive learning.⁴⁸ Inclusive dialogue means that no denomination considering itself to be Christian is excluded from the table of discussion. Receptive learning is a process of discerning the gifts brought by the "other" denominations that can be assimilated by our own denomination.

Further studies

Almost all the responses that address legitimate diversity recommend that the Faith and Order Commission undertake further studies on the topic, its limits, and its relation to unity. More ecumenical reflection is needed on what distinguishes legitimate diversity from heresy and schism. The responses recommend work toward the establishment of mutually recognized ecumenical criteria and structures to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate diversity, including in matters of faith and order. It is suggested that in future studies, the commission

47. Joint Commission on Doctrine of the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church (CRTC 2, 378).

48. South Australia Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches (CRTC 1, 340–48).

adopt a new perspective: trying to discern not what is “legitimate” or “illegitimate” in the Church, but rather what can be mutually recognized by churches as not contrary to the Christian faith, even if unfamiliar to a particular tradition. A deeper study is required regarding the relationship between ecclesial life and ethics: in particular, how divisive moral diversities among churches must be considered. Fruitful discussion on moral issues requires some basic agreement on Christian anthropology. Without a common understanding of the human being, it is not possible to come to an agreement on what is and what is not ethical behavior. Recalling divergences that exist between the churches in the understanding of the sacramentality of the Church, the responses propose that this theme be further addressed in the ecumenical discussion, following the method of receptive ecumenism. Further work is also recommended on the relation of the Church to other religions from the perspective of Christian soteriology: If we claim that Jesus Christ is the only Savior, what is the value of other religions?

Criticisms of *TCTCV*

The main criticism of *TCTCV* on the issue of legitimate diversity is that *TCTCV* does not define the legitimate limits of diversity; nor does it propose any guiding principles upon which the churches could agree to undertake together the discernment between legitimate and divisive diversity.

The second criticism is closely related to the first: the vision of unity in *TCTCV* is unclear. Even though diversity is generally cherished by churches as a positive and enriching value, they also recognize that there is a great need for a common vision of the Church. Without this vision, the ecumenical movement will not be able to achieve its goal. How can we arrive at the unity of the Church if we do not agree on what this unity means and requires?

The third criticism is that *TCTCV* does not reflect sufficiently the diversity of the Christianity of today. Essentially, *TCTCV* deals with concerns that are relevant for the northern hemisphere, where historic Christianity has been in decline for decades. *TCTCV* does not adequately address the issues relevant to the Christians in the southern hemisphere, where Christianity has been quickly developing—issues such as “new ways of being church,” the relationship of the Church to indigenous religions, and different approaches to mission and proselytism.

Two approaches to ecclesiology

Assessment of the value and limits of diversity depends on the churches’ general ecclesiological perspective. In this respect we can discern two distinct approaches. The first can be defined as an “approach from above,” based on a doctrinal or

traditional view. The second can be labelled as an “approach from below” taking an existential or contemporary view. *TCTCV* and some responses from historic churches (such as Orthodox churches, the Roman Catholic Church, and some Protestant churches) reflect the first type of ecclesiology. Most of the responses from Protestant churches and ecumenical groups adopt the second perspective. Defining the Church from above generally emphasizes questions of structure and authority, and prefers unity to plurality. This understanding tends to underestimate the historical diversity of the Church and its human sinfulness. Defining the Church from below generally focuses on the historic context and the individual believer, and prefers diversity to uniformity. This understanding tends to underestimate the necessary “essentials” of the Church.

The response from the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation illustrates the first (“doctrinal”) standpoint. The Catholic Association for Ecumenism and Ecumenical Forum for Catholicity take the second (existential) standpoint. They state that the limit to legitimate diversity is the one apostolic faith. They comment further that the majority of Christians in the Netherlands “cherish the idea of a community that is welcoming and hospitable, where everyone may enter and no one is excluded.” They then add that “great differences, discord, and even struggle can exist within the same denomination for a long time without creating a formal rupture of the bond of unity.”⁴⁹ However, the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation says that, from their doctrinal perspective, “legitimate diversity cannot include any diversity in dogmatic and moral issues.”⁵⁰

It is immediately apparent that the two responses speak about diversity from two different perspectives: While the Orthodox response makes a clear reference to the doctrinal or theological requirements for unity, the response from the Netherlands refers to the existential situation of Christianity in that country. This leads us to the question of how to maintain a right balance between the doctrinal requirements for unity, and legitimate existential diversities of local communities living in different cultural contexts and facing different pastoral challenges.

Two levels of diversity

The issue of legitimate diversity needs to be addressed on two different levels: “confessional” (limited to one church or one church tradition) and “ecumenical” (relative to the dialogue between churches of various traditions).

49. *CRTC* 1, 267.

50. *CRTC* 2, 23.

Several responses, when speaking about diversity, refer to the situation within their own church communion. They underline that diversity results from different historical contexts, languages, and cultures of the people to whom the Church proclaims the gospel of Christ. Diversity is thought to be intrinsically linked to the local context and to belong to the nature of the Church, understood as the universal communion of local communities. Within each ecclesial tradition, there are important differences among communities because of local contexts. These differences may create tensions and conflicts. An ecumenism *ad intra* is as important as an ecumenism *ad extra*. At the same time, an ecumenical bond among two communities representing different ecclesial traditions but living in the same place can be stronger and deeper than the sense of belonging to a wider church communion within one's own tradition.

Two aspects of diversity within one Church

In theological dialogue a distinction can be drawn between two aspects of diversity:

1. Diversity that results from different cultural, historical, or even socio-political contexts in which the Church lives. This diversity belongs to the very constitution of the Church as the reality of this world, and is not divisive in most situations. However, in the history of the Church, it has led sometimes to divisions that in the traditional theological and juridical language of the Church are called schisms.

2. Diversity that is rooted in different theological approaches to the reality of the Church. This is "doctrinal diversity" that is potentially divisive. In theological language, it is identified with heresy. During the Reformation era, different visions of the Church led to the break of ecclesial communion with the Roman Catholic Church.

Conclusion

The responses testify that in *TCTCV* the churches have moved closer to reaching a common understanding of the place of diversity in a visibly united Church. The churches are concerned to affirm that, as they progress on the way to fuller oneness in Christ, the unique ethos of their respective ecclesial traditions is not to be lost, but rather is to become a common heritage. The universal Church is conceived of not as a uniform monolith but as a communion of diverse local churches. The affirmation of an ecclesiology of communion with reference to the Holy Trinity provides a solid doctrinal basis for a fuller reciprocal appreciation of and enrichment by different cultural, spiritual, liturgical,

and theological traditions among churches, both at local and universal levels. An understanding of unity as a reconciled diversity of various Christian traditions becomes an invitation to the churches to a fuller recognition of the common apostolic faith undergirding their particular ecclesial expressions. At the same time, while affirming diversity as a legitimate aspect of the Church, belonging to its nature as a human community living in diverse and changing historical and social contexts, the responses point out that this diversity has limits beyond which communion is broken.

The responses also reveal important differences in how different church traditions understand legitimate diversity in various aspects of the Church's life—such as the confession of apostolic faith, baptism, ministry, decision-making, witness to the world, and service to humanity. Moreover, the responses note that the criteria for discerning legitimate diversity are not always shared, even within one ecclesial tradition. This situation is cause for the churches to develop a set of common criteria for determining the limits of diversity, and common structures so that they might use these criteria effectively. Such an agreement should follow the fundamental biblical principle, as expressed in the Council of Jerusalem, to impose no greater burden than is necessary for the recognition of unity (Acts 15:28–29). Based on this principle, it is possible to recognize the existence of various types of the same Church within the ecclesial *koinonia*. A historical example of this reconciled diversity is the existence of various traditions within the Catholic Church, such as the Oriental Catholic churches and the Anglican Catholic churches. Even though legitimate diversity is cherished by churches as a positive and enriching value, churches also recognize that there is a need for a common vision of the Church.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Authority

Susan Durber

Over recent decades, the subject of authority has come more and more to the fore, both within bilateral dialogues between churches and in the multilateral work of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC). Within the broader cultural context, respect for authorities is increasingly questioned and the very notion of authority is itself often undermined. It is not surprising, then, that authority has become the subject of ecumenical discussion. But questions of authority have always been at the heart of the ecumenical movement. Indeed, Christians have always asked what sources, texts, and traditions might be honored as authoritative; where authority is held within the Church; and how any of us might know who to trust or what to heed or how to think through a difficult question as we speak about and live out our faith.

Many of the responses to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*¹ reflect what seems to be a deeply felt need within many of the churches to find what is often expressed as “common criteria” to tackle the issues that are most painfully divisive now. For some, the responses to difficult questions—whether doctrinal, ethical, or moral—are made plain in the traditions of the church (though the pastoral responses to those questions may be nuanced and varied). To others, responses to such questions (and particularly ecumenically-agreed-upon responses) seem very hard indeed to find. Many of the responses to *TCTCV* appeal for help in navigating what may have become the most challenging of ecumenical tasks in the present times. Sometimes, perhaps, there is nostalgia for a past when authorities were held in common, when we all knew how to argue a case from common sources and in common ways, and when responses to profound moral questions were somehow clearer—even if, in

1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Henceforth, *TCTCV*.

truth, that past may never have existed. It is not always clear what is now sought and longed for. Shared authoritative sources? Shared criteria? Shared methods of argument? Anything that might help to prevent acrimonious division? There is in any event an evident longing for greater understanding of how we sometimes reach such very different conclusions about the same matters. And there is a profound longing for real ecumenical mutual accountability. Many of the responses to *TCTCV* express a desire to at least find ways to facilitate respectful and fruitful dialogue and to navigate, peaceably, the most difficult questions. This chapter seeks to set these very vivid present-day issues within the context of a longer ecumenical conversation about authority and discernment.

Ecumenical documents, certainly from *Baptist, Eucharist and Ministry* (*BEM*)² onward, have always said that the primary source of authority in the Church is Jesus Christ. have noted that his authority was, according to scripture, of a particular quality. It was “not like that of the Pharisees,” or indeed of the political powers, but an authority that came from within his very being and was rooted in his self-giving love. This was the kind of authority from which he taught, healed, and forgave, and it is this kind of authority that the Church is given (by Christ, as in Matthew 28) and should model.

In times when the authority of the Church has been damaged in the eyes of many by scandals and abuses of power, churches of many traditions are asking again what it means to proclaim the gospel, to speak of God in the world, and to act with an authority that is compelling.

Scripture and Other Sources of Authority

BEM referred to work done in 1980 on “Authority and Reception”³ and also to the considerable work done in 1963 in Montreal on Tradition, traditions, and tradition,⁴ work that focused on the authority of scripture. It seems that at that stage an ecumenical understanding of the authority of scripture was key.

A conference in Louvain in 1971 affirmed that the authority of scripture works not like any aggressive and dominating power, but rather as a testimony

2. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982). Henceforth, *BEM*.

3. “Authority and Reception,” in *The Three Reports of the Forum on Bilateral Conversations*, Faith and Order Paper No. 107 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1981).

4. *Tradition and traditions: Report of the Theological Commission on Tradition and traditions*, Faith and Order Paper No. 40 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1963).

that calls us to listen well.⁵ At the same time, its authority does not rest on human judgement, but is grounded in the work of the Holy Spirit.

Following Montreal, we continued to wrestle with how we can learn from one another about how to understand scripture in relationship with Tradition and our traditions, and how we accept scripture as authoritative for all, while also taking seriously the different ways in which it is read. This led, in 1998, to the significant text *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels (TEV)*.⁶ So, we read, for example, that the Church always submits itself to being interpreted *by* the word of God, so that scripture is always primary, but also that “to listen to the other does not necessarily mean to accept what other churches say, but to reckon with the possibility of a *‘hermeneutics of confidence.’*”⁷ Further, “for the sake of coherence of the faith and the unity of the community, a common understanding of the interpretative process is crucial for enabling the churches to affirm together their common Christian identity and to be open to what the Spirit is saying through the faith, life and witness of one another.”⁸

There is also a move within this text to think about other sources of authority as part of a wider process of ecumenical hermeneutics:

Part of the ecumenical method is to ensure that the partners in dialogue are made aware where authority resides in each church and how it is being understood and received by each participant. The process of ecumenical hermeneutics involves not only faithful understanding and interpretation of texts, symbols and practices but also analysis of the relative weight given to those texts, symbols and practices by the various churches in respect of the authoritative nature of sources themselves and the interpretations derived from them. Clarity about authority is a crucial element in that dimension of hermeneutics which concentrates on the faithful communication and reception of the meaning of texts, symbols and practices. Consequently, the relationship between Scripture, Tradition and traditions and Christian experience arising from liturgical and other practices needs to be dealt with again and again within the hermeneutical process.⁹

5. *Faith and Order, Louvain 1971: Study Reports and Documents*, Faith and Order Paper No. 59 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1971).

6. *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: An Instrument for an Ecumenical Reflection on Hermeneutics*, Faith and Order Paper No. 182 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998). Henceforth, *TEV*.

7. *TEV*, §8.

8. *TEV*, §10.

9. *TEV*, §31.

Since 1998, there have been a number of ecumenical conferences and consultations about the authority of scripture and the different hermeneutical keys that may open the scriptures (both in different traditions and now across different traditions). But a new, wider concern to find common sources of authority for the churches has also developed. The Faith and Order consultations in Cambridge and Moscow are examples of this new inquiry, which resulted in the two-volume publication, *Sources of Authority*.¹⁰ There has been a growing willingness to explore diverse sources of authority: experience, reason, science, liturgy, hierarchy, and the magisterium, for example. There is as yet no agreed statement on this, but a growing sense that we all hold scripture to be primary and normative—though we read and interpret it in different ways—and that we all turn to other sources too, many of which are accorded a shared, if sometimes informal, authority.

The Authority of the Ordained

BEM was clear that the authority received at ordination is rooted in Jesus Christ, “who has received it from the Father (Matt. 28:18) and who confers it by the Holy Spirit.”¹¹ The authority given is to be received as a gift for the whole community that the ordained person serves. There is an appeal against “autocrats or impersonal functionaries” and *BEM* makes clear that authority in the Church can only be authentic as it conforms to the model of Christ.¹² Here, already in *BEM*, is a crucial pairing that features in later texts: authority and authenticity. There is a sense that the authority of the ordained does not rest on external things like status, but comes from within, from an integrity that is somehow evident. Here the Church wrestles with the tension between institutional authority and what might be understood as a more charismatic or personal authority: an authority that can be recognized by others, rather than an authority which is formal and imposed.

TEV also says much to echo *BEM* in advocating a model of personal authority that is shaped by sacrificial love and humility, rather than by external power.¹³

10. *Sources of Authority, Volume 1: The Early Church*, ed. Tamara Grdzeldze, Faith and Order Paper No. 217 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014); *Sources of Authority, Volume 2: Contemporary Churches*, ed. Tamara Grdzeldze, Faith and Order Paper No. 218 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014).

11. *BEM*, Ministry, §15.

12. *BEM*, Ministry, §16.

13. *TEV*, §56.

Listening to Each Other and Discerning Together

In Odessa, in 1977, a conference was held in which the WCC wrestled with “the present crisis of authority” and how we might teach in a way that witnesses authentically to the apostolic tradition.¹⁴ The issues discussed included the authority of the past, the continuity of tradition, questions of personal authority and the teaching of the Church in its councils, and criteria for discerning the authenticity of doctrine.

TEV also considered how the churches might develop ways of consulting with and listening to one another, so that we can discern together on important matters of faith and discipline. It suggested, for example, that “an ecumenical exercise of teaching authority is already beginning to develop in some respects. It is hoped that ways of common decision-making can be developed, even as there is allowance for certain decisions a church must take without or even against the opinion of others.”¹⁵

At the world conference on Faith and Order in Santiago in 1993,¹⁶ reflection on questions of authority had been framed by *koinonia*. People were asking how the teaching and decision-making of the Church may become truly relational, helping us to be mutually accountable. They were searching for the kind of authority that seeks and serves the *sensus fidelium*.

What does *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* say about authority?

Perhaps surprisingly, *TCTCV* says little about scripture and authority, though it does describe the way in which there are different sources of authority at work among our churches “in varying degrees”: scripture, traditions, worship, councils and synods, and so on.¹⁷ *TCTCV* also refers to the authority of ecumenical councils,¹⁸ to a kind of authority accorded to ecumenical dialogues and to the authority of the lives of the saints or of significant leaders among the churches.¹⁹

14. Hans-Georg Link, ed., *Apostolic Faith Today: A Handbook for Study*, Faith and Order Paper No. 124 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1985).

15. *TEV*, §60.

16. *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Gunther Gassmann, Faith and Order Paper No. 166 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993).

17. *TCTCV*, §50.

18. Following §53. See Maxim Vasiljević, “Ecumenical” chapter 7 in this volume, 69–83.

19. *TCTCV*, §50.

However, all of this is described with brevity and is within a section about the gift of authority in the ministry of the Church. This very important discussion is subsumed under a discussion of ministry in a section of *TCTCV* that some have found to be confusingly structured.

TCTCV has the most to say on authority in connection with ministry. Here it echoes what has been said from *BEM* onwards, that authority comes from Jesus Christ and is characterized, as in his life, by self-emptying love: it is different from power exercised in the world. *TCTCV* emphasizes that the exercise of authority must include the participation of the whole community.²⁰ There is also an interesting reflection on the way in which some Christian leaders have had an impact beyond their own immediate community (such as Patriarch Bartholomew, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Brother Roger of Taizé).²¹ Here, there is a recognition that authority in the Church can sometimes come not from institutional position alone, but from personal authority, or authenticity. There is a reflection on the ministry of oversight as one in which authority is exercised and recognized (with the recognition, following *BEM*, that this should be offered in a balance of personal, communal, and collegial ways).²² There is also, new to this text, a reflection on the possibility of a ministry in service to the unity of the whole Church (primacy).²³

What *TCTCV* may lack—as many of the responses note—is adequate reflection on how to develop and support common structures of discernment and decision-making, so that we can recognize and heed the authority of each other's insights on particular, often difficult, issues. Paragraph 53 reflects on synodality and conciliarity, and the importance of such structures in actualizing the life of the community as communion. But there is no consideration of how different churches might, in practice, listen to one another, or how they might develop structures of conciliarity that have authority more widely than one particular tradition. There is reflection on the early ecumenical councils and whether we might be able to reach a common assessment of the normativity of their teaching today, but not enough about how councils or structures might be developed for the questions that threaten to divide us *now*.

A question at the end of §51 is key here: “All churches share the urgent concern that the Gospel be preached, interpreted and lived out in the world humbly, but with compelling authority. May not the seeking of ecumenical

20. *TCTCV*, §51.

21. *TCTCV*, §51.

22. *TCTCV*, §52.

23. *TCTCV*, §55.

convergence on the way in which authority is recognized and exercised play a creative role in this missionary endeavor of the churches?"

The churches seem increasingly to be recognizing that we need to find ways in which the gospel can be authentically heard in the world, but also ways in which we can more readily listen for a kind of authenticity and authority in each other. *TCTCV* suggests that we should listen to a wide diversity of voices: the whole community of the *laos* (the whole people of God, the baptized), those who are scholars, as well as those in "official" authority.²⁴ In these ways, the text reflects some of the significant changes in how some now talk about and recognize authority and discernment.

There is some reflection in *TCTCV* that we need criteria to know what patterns of Christian life might have authenticity and authority. "Does it lead to holiness?" is one example given, or "Does it build up *koinonia*?"²⁵ *TEV* took "Does it lead to the fullness of life for all?" as another.²⁶

TCTCV does reflect the ways in which authority has come to be framed—within ecumenical dialogues and more widely—as relational, as grounded in interior authenticity and holiness rather than in worldly power and status, as under scrutiny and tested in times when trust has often broken down. The ecumenical movement has reflected on how scripture has authority, not as an aggressive power, but as a testimony to be heard. *TCTCV* reflects that there is something of a "crisis of authority," but also that churches have a responsibility to preach and teach in compelling ways, in faithfulness to the apostolic tradition.

It may be that *TCTCV* does not set out as clearly as it could all the different issues around authority: the authority of the past, issues of continuity and change, and newly emerging models of authority, for example. The preponderance of its reflection is on the "who" question of authority, with its emphasis on ministry. There is also, perhaps, a sense of a text still engaging with internal church debates about authority, while not taking seriously enough the very pressing external crisis of authority in the wider world and its challenge for evangelism and mission.

TCTCV might also be said to reflect on the limits of authority (the limits of "legitimate diversity" for example) so that it invites preoccupation with what might be judged beyond the edges of authoritative teaching or faith. Might it be more fruitful to ask what it is that we can already and with confidence say

24. *TCTCV*, §51.

25. *TCTCV*, §§49–50.

26. Compare *TEV*, §52.

together with compelling authority, as mutually owned and taught in our life together as churches? If we know what it is that we *can* say and why, that might help us know how to begin to face together the more difficult questions.

What Do the Responses to *TCTCV* Say about Questions of Authority?

Texts and traditions

A number of responses to *TCTCV* strongly reaffirm the centrality of scripture in the text. There are some who want to be clear that the order and structure of the Church are subordinate to the witness of the gospel.²⁷ One response criticizes the document for not making the normative authority of scripture and its role in setting the limits of diversity more clear.²⁸ Another regrets that there are often places in *TCTCV* where there are no references to scripture.²⁹ The Moravian Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands is concerned that *TCTCV* seems to put scripture and tradition “on the same level,” and argues that scripture must always be above tradition.³⁰ Similarly, the Union of Welsh Independent Churches reflects that scripture is not simply (as *TCTCV* put it) “normative,” but is the “final authority” in our understanding of the Church.³¹ However, some respondents understand the scriptures as the creation of the *Church* through the living tradition.³² The South Australia Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and the Uniting Churches accepts that scripture is normative, but asks for more reflection on exactly what that means, since scripture can be so variously interpreted and understood.³³ Only one response explicitly calls for more work on hermeneutics and the interpretation of scripture.³⁴ References to scripture and authority, both

27. For example, Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, in *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 1, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, Faith and Order Paper No. 231 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 148. Henceforth, *CRTC 1*.

28. Doctrine Commission of the Anglican Church of Australia (*CRTC 1*, 36).

29. Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, in *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 2, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, Faith and Order Paper No. 232 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 274. Henceforth, *CRTC 2*.

30. *CRTC 1*, 130.

31. *CRTC 1*, 176.

32. For example, the Armenian Apostolic Church, Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin (*CRTC 2*, 63).

33. *CRTC 1*, 343.

34. Doctrine Commission of the Anglican Church of Australia (*CRTC 1*, 36).

within *TCTCV* and in the responses to it, remain mainly at the level of the abstract; they tend not to provide clear or confident reflections on how the authority of scripture might serve the churches in, for example, reflections on questions of morality.

Some responses also pick up the text's question about the authority of all the ecumenical councils. Those who do so are eager to have the authority of the councils more generally recognized across the churches. Some (for example, the Church in Wales) want to know more about what such councils say and what the implications of giving them greater authority would be.³⁵ Others (like the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland) emphasize that the ecumenical councils should be evaluated together, and that all authority in the Church should serve the gospel.³⁶

A number of responses stress that "living tradition," or "local tradition," has authority of its own and must be heeded.³⁷ There is a feeling among some that, despite previous work by the WCC, what it means to be part of a "living tradition" is not sufficiently understood in *TCTCV*. The Roman Catholic response reflects that the authority of the Magisterium is not affirmed in *TCTCV*, but the opening of a new kind of conversation about primacy is welcomed.³⁸

The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe emphasizes what they argue is only partly recognized in *TCTCV*: that biblical and theological studies also give authority to those who engage in them, and that theological competence acquired through education is compelling. The writers point out, also, that in this way authority may be held by those who are not necessarily ordained.³⁹

Some responses pick up on the statement in *TCTCV* that "a certain kind of authority may be recognized in the ecumenical dialogues and the agreed statements they produce" and urge churches to notice this (for example, the North American Academy of Ecumenists and the Episcopal Church).⁴⁰ However, the responses from the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation and from the Theological Committee of the Church of Greece argue that while such documents are respected, they cannot

35. *CRTC 1*, 12.

36. *CRTC 1*, 123.

37. For example, Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (*CRTC 1*, 134), and the Armenian Apostolic Church, Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin (*CRTC 2*, 59–60).

38. *CRTC 2*, 196–7.

39. *CRTC 2*, 276.

40. *CRTC 1*, 322, 165.

be accorded authority.⁴¹ The Roman Catholic response suggests that some ecumenical statements (such as the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith*)⁴² may have real authority for some, but that authority cannot simply be afforded to all ecumenical statements or reports.⁴³ It is also striking that while some churches are theoretically committed to giving weight to ecumenical documents like *BEM*, their responses to *TCTCV* betray little living awareness of *BEM* or other fruits of ecumenical dialogues. The response from the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church reflects a concern expressed by some others, that there must be no suggestion that *TCTCV* comes somehow from “ecumenical authorities” outside of the living churches themselves.⁴⁴

One response says that more work is needed on how churches can recognize “the guidance of the Holy Spirit” in the exercise of authority.⁴⁵ The Union of Welsh Independent Churches also affirms that it is the Holy Spirit who brings the gift of authority.⁴⁶ The response of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain (Quakers) welcomes the statements in *TCTCV* that “‘every Christian receives gifts of the Holy Spirit for . . . his and her part in the mission of Christ’ (§18)” (and that “the authority of God can be recognized by the Church when articulated by any of its members”). They reflect that they share the experience that “‘authority [emerges] wherever the truth which leads to holiness is expressed.’ (§50).”⁴⁷ The United Reformed Church in the UK argues that the faith needs to be discerned in each time and place, that context has its own kind of authority to shape the faith.⁴⁸ The South Australia Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and the Uniting Churches also highlights the need to listen to the voices of all and not only the privileged, arguing that a kind of authority is found in the voices and experience of the oppressed.⁴⁹ The Anglican Church of Canada, similarly, affords authority to the experience and voices of indigenous peoples.⁵⁰

41. *CRTC* 2, 23, 313.

42. *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, 31 October 1999 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2000), <https://www.lutheranworld.org/jddj>.

43. *CRTC* 2, 197.

44. *CRTC* 1, 133.

45. North American Academy of Ecumenists (*CRTC* 1, 322).

46. *CRTC* 1, 181.

47. *CRTC* 1, 97.

48. *CRTC* 1, 210.

49. *CRTC* 1, 347.

50. *CRTC* 1, 56–7.

Who holds authority in the Church and of what kind?

There are numerous responses that affirm what *TCTCV* says about the nature of power and authority within the Church, reflecting a wariness of what they describe as “institutional” authority or the kind of authority that could be confused with secular power. These express a preference for authority that is grounded in authenticity and integrity, in service and humble love. The Episcopal Church, for example, affirms that authority in the Church should always be exercised on the paradigm of Christ, who came not to be served, but to serve.⁵¹ The response of the Union of Welsh Independent Churches expresses a fear of certain kinds of authority, and the way it has sometimes been exercised. However, they affirm the need to witness to the gospel “with authority.”⁵² The Roman Catholic response urges that, since all authority in the Church comes from Christ, it must always be characterized by service, love, and communion; even papal authority must be seen as a ministry of *servus servorum Dei*.⁵³ The response of the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation affirms that authority in the Church must always be distinguished, as *TCTCV* asserts, from mere power.⁵⁴ The Salvation Army commends *TCTCV* when it describes authority as “humble service, nourishing and building up the *koinonia* of the Church in faith, life and witness . . . a service of love without any domination or coercion.”⁵⁵ The Religious Society of Friends in Britain argues that a church living “after Christendom” (when the secular power of the church has dissipated) can actually walk more faithfully in the way of Jesus, emptying itself of power and prestige, “taking the very nature of a servant (Philippians 2:7).”⁵⁶ The Church of Ireland agrees with *TCTCV* that authority in the Church must be distinguished from “mere power”; the kind of authority exercised in the Church must reflect the kind of authority found in Christ, whose authority was not based on office or position, but on the power of the truth itself.⁵⁷

There are many responses, from a variety of traditions, which urge strongly that the authority of the Church must always be distinguished from secular power. Paul Fiddes, a Baptist, reminds us that the Church has, properly, a

51. *CRTC 1*, 163.

52. *CRTC 1*, 186.

53. *CRTC 2*, 199.

54. *CRTC 1*, 23.

55. *CRTC 1*, 179.

56. *CRTC 1*, 95.

57. *CRTC 2*, 142.

prophetic role in speaking truth to worldly power.⁵⁸ The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America notes the constant danger of confusing spiritual authority and temporal power.⁵⁹ And the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches argues that the authenticity of the Church can really be found in its commitment to justice and peace.⁶⁰

In relation to the authority of the ordained, there are some voices who state that ministers do not, *per se*, carry the authority of Christ.⁶¹ They believe that this marks a difference in understanding between Catholics and Orthodox on the one hand, and Protestants on the other. Paul Fiddes affirms that Christians stand under the rule of Christ himself and that nobody else has the right to claim that authority.⁶² There is, in several responses, a wariness about authority invested in the ordained to the exclusion of the laity, and a marked preference for finding authority in the communal or the synodical rather than in the individual or personal (though this tendency might arguably be detected in all the responses).

Several responses regret that there is not more in *TCTCV* about the importance of the whole people of God. For example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America sees the omission of reflection on “the authority of the laity” as significant. They say that without the laity there is no church.⁶³ The Church of Norway regrets that *TCTCV* says nothing about democracy and the participation of people in the decision-making life of the Church.⁶⁴ The Methodist Church in Britain, similarly, argues that it is vital to ask what actual structures will most readily enable the active participation of all the people.⁶⁵ The Roman Catholic response urges that the Magisterium itself be bound by the Tradition in which “the common faith of the People of God has been set forth.”⁶⁶

There are many responses, from many different churches, that affirm the significance of synodality (whether local church, regional, or broader) as a way forward to finding a place from which authority in the Church may be acknowledged and accepted, freed from the dangers of naked power or individualism. This is a particularly strong emphasis within the Roman Catholic response, where appreciation is expressed for the explicit treatment of synodality in

58. *CRTC* 2, 309.

59. *CRTC* 2, 14.

60. *CRTC* 1, 150.

61. For example, United Protestant Church of France (*CRTC* 1, 69–70).

62. *CRTC* 2, 308–9.

63. *CRTC* 2, 14.

64. *CRTC* 2, 42.

65. *CRTC* 1, 23.

66. *CRTC* 2, 187.

TCTCV.⁶⁷ Synodality is a strong theme within the ministry of Pope Francis, who advocates “a synodal church,” and “a church that listens.”⁶⁸ The Roman Catholic response says that the “quality of the ministry of oversight is manifested in synodality or conciliarity.”⁶⁹ This new emphasis also means that the Catholic Church is drawn closer to those who have experience in practicing synodality and it looks forward to finding more substantial agreement on this in the future.⁷⁰

How do we discern together?

Many of the responses refer to the need to find commonly agreed criteria so that we can determine together the limits of diversity or, more positively, what things we can with confidence hold in common. Some ask whether we could develop a commonly recognized set of criteria for decision-making that would, because commonly held, have authority. This is perhaps the most frequent question among the responses. The response of the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation, for example, says that we need to do much more work together on the content and meaning of mutual accountability.⁷¹

Many of the responses highlight the reality that differences on moral questions are what now divide the churches and are also the focus of divisions within churches. A significant way forward would be for Faith and Order to continue to work on moral discernment and decision-making.⁷² The Church of Ireland, for example, reflects that one of the greatest challenges of the Church in our time is to respond to changes in cultural contexts and moral attitudes.⁷³ But, for the Church, *koinonia* is not only about unity in faith, but also unity in moral values, “based upon the inspiration and insights of the Gospel.”⁷⁴ The Roman Catholic response makes the strong statement that

67. *CRTC* 2, 200.

68. *CRTC* 2, 213.

69. *CRTC* 2, 198.

70. *CRTC* 2, 210, 213.

71. *CRTC* 2, 21, 24–5.

72. See the recent studies: *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document*, Faith and Order Paper No. 215 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013); *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 1: Learning from Traditions*, ed. Myriam Wijlens and Vladimir Shmaliy, Faith and Order Paper No. 228 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021); and *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 2: Learning from History*, ed. Myriam Wijlens, Vladimir Shmaliy, and Simone Sinn, Faith and Order Paper No. 229 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021).

73. *CRTC* 2, 143.

74. *CRTC* 2, 143.

“moral questions must be explicitly addressed if the ecumenical movement is to retain its credibility.”⁷⁵

Many responses to *TCTCV* stress that questions of authority are often raised in relation to questions of morality and ethics, as people search for wisdom on which to found and ground their thinking on such matters. This is perceived to be a crucial difference from the time and contexts in which *BEM* was written. Issues of morality seem to be the most likely to be church-dividing. Such issues raise questions of authority, as churches look to scripture, tradition, experience, contemporary social sciences, and the witness of individuals to work out how to respond to the questions people raise today. For some churches or Christians (holding very different views), the answers are clear and the reasons for supporting a particular view are readily given. For others, the search seems more complex. As these questions sometimes open deep divisions, churches are asking what authorities we might hold in common, and whether or how a search for common criteria or authorities might help. The Anglican Church of Canada urges us to be ready to look to the teaching authority of other churches and traditions as well as our own as we face difficult questions. They bear witness to their experience of inviting ecumenical partners to share in their own discussions on same-sex marriage.⁷⁶ The Roman Catholic response suggests that “both the teaching, attitude, and ‘lifestyle’ of Jesus, along with his behavior towards the men and women he encountered during his earthly ministry, must guide the ethical discernment of Christians. A more faithful *imitatio Christi* in its tangible manifestation of outreach to human sinners is called for.”⁷⁷

A number of responses wrestle, particularly in relation to moral questions, with the question of change. It is evident that different churches use the language of change differently. The Roman Catholic response, for example, speaks of respect for the “unchanging nature of the deposit of faith,” but also reflects that some things must change or be expressed differently in changing times—and yet “some differences in moral teaching” cannot be reconciled with the realization of full communion.⁷⁸

Some responses (the Church of England is one) urge that disagreements over moral issues should not become all-consuming, and that we should not make an idol of moral disagreement.⁷⁹ Christians have held different views on

75. *CRTC* 2, 211.

76. *CRTC* 2, 51.

77. *CRTC* 2, 202.

78. *CRTC* 2, 186, 204.

79. *CRTC* 1, 44.

moral issues in the past without being divided from one another and without breaking unity; there is no reason why this should not be true for today. But others (the response of the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation, for example) reflect that the moral questions that seem most pressing now become church-dividing matters because they are rooted in questions of theological anthropology, in the theological understanding of the human person, and in “fundamental realities about the relations between God and human beings.”⁸⁰

This question of how we find common authorities for making decisions together with agreed criteria is clearly a most pressing one for the churches.

Directions for Future Work

There can be little doubt, as evidenced by the responses to *TCTCV*, that the churches are seeking help in developing a common sense of the limits of diversity and finding commonly shared criteria to determine those limits. The responses also indicate that, for many churches, moral questions that seem most in danger of being church-dividing; ways of responding to them are sought through a shared appeal to common authorities. It is on issues of morality, in particular, that churches now find it most difficult to accept or heed what others take as authoritative, even while they express a desire to do so. This is a clear indication that there continues to be important work for Faith and Order to do on these matters. Before anything like “common criteria” can be found or “common sources of authority” named, there needs to be a growth in the understanding of how and why Christians from different traditions reach such difficult conclusions. There seems to be a gap in even understanding how decisions are reached among us and, even more, of how it may happen that churches may come to think of a question in a different way. Understanding of each other needs to deepen before dialogue can happen. An immediate challenge of the ecumenical movement is to facilitate that growth of understanding.

Some suggest that we should simply let the differences on such issues as sexuality stand, and not allow them to be church-dividing. Others argue that these issues go theologically deep and cannot be allowed to set the limits of diversity; indeed, some of the most “authoritative” sources of our faith will not allow us to do that. Issues of morality certainly lay bare the realities of our differences on authority and discernment. Here is the present crux in our common

80. *CRTC* 2, 24.

longing for the unity for which Christ prayed, and which is now a major focus of the work of the Faith and Order Commission.

Some of the responses to *TCTCV* note particularly that there is a crisis of authority even beyond this. What the churches share in common is a loss of their own authority in the context of the wider world. There is an urgent need for all Christians, together, to find ways to speak with confidence of the gospel in times when many in the world are skeptical and critical of the churches, and when the authority of the church—and indeed of many “authorities” of all kinds—is under question. All Christians are united in longing for the people of the world to recognize in our speaking and living truly authentic signs of the love of God. All our churches, judging by the responses to *TCTCV*, have learned that the Church cannot stand on worldly power and authority. Authority needs to be rooted in authentic, attractive, and compelling love.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Role of Women in the Church

Susan Durber

Over the past decades of the work of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC), discussion of issues related to women has moved from focusing predominantly on ordination toward broader reflection on the theological understanding of the human person. But both the narrower and broader discussions have ebbed and flowed, marked by decisive recommendations and long periods of silence. In ecumenical conversation, such discussions have become increasingly difficult. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (TCTCV)¹ is chiefly silent about the role of women in the Church.

That silence demands interpretation, as some of the responses to TCTCV suggest. It may be that the text, in seeking to identify areas of convergence, did not dwell on this issue because there simply is not a growing ecumenical convergence. In terms of ecumenical conversations, there have not been significant advances in this area since *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM).² In some places, it even seems as though the divergence on this issue is widening. It is also the case that churches were not asked about this issue; so, understandably, many did not reflect on it in their responses to TCTCV. While there are, without doubt, conversations about the role of women taking place among and between the churches—the Roman Catholic Commission on the female diaconate, and the commissioning of female deacons within the Patriarchate of Alexandria are two significant examples—those conversations are not much reflected within TCTCV or in the responses to it.

1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Henceforth, TCTCV.

2. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982).

In the early days of Faith and Order, the question of ordination was the chief issue raised in relation to women. At the 1961 assembly in New Delhi, the Faith and Order Commission was directly challenged to study the theological, biblical, and ecclesiological issues involved in the ordination of women.³ There was a consultation on the matter in 1963; then the ecumenical discussion quietened until 1979, when there was a consultation in Sheffield as part of the *Community of Women and Men in the Church* study. This consultation resulted in five key recommendations, urging that the following theological issues should find a place in the future work of the Faith and Order Commission:

- the significance of the representation of Christ in the ordained ministry, particularly in the relation to the ordination of women
- the diaconal dimensions of all ministries, especially their understanding of the diaconate and the place of women and men within it
- the possibility and implication of churches being in communion when they have different policies concerning the ordination of women
- the variety of ways of offering ministries, such as ordination, consecration, commission, and accrediting
- the relation of fundamental human rights to the Christian understanding of the calling to ordained ministry.⁴

These recommendations, though powerfully presented, were not taken up.⁵

After 1982, there was some discussion of the issue among the responses to *BEM*. Some protested the inadequacy of the document in that it described only the fact that there were different positions among the churches on the issue of the ordination of women.⁶ There was a sense of urgency about the need to discuss this

3. See *Concerning the Ordination of Women*, Faith and Order Paper (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1964).

4. Constance F. Parvey, ed., *The Community of Women and Men in the Church: A Report of the World Council of Churches' Conference, Sheffield, England, 1981* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983).

5. Melanie A. May, "A Survey of Faith and Order Discussion on the Ordination of Women: A Retrospective Introduction to Future Work," a historical survey considered by the Faith and Order Standing Committee, New Skete Monastery, Cambridge, New York, 26 May–1 June 1998, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/faith-and-order-on-womens-ordination>.

6. See *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" Text*, 6 volumes, ed. Max Thurian, Faith and Order Papers Nos. 129, 132, 135, 137, 143, 144 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986–1988).

issue more fully, not only among the respondents, but also in the Faith and Order Standing Commission. However, silence followed. Despite the voices of those who urged that *all* the churches were wrestling with questions related to the full participation of women in ministry, and that this was not an issue of Protestants versus Catholics and Orthodox, silence continued to prevail.

When Dame Mary Tanner spoke at the 2016 Busan assembly about the WCC study on the community of women and men in the church that had begun in 1979, she said that “the response was overwhelming. No other WCC study had received such engagement from groups all over the world. It was as if women were just waiting to speak—waiting to be given permission to speak out.”⁷

This study and consultation led to the conference in Sheffield and to its recommendations, which set a new kind of agenda. However, as Mary Tanner also reflected in Busan, this remains an unfinished agenda. It is not only that it remains unfinished, but that a sense of what the agenda is, and our ability or willingness to talk together about it as churches, has changed as well. It seems harder now to stir the passion and conversation than it once was. In some places there even seems to be a deeper kind of fear of, or resistance to, the conversation. The issues also seem to have broadened in ways that can make beginning a new conversation, or continuing the old one, harder.

The Faith and Order World Conference in 1993 in Santiago da Compostela⁸ took place in the middle of the Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. Mary Tanner, then moderator, reflected at the time that there were more women present than at any previous Faith and Order conference. Women had just begun to be ordained to the diaconate in the Church of England, for example, and were soon to be ordained to the priesthood.

That world conference made some recommendations concerning the role of women in the Church. In the report of section 1, “The Understanding of Koinonia and its Implications,” it was said that “a common understanding of the relationship between, on the one hand, human gender, and on the other hand, both ordained ministries and the ministry of the whole people of God has become a contemporary difficulty on our common journey. It is important

7. Erlinda N. Senturias and Theodore A. Gill, Jr., eds., *Encountering the God of Life*, Report of the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014).

8. *Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela 1993. Message, Section Reports, Discussion Paper. Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, Faith and Order Paper No. 164 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993).

that this issue be a continuing subject of dialogue.”⁹ This led to recommendation 4: “That Faith and Order continue with the study of the Community of Women and Men in the Church.”¹⁰

In section 3, “Sharing a Common Life in Christ,” it was reported that the issue of ordination is still controversial. It also said: “A clarification of the parameters of the debate show that the fact of not permitting the ordination of women does not imply a rejection of women themselves, since churches which do not ordain women nevertheless frequently appoint them to positions of considerable responsibility and influence. However, important as other ministries may be, the inability to be ordained to the priesthood is experienced by many women, who are convinced of their call, as a denial of their being and worth.”¹¹

The section included a recommendation that there should be further work done on the issue of the ordination women and particularly on:

- theological anthropology
- tradition
- practice
- the study of the churches’ ordination liturgies
- the process of decision-making both by churches that do not and those that do ordain women to presidency at the eucharist.¹²

It was suggested that there should be a continued sharing of and reflection on the different ways of reasoning used by churches to reach conclusions about this matter, taking into account cultural issues and understandings of tradition, and that the different churches should reflect on each other’s theological methodologies. The report urged that it would be helpful if churches could refrain from negative judgments of others and work to create a constructive atmosphere for discussion.

These recommendations from the World Conference of 1993 were offered in some detail, and some focused specifically on the issue of ordination, but they were never really taken up.

Instead, Faith and Order seems to have tried a different route. After Santiago, there was a study of theological anthropology. This was an attempt to return to the kind of first theological principles which might help all our

9. *Fifth World Conference*, Section 1, “The Understanding of Koinonia and its Implications,” §29, 11.

10. *Fifth World Conference*, Section 1, 12.

11. *Fifth World Conference*, Section 3, “Sharing a Common Life in Christ,” §23.

12. *Fifth World Conference*, Section 3, §24.

churches reflect on the many questions about human personhood that were then and are still causes of disunity among us. The study had a broad remit and focused on questions such as disability and poverty, HIV and AIDS, and developments in genetics and artificial intelligence. The study led to the publication in 2005 of *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology*, which issued an invitation to the churches “to affirm the image of God in every person; to be gracious and inclusive communities where persons are accepted as created in the image of God, welcomed as sisters and brothers in Christ, and challenged to grow, in the power of the Holy Spirit, more fully into the divine likeness.”¹³

The churches were also encouraged to continue reflecting on the implications of the belief that human beings are created in the image of God, by considering questions such as:

- How can we break the silence surrounding violence against women and children, and engage in ministries of healing?
- How can we affirm the worth and dignity of all persons irrespective of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, ability, religion, faith or not faith?
- How, taking account of the Christian tradition and also of scientific and other contemporary insights into the nature of gender, can we explore together the theological, pastoral and ecclesial significance of gender in the life of the Church?¹⁴

This was a long way from a conversation specifically focused on the ordination of women or even the role of women in the Church, but it might have been a different kind of starting place. For those who wanted to press the particular, however, this might have been frustrating. Do we really have to defend the view that women as well as men are created in the image of God? There were also those who felt that fighting for the ordination of women was too narrow an issue when women were in poverty and suffering violence. Wasn't addressing poverty more important? While hard to disagree with, that argument is a powerful way to silence discussion on some difficult issues.

Faith and Order has continued reaching for first principles by going back to the sources of authority on many such questions. The ongoing project on moral discernment is rather like the theological anthropology study in that it seeks to ask the kind of “meta” questions about why we might think differently

13. *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology: A Faith and Order Study Document*, Faith and Order Paper No. 199 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), 53.

14. *Christian Perspectives*, 53–54.

on these big questions rather than tackle a specific difficult question.¹⁵ There was also a Faith and Order study on sources of authority, which explored the ways we draw on our traditions to help us to address challenging theological questions.¹⁶ This study had two consultations. At one of them, a view was powerfully expressed that while there may be no theological objection to the ordination of women, tradition is against it—and weighty tradition cannot be overturned *even if* there is no theological objection. This was a moment when some of the limits of classic Faith and Order theological discussion became evident.

In 2013, Faith and Order published its second convergence text, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (TCTCV). As noted earlier, the text says little about the role of women. It does include inclusive statements like this one in §1: “According to the Bible, man and woman were created in God’s image (cf. Gen. 1:26-27), so bearing an inherent capacity for communion (in Greek *koinonia*) with God and with one another.”

And there are these sentences at the beginning of the final section, perhaps one of the most beautiful parts of the text: “The reason for the mission of Jesus is succinctly expressed in the words, ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son’ (John 3:16). Thus, the first and foremost attitude of God toward the world is love, for every child, woman and man who has ever become part of human history and, indeed, for the whole of creation.”¹⁷

The document also emphasizes what all our churches can say in common, that the church is *all* the people. “The whole people of God is called to be a prophetic people . . . a priestly people . . . a royal people. . . . All members of the Church share in this vocation.”¹⁸

In a passage that many have cited as moving and significant (the response of the Evangelical Church of Greece is a striking example), Mary is described as symbol of and model for both the Church and the individual Christian.¹⁹

15. *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 3: Facilitating Dialogue to Build Koinonia*, Faith and Order Paper No. 235 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021).

16. *Sources of Authority, Volume 1: The Early Church*, ed. Tamara Grdzeldze, Faith and Order Paper No. 217 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014); *Sources of Authority, Volume 2: Contemporary Churches*, ed. Tamara Grdzeldze, Faith and Order Paper No. 218 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014).

17. TCTCV, §58.

18. TCTCV, §19.

19. TCTCV, §15. For the Evangelical Church of Greece response, see *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 2, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, Faith and Order Paper No. 232 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 77. Henceforth, *CRTC 2*.

However, *TCTCV*'s only explicit reference to the controversial or dividing issues around gender in the Church is in a section about ordained ministry, where the text simply says that "Christians disagree as well over the traditional restriction of ordination to the ministry of word and sacrament to men only."²⁰

Many of the responses do not comment on the omission of references to gender in *TCTCV*. This may not be surprising, since the text did not explicitly invite them. Following are excerpts and summaries from responses that do comment on the topic.

Church of Scotland

"It is regrettable that the document is completely silent about the place of women in the Church. This is a serious omission."²¹

Salvation Army

"As an outworking of the conviction that all people are equally created in God's image, equally redeemed by Christ, equally gifted by God, and equally called to use those gifts as God directs, all forms of Christian leadership in The Salvation Army, at any level of seniority, are open equally to men and women."²²

North American Academy of Ecumenists

"We agreed that 'issues relating to ordained ministry constitute challenging obstacles on the path to unity.' . . . We note that some of these issues (such as ordained women) stem from a 'development in tradition.' We suggest that ecumenists need to ask: What are the criteria for recognizing a legitimate development in tradition? We need to *presuppose the good faith of others* before we assess their decisions. Such good faith needs to apply more generally to the recognition of others' ministries. Ecumenists could be helpful in providing a broader framework for these challenging discussions, rooted in the mutual respect we have built over decades of dialogue."²³

20. *TCTCV*, §45.

21. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 1, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, Faith and Order Paper No. 231 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 5. Henceforth, *CRTC 1*.

22. *CRTC 1*, 79.

23. *CRTC 1*, 321.

The Moravian Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

“In the ancient *Unitas Fratrum* women were consecrated as bishops. This was discontinued. ‘In 1957 Church Order granted permission to each province to ordain women.’”²⁴

Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches

“One particular concern is the issue of the ordination of women. The convergence text does not even discuss this topic in detail, but only mentions it in passing by noting that the limitation of ordination to men is a controversial issue. For the Reformed tradition, the ordination of women results from the nature and mission of the gospel and is not up for negotiation.”²⁵

Union of Welsh Independent Churches

“We wish to reaffirm the equal place of women and men within the ministry of word and sacrament has never been a question for us. We have welcomed the gifts that both women and men bring in enriching the worship and witness, service and pastoral care of our churches. Any suggestion that the exclusion of a person on the basis of their sex is absolutely contrary to our understanding of God’s calling of women and men to ordained ministry within the Church.”²⁶

They also comment that it is strange that, in the text, all the examples of the gift of authority are men.²⁷ They ask whether Mother Theresa might not be a good example of a woman whose story has authority across the churches. They also remark that *TCTCV* “places less emphasis than we would wish on the equality of women and men not only in the life of the Church, but more specifically, in the ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament within the Church. We encourage further study of the implications of these developments, not least in relation to episcopal oversight, and their creative and enriching significance for the life and witness of the churches.”²⁸

24. *CRTC 1*, 131.

25. *CRTC 1*, 152.

26. *CRTC 1*, 184.

27. *TCTCV*, §51.

28. *CRTC 1*, 189.

United Reformed Church

The United Reformed Church makes clear that women may hold any position in their church, and that all women are encouraged both in education and in leadership. They draw attention to the celebration in 2017 of the centenary of the first ordination of a woman in a trinitarian church in the UK and offer this experience to the wider church.²⁹

Union of the Waldensian and Methodist Churches in Italy

“Considering that a consensus on ministry cannot, and must not, represent the linchpin of fellowship, we should not seek one single model but reflect on possibilities and conditions for a plurality of ministries. In this context of differentiated recognition, we consider it urgent to undertake serious reflection on the ministerial role of women.”³⁰

Church of Norway

“A particular challenge in the discussion on ministry is the question of ordination of women. The issue is briefly mentioned in §45, but the Synod misses a more thorough treatment of it. This issue is often not dealt with in ecumenical documents, although the question is of great importance to many churches. Discussions around women in ordained ministry, access for women to church leadership, and questions around gender equality are generally not found in the document. The calling to ‘defend human life and dignity’ (§64) should also include defending the dignity of women, thereby dealing with questions of gender equality.”³¹

Evangelical Church in Baden

The recognition of women’s ordination is very important for this church that also suggested adding the name of Dorothy Sölle to the list of those who might be referred to as having spiritual authority more broadly than only within their own church or communion.³²

29. *CRTC 1*, 198.

30. *CRTC 2*, 33.

31. *CRTC 2*, 39.

32. *CRTC 2*, 107.

Uniting Church in Australia

“The Uniting Church has ordained women to the ministry of Word and sacrament since the Union in 1977, following the practice of the three uniting churches, which all ordained women. Explaining this, the Assembly of the Uniting Church said: ‘We therefore declare, without reservation, our belief that the practice of the Uniting Church in Australia in ordaining both women and men to the ministry of the Word is fully in accordance with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we beseech those members of other Churches, or even of our own Church, who have not yet reached this conclusion to think again.’”³³

Roman Catholic Church

There are two relevant comments in this response, both confined to the question of the ordination of women. The first comment is that “certain aspects of Church life are to be considered as determined by God’s will.” The writers added, “*TCTCV* was not able, at this stage of multilateral dialogue, to apply this principle to issues such as . . . the ordination of women, . . . [but] further reflection on how God’s will applies to such issues needs to guide our dialogue about them.”³⁴

The second comment is in reply to the question about the extent to which *TCTCV* offers a basis for growth in unity among the churches. Here there is an affirmation of the text for tracing ordained ministry to “the Lord’s choice of the Twelve,” distinguishing them from the rest of the disciples and sharing his authority with them. This, the response argues, promotes the view that “certain aspects of the Church’s order were willed and instituted by Christ himself.”³⁵ The implications for the ordination of women are not spelled out, but implied.

The North Carolina Council of Churches

This response notes that *TCTCV* does not mention the role of women in ministry and regrets this omission precisely because, in the view of the responders, it is one crucial example of the way in which the text seems to avoid the very matters that are now dividing the church “both interdenominationally and intra-denominationally.”³⁶ The Council members

33. *CRTC* 2, 99.

34. *CRTC* 2, 167.

35. *CRTC* 2, 210.

36. *CRTC* 2, 258.

found it frustrating and inexplicable that such a text would simply not mention (or barely mention) those things which are actually the subjects of the most painful and difficult conversations among and within churches, and which are now threats to Christian unity. They name gender, same-sex marriage and the ordination of “women and men whose self-understanding is gay, bisexual, lesbian, queer, or those who are led to live as transgendered persons.”³⁷

Finnish Ecumenical Council

“We do appreciate *TCTCV* as an achievement. Yet we want to emphasize that the Faith and Order Commission ought to raise up more powerfully both the challenges and successes of contextual realities and the general issue of women’s full participation.”³⁸

Conclusion

The reference of the Finnish Ecumenical Council to “women’s full participation” echoes pleas from some churches that a more confident theology of the whole people of God, the *laos*, should be shaping our understanding of the Church. It may be that ecclesiological issues about gender are now much broader than the question of ordination. In these times, there seems to be more awareness that the Church includes *all* the women (as well as all the men) who are part of it; and that the Church is called to be sign and servant of the good news that brings liberation for all women, an end to rape, violence, and poverty, and an affirmation of the inherent dignity and worth of all humankind. While there are voices keen to make sure that questions about ordination are not forgotten—particularly when the ordination of women in some churches has been mostly positively received and has not deepened disunity in ways that many feared—there is also a need to include broader issues with which the churches are now engaging about humankind being made male and female in the image of God. One comment from the response from the Church of Norway also opened up the question of gender by referring to a particular metaphor for the Church: “Some understand the biblical passages used in §69 of *TCTCV*, about Christ and the bride (Eph. 5:25 and Rev. 21:1–22:5), as a sufficient way to describe the longing for unity in Christ, while others experience the metaphor used as problematic, because it makes associations to patriarchal structures that

37. *CRTC* 2, 257.

38. *CRTC* 2, 227.

can be perceived as oppressive.”³⁹ They might also have observed that some of the other dominant words to describe the Church in *TCTCV* are resolutely “male” (prophet, priest, and king, for example).

It is notable that if we compare the report from the Faith and Order World Conference in 1993 with the present work of Faith and Order, questions of the role of women in the churches are much less visible now than they once were. It is also the case that the questions related to gender which now seem to threaten to divide us, and which are alluded to in some of the responses to *TCTCV*, have a rather different character. It seems much more difficult now than 30 years ago even to use the word “gender.” The word featured considerably in the Santiago report, but many now seem to regard it as almost unusable and belonging more to a modernist secular discourse than the liberating realities of being remade “in Christ.” There seems to be a growing sense, among some, that talk about gender may open up even more fearful conversations about sexuality or transgender issues.

Among others, there is an equal and opposite exasperation and a weariness with conversations about justice for women that seem to get nowhere. The theological conversation now seems, often, to seek to return to methodology, to discussing questions of authority and sources rather than addressing the issues themselves. This often means that these issues disappear from view. This may partly explain the “silence” of *TCTCV* and the way in which gender issues were not raised as much as they might have been in the responses. It can be argued that the churches have begun to think about issues of gender within a much broader context, addressing the things that have most impact on the poorest people in our communities rather than the concerns of those who might be called to ordained ministry.

A conference on the Role of Women in the Churches at the Monastery of Bose in October 2017 (after the publication of *TCTCV*), in which members of the Faith and Order Commission participated, revealed that there is a wide variety of experience among our churches in relation to theological discussions about women’s ordination, the role of women more broadly, and theological anthropology. This is one subject where visible unity seems farther away in some places, and where more work is needed. While some churches report the experience of women participating in ordained ministry as a new “normal,” others note that women are participating fully while not being ordained or commissioned to ministries. Still others raise questions about the complementarity of male and

39. *CRTC* 2, 42.

female or the “overcoming,” in Christ, of gender division. This is a lively and sometimes tense area of discussion among the churches, one that *TCTCV* did not acknowledge fully and which the responses do not entirely reflect.

Questions about the role of women in the Church have, in some contexts, become *more* difficult in these times. Gender issues were much more muted in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* than some wished. It has, it seems, proved difficult to take this conversation forward in Faith and Order. But it is clear, in a number of the responses, that some have noticed a significant gap in *TCTCV*. It remains imperative to address theological issues about what it means to be human beings together, and about the role of women in the Church, as well as in the whole community of humankind.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Theme of Sin in Relation to the Church as Such

Georgios D. Martzelos

TCTCV on the Theme of Sin

Referring to the four attributes of the Church in the creed of the second ecumenical council held in 381 in Constantinople, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*¹ declares that the Church is holy. The ontological holiness of the Church is witnessed in the Bible. The Church is holy because God is holy.² Jesus “loved the Church and gave himself up for her in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word . . . so that she may be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:26–27). The essential holiness of the Church, according to *TCTCV*, is also witnessed to in every generation by holy men and women and by the holy words and actions the Church proclaims and performs in the name of God, the All Holy. “Nevertheless,” it points out, “sin, which contradicts this holiness and runs counter to the Church’s true nature and vocation, has again and again disfigured the lives of believers.”³ For example, although the Church has always been dedicated to proclaiming in word and deed the good news of salvation in Christ, celebrating the sacraments (especially the eucharist), and forming Christian communities, church history reveals that this effort has sometimes been betrayed by the sinfulness of her messengers.⁴ In addition, “Christians have at times colluded with secular authorities in ways that condoned or even abetted sinful and

1. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Henceforth, *TCTCV*.

2. See Isaiah 6:3; Leviticus 11:44–45.

3. *TCTCV*, §22.

4. *TCTCV*, §5.

unjust activities.”⁵ “For this reason, part of the holiness of the Church is its ministry of continually calling people to repentance, renewal and reform.”⁶

Referring to the theme of the relationship between the Church’s holiness and human sin, *TCTCV* says:

As a pilgrim community the Church contends with the reality of sin. Ecumenical dialogue has shown that there are deep, commonly-held convictions behind what have sometimes been seen as conflicting views concerning the relation between the Church’s holiness and human sin. There are significant differences in the way in which Christians articulate these common convictions. For some, their tradition affirms that the Church is sinless since, being the body of the sinless Christ, it cannot sin. Others consider that it is appropriate to refer to the Church as sinning, since sin may become systemic so as to affect the institution of the Church itself and, although sin is in contradiction to the true identity of the Church, it is nonetheless real. The different ways in which various communities understand sin itself, whether primarily as moral imperfection or primarily as a break in relationship, as well as whether and how sin may be systemic, can also have an impact upon this question.⁷

For this reason, some communities avoid characterizing the Church as sacrament, believing that this could obscure the distinction between the Church as a whole and the individual sacraments. This belief makes them feel the need for a clear distinction between the Church and the sacraments: the sacraments are for them the means of salvation through which Christ sustains the Church, and not actions by which the Church realizes or actualizes itself. On the other hand they believe that characterizing the Church as sacrament may lead one to overlook the sinfulness still present among members of the community.⁸ The Church is the body of Christ; according to his promise, the gates of hell cannot prevail against it (Matt. 16:18). Christ’s victory over sin is complete and irreversible; and by Christ’s promise and grace Christians have confidence that the Church will always share in the fruits of that victory. However, Christians also share the realization that, in this present age, believers are vulnerable to the power of sin, both individually and collectively. All churches acknowledge the fact of sin among believers and its often grievous impact, and for this reason all of them recognize the continual need for Christian self-examination, penitence,

5. *TCTCV*, §65.

6. *TCTCV*, §22.

7. *TCTCV*, §3.

8. *TCTCV*, §27.

conversion (*metanoia*), reconciliation, and renewal. In other words, holiness and sin relate to the life of the Church in different and unequal ways. Holiness expresses the Church's identity according to the will of God, while sin stands in contradiction to this identity.⁹

The Responses: Convergences and Divergences

Not all responses to *TCTCV* refer to the theme of sin in relation to the Church as such. Of the 78 responses received, only 27 address this topic either directly or indirectly. Following is a detailed summary of the responses on this matter.

The Church of Scotland welcomes the realism of *TCTCV* in relation to the sinfulness of the Church. Developing further their comment on the Church *in via*, they note that in §§33–36, *TCTCV* tries to hold together two opposing views, namely, that the Church can never sin and that it is a community that does so. In their opinion, “the Reformers would have talked of systemic sin at the time of the Reformation.” But, as they point out, “in our Reformed tradition, it is not evident how we could sustain the concept that the Church is without sin because we have not developed any concept of Christ as sacrament or the Church as sacrament.”¹⁰

The Methodist Church in Britain observes that “*TCTCV* relates the essential holiness of the Church to the reality of human sinfulness within an eschatological perspective that has the potential to overcome significant differences among Christians. Thus, as a pilgrim community, the Church contends with the reality of sin” (§35).¹¹ In this sense “Methodists are among those Christians who believe that ‘it is appropriate to refer to the Church as sinning, since sin may become systemic so as to affect the institution of the Church itself and, although sin is in contradiction to the true identity of the Church, it is nonetheless real’ (§35).” Recognizing that other Christians emphasize the essential holiness of the Church, they find it helpful to acknowledge that “holiness and sin relate to the life of the Church in different and unequal ways. Holiness expresses the Church's identity according to the will of God, while sin stands in contradiction to this identity (§36).”¹²

9. See Romans 6:1–11; *TCTCV*, §36.

10. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 1, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, Faith and Order Paper No. 231 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 7. Henceforth, *CRTC 1*.

11. *CRTC 1*, 21–2.

12. *CRTC 1*, 22.

The Church of England affirms that the document is particularly effective in holding the tension between those churches which are reluctant to attribute sin to the Church (rather than only to her members) and those that teach that it may be attributed to her as such. For the Church of England, the Church is holy because of God's holiness and because of the gift of Christ's love for her in the sending of the Holy Spirit. "That the Church is essentially holy," they point out, "is a welcome statement, 'witnessed to in every generation by holy men and women and by the holy words and actions the Church proclaims and performs in the name of God, the All Holy' (§22), as is also the recognition of the contradiction of this by sin and the Church's consequent ministry of a call to repentance." The Church of England accepts as its own the statement of Vatican II that the Church is "*sancta simul et semper purificanda*."¹³ Yet because the theme of sin in the Church is a sensitive and tricky one, they note that it seems impossible to bridge the gap between the Lutherans and the Orthodox on this issue. For this reason, the Church of England proposes more work in this area, "perhaps addressing the imperative of continual reform and renewal (which is a potential point of convergence between the Reformers and Vatican II)."¹⁴

For the United Protestant Church of France, the Church is holy *and* sinful while it still anticipates the kingdom of God. The theologians of this church strongly believe that the Church is vulnerable to sin, and this can affect her structures. Contrary to what *TCTCV* suggests in some places, it seems to them "not only possible but theologically desirable to speak of the sin of the Church, and not only of the 'sin of the messengers' (§5) or 'human sinfulness' (§6)."¹⁵ By declaring this, they do not want to emphasize the sinful character of the Church at the expense of her holiness. Following the inheritance of their reformers, their intention is to underline "the ancient theme of the Church as *casta meretrix*, as it was also highlighted anew in Roman Catholic theology at the time of the Second Vatican Council . . . by Hans Urs von Balthasar and in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (§8): 'While Christ, holy, innocent and undefiled . . . knew nothing of sin . . . , but came to expiate only the sins of the people . . . , the Church, embracing in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of penance and renewal.'"¹⁶

The North American Academy of Ecumenists, speaking of the Church as *koinonia*, people of God, body of Christ and temple of the Holy Spirit, points

13. *CRTC 1*, 43.

14. *CRTC 1*, 50.

15. *CRTC 1*, 69.

16. *CRTC 1*, 69.

out that these notions “enable us to appreciate that the Church is both a divine and a human reality (cf. §23). [Further,] the image of the prophetic, priestly, and royal people of God (1 Pet. 2:9–19) helps us to understand the Church as a community of flesh and blood human beings—still subject to sin, a pilgrim people, still moving through history toward the fullness of God’s design.”¹⁷ “The notion of the Church as a pilgrim people” helps the Church to recognize that, “at times, the sinful actions of members of the Church—both as individuals and collectively—make the Church a counter-sign of God’s presence in the world.”¹⁸

According to the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, “the question of the relationship between the church’s holiness as the Body of Christ and the reality of human sin is left unresolved (§35). [However,] Quakers have no difficulty in recognizing that the visible church is scarred by imperfections.” Although their understanding “in the long debate about original sin versus human perfection is . . . neither wholly optimistic nor pessimistic,” they acknowledge “the continuing estrangement between God and humanity.” However, quoting a passage from the early Quaker William Dewsbury, they are confident that Christ can give moral perfection to those who hold fast to the inward light.¹⁹

For the French Informal Ecumenical Group, sin is a characteristic element not only of the messengers of the gospel but also of the Church. The Lutheran principle *simul justus et peccator* should not be applied only to the members of the Church. It also applies to the churches, as suggested by the letter to the Ephesians, which speaks of the Church in singular.²⁰ When the dysfunctions or the errors in the Church are transferred onto the shoulders of individual Christians alone, that gives the unpleasant impression that the Church as such remains irreproachable. “This is an example of an old understanding of the Church’s holiness which is not recognized by all partners of the ecumenical dialogues.”²¹ The answer to this issue from the French Informal Ecumenical Group is that “the Church is both sinful and justified by pure grace.”²²

In only two lines, the response of the Moravian Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands gives a clear position on the issue at stake. It is explicitly stated,

17. *CRTC 1*, 318.

18. *CRTC 1*, 319.

19. *CRTC 1*, 103.

20. *CRTC 1*, 327.

21. *CRTC 1*, 329.

22. *CRTC 1*, 329.

“The Church is made of sinners saved by the grace of God. We ought to be able to empathize with sinners who are in need of redemption.”²³

The Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches believes that “from a Protestant point of view, it is doubtful whether the Church can be thought of as being sinless.” They comment that *TCTCV*

acknowledges the reality of sin, but placed it in fundamental contradiction to the Church’s true identity due to its holiness. The Protestant churches see the holiness of the Church as a reflection of the holiness of its head Jesus Christ. As the entirety of sanctified believers gathered to be his body, the Christian Church is the *communio sanctorum*, a community set apart from the rest of the world. But as part of the creaturely world, it is unholy just like creation itself, and sins with it, and relies on God’s justification. It is never its own holiness that the Church partakes of, but the holiness of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Church must acknowledge and confess its sin.²⁴

The Union of Welsh Independent Churches cannot accept that the Church is “sinless,” although these churches believe the Church to be holy, since as the body of Christ in the world she consists of sinful human beings. Therefore, they concur with *TCTCV* §§35-36 that, while “[holiness] expresses the Church’s identity according to the will of God,’ it is possible also to describe the Church and the churches ‘as sinning, since sin may become systemic so as to affect the institution of the Church itself.’” In this sense, they recognize that “the Church and the churches are in a process of renewal, restoration and sanctification, in and through the death and resurrection of Christ, toward . . . eschatological perfection.”²⁵

The Evangelical Church of Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia thinks that it is misleading to describe the Church “as a reflection of the communion of the Triune God,”²⁶ because not only the people gathered in the Church but also the Church itself is sinful and needs justification. For this reason, this church believes that the question of official authority in the Church expresses the lasting tension between the holiness and the sinfulness of the Church.²⁷

23. *CRTC I*, 129.

24. *CRTC I*, 146.

25. *CRTC I*, 182.

26. *TCTCV*, §25.

27. *CRTC I*, 193–4.

The Christian Council of Norway considers that the many divisions of the one Church can indeed be seen as an expression of sin. However, they strongly believe that this expression of sin can also be seen as God using something negative in a positive way, where the many expressions of being church can be seen as God establishing the one Church to communicate the gospel of Christ effectively to the world in a variety of ways.²⁸

The Association of Mennonite Congregations in Germany disagrees with the position stated in *TCTCV* with regard to the sinfulness of the Christians and not of the Church. So, as these communities state in their response, “in [*TCTCV*] we encounter an understanding of the Church that has clear hierarchical features (see for example §§48–51). This understanding of the Church is exacerbated by the notion that only Christians, but not the Church, can be sinful and act sinfully (see §22, 2nd bullet point). We cannot share this view because of the crimes that were justified, approved and committed in the history of churches. Here we find that the study lacks the distinction between the visible and invisible Church.”²⁹ As is clear from this statement, the problem of the sinfulness of the Church can be solved only on the basis of the distinction between the visible and the invisible Church, according to which only the visible Church is subject to sin, whereas the invisible Church remains irreproachable.³⁰

According to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Church as a divine and human reality is in its humanness capable of sin. Although *TCTCV* is “very careful to speak of sin only in the ‘lives of the believers’ and not in the body of the Church itself, out of deference to those traditions which cannot affirm that the Church, as the body of Christ, is sinful, . . . many Lutherans are comfortable making the affirmation that the church, and not simply its individual members, can and has sinned, and as a body, can and must repent.” From this point of view they acknowledge that “the church as a whole, and not only its members, must be called to repentance, renewal and reform (§22).”³¹

The Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation holds a totally different position referring to this theme. They remark that “the holiness of the Church is only vaguely presented [in *TCTCV*], and the reason for its essential holiness is not specified, nor is it plainly stated that sin is

28. *CRTC* 2, 37.

29. *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, vol. 2, ed. Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, Faith and Order Paper No. 232 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 3. Henceforth, *CRTC* 2.

30. *CRTC* 2, 4.

31. *CRTC* 2, 11.

absolutely excluded from its nature.”³² Although they appreciate that “*TCTCV* stresses the dialectics of the eschatological-historical nature of the Church in anticipating the kingdom of God, guided by the Holy Spirit to its full eschatological realization,” this consultation points out that, “from the Orthodox point of view, it should not be understood in the sense that the Church will be fully realized only at the end of time (*eschata*), while remaining an incomplete and sinful reality in any given time of its history (§33),”³³ a notion contradicted by *TCTCV* §22. In response to *TCTCV* §35, the Orthodox affirm that the Church is holy in her nature. “Being the body of Christ, the Church cannot sin despite the sinfulness of its individual members. Therefore, we [the Orthodox] strongly affirm that there is a ‘continual need for Christian self-examination, repentance (*metanoia*), conversion, reconciliation and renewal (§36).’ At the same time, in the course of history one can discern how distortions in faith and order led to separations of some ecclesial communities from the one Church.”³⁴

The Finnish Ecumenical Council notes that “while churches as human communities are not perfect, . . . the Church of Christ is holy.” As the response explains, “many of our churches can easily relate to an idea of sanctification as a continuous growing into Christ.” However, they find that “the struggle against evil on the individual level . . . receives very little attention” in *TCTCV*.³⁵

The Anglican Church of Canada takes only an indirect position on this matter, saying that they “seek to enact repentance together [with other Christians] for the common sins of the Church concerning the trauma inflicted on Indigenous peoples at the hands of” the state and Church in Canada.³⁶

The professors and students of the Evangelical Theological Faculty in Leuven, Belgium, point out that they feel uncomfortable with *TCTCV* “when it seems to start from an essentialist understanding of the Church and to underestimate the . . . sinfulness of her historical reality.”³⁷ For this reason, they regret that “where care is given to respect and protect the historical church and/or her Tradition, . . . this actually implies a denial of *evil* done by her.”³⁸ The students noted “a limited attention to sin in *TCTCV* . . . and this was frequently linked to the church (history) and her mission.” So, as they emphatically note,

32. *CRTC* 2, 20.

33. *CRTC* 2, 21.

34. *CRTC* 2, 22.

35. *CRTC* 2, 225.

36. *CRTC* 2, 57.

37. *CRTC* 2, 338.

38. *CRTC* 2, 340.

Many of us were astonished that §6 lists in only one sentence some “tragic events” in the history of the church and blames individuals (“those engaging in evangelization”) for it rather than stating that the church has at times compromised her mission (cf. §§22, 27, 65). The firm statement that “all authority in the church comes from her Lord and head, Jesus Christ” (§48) and the subsequent discussion of authority do not even mention the possibility of power abuse, let alone confess its reality. We were glad that the document acknowledges in §35 that a different approach is possible, in which the church is conscious of being *simul iusta ac peccatrix*. Even while we understand the underlying theological differences, we feel that a more elaborate discussion of critical episodes in Christian church history would have been in place. A heartfelt *mea culpa* would help us to admit that the consequences of our past mistakes are still present in the church today and allow us also to learn from them for the future.³⁹

The V. Rev. Presbyter Nemanja S. Mrdjenovic, in accord with the response of the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation, states in his individual response that “the sinfulness of men and women who are members of the Church does not have anything to do with the holiness of the Church. In the Church as the eucharistic event, the holy sacraments are distributed . . . not because all members of the congregation are in good moral condition, but because . . . ‘One is Holy, one is Lord, Jesus Christ’ and the community is communing with Him, thus becoming His ‘spiritual body.’”⁴⁰ In his opinion, the “problem” of the sinless Church continues through the text, and “later on two quite contradictory views are presented as co-existential (§35), suggesting that the authors possibly could not reach consensus and they simply moved on.” For this reason, he proposes that “if a paragraph or two were dedicated to a definition of sin, which might be an easier topic for a consensus, there would be more clarity overall in this aspect which continues to cause uneasiness when it is presented as part of the convergence text.”⁴¹

According to the Evangelical Church in Germany, the statement of *TCTCV* §22 about the “essential holiness” of the Church can be understood only in reference to the Church herself, because she is more than the sum of her members. Therefore, although in the personal life of believers, “sin contradicts this holiness,” the “great sinner” (cf. Luke 7:36–50) can, according to the Reformed

39. *CRTC* 2, 340.

40. *CRTC* 2, 349.

41. *CRTC* 2, 349.

belief, serve in the forgiveness of sins “as an image of the holiness of the Church.” *TCTCV* points to this; however, it is in a different context.⁴² In this context, the Evangelical Church in Germany proposes a “categorical distinction between the kingdom of God and the Church,”⁴³ thereby clarifying their position on the question of the sinfulness of the Church.

According to the Church of Norway, the question as to “whether the Church has a part in sin (§§35, 65) [is] a point that requires further reflection. The injustices that the Church, either as an institution or through individuals, has enforced upon people throughout history and still does today must be dealt with. Too many people have experienced the church as oppressive. This duality of the church,” they point out, “must therefore not be trivialized.”⁴⁴

The Christian Law Panel of Experts, summarizing the different positions of churches on the matter of sin of the Church as such,⁴⁵ holds the opinion that “whatever the theological position of churches about sin within the Church, the juridical instruments indicate that all the churches here recognize the capacity of the faithful to engage in wrong-doing contrary to the normative standards of the church in question. Each church has norms to address wrong-doing, resolve internal disputes, and maintain church discipline.”⁴⁶

The Ecumenical Forum for Catholicity in the Netherlands attempts to explain the way in which the criticism about the Church’s sinfulness should be accepted. In their view, claims that the Church is sinful should be seen as “a prophetic protest” and as an appeal for renewal and reform inspired by the Spirit. The Church is always called to conversion and repentance and is “constantly involved in a positive tension with the eschaton.”⁴⁷

The Jamaica Baptist Union notes that the sinfulness of the Church does not take her holiness away from her, because “sin relates to the human condition and holiness to the divine.” Although they agree that holiness “expresses the Church’s identity as the body of Christ” and “sin stands in contradiction to this identity,” they accept nevertheless that sin is real in the life of the Church.⁴⁸

The response of the Roman Catholic Church reiterates the teaching already formulated in *Lumen gentium* on the issue of sin in relation to the Church as

42. *TCTCV*, §35; *CRTC* 2, 116–7.

43. *CRTC* 2, 119; quoting *Gemeinschaft der Evangelischen Kirchen in Europa*: GEKE Statement, 6.

44. *CRTC* 2, 43.

45. See *TCTCV*, §§35–36.

46. *CRTC* 1, 289.

47. *CRTC* 2, 253–4.

48. *TCTCV*, §36; *CRTC* 2, 156.

such: “The Church . . . is believed to be indefectibly holy. Indeed Christ, the Son of God, who with the Father and the Spirit is praised as ‘uniquely holy,’ loved the Church as His bride, delivering Himself up to her. He did this that He might sanctify her.”⁴⁹ “Because Christ is sinless, His body, the Church is also sinless. Yet, individually, all are sinners. Christ came to expiate the sins of people. Thus, the Church, embracing ‘in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of penance and renewal.”⁵⁰

The Joint Commission on Doctrine of the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church states that, although *TCTCV* “opens up a discussion on sin and the Church . . . the relationship between sin and the institution of the Church would require further discussion.” This is because speaking of “human sin and disobedience” and the “sin of the messengers” casts sin as referring only to individuals.⁵¹ Further, while *TCTCV* acknowledges that “the final victory of Christ brings a great sense of hope for those living in terrible situations, it does not say enough about how awful structures can be, before the victory is won, even when talking of the ‘grievous impact’ of awful structures and misery that continue to exist before Christ’s victory is won.”⁵²

The North Carolina Council of Churches starts from the point that the division between the various churches, as well as what perpetuates this division, is sin. The response emphasizes that recognition of the sin of division by *TCTCV* would have permitted the Church to repent for this sin. A call to repentance could have been mutually shared by all Christian communities. However, as it states, “the onus for repentance would seem to rest mainly upon those who ‘identify the Church of Christ exclusively with their own community’ (§10).”⁵³

Agreement and Disagreement on this Theme

After the above presentation of the positions of churches, organizations, and individuals on the matter of sin in relation to the Church as such, we understand that the vast majority of churches are in favor of the view that the Church can sin and has sinned in the course of its historical route. For this reason, it can and must repent in order to fulfill its divine mission in the world. This view is based in the Lutheran and wider Protestant notion of *simul justus et peccator*,

49. *Lumen gentium*, 39.

50. *CRTC* 2, 191; *Lumen gentium*, 8.

51. *CRTC* 2, 376; phrases quoted from *TCTCV* are from §1 and §5.

52. *CRTC* 2, 377.

53. *CRTC* 2, 256.

which is transferred from the level of the individual believer to the collective level of the Church as the body of Christ.

Only five responses make a clear distinction between the members of the Church subject to sin and the Church as the body of Christ which, in her ontological nature, remains holy and irreproachable: the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Inter-Orthodox Consultation, the V. Rev. Presbyter Nemanja S. Mrdjenovic, the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Finnish Ecumenical Council.⁵⁴ However, between the first four responses and the fifth one there is a difference which, beyond the differences in ecclesiology between them, is probably also because of the different confessional languages. The first four named believe that sin is related only to the members of the Church and not to the Church herself. The Finnish Ecumenical Council, however, refers to the churches as “human communities,” and for this reason considers them to be imperfect. At the same time, they stress that the Church as the body of Christ is not subject to sin.⁵⁵ It is not clear, though, how the idea that churches, as human communities, are imperfect because of sin is compatible with the holiness of the Church as the body of Christ.

An intermediate position seems to be taken on this subject by the Ecumenical Forum for Catholicity, which suggests understanding the allegations of the sinfulness of the Church as a “prophetic protest” and as an appeal to the members of the Church for renewal and reform through conversion and repentance.⁵⁶

The Theme of Sin in Relation to the Church as a Subject for Future Study

Five responses call for further elaboration and discussion of some aspects of this matter. The Church of England states that more work is to be done on the issue of the sin of the Church as such, in order that the gap between the Lutherans and the Orthodox on this issue might be bridged. The Evangelical Theological Faculty, Leuven, Belgium, notes that a more elaborate discussion of critical and tragic episodes in Christian church history must take place of course in the framework of Faith and Order. On the other hand, the Church of Norway proposes the topic as a point for further reflection and elaboration, because of the injustices that the Church, either as an institution or through individuals, has caused people throughout history. The V. Rev. Presbyter Nemanja S. Mrdjenovic

54. See discussion of each above.

55. *CRTC* 2, 225.

56. *CRTC* 2, 353.

believes that a definition of sin in one or two paragraphs might help to reach a consensus. This would circumvent the presentation of two completely opposing views on the topic that *TCTCV* presents as coexisting. And the Joint Commission on Doctrine of the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church notes that the relationship between sin and the institution of the Church would require further discussion and elaboration because *TCTCV* perceives sin only as relating to individuals.⁵⁷ More needs to be said beyond *TCTCV* §36 about *the sinful structures and painful situations that believers face until the final victory of Christ in history*.⁵⁸

Although there are different understandings among the responses concerning the issue of sin in relation to the Church as such, only the Methodist Church in Britain refers to the question asked by *The Nature and Mission of the Church* as to “whether all churches might not be able to agree on the following proposition: The relationship between sin and holiness in the Church is not a relationship of two equal realities, because sin and holiness do not exist on the same level. Rather, holiness denotes the Church’s nature and God’s will for it, while sinfulness is contrary to both (cf. 1 Cor. 15:21–26).”⁵⁹ The reason for that is probably that this question is not included as an open matter in *TCTCV*.⁶⁰ At least the member churches of WCC, after a further study and elaboration of the above-mentioned proposition, should also respond to the question on this matter of concern.

Conclusion

The responses to *TCTCV* make clear that there is disagreement as to whether the Church as such can sin or has sinned in the course of its history. This directly leads to the question of whether the Church can and must repent to fulfill its divine mission in the world. Responses vary, depending on how the responding churches, organizations, and individuals perceive the Church. Those who perceive it ontologically as the body of Christ believe that the Church can never sin and has never sinned. Therefore, sin characterizes only its members and not the Church itself. Those who perceive the Church as a divine-human community and speak in terms of its human dimension believe that sin is real and systemic in the Church’s historical route. For this reason,

57. *TCTCV*, §§1 and 5.

58. See discussion of each above.

59. *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 198 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), 34; *CRTC* 1, 21–2.

60. See *TCTCV*, §36.

they are not content to attribute sin only to its members; it is also an aspect of the Church itself.

The resolution of this issue should take into account the attitude of the apostle Paul who in his letters (for example, to the Corinthians) characterizes the believers of a local church as saints, while at the same time criticizing them for actions due to their sinful behavior. This attitude cannot be understood unless one considers that the holiness of the Church and its members as the body of Christ are dogmatically and ontologically given. At the same time, acknowledgement of sin is morally demanded because of the imperfection and sinfulness of church members themselves.

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

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.”¹ 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

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

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 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 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 Susan Durbur

Moderator

Commission on Faith and Order

Rev. Dr Odair Pedrosa 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.² 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

2. 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>

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 (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*.³

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 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

3. 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>).

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.”⁴

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.⁵

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

4. John 17:21.

5. 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>.

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.⁶ 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.

6. 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.’”

- 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.

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*,⁷ 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

7. See Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 10:16.

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 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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 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.

8. *Churches and Moral Discernment*, eds Myriam Wijlens and Vladimir Shmaliy, 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>.

9. *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 3: Facilitating Dialogue to Build Koinonia*, Faith and Order Paper No. 235 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/churches-and-moral-discernment-iii>.

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."¹⁰ 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.

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>.

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Churches now agree more than they disagree on many characteristics of the Church and its faith, mission, and life: the responses to the convergence statement *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* make this clear. Within this growth in agreement, key themes come to the fore, calling for greater understanding, study, and common conversation: visible unity, communion, mission, the role of the people of God in ministry and decision-making, sin and the church, and more. This volume presents essays on sixteen of these key themes. Each essay was written by a member of the subgroup of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order that focused on reading and analyzing the responses. The essays were then discussed by the group and revised in light of the discussions. Some of the themes have been prominent since the 1982 convergence statement *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Others have emerged more recently. Together with the report *What are the Churches Saying about the Church?*, the essays illuminate the many ways in which the vision of unity has inspired and changed the churches, as well as critical areas where future work is needed.



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