

**EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF FINLAND  
GENERAL SYNOD  
OFFICIAL STATEMENT**

The Document of the World Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order

The Church: Towards a Common Vision (2012)

**Introduction**

We are grateful to the Commission on Faith and Order for the convergence document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (hereafter "The Church"). It comprehensively, yet clearly and concisely, addresses the basic question of how the ecumenical movement deals with the nature, purpose, and mission of the church. This theme is at the heart of the ecumenical endeavour, and is no less important for the internal unity of the churches. The achievement of a common vision for the church requires much prayer and work.

On one hand, the document paints an effective picture of the results and rapprochement achieved by multilateral and bilateral theological dialogues; on the other, it outlines many questions which need further elaboration. The document contributes to a clearer understanding of the state of ecumenical discussion, cogently identifying those differences which are based primarily on language, culture, and tradition, and those that raise actual and substantial theological questions. It is especially to be welcomed that it states from the outset that the church's foundation lies in the salvific plan of the Triune God, and in the sending of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit into the world.

One of the fundamental themes of the document is participation in the life of the Triune God as the gift "by which the Church lives". According to the document "God calls the Church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity in hope of reconciliation and healing" participation in this life (§ 1). By the life of God is meant the internal communion of the persons of the Triune God (*communio, koinonia*), in which Christians are called to participate in accordance with the high priestly prayer of Jesus found in St John's Gospel: "I pray that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." (John 17.21) The essence of God (the immanent Trinity) and the activity of God (the economic Trinity) are thus connected. The Father sends his Son into the world to unite the world in the person of his Son. This forms the basis of the theological principle that witness, mission, and diakonia, and also the building of unity, belong together. At the same time the central concept of the *Missio Dei* and ecclesiology are connected in the ecumenical theology of mission, diakonia, and evangelism.

The document challenges our church to reflect on the extent to which it is possible to apply this to the way in which we think about communion ecclesiology. A consideration of God's saving work in this context, as found in the document, may prove ecumenically fruitful.

The document has also raised ongoing challenges, such as the proclamation of the gospel in the interfaith context, moral issues as a challenge to unity, and the place of the churches in various social contexts. Our church considers this a positive step. The document may provide tools for the churches to address these topical issues.

The document as a whole paints an encouraging picture of the extensive common understanding among the churches concerning the nature and mission of the church in the world. In this light those factors which still separate us appear not as hopeless obstacles but as challenges which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the churches can face with confidence. We therefore wish to answer the five questions the document poses to the churches in order to make our contribution to the ongoing work of the Commission on Faith and Order:

1. To what extent does this text reflect the ecclesiological understanding of your church?
2. To what extent does this text offer a basis for growth in unity among the churches?
3. What adaptations or renewal in the life of your church does this statement challenge your church to work for?
4. How far is your church able to form closer relationships in life and mission with those churches which can acknowledge in a positive way the account of the Church described in this statement?
5. What aspects of the life of the Church could call for further discussion and what advice could your church offer for the ongoing work by Faith and Order in the area of ecclesiology?

In our answers, we have also taken note of the document's additional questions in italics following the working out of the subthemes. Because the document challenges us to relate these questions specifically to the life and renewal of our church, we have amended the questions accordingly.

### **1. To what extent does this text reflect the ecclesiological understanding of our church?**

The document's ecclesiology is built on the resource of communion ecclesiology, which emphasises that the church is a participation in the life of the Triune God. In the Lutheran Church the work of God and ecclesiology have traditionally been considered through the prism of the doctrine of justification. The Augsburg Confession (1530) describes the church as the place where the Holy Spirit generates justifying faith through the teaching of the gospel and the office of those who administer the sacraments (CA IV, V). It affirms that: "... Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike." (CA VII) Central, therefore, are the word of God and the sacraments, as well as the teaching of the gospel and the office ordained for the administration of the sacraments (CA V). The doctrine of justification is thus associated with the doctrine of grace, through which God is really present and acts to create justifying faith among the congregation. Through the principle of incarnation the work of God is connected to the specific means of grace and the humanity of Christ.

The communion ecclesiology represented by the document and the Lutheran incarnational and justification-centred approach should not be seen as opposites. They might be seen as representing a difference of perspective. The doctrine of justification, the doctrine of the sacraments and the incarnation, and the doctrine of the Trinity form three concentric circles, through which the work of God may be viewed from either a narrower or broader perspective. The Lutheran Church accepts the

early church's Trinitarian dogma. From the outset the Augsburg Confession recognised the assent of the Lutheran Reformation to the ecumenical creeds of the early church in their western form, and thus to the classical conception of the Holy Trinity. Although the document's language about the life of the Holy Trinity in relation to communion ecclesiology is not typical of Lutheranism, from our church's perspective it can be considered legitimate. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland aims to be an embodiment of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, that is, of the heritage of the undivided church. Our church's Bishops' Conference published the Future Report of the Church, 2020 in 2011, which answers the question "What is the church?" as follows: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland confesses the faith which the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church of Jesus Christ has always professed. The Church of Christ dates to the time of the apostles, and today covers the whole globe. The church is thus in its essence one, although it appears diverse and is realised in local communality."

The Lutheran confessional writings seek to identify essential questions, rather than to present a dogmatic overview. For this reason, Lutheranism defines only certain basic features of ecclesiology. Our ecumenical strategy, as outlined by *Our Church: A Community in Search of Unity* (2009, p. 18), in describing the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments as the sufficient precondition for the real unity of the church, emphasises that "...what is sufficient (*satis est*) for Church unity – that is, doctrinal agreement – is also necessary (*nesesse est*) to achieve unity". We do not support minimal consensus, which results in the content of the basic truths of the Christian faith remaining unclear. In the Lutheran tradition, therefore, our church emphasises the unity of the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, but at the same time acknowledges that human traditions, ways of worshipping, and the ceremonies people celebrate need not be the same everywhere. The gospel, through word and sacraments, is the criterion for the unity which nurtures faith and unites human beings with God and the church as the body of Christ, and is a necessary precondition for the existence and survival of the church (cf. § 14). Diversity is inherent to the changing expressions of faith.

Our church emphasises the continuity of apostolic teaching. The criterion by which doctrine is measured is the word of the Bible, with the gospel of the grace of Jesus Christ at its heart. Historical apostolicity, or the succession of orders, is one mark of the desire to remain faithful to the gospel (see § 22). Our church understands the ordained office especially as the office of the servant of the word and sacraments. Responsibility for public proclamation and teaching especially belongs to the ordained office, but at the same time the task of the parish is to assess office-holders' adherence to apostolic teaching. The synodical structure of our church's governance, in which priests and laity together decide upon issues, is a reflection of the principle that the teaching office and the members of God's people together represent the church.

The Church aptly describes the legitimate diversity of communion as "a gift from the Lord" (§ 28). However, the document also acknowledges that diversity can exceed its boundaries and become a threat to unity. The churches must be active in preventing fragmentation, and teach the basic truths of the Christian faith, while treasuring "their legitimate differences of liturgy, custom and law" and fostering "legitimate diversities of spirituality, theological method and formulation" (§ 30). This criterion serves to promote the church's unity and catholicity (its fullness and universality of faith). Responsibility for unity lies chiefly with the bishops, but it is also the task of the clergy acting collegially, and of all members of the church in their common life. This understanding and the exchange of ecumenical gifts without losing sight of the visible unity of the church has as its objective the building up of the unity of the different members of the body of Christ.

The balance between the maintaining of unity and legitimate diversity is important at a time when Christianity is growing globally, spreading to new cultural and social contexts. The document emphasises (§ 28) 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”. It should be added that our church’s missional environment is increasingly characterised by diverse value systems and multiculturalism, which means that questions of unity and legitimate diversity are perhaps more relevant to us than they have ever been. Ecumenical work affords important perspectives for our church as we seek to bring the message of the gospel to all in our society.

Current ecclesiological reflection is closely related to the division of the church. The Lutheran emphasis that the church is “...the congregation of saints, in which the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments duly administered” allows for different ecclesiological emphases, as long as there is an adequate articulation of the basic position. In many Lutheran theological documents these issues are not traditionally considered as belonging to the field of ecclesiology. However, it is natural to conclude, especially in the ecumenical context, that the perception of the church provides a framework for the language used about baptism, the eucharist, and ministry, for example. Each church has its own identity, reflected, for example, in its understanding of the sacraments. However, the document is very consistent with the Lutheran emphasis, according to which the proclamation and reception of the gospel are determining factors of the church, through which, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, people come to saving faith and are sacramentally incorporated into the body of Christ (§ 14).

From the Lutheran perspective the text can be seen as expressing the idea that the content of the gospel is ultimately Christ, the Word of God, who is present as the visible word in baptism and the eucharist, and through them effects justifying faith. Our church emphasises the cohesion of word and sacraments. The content of both is the same: Christ. Lutheran theology emphasises justification by faith and that the faith initiated by God is neither dead nor theoretical, but active and effective, and that it is revealed in works of love. Faith and love belong together in Christ, who to the Christian is both the gift given in justification (sacramentum) and the example we are called to follow (exemplum). This accords well with the document’s conclusion, which emphasises that koinonia or communio “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)” (§ 67). On this basis our church emphasises diakonia and mission as a task arising from the church’s essence.

The document’s concluding chapter deals with religious pluralism (esp. § 60) and the moral challenge of the gospel (§§ 61-63). Lutheranism considers that it is in the nature of each human being to possess an awareness or need of God, variously manifested in both religious and irreligious ideologies. Human beings also have a limited knowledge of natural moral law, which is capable of exposing their sinful state, but not of improving it. Apart from God’s self-revelation through the coming of Christ into the world, human beings cannot know God as such. This need will remain until the last judgement and until the liberation of humanity from the dominion of sin. Our church emphasises the liberating power of the gospel’s moral teaching, which releases the human being from sin and judgement, and gives power to live a good life. The Christian is sinful in this life, and is therefore always in need of grace and sanctification.

## **2. To what extent does this text offer a basis for growth in unity among the churches?**

The document promotes growth in unity in many ways. Firstly, it outlines a general framework for discussing questions concerning the nature and mission of the church. The saving activity of the Holy Trinity in history “is essential to an adequate understanding of the Church” (§ 1–4). This places

ecclesiology at the heart of the Christian faith in a way that is both theologically profound and widely acceptable.

To the extent that it is currently possible, the document also sketches a common understanding of negotiations between the churches. This common understanding encompasses a presentation of the biblical teaching about the church that will be widely acceptable (§§ 11–21), and a proposition concerning the attributes of the church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic (§ 22). This will serve to facilitate the definition of the extent of unanimity in the discussions between the churches. It is important for our church that this common understanding be described as extensively as possible, because we regard unanimity on the basic truths of faith as the necessary and sufficient precondition for unity (Our Church, p. 18).

In addition, the document names several themes in which an extensive common understanding is not yet reality. These include questions of institutional structures (§ 24) and authority (§ 51), the status of sacraments or ordinances (§ 44), ministry (§§ 45–57), continuity and change in the church (§ 24), the limits of legitimate diversity (§ 30), the relationship of local churches within the universal church (§ 32), religious pluralism (§ 60), and moral questions (§ 63). Concerning these, the document succeeds in drawing a map to assist churches to focus their discussions on those issues which contribute to greater unanimity. The document also challenges and inspires us to face difficult questions. For example, it is important for our church to seek reconciliation concerning those questions of morality which are currently divisive in relationships both between and within the churches.

The question The Church poses (II B) concerning the relationship between continuity and change in the church and the lively dialogue between them is very important from the perspective of Lutheran identity. We are happy to accept the invitation to reflect with other churches on our basic commitments concerning continuity and change and their possible development. In its 2011 Future Report of the Church, 2020 our church's Bishops' Conference stated that in the changing missional environment the church should adhere to two principles: "Lutheranism and ecumenism are not mutually exclusive, but belong together", and "the unity of the church encompasses a diversity of spiritual life". From this follows an ecumenically open attitude on the one hand, and a striving for the church's internal unity, or the binding together of the spiritual life of the gospel of Christ in its various forms, on the other. Ecumenical openness is described in our church's ecumenical strategy, according to which our church enjoys its closest links with those churches which, like our church, represent and respect the undivided common heritage of Christianity, and which have a classical interpretation of the Christian faith and a sacramental understanding of the church. Our church also collaborates with churches and Christian communities whose teaching and confession differ from our own.

According to the Nicene Creed the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic, as the document reminds us. Lutheran theology also adheres to these distinctive marks of the creed. Our church's Catechism says of the catholicity and apostolicity of the church: "The Church is one since it has one Lord and common faith. Secondly, the Church is holy because the Holy Spirit works in its midst. Thirdly, the Church is catholic since it has been sent to serve all nations with God's word. Finally, the Church is apostolic as it lives by the Gospel handed down by Jesus' first disciples." (Catechism, 21) Our church emphasises the continuity of apostolic teaching. In recognising the distinctive marks of the church as set forth in the Nicene Creed, the main criteria are the teaching of the gospel, the sacraments duly administered, and the office ordained for their service. The report of the Roman Catholic-Lutheran Dialogue Group for Sweden and Finland, Justification in the Life of the Church (JLC 2010), states: "We understand apostolicity as continuity in faith, in the life of the church and in the structures and ministry of the church. The ministerial succession serves the continuity of the life of the church in

Christ and should thus be considered as both a constituent part and an expression of the apostolicity of the church. The same applies to the consecration of a bishop in historic succession through the laying on of hands.” (JLC § 361)

The church’s catholicity and apostolicity should clearly also include the transcendent dimension of the church’s life, a connection with the risen Christ, and the rejoicing of the saints in heaven. As The Church reminds us, the Nicene Creed affirms that the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. This is also affirmed by Lutheran theology. For example, the Anglican-Lutheran Porvoo Common Statement, in referring to the understanding of the apostolicity of the church in the Faith and Order document Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry (BEM 1982, Ministry § 34), states: “The Church is called to faithfulness to the normative apostolic witness to the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of its Lord. The Church receives its mission and the power to fulfil this mission as a gift of the risen Christ. The Church is thus apostolic as a whole.”

The questions of the church as an active sign (*signum*), instrument (*instrumentum*), sacrament (*sacramentum*) (II C), and that related to the looser expression “the sacramentality of the church” are important themes. The sacramentality of the church is often seen as a watershed between the churches, especially in the Central European debate. The document raises the question of the desirability of discussing different emphases connected with the “sacramentality of the church”. For example, in the dialogue report *Justification in the Life of the Church* the embrace of humanity by God in Christ is called the “original sacrament”, and the church as the sacramental framework of the sacraments is called the “foundational sacrament” (JLC, § 144). At the same time it should be borne in mind that paragraph 36 of *The Church* presents a dual understanding. First, the church is the partaker of the fruits of Christ’s victory, against which the gates of hell cannot prevail. Second, its members are, however, “vulnerable to the power of sin, both individually and collectively”. The document also states that the church “enjoys a spiritual, transcendent quality which cannot be grasped simply looking at its visible appearance”, and that its “earthly and spiritual dimensions ... cannot be separated” (§ 26).

The Lutheran Confessions emphasise that the church stands for ever. In essence it is a spiritual people, the righteousness of the heart. In this world this spiritual reality cannot, however, be separated from the external church (CA VI & VIII; Apol. VII & VIII). The Lutheran Church is also comfortable with the New Testament’s language of the church as a mystery (Eph. 5.32). In a spiritual sense it extends to the other side of this visible reality. Our church therefore sees it as legitimate to speak about the church as an instrument of God and as a sacrament. This is anchored in the Eastern Church’s use of terms distinct from those used by the Western Church. The Epistle to the Ephesians refers to the church as a *mysterion*. The Eastern Church also uses this word for what the Western Church calls sacraments. The terms may vary, but the words are connected. The invisible reality of God is present in both the church itself and in the individual sacraments. Speaking about the church as a sacrament should not, however, obscure the fact that the church is at one and the same time a community of the justified and the sinful. In this world its holiness and invisible essence are concealed as opposites.

The document invites the churches to reflect on whether common criteria and mutually recognised structures might be created in order for the churches to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate diversity (II D). The challenge to the unity of the church caused by differences in both faith and practice is a key objective. The interpreting and evaluation of differences require further work for the strengthening of Christian unity in ecumenical interaction with other churches as well as within our own church. A question related to this is the identity of the church in the light of its basic task of spreading the gospel, and in distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate diversity. This relates to how the *Traditio* (the gospel itself, see § 11) and human tradition are to be separated, and how the

church can recognise the authentic counselling and guidance of the Holy Spirit in its life. Lutheran tradition stresses that every doctrine and teacher is to be judged against the word of God. The interpretation of the Bible takes place in the critical interaction of the church's confessions with those with authority to teach and with the parish: authority is not confined to a single instance.

Since the beginning of the 1990s communion ecclesiology has served as a basic Faith and Order model for understanding the relationship between the local and global churches, underlining the importance of the local congregation as a worshipping community (II E). The model is clearly anchored in Trinitarian faith and in the church as a spiritual community, and it builds connections between the churches in a way that allows different traditions to identify areas of overlap.

The document brings welcome clarity to ecumenical work by bringing together the elements of full ecclesial fellowship (III B, § 37) and stating that "...there is widespread agreement that the Church is called to proclaim, in each generation, the faith 'once for all entrusted to the saints' (Jude v. 3) and to remain steadfast in the teaching first handed on by the apostles" (§ 38). This faith is to be interpreted in changing circumstances. On many points of doctrine the churches are basically unanimous. For example, the Nicene Creed and its interpretation are mentioned. Our church's statements on the previous versions of The Church have highlighted the importance of the apostolic faith and the ecumenical creeds in ecumenical work. A vital contemporary challenge – how the faith experience of the whole people of God, the insights of theologians, and the discernment of the ordained ministry function together – is addressed by paragraph 39. The document thus assists in the identification of a shared challenge, and the different perspectives concerning it that need to be considered in the churches' discussions with each other. In addressing this question, our own church has striven to ensure that the synodical principle is complied with, reflected in the fact that both those in ordained ministry and the laity are, as a rule, involved in its governance.

The chapter dealing with sacraments adds nothing essential to the progress already articulated in the document Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry (1982), the compilation Harvesting the Fruits (2009), and the document One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition (2011). In ongoing discussions to promote the visible unity of the church, other rites or sacraments should also be considered. For example, the Christian understanding of marriage is currently topical. However, the deep difference between the churches in this respect seems to lie in whether we can talk about "sacraments" or "ordinances". In other words, do we speak of mediating grace or only of the expression or recognition of existing reality? According to the Faith and Order document One Baptism, which The Church quotes, most traditions affirm that these events are both instrumental and expressive, although they emphasise these dimensions differently. If we could agree that the difference lies less in doctrine than in emphasis (§ 44), we could proceed towards the recognition of a single Christian baptism on a much broader basis than is currently possible.

Our church cannot agree with the idea that baptism and eucharist are only expressions of obedience denoting an ordinance that neither bears nor transmits grace. Lutheranism clearly follows the tradition of the early church in emphasising baptism as an effective sign and means of grace. This perspective is an inherent feature of our church's sacramental doctrine. At the same time, baptism is inherent to Christian initiation. Baptism and teaching belong together, as do baptism and a confession of the faith that can address the age in which it is proclaimed. According to our Catechism: "Baptism makes us Christ's disciples and members of the Christian Church. ...The Holy Spirit regenerates us, imparting faith with which we grasp hold of the promises of baptism." (Catechism 35) It is encouraging that in the Catholic-Pentecostal dialogue, for example, there has been a growing convergence concerning the relationship between baptism and faith. Lutheranism also emphasises the idea of the daily renewal of

baptism, preserving the grace of baptism as the source of the forgiveness of sins and the striving for a new life, which reflects the idea that in baptism the Christian is at the same time called to follow Christ.

The document states that questions related to ordained ministry (§ 45-47) continue to “constitute challenging obstacles on the path to unity”, and that solving them should be prioritised as important and urgent. A related aim is unanimity concerning “whether or not the threefold ministry is part of God’s will for the Church in its realization of the unity which God wills” (§ 47). In this respect, it is appropriate to underline that all authority in the church should serve the core function of the church, the gospel, and its expression.

The discussion about the authoritativeness 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). Lutheranism is critical of the idea of the infallibility of the church councils, even though the doctrinal decisions of the ecumenical councils have been agreed as part of the common tradition. This is related to the broader question of the sources of ecclesiastical authority and the relationship between them (see § 46). Our church considers that this issue cannot be resolved by recognising the infallible authority of a human body. Our church is in principle positively disposed towards the idea of human consensus based on primacy (*de iure humano*), whereby a bishop can chair a college of bishops and synod (as *primus inter pares*), but rejects the idea that one person may be given supreme power, and that this is based on divine statute (*de iure divino*).

The document appropriately draws attention to two current ecumenical challenges: an ecumenical response to religious plurality; and the significance of questions of morality for the mission and unity of the church. Clearly, questions concerning anthropology and morality have their place in ecumenical dialogue. From a Lutheran perspective, however, it is problematic that in relation to the gospel there is no mention in the document of the proclamation of God’s law as the prerequisite for its reception. Even where questions of morality are concerned, the document only refers to the moral challenge of the gospel (§ 61).

According to classical Lutheran theology, God’s word consists of demands and promises (law and gospel). The proclamation of the commandments of God belongs to the functions of the church. It is the foundation of Christian moral teaching. In both Nordic Lutheran and Roman Catholic theology the concept of natural moral law has been applied in an explication of the universal character of God’s demand of love, and the common ethical ground for all people of good will which it provides. If moral self-criticism is neglected, ecclesiology tends to become unrealistic in its assessment of the moral strength of Christians. This is to compromise the pure gospel. Yet the gospel also includes the call to do good: Christian freedom is freedom to love one’s neighbour, even if incompletely. In this context, it is welcome that paragraph 36 clearly states that the churches “...recognize the continual need for Christian self-examination, penitence, conversion (*metanoia*), reconciliation and renewal”.

The churches should remember that it is their task to be servants of the divine plan, which seeks to transform the world (§ 58). The document therefore underlines that the churches should speak on behalf of those in their own societies who are marginalised (§ 64). This is also a key theme of the World Council of Churches’ mission document *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in*

Changing Landscapes, which from our church's perspective represents an important parallel text with our document Mission from the Margins, which presents a mission that runs from the periphery to the centre.

The concept of the universal character of God's law of love arises from faith in the Triune God as Creator. God loves not only human beings, but the whole of creation. The concept of koinonia also sees creation as reflecting the reality of God's self-giving love: "No creature is in existence only for itself, but for others, i.e. to further the life and welfare of other creatures." (Climate Programme of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, p. 35) In the midst of the environmental crisis an important element of our contemporary Christian way of life and calling is our care for the poor and for creation. The document might have been clearer in its articulation of the essential place the integrity of creation has in the concept of koinonia. However, this is emphasised in the document's conclusion (§ 66). God's saving work and the healing of the world are focused on this age, but they also have an unbreakable and eternal dimension. They create hope in the face of death and eternal judgement.

### **3. What adaptations or renewal in the life of our church does this statement challenge our church to work for?**

The document will help us to reflect on the church's essence from the perspective of Trinitarian communion ecclesiology. Can this perspective serve the doctrines of the sacraments, the incarnation, and justification alongside our ecclesiological self-understanding? At the same time language about the church as a sacrament or as a sacramental sign challenges us to take seriously the presence of God in the church and its structures. Theologically this may be acceptable, but is it useful and unproblematic? This perspective also encourages us to take seriously the church's eternal dimension, and the nature of the invisible church as a mystery, extending from here into the world. We should also articulate more clearly what it means to say that the eucharist is the framework of the church's life, and that we belong to a global communion of local churches. We should also continue to work to identify common criteria for discussion about legitimate and illegitimate diversity and moral questions in the church, and in our efforts for unity between the churches, as well as the concrete solutions that will best serve the church's handling of such matters.

Where sacraments are concerned, we should continue to strive for mutual recognition of baptism with those traditions which speak of ordinances rather than sacraments. Further discussion is also needed concerning rites other than baptism and the eucharist that are regarded as sacraments in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions.

The question concerning the church's offices of priest, bishop, and deacon, and the related question concerning the clearer recognition of the threefold character of the ordained ministry also need further work by our church. Our internal debate about the nature of the deacon's office continues. Both within our church and in our encounters with other churches, such questions require constant reflection and a quest for a common approach. In our context, for example, in addressing the ordained ministry (of deacon, priest, and bishop) it may be possible to make progress in Catholic-Lutheran and Lutheran-Methodist dialogue. To this area belong also the manner in which we address the ministry of universal unity (the papacy) and, especially with the Orthodox churches, the question concerning the normativity of the ecumenical church councils.

The challenges of secularisation and religious and social pluralism call us to find new ways of acting and thinking that keep the word of God visible. Within the church this will require a correct balance between the faith experience of God's people, the insights of individual theologians, and the

discernment of those in ordained ministry concerning the faith and doctrine of the church. At the same time the ideals prevailing in our society highlight democratic decision making, requiring us to reflect on how the teaching office of the church and its normative tradition are understood in our own contexts. The word of God serves as a general criterion, but individual office holders, parishioners, and organs may interpret this in different situations in different ways, which can lead to tension. This will require ongoing work to strengthen unity within our church, between the church's movements, and with other churches. The question often crystallises around who exercises authority in the church. Those who interpret the word, in particular public office holders and synodical institutions, should be able to recognise the limits of legitimate and illegitimate diversity and safeguard the church's unity (II D). At the same time they should facilitate the transformation of the missional environment that is required for legitimate diversity. The challenge is compounded by the fact that sometimes from the point of view of the teaching of the gospel peripheral matters may become a threat to unity. There is not always unanimity concerning specific criteria for unity and what is essential for the teaching of the gospel. The document therefore challenges us to examine unity from the perspective of the limits of legitimate diversity in the internal discussion and work of our church.

As a Nordic folk church we are experiencing a change in our traditional position in society. The loss of financial resources may be seen as an opportunity for the church to develop a more communal working structure and self-understanding. In this way *koinonia* might be realised more profoundly in the life of our church and its parishes. We will need to move away from clerical and church worker centred models towards a greater inclusion, accountability, and recognition of parishioners. The ecumenical welcome given to immigrants and the building of contacts with migrant churches also call us to adopt new ecclesiological models (cf. § 7). The fracturing of homogenous culture and its replacement by cultural pluralism calls our church to a continuous consideration of how we can proclaim the gospel in languages, symbols, and images that are meaningful in our own time (§ 28). Following the publication of the Lima Document (BEM), our church admitted children to Holy Communion, but we still need to strengthen the link between baptism and the eucharist (§ 42).

In our consideration of the link between the church's decision making and the will of God, the WCC's experience of consensus decision making may prove helpful, aiming as it does "to give voice to the voiceless and to uphold unity in diversity" (§ 54).

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

According to the ecumenical strategy of our church, "[c]hurch unity will be possible when there is sufficient doctrinal agreement between churches and when the sacraments and the ordained ministry are recognised". The Anglican-Lutheran Porvoo Communion, to which we belong, and whose churches function together and treat each other's members as their own, is one such far-reaching fellowship. The Porvoo Common Statement and the Porvoo Communion of Churches are vibrant examples of ecumenism. They are significantly influenced by the BEM document. Consensus concerning the basic truths of Christian faith is comprehensively articulated by the Common Statement, and church representatives – including the Primates – meet regularly and consult with each other in matters of mutual importance for the churches. Space has also been given for factual contextual diversity. Our church also has altar and pulpit fellowship and mutual recognition of ordained ministries with the Finnish and Swedish speaking Methodist churches in Finland, which belong to the episcopal United Methodist Church. The Church is a reminder to us that the achievement

of unity in conciliar interchurch relations and in decision-making structures requires further development.

As already mentioned, The Church 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 (§§ 25-27; §§ 40-44). In spite of our church's ongoing ecumenical dialogues with the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church family and the evangelical Free Churches (Pentecostals and Baptists), we still do not enjoy eucharistic fellowship with them. The approach suggested by The Church may bring us closer to the attainment of this objective. If the difference between those churches with a sacramental emphasis concerning the birth and nurture of faith and those that speak of "ordinances" can be bridged in the way suggested by the document, new possibilities for building fellowship and unity with the evangelical Free Churches will emerge.

The document's presentation of areas of common understanding will facilitate our church's work in seeking consensus. Our church is committed to the heritage of undivided Christendom, while at the same time seeking to be open to the Reformation principle of renewal. This openness encompasses our position that the word of God, the sacraments, and those who are ordained to administer them should be understood as constitutive concerning faith, salvation, and the church (Our Church, p. 17). The common understanding presented by the document concerning the Trinitarian character of the birth of the church (§§ 1–3), the importance of the ecclesiology of the Bible and the creeds (§§ 11–22), and the church-defining character of the gospel, baptism, and the eucharist (§ 14) is compatible with the positions of our church. It can therefore serve as an effective foundation for the quest for a broader consensus.

In building fellowship with the charismatic and Pentecostal movements, whether in the Global Christian Forum or elsewhere, it is especially important to discuss the activity of the Holy Spirit in the ecclesiological context. From this perspective, § 33 of The Church may build a bridge.

### **5. What aspects of the life of the Church could call for further discussion and what advice could our church offer for the ongoing work by Faith and Order in the area of ecclesiology?**

The document clearly states that questions concerning the ordained ministry remain a significant obstacle on the way towards unity. Ongoing discussion concerning them is needed in order that the visible sign of unity between the churches – eucharistic fellowship – may be further extended. Questions related to this are the authoritative interpretation of faith and doctrine, legitimate and illegitimate diversity, and ministry as the servant of the universal unity of the church. The impact of moral questions on church unity also remains a burning issue. To this area belong questions concerning the Christian understanding of marriage and theological anthropology in general.

If we are to achieve mutual recognition of baptism, it will be necessary to elaborate the distinction between "sacraments" and "ordinances". It would also be good to clarify the relationship of baptism and the eucharist with other rites described as sacraments, and where the line between legitimate and illegitimate diversity lies in this respect.

The report of the Roman Catholic–Lutheran Dialogue Group for Sweden and Finland, *Justification in the Life of the Church*, 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) It is clear that in Catholic theology it is symbolically important that there are seven sacraments, covering the whole course of human life. 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.” According to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, which belongs to the Lutheran confessional writings, confession, ordination, and marriage may be regarded as sacraments, depending on definition (JLC § 156). In the Lutheran doctrine of grace word and sacraments are not opposed to each other. An emphasis on the nature of the sacrament as a visible word and sign would also make possible the building of a bridge to those churches which speak of “ordinances” in emphasising the external word and its meaning.

It may also prove possible to develop a common understanding concerning the ordained ministry and the related issue of the historic episcopate. The document *Justification in the Life of the Church* concludes: “Against the background of our significant convergence on the character of the ministry and the apostolicity of the church, we believe that we must ask what the remaining differences between Lutherans and Catholics would be with regard to the criteria for a valid Episcopal ministry and a valid apostolic succession; and we ask this in order that a fuller communion between our churches might become a reality. This question is a significant one for a future dialogue.” (JLC § 363) The Church gives some hints of what these remaining questions might be. Global and multilateral dialogue is needed in order to identify them more clearly.

The Faith and Order Commission might also consider the stepping stones towards the full visible unity of the churches. The goal should be that members of the World Council of Churches recognise each other as churches and proceed towards the full visible unity of the church, in faithful response to the gospel of Jesus Christ and his prayer for the unity of his own. This would also create possibilities for building visible unity beyond the WCC’s current organisational boundaries. Ecumenical methodology needs to develop in a more diverse way. The northern churches need to find new ways to interact with the churches of the global south and east, as well as with various new charismatic communities and immigrant congregations.

In recent years millions of Christians have moved from Eastern to Western Europe or from the southern to the northern shores of the Mediterranean. Migrants have brought with them their culture and faith. More and more parishes and extended families have members who belong to different Christian churches and groups, or are influenced by them. Christianity’s intercultural nature is increasingly obvious. It must be seen as of the church’s essence that it is able to cross various borders. In the midst of change the churches must resolutely seek contact, interaction, and the growth of mutual understanding.

In considering ecclesiology it is essential to cooperate with bodies like the Global Christian Forum and the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME). In particular the latter’s mission document *Together Towards Life* introduces important ecclesiological perspectives which it would be important to integrate more fully with the work of the Faith and Order Commission. The ecumenical process also needs to involve the so-called charismatic churches, which have no denominational affiliation or do not belong to existing ecumenical organisations.

The results of ecumenical dialogues should be communicated in different contexts so that they will not be lost in broader global interaction, and new generations will be able to continue the work to proclaim the gospel and to advance the Kingdom of God.

Turku, 4 November 2015

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