

Re: THE NATURE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH

/National Council of Churches in Denmark (prepared by a Working Group within the Council), September 2009

Methodological considerations

The basic point of departure in the document is obviously confessional separations. This is evident e.g. in the grey boxes in which different confessional attitudes are simply listed, and where it is presumably assumed that there exists an inherent motivation to overcome them. Although this can certainly be hoped for, a century of ecumenical experiences show that this hardly is within realistic reach at the present. Starting from confessional plurality may appear natural because such pluralism is the context in which our churches live. It is within this context that they have to develop into something else - something that is able to overcome confessional disunity and heal the deep wounds of confessional trench warfare. When looking for new directions it is important to know exactly where you are here and now.

However, this point of departure can be misleading. It might be more constructive to start with what all Christian churches have in common - the living tradition as it is expressed in the communion of worship and action. All Christians have a common language rooted in Scripture and articulated in the ancient creed. This can be conceived as a kind of Christian *Ursprache* that continues to be used in the worship of practically all churches. However, the deeper meaning of this *Ursprache* is seriously obscured, not least because churches have introduced their own hermeneutics and their own confessional grammars, each church claiming that its confessional stance is the only valid one in the proclamation and interpretation of the Christian message.

It may be argued that we cannot but apply our separate grammars and hermeneutics if we want to speak of our faith at all. Everybody speaks with his or her own tongue and in his or her dialect. But this is exactly the reason why inter-confessional endeavours cannot - or at least cannot only - start with dogmatic divisions no matter how important such debates may be. Inter-confessional endeavours must start where we are - one with Christ and therefore one with one another. In the ecumenical dialogue *lex orandi* precedes *lex credendi*. Christian worship embraces all hermeneutics and grammars in a vigorous effort to reconcile them so that the *lex credendi* may ever more reflect the living tradition as it is actually manifested when Christian churches worship and pray.

All positive ecclesiological achievements notwithstanding, the authors of the paper presented here are aware of the fact that we do not fully agree on the theological content of the notion "the Church". We represent denominations who are not in full communion with one another, and who even sometimes sacramentally exclude one-another. However, the conviction that members of any denomination are in some way related to Christ stimulates both our modest endeavours towards - and

our fervent hope for - the overcoming of these tendencies and the reaching of an ever deeper common understanding of His Church.

Chapter I: The Church of the Triune God.

Section A: The Nature of the Church, §§ 9-33

§ 9 identifies the Church as *creatura verbi et creatura spiritus* and thus as God's gift. In this paragraph the emphasis lies on the triune God as the Ground and Origin - the Giver - of the Church as communion, while §§ 10, 11 and 13 elaborate on God's gift. God creates the Church as communion by involving human beings in a living relationship with God, making women and men Christ-like by incorporating them into the body of Christ. By partaking in the life of God, mediated by the living voice of the gospel, the sacraments, and faithful service, they become God's Church - a both divine and a human reality, a mysterion cf. § 45.

We resonate with these attempts (and similar paragraphs in the latter parts of the text, e.g. § 49) to formulate an ecclesiology that holds the Giver and the gift together. The text succeeds in linking Giver and gift, and thus it avoids making the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church either too objective (by concentrating exclusively on God as the Giver of grace) or too subjective (by concentrating exclusively on women's and men's reception or non-reception of God's gifts).

While acknowledging that latter parts of the text elaborate on sacraments and ministry as means of God's gift of "faith in communion", it is our opinion that the initial paragraphs on the nature of the Church also demand an explicit reference to the worship setting in which this ecclesiology makes sense. We understand theology to explicate Christian practice. The triune God is a God first praised and prayed to, first worshipped and narrated. Speaking about God is also a matter of bodily actions - such as eating and drinking, washing sins away in baptismal water, participating in worship and serving our neighbour. It is the actual worship in community that gives content to what Christians mean by "God", although such living confession often falls short of the community's words and the self-understanding expressed in creedal statements, cf. the box following § 13.

Similarly we agree that the paragraphs in A II (Biblical Insights) presuppose not merely an "and" (Bible *and* living tradition), but a hermeneutical circle - it is in interpreting the Scriptures that the Christian community interprets itself. The closing of the biblical canon is both the effect and the cause of the circularity between the biblical text and the worshipping community. Thus the Christian Bible exists thanks to the worshipping community, for the use of the worshipping community and in order to shape the worshipping community.

Convinced that actual worship, interpretation of the Bible, and formulation of doctrine are an interwoven whole, we acknowledge that there is a wide diversity of Bible readings and ecclesiologies (cf. § 16) that cannot be fully and unequivocally grasped by theological statements (cf. § 45 and § 60). Diversity of Bible readings and

formulations of dogma only become a hindrance to Christian unity, when one reading and one theological tradition is identified as the one and only legitimate Christian hermeneutics, and hence absolutized as an idol. It follows that we understand ecumenical endeavours as the attempts to encourage Christian faith communities to recognize each other as analogous ways of testifying truly to the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the one *koinonia* not rooted in ethnicity, race or social groups, but in God's gift of a new creation (cf. § 26).

Section B: The Mission of the Church, §§ 34-42

We affirm the Faith and Order study's focus on mission as integral to being God's Church serving God's reign. In conjunction with the study we want to affirm that a credible, apostolic Church is a missional Church (§ 35) at a specific time and in a specific location. A missional Church is a way of living - in worship, proclamation, and service (leitourgia, kerygma and diakonia; cf. § 36) - within a particular historical setting. And although following the crucified and resurrected Christ equals seeking life in abundance for all, in a brutal world persecution and martyrdom might become the fate of missional Christian communities.

Chapter II: The Church in History

As Danes living in a secular society, we resonate with the description § 51 of an existing gap between "believing" and "belonging". The distinction is backed by empirical facts. The paragraphs on "the Church and sin" (§§ 50-56, including the pertinent box) highlight the fact that the theological debate on "Church and sin" is inconclusive. It seems to us that Christian believers deal most appropriately with the power of individual and collective sin by approaching the merciful, triune God with the supplication of a contrite heart: "*Look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church*". Christians believe the Church to be the one, holy Body of Christ, but because of its actual manifestations as "the Church in history" we need "*the repentance, mutual forgiveness and restoration*" (§ 59) that will identify our local communities as not merely *our* church, but also the Church of Jesus Christ (§ 66, including box, and the New Delhi Statement).

Our conversations on Section B, C and D, §§ 57- 66 "Communion and Diversity" (including the pertinent boxes) and Chapter III, Section B and C, §§ 74-81 "Baptism" and "Eucharist" (including the boxes) have showed the continuing divergences in ecclesiology and ecclesial ordo as articulated in the study. We note that there are those churches whose vocation does not include the ministering of the liturgical sacraments, but who, nevertheless, see themselves as included in the sacramental life of the Church. Viewed as a whole these sections of the text seem to us to be without friction. They adequately describe the understanding of a "*real, but imperfect communion*" and the ecumenical rapprochement that has been achieved.

However, they do not reveal costly new avenues for churches to open up their theological codes in these matters.

Chapter III: The Life of Communion in and for the World

Recognizing our common conviction that together sinners become the body of Christ, something greater than what they are as individuals, we want to highlight our agreement with § 71 in which the “apostolic tradition” is articulated in active terms. Apostolicity - the “permanent characteristic of the Church” - means witness to the faith of the apostles as recorded in the Bible, proclamation and fresh interpretation of this witness, celebration of baptism and the Eucharist, transmission of ministerial responsibilities, communion in prayer and suffering, service to the needy, and the mutual sharing of the gifts given to each church. We understand the *lex orandi - lex credendi* principle to include all of these acts and, consequently, we understand our ecumenical calling as the call to create such practice, thus making the actual, local church a living witness to the apostolic faith.

Affirming that the apostolic ministry of all the faithful (§ 82-89, including box) is carried out both by laity and the ordained we note a) some Protestant traditions’ emphasis on linking the ministry of all believers with specific ecclesial functions and obligations attributed to lay people, women and men; b) The Orthodox and Roman Catholic monastic tradition as a specific form of testimony; c) the intertwining of a historic episcopal succession (men only), valid eucharistic presidency, and transmittance of the one apostolic faith within the Orthodox and Roman-Catholic tradition; d) the different forms of a threefold ministry (cf. § 87); e) the Lutheran tradition’s lack of a common world-wide practice and a commonly held understanding of ordination, and f) the discrepancy, felt in all our churches, between the practice and the theory of the apostolic ministry of *all* believers.

In accordance with §§ 90 - 97 we affirm that churches need both the ministry of all believers, the ministry of the ordained, and some form of episkopé, exercised both personally, communally and collegially. Although the changing roles and shapes of the ordained ministry are readily acknowledged (and less readily or “not at all” its extension to the ordination of women), the relationship between an episcopal “historic succession” in apostolic ministry and the apostolic continuity of the Church (cf. § 89, box f) are still an unresolved matter. The lack of convergence on the forms of ordained ministry spills over into varying convictions regarding “Conciliarity and Primacy” (§§ 99 - 104).

The Roman Catholic Church attributes papal primacy to the bishop of Rome. The Orthodox and Protestant traditions have adopted different forms of conciliarity as the means of speaking the truth on behalf of the whole Church. We note, however, that the Orthodox emphasis on conciliarity includes the notion of simultaneous equality and primacy within the hierarchy. (cf. § 97). Our deliberations on “authority” (§§ 105-108) in connection with “conciliarity and primacy” focused on authority as a

necessarily embodied authority - whether the embodiment is manifested in hierarchical ways or entrusted to more horizontal structures. Neither the Bible nor the early Christian creedal statements or the inherited, written “Confessions” interpret themselves. Instead of forging one institutionalized way of exercising ecclesial authority, the key question seems to us to be: From whom does a Christian faith community expect guidance as to whether or not its current thinking and practice continue the faith of the apostles?

Chapter IV: In and for the World

The document identifies differences in ethical positions as a potential church-dividing issue. Today this issue threatens progress in the ecumenical movement. The churches have not achieved a common understanding on the concept of ethical heresy, and much more has to be done in order to avoid further divisions among the churches.

From our point of view it should be clarified whether or not - and if so to what degree - ethics should be regarded as an integral part of ecclesiology? In our opinion the text goes too lightly over this issue.