

# The Church Towards a Common Vision: Reception of the Document in Danish Ecclesial Context

*The following is the official response from a working group initiated by the Council on International Relations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (Det Mellemkirkelige Råd) in collaboration with the National Council of Churches in Denmark (Danske Kirkers Råd). The statement was produced in the period August 2016 to November 2016. The statement was submitted to the plenary of the National Council for comments in January 2017 and final approval at the annual general meeting in April 2017.*

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## 1. Summary: Resonance, Challenge, Future Questions and Recommendations

The response continues the earlier practice concerning Danish response to 'The Nature and Mission of the Church'<sup>1</sup>. The following official response aims to answer the five initial questions stated in the TCTCV document. The response recognizes areas of resonance (*Missio Dei*, pneumatology, Church is presence of Christ, ecclesiology and mission no longer separated, church as eschatological community), of challenge (priesthood of all believers, apostolicity, universal ministry of primacy), identifies future questions (Is visible unity *the* ecumenical goal? What does legitimate diversity mean? Different hermeneutics and anthropologies in Global South and Global North). Furthermore, the response identifies a number of areas where the document challenges our Danish ecclesiologies. Finally, the response sums up findings in a number of recommendations from the Danish perspective: a Danish translation of the document, development of a study guide for ecumenical study of TCTCV in Danish context, and furthering ecclesiological convergence with the global church present in Denmark in the form of increased interaction and relationship with various ethnic migrant churches.

## 2. Introduction: Receiving an ecumenical document

Published in 2013 by the WCC's commission *Faith and Order*, the document TCTCV was a result of many years' work by representatives from various Protestant, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Pentecostal churches, lay people and ordained ministers alike.

According to the foreword, the nature of the document is an ecumenical 'convergence' document. The text documents how far Christian communities have come in their common understanding of ecclesiology. Furthermore, we take 'convergence' to mean that the document invites readers and responders to uncover what a global, multilateral, and in this sense, ecumenical understanding of the nature, mission and purpose of the church might be in their own various contexts.

The document encourages churches to receive and use the text to 'test and discern their own ecclesiological convergences with one another, and to serve their further pilgrimage' towards unity. Being mindful of our responsibility to test and discern our ecclesiological convergence, we have prepared the following response describing results and insights from our reception and response to the text and well as our ecclesiological convergence with the global Christian church. As we understand and use the term 'reception' it is the process by which churches make their own results of encounter with others. Thus, reception is an important methodological step in ecumenical reflection and work towards unity. On a fundamental level, there is ecumenical agreement in Denmark that the document is timely and able to stimulate fruitful ecumenical cooperation.

In Denmark, the reception process was initiated by the Council on International Relations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark and the National Council of Churches in Denmark. After a general meeting at Aarhus University in August 2016, it was decided that a smaller working group under the auspices of the

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<sup>1</sup> See earlier responses to former version 'The Nature and Mission of the Church' here:

[http://www.danskekirkestraad.dk/fileadmin/filer/Documenter/Kirkens\\_v%C3%A6sen\\_og\\_opgave\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.danskekirkestraad.dk/fileadmin/filer/Documenter/Kirkens_v%C3%A6sen_og_opgave_FINAL.pdf) and here:

[http://www.danskekirkestraad.dk/nyheder/nyhed/?tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=29&tx\\_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=2&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=170&cHash=e415742612813c99e599051314c8853a](http://www.danskekirkestraad.dk/nyheder/nyhed/?tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=29&tx_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=2&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=170&cHash=e415742612813c99e599051314c8853a)

National Council of Churches in Denmark should draft and present a statement for approval by the National Council of Churches in Denmark, January 2017. Input and comments was offered from Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Pentecostal theologians – Birger Nygaard, Mogens Mogensen, Maria Munkholt, Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen, Jakob Egeris Thorsen, Tonny Jacobsen, Jette Pedersen and Jan Nilsson. The text was prepared by Jonas Adelin Jørgensen, and commented and revised by Jakob Engberg, Henning Thomsen, Bent Hylleberg and Jakob Egeris Thorsen.

### 3. Setting the Scene: Recent Ecclesiological Debate in Danish Context

In the Roman Catholic Church in Denmark, ecclesiological debate has in recent years circled around the relation between the universal church and local Danish context. Debates about ecclesiology has also surfaced in relation to the more pastoral question of marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics and possible participation in the Catholic Eucharist.

In the larger community of free churches in Denmark – spanning from Methodist, Mission Covenant Church, and Baptists to Pentecostal and Charismatic churches – practical questions about cooperation between churches has been central. This has manifested itself e.g. in joint summer conferences between Baptists and Mission Covenant Churches in Denmark and in establishment of Frikirkenet, a network of Charismatic, Pentecostal and other free Churches and a number of Christian institutions and organizations.

Most Baptist churches and some charismatic churches have accepted ‘transferred membership’ in the last decades. This is viewed as an ecumenical gesture which means that members in e.g. the Lutheran Church, baptized as a child, can become member of a Baptist church without being ‘re-baptized’. Alternatively, some Baptist Churches have welcomed an ‘open membership’-model as is known from Baptist churches both in Sweden and in Great Britain.

In the established Lutheran Church, debates has taken place on acceptance of the Porvoo Declaration and the Leuenberg Concordia at the turn of the millennium. In recent years discussions has taken place primarily in relation to the work of a politically appointed commission investigating the future structure of the established Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark and relation between church and state.

In the so-called ‘Betænkning 1544: Folkekirkens styre”, the report finalized by the commission in 2014, the main task of the church is described and a rudimentary sketch of an ecclesiology is offered in the chapter ‘Folkekirkens opgave og idenitet – og syv pejlemærker’. The mission of the church is ‘proclaiming Christ as savior of the whole world’, which is acknowledged as the basis for all activities in the church. The rudimentary ecclesiological sketch mentions ‘points of navigation’ including the relationship between people and church (more than 75% are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church), the national presence on local level, inclusion and liberty, congregations and unity of church, independence of pastors, democratic legitimacy, and state-church relations. The unfolding of the church’s mission in Danish context is said to include church service, instruction, diaconia, and mission or evangelization.

#### Q1: To what extent does the document reflect ecclesiological understanding in our context?

Thus, the shared concerns between ecclesiological debate in the Danish context and the TCTCV-document relates to the missional nature of the church, legitimate diversity and unity in the church and between churches, and ministry and ordinances in the church. These three areas are the areas in which the Danish churches might benefit mostly from interaction with TCTCV. The one area that plays an important role in ecclesiological debate across churches in Danish context – the role of laity – is, however, not a prominent

theme in the document. This goes a long way to answer the first question 'To what extent does the document reflect ecclesiological understanding in our context?'

## 4. The text of the document 'TCTCV': Resonance, Challenges and Questions

On an overall level, the document is received positively in that the document sums up a long development, stretching from the Lima-declaration, over to former versions of the document, and now finally presents itself under the heading 'Towards a Common Vision'. The document continues F&O's long time commitment to formulating an ecumenical ecclesiology, and we find that the document resonates with our understanding in a number of ways. At the same time, we are challenged and feel that there are issues that need future attention:

### Areas of resonance

We **resonate** ecumenically with the attempts to view Trinitarian theology, ecclesiology and mission as closely interrelated, with the prominent use of pneumatology and with the invitation to move beyond confessional and geographical limited outlook.

- **The Church is the presence of Christ.** Therefore, the church is not a voluntary association of isolated saved individuals organized to promote individual interests; it is the fellowship of all those in Christ, rooted in the relational nature of Father, Son and Spirit, a consequence of God's economy of salvation, and equipped by the Spirit with gifts, qualities and orders. As Christ was the presence of God, the church is now the presence of Christ.
- **Missio Dei** remains the theological framework within which both ecclesiology and mission are appreciated and related. The unity and universality of the church becomes part of God's economy of salvation, and the challenge to churches to 'recognize that the membership of the church of Christ is more inclusive than the membership of their own church body' (p.8) therefore remains a theologically important challenge.
  - The church exists in its relation to Christ, and in its mission to the world.
  - The invitation to move beyond a 'confessionalistic' and geographically limited outlook is a much needed and appreciated quality of the document.
- **Pneumatology** is central and holds a more prominent place in ecclesiology than in prior documents.
  - We see this in other recent documents from the WCC as well, e.g. the *Together Towards Life, Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (CWME 2013).
- **Mission is no longer a separate area of ecclesiology**, but the church is 'missionary by its very nature' as a consequence of God's economy of salvation. That is, the document sets the church's mission as point of departure to understand the nature and tasks of the church.
  - In contrast to BEM, which does not mention the mission of the church in relation to baptism, Eucharist and ministry, the TCTCV fully acknowledges these practices to be understood in relation to the mission of the church.
- The recognition of **Eucharistic fellowship** as one of the founding practices of church resonates ecumenically in Danish context.
- The importance of **Scripture** for theology, as reflected in our ecumenically acknowledged emphasis on a scriptural theology.

- The church is an **eschatological community**, living in hope for things to come. As a (paradoxical) fellowship of the cross (the place of ultimate isolation and death), its mission is to give witness of the restored communion which God intends for all humanity and all creation in the Kingdom. Ecclesiology and eschatology remains closely connected.

On an overall level, we therefore welcome the document and view developments as positive and relevant in our context and for our ecclesiological reflections.

### Areas of challenge

We are **challenged** by the document in relation to our own ecclesiastical context in Denmark in several ways:

- The document acknowledges the **priesthood of all believers** or **universal priesthood**, an insight ecumenically valued and treasured in Danish context. However, the TCTCV discussion about episcopate and ministry of primacy seems to be lacking connection with this important theological category, and we feel that the universal priesthood of all believers remain unrelated to the discussion about ministry and ordinances. We feel that there is more to explore in the relationship between universal and special ministry of believers.
- The document points to **apostolic succession**. Apostolic succession is a real challenge in the sense that ecumenically divergent understandings of apostolicity remains between churches in Danish context. However, we find the term apostolicity could be explored further in search for an ecumenical ecclesiology.
  - From a Lutheran perspective, we believe that the Porvoo Declaration might offer valuable inspiration on what apostolicity might mean from an Anglican and Lutheran point of view in terms of Gospel, Church and Episcopate. In the Porvoo Declaration, apostolicity is interpreted as a common tradition of spirituality, liturgy and sacramental life (32, e), and it is said that a ministry of pastoral oversight (episcopate), exercised in personal, collegial and communal ways, is necessary as ‘witness to and safeguard of the unity and apostolicity of the Church’ (32, k). We find these formulations helpful in fleshing out what apostolicity might mean.
- The pointing out of a **universal ministry of primacy** is challenging to those of us who identify with various protestant traditions. Again, the challenge remains
  - From a Roman Catholic point of view, we see a number of other ways and means of relating fruitfully to churches other than a universal ministry of primacy, e.g. the (in itself Roman Catholic) differentiation between churches, ecclesial fellowships and Christian groups (cf. *Lumen Gentium* as well as *Dominus Iesus*). 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.
  - From our various protestant perspectives, we question ourselves whether anyone in full honesty believe that orthodox and protestant churches would come to a full recognition of a universal ministry of primacy? Rather, we see a more realistic and interesting option in exploring how fellowship and episcopate might supplement each other?

- From the perspective of the free churches in Denmark, we would argue for mutual recognition in love between various ecclesial bodies rather than trying to hierarchically organize churches according to criteria not ecumenically recognized.

## Q5 Future questions: What aspects of the life of the churches could call for further discussion?

We *see future questions* in the italicized questions in the document, and the document forces us to continue working with the difficult areas in ecumenical relations, areas where we sense that future challenges are located (cf. question no. 5: What aspects of the life of the churches could call for further discussion?):

- **Visible unity:** 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?
  - Again, we must point out the diversity between ecclesial bodies in our Danish context when discussing whether visible unity is a priority or whether, for instance, mutual recognition in love is a more productive goal.
- **Legitimate diversity:** If diversity is not only acknowledged but distinction is to be made between a legitimate, valuable, and stimulating diversity and an illegitimate and destructive diversity, we need further reflection and guiding structures in making this distinction<sup>2</sup>. The diversity is a complex area, in that diversity might be identified in a number of areas: in theology, in pastoral practice, or in ethics and moral instruction.
- **Hermeneutics and anthropology:** In the Danish Lutheran church, dividing factors inside and in relation to other Lutheran churches is how Scripture is used and how moral issues are looked upon. Areas such as marriage and sexuality divide churches in a liberal Global North and a conservative Global South in Lutheran churches, but also internally in the Danish Lutheran Church. In this situation, not only ecclesiology is in focus but also reflection on Scripture and what a ‘Scriptural theology’ might mean in relation to anthropology and sexuality.

From our perspective, a continuing difficulty is located in the nexus between these terms and ideals: How do we reconcile visible unity with legitimate diversity when faced with different Scriptural hermeneutics and theological anthropologies? Is it really the best strategy to call for acceptance of certain abstract and ideal concepts of unity in order to define the boundaries for a legitimate diversity, but at the same time pay relative little attention to the contemporary reality in which churches find themselves?

F&O has in a number of documents and processes worked with the communion in unity and diversity. In the TCTCV, the insights summed up pp.16-18 remain superficial compared to the much more serious integration needed of protestant perspectives on the necessity of mutual understanding and appreciation independently of recognition of ministry and ordinances (cf. the comments on priesthood of all believers, apostolicity, and a universal ministry of primacy above) .

Again, comparing the TCTCV to the older BEM, it has been claimed that BEM had success in addressing some of the pressing ecumenical issues – apostolicity, *episkope*, etc. by removing the cultural and historical

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<sup>2</sup> This is not a new question in Church history, but a well-known challenge e.g. in the Moravian Church as mirrored in their famous dictum: “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, love” seen in relation to the foundational document ‘The Ground of Unity’.

context of the terms. Although ecumenical documents might be viewed as successful by doing so, it lead to an active ignorance of the contemporary reality of the churches and their mission.

In contrast, we suggest it to be more fruitful to think the other way around, starting with our common contemporary reality and the challenges facing globally and alike, calling for ecumenical response to these challenges.

Among the **constructive comments** for the future ecumenical work on ecclesiology and unity, we collected in the process of the Danish reception the following insights:

- **Hope:** The TCTCV is concerned with pneumatology and with the eschatological character of the church. However, as a theological category 'hope' is entirely missing from the document. We believe that Christian witness in proclamation and diaconia must be related to our Christian hope.
- **Hospitality:** Rather than calling for a *laissez faire* theology and practice in relation to Eucharist, we would like to explore how an 'Eucharistic hospitality' between churches might be practiced. That is, what are the practical possibilities for opening up Eucharistic celebrations to other Christians?
- **Fellowship:** As mentioned above, in a situation where numerous new and dynamic ecclesial fellowships emerge especially in the Global South but also in our own context, we need to explore how sacramental and episcopal churches might form fruitful fellowship these groups.

## 5. Methodological Notes and Comments on TCTCV

Among our methodological notes, most importantly we want to point to the question about vocabulary, representation in ecumenical dialogue, and the style of the document:

- **Vocabulary:** On the background of the considerations presented above, 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 (e.g. 'sacramentality', 'ordinances', the 'primacy' or St. Peter ministry, 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!
- **Representation and reception:** WCC and its constituency represents roughly 20% of the world's Christians, and the core of WCC is made up by historical European and American churches as well as various orthodox churches. Many of these churches experience diminishing membership for reasons well explained in the document (secular culture, questions about relevance of church in modern life). We know that more than 60% of the Christians today live in the Global South, and that a large part of them are Charismatic and Pentecostal Christians. The kind of ecumenism these brothers and sisters endorse is probably quite different from the one proposed in the document. This means that there is a vast majority of Christians outside of the intended readership of the document, and that there remains a challenge in stretching out the ecumenical dialogue to all Christians. As reception is an increasingly important topic in ecumenical theology, more consideration into the process of reaching the majority of Christians is needed.
- **Style:** The style of the chapters varies throughout the document. Whereas the first chapters seem to be authoritative, the latter chapters are more tentative. Thus, the intention and status of the document seems to change through the text. Does a 'convergence text' mean an authoritative or a

tentative text? The document is said to be comparable in status to BEM (F&O paper no. 111), but the style, structure and textual clarity is quite different.

## 6. Ecclesiological convergence with the global church: a Danish reflection on the guiding questions

As a way of summing up and rephrasing what is said above, this section will answer the guiding questions provided in the TCTCV-document (p.3). The first and fifth guiding questions are tentatively answered above and therefore focus is on the remaining three questions:

### Q2: To what extent does the document offer a basis for growth in unity among churches in our context?

We agree that the document is valuable in its offering of an ecumenical language for discussing and identifying what unites and what divides us as Christians in Denmark. The very conversation itself fosters growth in unity among churches in Denmark.

- In the Lutheran Church, ecclesiological discussion focus mainly on confessional and national unity – and only to a lesser degree on unity across confessional or geographical borders. Historically, inclusion in the established church system and liberty within the same system are the historically proved instruments to unity, not confession. Historically and constitutionally, this is reflected where the Danish constitution is the founding document of the established church, not the (Augsburg, Lutheran) confession. Therefore, from a Lutheran perspective we feel sad to report that the key goal of the ecumenical movement – the full and visible unity between churches – is not within the horizon, not even within the established national church itself from a Danish Evangelical Lutheran perspective.
- On the other hand, we feel challenged where the TCTCV warns about limits to legitimate diversity (p.17). The document does not unfold how agreement on limits might be reached. But it lists criteria for full communion in a visible united church (p.22), and points to shared moral values and social ethics (p.35). 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 in the established Lutheran Church of Denmark.
- Consequently, in our Danish context, historically speaking the experience is that freedom rights and religious liberty unites. The legitimate diversity in relation to doctrine and life within and across Christian churches in Denmark is as large as across the global churches. We find this confirmed by the document where it says that ‘Legitimate diversity in life of the communion is a gift from the Lord’ (p.16). From the perspective of free churches, we therefore encourage a focus on unity as mutual recognition in love between ecclesial bodies.

### Q3: What adaptations or renewal in the life of our church does this statement challenge our churches to work for?

We view the document as valuable in that it might stimulate discussion and reflection within the various churches on an ecumenical ecclesiology.

- 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 exist. We see this contrasted by the document which insist on koinonia as the most

fundamental theological statement about the church, because we believe that such a fundamental statement must manifest itself.

As pointed out above, we see the ecumenically challenging nexus between visible unity, legitimate diversity and hermeneutics and anthropology as aspects calling for further discussion: How do we reconcile visible unity with legitimate diversity when faced with different Scriptural hermeneutics and theological anthropologies?

Q4: How far are we from forming closer relationship in life and mission with churches, which acknowledge in a positive way the ecclesiology of the document?

In recent years, a number of ecumenical activities has been continued or started, all of which has proven to be valuable in forming closer relationship in the life and mission of churches. We would like to point to the following: The ecumenical triannual Danske Kirkedage (Danish 'Kirchentage'), the activities surrounding 'Grøn Kirke' ('Green Church working group') focusing on local congregations engagement in ecological advocacy and sustainable practice, ecumenical participation in the annual national political festival Folkemødet, and the annual ecumenical prayer week initiated by Evangelical Alliance in collaboration with National Council of Churches in Denmark.

- From a Lutheran perspective, and in contrast to the TCTCV, there is a more static understanding of the established Evangelical Lutheran Church's mission in Danish context. In the case of the established church, the church's mission manifests itself in worship, instruction, diaconical work and evangelism or proclamation. That is, when the church's mission translates into activities, focus remains on ritual service, confirmation classes, material service to homeless and economically marginalized individuals, and various cultural activities on local level.

We see this contrasted by the dynamic understanding of the church's mission (p.6), and especially as it is unfolded in the last part of the document (*The Church: In and for the World*). Here the activities of the church are said to include 'promotion of the values of the Kingdom of God', and opposition of policies and initiatives which contradict them. Special mention is made of justice issues, freedom of religion and belief, religious pluralism, social order, and economy. To a large degree, these areas are addressed in relative separation from the local congregations by various faith based organizations and their professional staff.

To sum up, the statement challenge us to form closer relationship by discovering the more dynamic dimensions of the churches' mission together as expressed in ecumenical activities and various faith based organizations.

## 7. Recommendations from Danish perspective

Looking ahead, we recommend discovering the more dynamic dimensions of our churches together in our common contemporary reality. We believe that an ecumenical response to social, economic and ecological challenges in Danish context is timely and needed. Understanding the nature and mission of the churches is a challenging issue facing contemporary ecumenism. The working group believes that the TCTCV has a potentially important role to play in discerning stepping-stones in the continued work towards a common understanding of ecclesiology and in turn toward a more visible unity between churches in Denmark. To facilitate the further discussion, we recommend a) a Danish translation of the document as well as b) development of a study guide for ecumenical study of TCTCV in Danish context. Together with c) a strategic dialogue with migrant churches in Denmark, we see possible ecclesiological convergence with the churches in Denmark toward a deeper ecumenical understanding of the nature and mission of our churches together.