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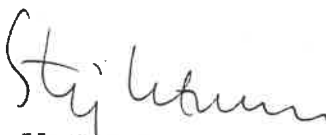
Dear Sirs!

We are pleased to enclose the responses from the Church of Norway to *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*. It is our hope that our responses are relevant and fruitful to the further process with the statement.

We look forward to the results of the study!

Regards

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Moderator


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General Secretary

The Nature and Purpose of the Church

Some Comments from the Church of Norway

On behalf of the Church of Norway, we – the Commission on Theology under the Council on Foreign and Ecumenical Relations – want to express our gratitude for the significant ecumenical work that has been achieved in bringing out the Document. It is our hope that the process of reception and response to the text will lead to a convergence text for the whole ecumenical fellowship.

In the text of the Document, we are able to recognize fundamental elements of the Christian faith and of the Faith of our Church. The Document shows will and ability to search for common doctrines in the midst of what often seems as contradicting views. Hence, it would presumably be helpful for our bilateral dialogues with other Churches as well. The Document will also help us clarify our own ecclesiology, too. However, we would have wished a more precise and comprehensive picture of the visible differences within the Christian Church.

From our Lutheran perspective, we want to offer our comments around five themes upon which the reception of the text has focused.¹

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1. The Church as Sacrament. Some reflections from a Lutheran point of view

The Document contains an understanding of the Church in History that we find to be a valuable presupposition for the understanding of the Church as sacrament. We want to underline that both the understanding of the Church and sin, as well as the understanding of the Church as God's sign and instrument, prove to outline important presuppositions on which the following, affirmative reflections on the understanding of the Church as a sacrament are to be understood.

To speak of the Church as a sacrament is not a familiar way to refer to the identity of the Church in our Lutheran tradition. However, we find it worthwhile to reflect upon the extent to which this is a way of thinking about the church that can be ours as well. We therefore want to point to the following:

- 1.1. The notion of sacrament can be traced back to the Greek *mysterion*, as used in Eph. 3:3-9, Col. 1:26 pas. Here, the Church is described as the medium or instrument for God's communication of his plan of salvation – the mystery. Hence, there is a close link between God's mystery and the Church. However, the scriptural basis itself seems not sufficient to describe the Church as a sacrament. It is God's plan or God's Son that is described as *mysterion* – not the Church.
- 1.2. Against this background, we also find it fruitful to speak of Christ as the sacrament of unity. He is the word of God, the visible presence of God in the world, and the mediator of God's grace. However, as is clear from the New Testament itself, the Church is understood as the body of Christ. As this body, as the community existing *in Christo*, we find a different path to using the notion of sacrament when we speak of the Church.
- 1.3. Turning then to how the concept of a sacrament is used in our tradition, there are four distinctive marks that constitute a sacrament:
 - a) The *sine qua non* for a sacrament is the word of God. The word of God has called the community of believers together in order to give God glory and to give witness of his Son to the world.
 - b) Closely linked to this is the calling of God. The Church is not there due to its own interests, but to understand itself as the People of God – as the community that has its origin in the will of God.
 - c) The visible sign is something that symbolizes something that every human being needs in order to live: In terms of the sacraments of Eucharist or Baptism these are bread, wine and water. If the church is to be understood in analogy with this, we suggest that the human community is the visible sign. This is something that every human needs in order to grow, become mature and find her or his own identity. When understood in the context of God's word and the Church, the human community bears witness to the eschatological community where the full and unrestricted unity of humankind is realized, and where everyone participates as a limb on the body of Christ, linked to all others in full unity and interdependence.

¹ The different chapters have been written by different authors, but the Commission is responsible for the text as a whole.

- d) A sacrament not only witnesses about the grace of God, but mediates it effectively. If the Church is then to be understood as a sacrament, this would mean that the participation in the unity of believers implies participation in a community and partake of an identity where one already here and now anticipates the eschatological life in God's presence. In the historical shape of the Church, we can face the divine mystery of salvation in a yet not fully realized form.
- 1.4. Having said this, we do not think that the Church can be understood as a sacrament if we take the point of departure for such understanding in the visible structure of the church, or in the ministries that serve it. The visible sign is the community of believers gathered around Word and Sacrament, who serve each other in mutual recognition and in mutual accountability, thereby expressing their common dependence upon the same God and his saving grace.
- 1.5. To speak of the Church as a Sacrament does not imply that the Church must be identified with Christ. In the same way as it is the Word of the Gospel that makes the visible sign a sacrament, Christ is the one that makes us his body. In this, there is an asymmetry between Christ and his Church that cannot be removed or reversed. "This means that the Church does not actualize its own existence in the sacraments; rather the Church receives salvation and its very being from Christ and, only as a recipient does it mediate salvation. In this perspective, the individual sacraments are linked with Christ as he faces the church. One should be reticent about language that blurs this distinction".²
- 1.6. As with other sacraments, there is a general invitation to participate and share in it also with regard to the church. This means that all who are baptized in the name of the triune God to whom the Church bears witness, are invited to live in this community and share in it.
- 1.7. Since the Church, as everything else in this world, is not without sin, the sole possibility for understanding the Church as a sacrament is linked to the sanctifying action of God, expressed in his forgiveness and calling to the church. Hence, the Church cannot be understood as an entity without sin.
- 1.8. Baptism and Eucharist, as the two constituent sacraments of Christian life and the Christian community, always take place within the community we call the Church. Therefore, an understanding of the Church as a sacrament is closely linked to what we can call *the unity of sacraments*, where every sacramental expression points to all the others: Baptism points to the Eucharist, that expresses the community, in the same way as the Christian community points to the expressions of this community in the common witness found in the Eucharist and in Baptism. Therefore, we recommend that the use of the notion *The Church as sacrament* should always take place in the context that gives expression to this unity of sacraments.
- 1.9. The redemptive work of Christ, as it manifests itself in the sacraments, also includes the rest of Creation. Hence, when bread, wine, water are included in the sacramental

² Cf. Lutheran-Roman-Catholic Joint Commission: *Church and Justification – Understanding the Church in the Light of the Doctrine of Justification*, sect. 128.

presence of Christ in the Church, the Church bears witness to how the whole of Creation is waiting and hoping for the full realization of God's future (cf. Rom 8, 19-22).

As a conclusion, we find it possible against this background to express our openness towards understanding the Church as a sacrament. The Church is "a visible sign of God's grace", that effectively signifies and conveys the grace of God through its community, the Eucharist and Baptism. Hence, also the Church can bear a promise of the eschatological future of God. This implies that we are also able to recognize the opinion of those who see the sacraments as the opportunity for God's grace, utilized by God as an occasion to give his grace. This occasion is found within the Church as the sacramental community that bears witness to him.

2. Liturgy and Unity

The role of liturgy in the search for a visible unity among the churches is an essential aspect of the work of Faith and Order, cf. the by-laws of the organization.³ The Montreal conference of Faith and Order 1963 devoted a whole section to the question of worship. Important points were agreed upon at the Faith and Order meeting in Louvain 1971. Apart from a consultation in Geneva 1969, Faith and Order did not for a long time undertake a further study of worship. The interest was turned to the work on the *theology* of the Eucharist and detailed work on Baptism and Eucharist (Lima 1982). The crucial aspect of worship in ecumenical matters was again underlined in the declaration from the WCC Assembly in Canberra, and from the world conference of Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostela 1993.⁴

On this background it is noticeable that the theme of worship is absent from the *The Nature and Purpose of the Church (NPC)*, apart from the question of Baptism and Eucharist. In the following we comment on a number of questions which must be addressed if we are to take seriously the doxological side of the ecumenical question.

- 2.1. The understanding of the Church in the Augsburg Confession art.VII means that the *locus* of unity and disunity in the Church is the liturgy or worship of the Church: "For true unity in the church it is enough that one agrees on the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments". *Unity is thus agreement in the core of worship.*
- 2.2. The unity of the Church becomes a visible unity when the Church in its praise of God and its witness to his grace preaches the Gospel with one accord. The unity is questioned by the discord of the professed believers in their praise and confession.
- 2.3. There must be a common core in the worship of the church, related to the means of grace constituting the Church. A common *ordo* is an expression of this, it is not in itself, however, necessary.
- 2.4. A common form of worship handed down by tradition may be beneficial, but not essential to unity. (This will probably be in fundamental conflict with an Orthodox view.)
- 2.5. Intra-church and inter-church differences in liturgy do not in themselves create a division in the Church. We must distinguish between diversity and division in worship. Diversity in worship does not threaten unity, but is a richness to be welcomed. Cultural diversity, for one thing, is a treasure. A theologizing of cultural differences must be avoided. At the same time we have to admit that it is not always easy to agree on what is legitimate diversity and what is church-dividing disagreement.⁵

³ *So we believe, so we pray : towards koinonia in worship*, Report from the FAITH AND ORDER-konsultasjon in Ditchingham 1994, edited by Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller. Faith and order paper no. 171, Geneva : WCC Publ., c1995, 15

⁴ For references, *ibid.* 16.

⁵ On the question of worship and culture, see the LWF-study *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity*, Geneve 1996.

- 2.6. There has been a clear growth in acts of common worship in ecumenical gatherings and in bilateral relations between churches. At the same time the obstacles to common worship have become clear. They are most obvious in the question of intercommunion, where the positions of the various Churches are still very different, even if practice does not always correspond to theory.
- 2.7. The crucial question will be: *Can we have a partial koinonia in worship? And could common worship enhance true ecumenical progress?* The tension between the confessions in regard to the question whether the koinonia in worship is a means to attain full visible unity, or the goal itself, is well known.⁶ Can common worship promote unity between those who do not agree on doctrine and who are not members of the same church body? The disagreement on what it is that constitutes the division in worship will remain a decisive question.
- 2.8. The question of common worship can be, and has been, approached in various ways. Common liturgies have been developed, where the participants from the various churches can worship together without conflict as far as the content and form of the liturgy itself go. Such liturgies will normally have to be non-sacramental prayer liturgies. In other cases churches have invited members of other churches, with whom they do not have sacramental fellowship, to take part in their services, with or without admission to the communion.
- 2.9. We must distinguish between a division that hinders common worship and a division that is expressed or demonstrated in the liturgy itself. How much weight shall be put on our *knowledge* of differences of opinion, if we can have a worship where the division does not become visible? Is there ecumenical progress in creating neutral liturgies which do not reveal the disagreements? (What if a sermon in a Eucharistic celebration in a sister church contradicts our understanding of a mutually accepted liturgy?) Is it of decisive importance to avoid false agreement in worship? Attempts at establishing a common worship may reveal existing discord, and should never be used to *conceal* it.
- 2.10. Is common worship then a goal or a means? We should say: both. Common worship should be worship that is conducted in good conscience, as a sign of achieved concord and as an inspiration to seek further visible expression of unity. The classical *lex orandi lex credendi* (Prosper of Aquitaine) does not mean that faith is always governed by prayer. The relation is a dialectical one, as is clearly shown by the dogmatic struggles in the Early Church. Worship and belief interact. Maybe our ecumenical work has not been comprehensive enough. It is decisive that the discussion about the liturgical expression of unity in the Church should be present in the ecumenical process all the time, in order that the dialectic between worship and doctrine can determine the direction of the process. We may venture to say that the ecumenical movement till now has not managed to integrate this relation in its concept.⁷ *Maybe doctrinal issues should always be discussed in a doxological*

⁶ Cf. NPC 40.

⁷ Cf. *So we believe...*, xi.

context, as a question of how we can celebrate together, in relation to liturgies old and new.

- 2.11. It is also essential to see clearly that the question of unity in worship is not only a question of earlier divisions. The Church will probably to an increasing degree be confronted with new liturgies which divide, because they manifest disagreement in the faith and in the question of how the faith can be legitimately expressed in doxology.⁸

⁸ Cf. *So we believe...*, 52.

3. Eucharist as the realisation of Koinonia

The Eucharist occupies a central place in the determination of *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*. The Document offers a broad and inclusive understanding of how the Eucharist is linked to the widely accepted term *koinonia*, which we largely can agree to. However, we want to underline some similarities and some differences.

- 3.1. Our understanding of the centrality of the Eucharist is closely connected to our doctrine of the Church.
- 3.2. We are pleased to see that the interconnection of the sacraments is focused on in the Document: "Baptism is very closely linked with the Eucharist" (§78). However, the Eucharist needs to be joined to the proclamation of the gospel as well. The Church is not able to create its own existence in the world, but is bound to receive the grace of God through all these channels of grace. It is therefore necessary to see the whole matrix of preaching, Baptism and Eucharist together. The question to be asked in an ecumenical framework, as we see it, is whether the common understanding of the Gospel and Baptism can lead us to a common table of the Lord.
- 3.3. The fellowship of Christians gathered around the table cannot be accompanied by every doctrine and lifestyle. The notion of "all kinds of injustice, racism, estrangement, and lack of freedom" as "radically challenged" (§80) in the Eucharist, may qualify the new reality realized in the eating and drinking. We do not demand uniformity, but if the gathering around the table is in conflict with the Gospel or Baptism, it should not take place. Such conflicts exist when the Holy Communion is allowed to be a means of preserving sinful structures.
- 3.4. In our Church, the perspective of the Eucharist as a *means of grace* for the baptized has dominated the spirituality of the Holy Communion. The focus at stake here is the liberating force in the sacrament: The self-giving of God to the community. This self-giving of God may not contradict the understanding of the Holy Communion as "a thanksgiving", "a memorial" or "a communion of the faithful" (§79), but it qualifies these notions in a specific way. God is the One who acts, since Christ is truly present in the elements that are blessed by the word, and the worshippers are the receivers of the gift, the gift who is none other than God.
- 3.5. On this background, we can understand Holy Communion as a sign of the visible unity among Churches, a manifestation of the God-given *koinonia* that transcends the borders of the different Churches. In an ecumenical framework, it would be misleading to understand the Eucharist as "a means of creating visible unity" (p.40); if by that we suggest that the Lord's supper is negotiable. On the other hand we would like to emphasize that the Eucharist could serve as a means for realizing the unity among believers. Since it belongs to the Lord, it cannot be treated as a property, either of the universal Church or of the local Church. The *koinonia*, which becomes visible in the Eucharist, is the result of acknowledging each other as Churches. The common Holy Communion, whether it could mean eucharistic hospitality, inter-communion or co-celebration, should be understood as a fruit of this acknowledgement. Hence, our Church would understand celebrating a common Holy Communion as a goal for all ecumenical activity.

- 3.6. Holy Communion is the realization of a unity that exists in spite of differing opinions among the partakers. The celebration does not presuppose a community where all the divisions are abridged, but fulfils the healing by the gathering in the one bread and the one chalice which is Christ. Therefore, Holy Communion unites us all in the oneness of Christ.
- 3.7. We are pleased to see the centrality given to the Eucharist in the understanding of *koinonia* in the document. However, coming from a folk-church setting, where all too few of the baptized members of the Church participate in the Holy Communion, we would plea for an even stronger focus on this sacrament in an ecumenical framework. We understand the Eucharist as the realization of fellowship among Christians, but must admit that the experience of celebrating Holy Communion is often an experience of division. We are deeply troubled by the lack of participation in our own Church on the one hand, and among the members of the *oecoumene* on the other.
- 3.8. All the other paragraphs in section III and IV should be qualified thus: The goal of a common understanding of *koinoia* is to make it possible for all Christians to share all the gifts of God, including the Holy Communion, together.

4. Unity in Diversity

The Document draws upon a rich mosaic of biblical images which identify the unity and the diversity of the Church. It rightly claims that a polysemic diversity is firmly rooted in the Christian doctrine of the Triune God. By saying this, the Document offers a specific understanding of how the relation between unity and diversity within the Church could be understood in an ecumenical framework. In addition, it opens up for a fresh understanding of what it means to be the Church in service to the world.

- 4.1. The Document refers to *koinonia* as the key term to portray the visible unity in the Church. The strength of the term is its ability to hold together the activity of God and the activity of the Church (§52) by pointing to the communion between the two. From our Lutheran point of view it is important to stress the asymmetrical structure between God and the Church: Unity is present in the Church, because it is called by the one God. It is not the achievement of the Church, since the Church is the receiver of unity. The Church will always remain sinful, a "piece of the world", and it is not able to create true unity by itself. If we appeal to "the restoration of unity between Christians" (§58), it should be qualified as a new discovery of the already given unity in Christ (1. Cor 1,13).
- 4.2. Having said this, we affirm that there is a "constant need for repentance, mutual forgiveness and restoration" (§60) in the Church. But the structural elements – i.e. reaching binding agreements - in the Church can only be perceived as "signs of the new life of communion" and not the realization of the unity itself. Having qualified the structures of the Church as a sign, a wide range of opportunities remains to display for the world that the Church is one. We hereby think of all the social work carried out by Churches together, and of common understanding of the faith. Realization of unity, though, is the work of God who is present in the Church by the means of grace. The Church receives its unity from the reception of the *gospel* in the Church, because through the gospel – and only through the gospel - the triune God includes the Church in communion with him.
- 4.3. In §61 God is located as the giver of both unity and diversity. The text focuses upon the diversity of *gifts* through the Holy Spirit, and how they all work for the common good. Even if we strongly support such a notion, the focus could be drawn towards the radical diversity within the *subject* of the giving, too. The notion of three persons within God opens up for an understanding which will break all attempts to "capture the Gospel...[in] the one and only authentic way". As a response to such a challenge, it seems insufficient to point towards an emanation of diversity from a common source. In a trinitarian theology the source is diverse and impossible to fix as a metaphysical principle. These two belong together: a profound unity and a profound diversity. They are both rooted in the reality of God.
- 4.4. Diversity receives its identity from the notion of the true Church as a Church *servicing* the Gospel (*ministerium evangelii*). Since "the gospel has to take flesh authentically in each and every place...relevant to particular times and particular places" (§ 62), it is subject to change. In fact, the Church must always remain in the process of change if it will fulfill its mission as a serving Church to new generations. Hence, there is a demand for a *thorough engagement with the relevant cultural expressions* in the different contexts. The gospel itself is not a timeless and spaceless entity, but

connected to humanity in its temporality and geography. The question of what is "authentic" or "relevant" can be posed as such: How can the Church express the name Jesus Christ so that nothing human is alien to that expression?"

- 4.5. The Document (§ 63) points to the fact that diversity can be destructive of unity and lead to division. At the same time unity can be destructive of diversity and lead to uniformity. Even if a relation between unity and diversity presupposes limits to prevent division and uniformity, it is from a Lutheran perspective important to stress that the power to define these limits does not belong to a *formal institution*. In the well known formula *extra nos*, the Reformers sought to express a fundamental otherness of the Gospel: As Church, we do not have the Gospel as rulers over a property, but are given grace through it and entrusted a ministry for it. Therefore no absolute teaching authority can fix the relation between unity and diversity, but the ministry of the Gospel calls us to discover the right relation again and again.
- 4.6. Having said this, we see it as important to distinguish between questions concerning the more fundamental aspects of the Church and questions where a diversity is both legitimate and required. It is the former that deserves the determination "there are limits within which diversity is an enrichment" (§63). The doctrines found in the ecumenical creeds are examples of such "fundamentals". But the interpretation of these fundamentals cannot be fixed, but is open to a diversity connected to the concrete time and space of the interpreters.

5. Notes from a gender perspective

The document contains a multitude of perspectives from which the Church can be described. We want to draw attention towards the perspective of gender. The focus could be manifold, but we will start from a central metaphor in the document, the Church as "Body of Christ", and proceed to touch upon some issues important to the perspective of gender.

- 5.1. When the Church is identified as "Body of Christ" (§19 – 22), we want to underline how we find it legitimate to use this metaphor in an ecumenical ecclesiology. The keywords of the document that are used to describe what the Church is, do not exist in a vacuum, but should be reflected through what they could mean in a given social context. In the New Testament we can find a broad variety of key terms and a variety within the use of these terms.
- 5.2. In the history of the Church, Paul's idea of a "Body of Christ" has often been used to legalize a doctrine of the Church being a mystical bride. When it is combined with the picture of Christ as a male saviour, the whole metaphor can be used to preserve patriarchal structures: It brings the religious ideals of the Church being subordinated to Christ into the rules of social life. However, this may not be the only interpretation of the Pauline metaphor.
- 5.3. This view can be traced back to an interpretation of the narrative of Creation in Genesis 2. God is thought to have first created the perfect man, i.e. the male, and created the woman out of the man. Eve is in this model thought to be a mere imprint of Adam. The interpretation serves as a premise upon which ecclesiastical consequences are drawn: The Church is the new Feminine who is in need of the perfect maleness of Jesus Christ.
- 5.4. The Christology of the Pauline letters, as it is exposed in the Document (§19 – 22), reflects a particular historical situation. These metaphors are not able to supply binding answers for all the questions related to gender that are raised today. Hence, there is a need to limit the scope of the metaphors in interpreting the present situation.
- 5.5. The metaphor of the Church as "Body of Christ" should be qualified more precisely. It is important to clarify the aim of using the metaphor. This could be described in a very concrete manner by either *challenging* or *preserving* existing ecclesiastical structures. We would seriously question the latter, which could strengthen oppressing structures in different churches and which often leads to a loss of the status of women. We would rather plead for an interpretation of the metaphor in service of the former, challenging the Churches to find new ways of solving the present questions of gender.
- 5.6. In addition, we want to underline that the maleness of Jesus is of no importance to his function as Saviour. However, it is as a concrete historical human being, who took flesh upon himself, that he was able to fulfill his saving activity in the atonement.

5.7. The ordination of women is one of the most debated issues in the ecumenical movement. It seems as if the Document is not addressing this issue properly, by only addressing "the ordination of only men to a ministry of word and sacrament" as one of many "issues to be explored further" (p. 44). We would ask for a strengthening of this perspective in the section on "Ministry".

Ecumenical documents referred to:

Church and Justification. Understanding the Church in the Light of the Doctrine of Justification. The Lutheran World Federation 1994.

So we believe, so we pray: towards koinonia in worship / edited by Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller. Faith and Order paper no. 171, Geneva : WCC Publ., c1995.

The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A stage on the way to a common statement, Faith and Order No. 181, November 1998

LWF-study *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity*, Geneva 1996.

