

A Reflection on the Nature and Mission of the Church

by the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, in Light of the World Council of Churches Document, The Nature and Mission of the Church

INTRODUCTION

The Church in Context

1. Of the many parallel processes that are involved in the pursuit of Christian unity, one of the most important is the churches' reflecting together on what the Church is and what the Church does. If the churches are to draw closer together – towards being able to recognize in one another the apostolic faith and the life of the Church – such a process of common discernment is vital. This has been a sure conviction of the theological work pursued through the Faith and Order movement.

2. The World Council of Churches (WCC) Faith and Order Commission's pursuit of this question has so far yielded an important document, The Nature and Mission of the Church (NMC), which represents years of consultations on numerous dimensions of ecclesiology.[1] Even as this text is undergoing its own process of thorough revision, the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCCCUSA)[2] has taken up this text during a four-year study as a means of stimulating our own process of common ecclesiological engagement, as churches situated in the context of the United States of America.[3] Our study is neither a commentary nor a set of suggested revisions, but is a reflection on the nature and mission of the Church through the lens of The Nature and Mission of the Church. As a result, our reflection paper refers often to the NMC text. Our work is the product of eight semiannual meetings. Held during the years 2008-2011, these meetings brought together a group of ecumenically committed theologians, pastors and church leaders from an especially wide variety of traditions. A list of persons involved, with their respective affiliations, accompanies this paper.

3. The process that generated this reflection made an indelible impression on all of us who participated in it. Had we not participated in it, many of us would not be considering some of these issues at all, or certainly not in this way, in this light or with this vocabulary. Our doing so enlarges our perspective and brings us closer to one another. The process compelled us to engage seriously and deeply with a text which, although provisional, represents a wealth of profound ecumenical discernment on ecclesiology. We have learned a great deal from our conciliar study of this remarkable document.

4. Our every intention is that the effect of our reflection is not limited to ourselves but reaches further, to revitalizing the commitment of churches already engaged in ecumenical dialogue and cooperation, and to nurturing the zeal for unity among churches not yet so engaged. We therefore commend to US churches this reflection as an invitation to engage deeply in the study of ecclesiological questions, and to do so especially through the landmark text, The Nature and Mission of the Church. To serve this process, also accompanying this paper is an essay on the unique context of churches in America.[4] Written by a study group member, it helps set the stage for an American perspective on the nature and mission of the Church in relationship to the WCC document.

5. Our reflection ought to be considered within the following contexts:

a. **American context:** Our location and history in the United States of America have affected every one of our churches, including those that have long histories outside this continent, and particularly those churches indigenous to America. The landscape of Christianity in this country is greatly influenced by trends in the cultural and spiritual life of its people. Trends such as consumerism, entrepreneurialism and secularization have made their impact on American life and have touched our faith communities in various ways. Event-driven and service-oriented, Americans often exude a spirit of collaboration in the service of others that becomes a uniting force among our churches. While the transformative power of the gospel makes relationship with any context ambivalent, these and other trends have shaped religious life in America. This Faith and Order reflection on The Nature and Mission of the Church is framed by the common experience that we share as a consequence of these current trends.

b. **Conciliar context:** This is not a reflection of individual bodies but of a council of churches. Coming from and representing particular ecclesiastical bodies, histories and traditions, we are bound together in the National Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission and offer this study as its own kind of convergence text. While our individual confessions influenced our conversation, this is a conciliar reflection.

c. **Faith and Order context:** Our reflection emanates from a national commission that sees itself as part of the global and historic Faith and Order movement inaugurated in 1927.[5] We offer this text in the spirit of the Faith and Order mandate to “call the churches to the goal of visible unity” and hope that it contributes to that call.[6]

6. Our discussions yielded many observations and considerations on issues raised in NMC. However, this reflection focuses on the comments that mirror the contexts described above. Our remarks are often cast as challenges and opportunities as we and our churches seek to deepen unity in Christ.

7. Our fervent hope is that this reflection speaks for the American churches and for their particular concerns, theoretical and practical, and that it contributes to the furthering of their own ecclesiological self-understanding and ecumenical commitment “that all may be one, ...that the world may believe...” (Jn 17:21).

The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Text in Context

8. The gathering of a group of Christians from diverse traditions to write together a document on the Church is a daunting task. As one of our study group members put it, “The Nature and Mission of the Church resembles ecumenical common prayer, which is often a hodgepodge of elements, some of which appear familiar and some unfamiliar to each of the churches participating.” This provisional WCC text is the most complete ecumenical convergence statement on ecclesiology to date and a source document for a decisive conciliar common statement on the Church.[7]

9. We appreciate the desire for Christian unity expressed in NMC and offer the following reflections regarding the characteristics of the document in the hope that they will nurture the reception of NMC in our churches.

a. **Concepts Rooted in Scripture.** We affirm the ways NMC grounds theological reflection in Scripture. Biblical language and images of the Church in the text enhanced our conversations. By contrast, speaking of the Church as “*creatura Verbi*” and “*creatura Spiritus*” in the text impeded our conversation because the terms were unfamiliar or unclear to some churches, while others found

them theologically confusing. Speaking of the church as “the people of God,” “the body of Christ” and “the temple of the Holy Spirit” in the text was widely familiar and intelligible, and so enriched our understanding and encouraged our agreement.

b. Language Matters and Context. In conversation and in literature we assume a shared understanding of the words we use. Too often, however, our language finds us talking and writing past each other. We sometimes do this in ecumenical dialogue and studies, and NMC is no exception. We noted several places in the document where clarification of the meaning of terms would further ecumenical communication. Even the word “Church” requires a more careful definition at every turn, recognizing that it can refer both to eschatological and historical realities, recognizing too that different confessions understand themselves differently in relationship to “the Church.” In order to more effectively foster unity, we encourage use of language that is familiar to and inclusive of a broad range of ecclesial traditions. Certain uses of language in NMC stand out as common to the theological cultures of Catholic, Orthodox and Reformation traditions. Because of the strong presence of various Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in the United States, which are part of theological cultures other than these three, it is important to use language common to all such cultures if these ecclesial communities are to feel included. Prominent use of language proper to the former traditions as inclusive references (for example, “Mass” in NMC 81 and “synods” in 100) makes it difficult for the latter to relate to and receive the document. However, retaining use of “eucharist” (as found in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry[8]) and “communion” (with its link to “koinonia” in NMC) has the potential to challenge all ecclesial traditions towards deeper appropriation of this gift.

c. Other Ecumenical Documents and Dialogues. At various points in our conversation there was mention of Faith and Order papers, bilateral dialogue findings and other publications that address issues relevant to the nature and mission of the Church. Today not everyone around the ecumenical table is familiar with this literature. Therefore, while we appreciate the extent to which NMC provides bibliographical sources, we recommend that future documents of this kind have fuller notations that also provide more sources, including those tracing advances towards full communion in various dialogues.

d. Ecumenical Divergences. Naming the differences in our churches’ faith and order is a vital part of the road to convergence. The NMC text signals some of these divergences by attempting to describe them within boxes. Without offering creative ways forward, these boxes were of limited use. The commentaries in the 1982 Faith and Order convergence text Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry were more helpful in suggesting ways in which our various convictions and practices might challenge each other to more faithful life and more visible unity.

e. Underlying and Related Theological Convictions. We are grateful for the ways in which NMC makes clearer the ecclesiological assumptions within which Christians understand baptism, eucharist and ministry. We also recognize that our conversation pointed to areas for further theological dialogue, specifically anthropology and christology, since they impact our diverging and converging expressions of Christ’s Church and related understandings of baptism, eucharist and ministry.

10. These reflections on the characteristics of the WCC text, The Nature and Mission of the Church set the stage for this National Council of Churches Faith and Order study on the nature and mission of the Church.

I. THE CHURCH OF THE TRIUNE GOD

Foundational Themes and the American Context

11. Our study of The Nature and Mission of the Church identified three foundational and recurring themes in the first section of the document, “The Church of the Triune God,” that call for affirmation and highlight some of the challenges our American churches are still facing in our ecumenical journey. These themes are:

- the Church as gift of God
- the communal life and nature of the Church
- the holistic mission of the Church as intrinsic to its very life and being

12. Our group supported the affirmation of “the Church as a gift of God.” The Church, says NMC, “belongs to God, is God’s gift and cannot exist by and for itself” (9). The Church is created and sustained by God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – through God’s word and sacraments.

13. Emphasis on the Church as God’s gift is most welcome and indeed crucial both theologically and contextually. Theologically, it is imperative that we recognize continually that the Church’s life and future do not depend only on human efforts and endeavors, however noble, well-meaning and God-pleasing they may be. God graciously calls us into the Church and into active participation in the Church’s mission, but the Church does not depend ultimately on our response and faithfulness. It depends on God’s faithfulness, presence, power and grace. Especially in our American context, where human effort, initiative and ingenuity are so highly valued, it is important to highlight the uniqueness of the Church as God’s creation and gracious gift in and to the world.

14. At the same time, our reflections on NMC highlighted a few ways in which our churches are still challenged in their understanding of the Church as “gift of God.” This document brings to our attention important issues such as the relationship between nature and grace, Church and institution(s), gift and guarantee. For example, the box after paragraph 13 refers to churches that view (or do not view) “the ordained ministry” as a “guarantee” of “the presence of truth and power of the Word and Spirit of God in the Church.” It also refers to churches that view (or do not view) “institutional continuity” as “the necessary means and guarantee of the Church’s continuity in apostolic faith.” These references focus on the reality of our different understandings of ministry and ecclesial institutions. In the American setting, as elsewhere, these different understandings are at the core of our respective identities and divisions. As the box notes, “it remains for future theological work” to discern whether or not these differences can be reconciled.

15. We affirm a second foundational theme, NMC’s Trinitarian understanding of the communal nature of the Church. Recognizing the Church as our common participation in the Threeness-in Oneness and Oneness-in-Threeness of Father Son and Holy Spirit, overcomes the American tendency to see the church as a voluntary association of individuals. The Triune God as source and focus of ecclesial communion is an insight that enriches the Church at every level of its life (13).

16. This emphasis on the communal life of the Church grounded in the Trinity is especially significant in an American ecclesial context. Americans in general tend to have an impoverished commitment to communal goals, values and obligations. This poverty leaves even Christians with an inadequate approach to reading Scripture and living out their Christian faith. The emphasis in NMC on the communal life of the Church and on the roots of that communal life in God’s life and plan can help Christian congregations in our country to imagine and discuss their lives as a community of believers, which would represent a concrete step towards the visible unity of the Church (see 32).

17. NMC's stress on the Church as body of Christ (20-21), the concept of community (koinonia) (24-33) and people of God (18-19) illustrates the scriptural richness of this communal theme. The latter concept especially can help us reject an interpretation of the Church as a people freely constituting itself as a political entity – a powerful image in a country whose Constitution begins with the words “We the People” and whose Christian traditions have deeply influenced its culture.

18. At the same time, we are challenged by some issues related to understanding the Church as a community. We are challenged by the contrast between the reality of the Church's unity and communion (rooted in the Trinity) and the Church's failure to manifest that unity and communion in a visible way. A distinction that some churches make between the visible and the invisible Church tends to leave people with no reason to seek or value efforts towards manifesting the visible unity of the churches. These contrasts and distinctions need to be addressed more explicitly. Another challenge we face concerns the precise meaning we give to the affirmation that the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. We experience a genuine dichotomy when we see the Church in our context as broken, sinful, uncatholic and failing in apostolic mission. Discussed in section two of NMC, this will be considered below.

19. A third foundational theme deserving of affirmation in NMC is its emphasis on the holistic mission of the Church as intrinsic to its very life and being. In the opening paragraph of section one on the nature of the Church as gift, the document underscores that “of its very nature [the Church] is missionary, called and sent to serve, as an instrument of the Word and the Spirit, as a witness to the Kingdom of God” (9). For many in our churches the emphasis on social justice (see 36, 38, 40) as integrally related to mission is helpful and important for it counters the tendency to think of mission only as a matter of calling individuals to repentance and faith in Christ. While such stress on social justice is commendable, there is also a type of social activism in American culture that the Church needs to challenge. Socially and politically concerned churches have often been activist without sufficient theological grounding. It is important to remember that the Church has several roles to fulfill in its missionary endeavors: intercessory, proclamatory, doxological, prophetic, etc. Our churches that focus primarily on social and political dimensions of witness need a balanced and holistic approach with more emphasis on catechesis, prayer, worship and sacraments, and vice versa. As our churches seek to move towards more holistic mission, there are invaluable gifts to be shared across ecclesial traditions.

20. Surely challenging, this theme also offers us the opportunity to further reflect on our understanding of the mission and witness of the Church in the world. In so doing we must ponder anew what it means for the Church to participate in God's work and in the divine mission of the Son and the Spirit. It is easy in our American context to accentuate human endeavors and to portray mission as something “the Church does” rather than something God does through the instrumentality of the Church. This harkens back to the focus of this entire section of NMC – the Church is a gift of God.

Implications

21. In this section NMC gives prominence to the proclamation of the gospel, yet our churches differ on the specific message to be proclaimed and why this message is necessary. Human sin, the need for repentance, the saving work of Christ and the empowering work of the Holy Spirit, and the role of the sacraments are topics that call for further explication in discussing the proclamation of the gospel in the context of the Church's mission to the world.

22. Our churches are also challenged by a seeming lack of urgency and passion for the Church's mission. More attention to the reality of sin (in the Church and in the world), suffering as a result of sin (individual and institutional), the need for repentance, the uniqueness and transformative nature of Christ's saving work, and the eschatological context of the Church's life and mission could give our churches' mission a greater sense of vitality and urgency.

II. THE CHURCH IN HISTORY

Themes Challenging the Unity of the Church

23. "The Church is an eschatological reality, already anticipating the Kingdom. However, the Church on earth is not yet the full visible realization of the Kingdom" (48). So begins the second section of *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, "The Church in History." This introductory statement sets the stage for several themes which we receive as both opportunity for and challenge to greater faithfulness in the visible unity of the Church. These themes are:

- the tension between the Church's essential holiness on the one hand, and the need to address and repent of the Church's historic failure to live up to its identity on the other
- the strengths and weaknesses of "communion" as the basic concept of Christian unity
- communion and diversity, and the need for mutual accountability among the churches.[9]

24. NMC addresses the tension between the holiness of the Church and its historical sin and failure (49-52). The difficulty of speaking and writing about this tension is reflected in the document and characterizes our own struggles in American churches to account for the ambiguities between Church as "gift" (that which we are by grace) and Church as "calling" (that which we are called to be).[10]

25. We affirm the historic creedal confession that the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. This is the God-given gift of unity. At the same time we acknowledge that we have not lived up to the call to manifest this unity in a full and visible way. If we were one, there would be no need for the ecumenical dialogue and work in which we are engaged. Historically in the United States, denominations were a way in which an immigrant people either brought their religious communities with them to the new land or created "homegrown" indigenous Christian communities. In the process, however, these divisions hardened into Christian communions that have sometimes been antagonistic to one another and content with the resultant disunity, at times even seeing it as a source of pride and independence. We are challenged to see that these old divisions are perceived as an indication of Christians' failure to be a reconciling force in society. At the same time Christians need to acknowledge the fact that some divisions occurred because people believed the separations were necessary for them to be faithful to God as they understood the relevant circumstances.

26. We also note that division is not just something that characterizes relationships between and among churches. It is a real force within churches, denominations and confessional communions themselves. In the USA these divisions include racism and classism, as well as professionalism in leadership which has closed off those without privilege or specialized training. Finally, we live in an age when many of our churches are faced with internal conflict and even schism around ethical, social and exegetical issues. The flashpoints of these conflicts include the ordination of women and the life in the Church of openly homosexual persons. However, the controversy over such issues unearths an even deeper and broader controversy in our churches on questions of basic christology, ecclesiology, and scriptural and ecclesial authority. The Church's failure to live out fully its call to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic, chastens and calls us to repentance.

27. Clearly, we still have a long way to go before reaching consensus. However, we agree that this discussion is best framed by noting that sin and holiness are engaged in asymmetric warfare in the Church: “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom 5:20). It is the absolute priority and lordship of God’s grace and holiness that makes this struggle asymmetrical. God and the devil are not equal powers. Framing a discussion of the Church’s holiness and sin in this way helps us live into that which we are yet to be. While acknowledging our failure to be what we were called to be, we strive to be the community of reconciling peace given in Christ, who draws this community from all nations. We are challenged to recapture the urgency of Jesus’ prayer for unity, “that the world may believe” (Jn 17:21).

28. This World Council of Churches document seeks to help foster mutual recognition of the Church’s genuine apostolic faith and life, in each locality, among diverse local churches. The language used to express this recognition and unity is the language of “communion” (koinonia), qualified by some churches in terms of stages of communion along the way to a full and visible communion. While we affirm “full communion” as the goal of ecumenism, we are challenged by how it will be realized in our context.[11]

29. The concern of some churches is that, when talking of “full communion,” many churches and ecumenical texts identify constitutive elements of this communion (for example, the mutual recognition of the ministry of word and sacrament). While this identification represents a significant ecumenical consensus, which conciliar ecumenism has helped achieve, it presents a challenge for those churches in the America context, in which emphasis on voluntary association and initiative has led Christians to see unity more in terms of shared witness and thus would include among the “bonds of communion” (NMC 66) the grassroots ecumenism that goes on within mission and other forms of interchurch cooperation.

30. Furthermore, while NMC suggests that the absence of full communion hinders the mission of the Church, many American Christians at the level of the local congregation do not, in fact, perceive this as a problem. In fact, to some American Christians the ecumenical language of communion is foreign and unintelligible. This is particularly true of churches outside traditional conciliar structures. Our concern is that these churches are often excluded from participating in the discussion about communion among the churches. The WCC text also seems to preclude the acceptance and recognition of new and emerging church communities as legitimate participants in the ecclesial search for unity, whereas these expressions of church are a growing and vital segment of the Christian landscape in the United States. In this regard we affirm NMC’s recognition that “we all participate in some ways in Jesus Christ, although we do not yet live in full communion” (57).

31. In the discussion about communion and diversity, NMC raises the important issue of the need for mutual accountability among churches. This discussion is undergirded by the distinction between diversity and division. With NMC we affirm that God through the Holy Spirit bestows diverse and complementary gifts on all the faithful for the common good (60). We recognize that we must appreciate this in our own context of cultural and religious diversity. We affirm the presupposition in the text that all cultures need conversion to the gospel and that the gospel should be the criterion for discerning the good and the bad in any given culture. In addition, we recognize that not all diversity is healthy or sustainable within full communion. As we Christians and our churches face the challenge this poses, may we also see therein the opportunity to articulate how God and the gospel are the measure of legitimate cultural diversity in the forms of Christian expression and living. Hence the import of our accountability to one another.

32. Given the ecumenical focus on communion, we appreciate the attention given to this concept in the third section of the document, to which our reflection now turns.

III. THE CHURCH IN COMMUNION

General Comments

33. Section III of The Nature and Mission of the Church underscores the gift of communion that God bestows upon the Church and its renewing potential for our life together. Our awareness of this gift is invaluable as we cope with the fragmenting character of American society that has influenced churches of every stripe across our land. This section covers familiar ecumenical territory, drawing especially on another WCC document, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (1982), to which many member communions of the National Council of Churches and member churches of its Faith and Order Commission have given official responses, which are considerably positive.

34. Our discussions have taken note of this background, while also lifting up the challenges posed by our American context and the opportunities this section holds for the unity and renewal of our churches. Three questions frame our reflection:

- How does NMC integrate and build upon other ecumenical work preceding and following BEM?
- How might the NMC process further the work of BEM and revitalize the witness of our various traditions?
- How can the NMC process help us address new questions that have developed over the past three decades?

a. We remember the affirmation of the WCC's Faith and Order Commission at its 1978 meeting.[12] The Commission stated three requirements for the unity of the church:

- a common confession of faith sufficient for the churches to mutually affirm that they stand in the same apostolic heritage
- a common understanding of sacraments and ministry sufficient for the churches to mutually recognize members and ministers and to partake together in the eucharist
- a common understanding of authority sufficient for the churches to make decisions together

Without these, our churches remain not just diverse but divided. We believe this affirmation undergirds and clarifies the prefatory paragraph of this section (NMC 67).

b. We recall the affirmation that a search for visible unity must give attention to "the Tradition of the Gospel...testified in Scripture, transmitted in and by the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit." [13] This formulation has helped mitigate the sterile disputes setting Scripture against Tradition. We found this useful in our conversations in which participants found themselves more or less resonant with the witness of Tradition over against Scripture.

c. We consider the extent to which a sacramental sign effects the reality it signifies. In a reply to the churches, the WCC's Faith and Order Commission acknowledged that "The church is neither independent of its divine master nor do baptism and eucharist have their role and efficacy in themselves independently of God's action." [14] Recalling this statement – which, after all, is part of the continuing BEM process – clarifies the discussion generated by NMC.

35. We reflected upon insights from a wide range of bilateral and multilateral conversations and ecumenical achievements in past decades which ground the witness of NMC. In turn we saw in NMC a certain harvesting of the fruits of their findings. From this vantage we respond to the call “of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in common life in Christ and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.”[15]

Specific Comments

36. We offer the following observations regarding the gifts of grace that God bestows on the Church named in this section – apostolic faith, baptism, eucharist, ministry (including oversight) and authority – paying particular attention to the challenges they pose in our context and the elements of the emerging ecumenical consensus we can affirm.

Apostolic Faith

37. Ecumenical underscoring of what BEM calls “the faith of the Church through the ages”[16] is especially important in the American context where the society as a whole suffers, in the words of one study group member, from “a tyranny of the present,” a concern for the “new” that pays little attention to the past. Christians in such a setting need to be reminded that we receive the faith once for all given to the saints and apostles. Otherwise, we easily fall prey to culturally-shaped prejudices couched in biblical language.

38. Some of our churches, born on the American frontier, have emphasized “discontinuity,” seeking to restore the New Testament church, removing what they take to be the distorting accretions of intervening centuries. Reflecting a restorationist impulse seen in other Protestant traditions, these bodies historically have tended to separate themselves from other followers of Christ. We recognize that the practice of the Church through the ages has by no means always reflected the gospel it was entrusted to proclaim. This, however, does not invalidate our acknowledgment of and thanksgiving that the Church’s essential unity in faith, as determined through prayer and theological discernment, stretches across the centuries as well as around the world.

39. With this in mind, our Commission affirms the importance of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 as a sign of Christian unity (NMC 69, 72) so long as it is not used as a test of fellowship in ways that would further divide the Church. We also affirm, in line with paragraph 71, that confession of the one apostolic faith, of which the Creed is a preeminent symbol, is appropriately seen as one dimension of the apostolic Tradition of the Church.

40. Furthermore, it is our conviction that the WCC Faith and Order study on the apostolic faith requires renewed and sustained attention.[17] Towards that end, we identify issues that demand further ecumenical consideration:

- the sources to which Christians can legitimately appeal when seeking to articulate the apostolic faith
- the role of history and culture in shaping a church’s understanding of the apostolic faith
- the practical and ethical implications of the Creed in various contexts

Baptism

41. American churches, like others worldwide, have long been divided between those that baptize only persons who offer a personal confession of faith and those that also – in fact, usually – baptize the infant children of believing parents. We give thanks that the ecumenical convergence of recent

generations, especially in light of BEM, has taken much of the sting out of this controversy, allowing us to recognize that the real question (one that we commonly face) is what does it mean to be baptized at all in a culture that has increasingly little regard for it. All our churches need to lift up the significance of baptism in the life of faith, to strengthen the processes by which we nurture both children and adults to faithful discipleship rooted in baptism and to underscore the ethical implications of baptism.

42. We affirm the emerging ecumenical consensus reiterated in NMC, including:

- that baptism is the basic bond of our unity in Christ (BEM-B6; NMC 74)
- that the New Testament speaks of baptism through a variety of images – conversion, pardoning and cleansing; a gift of the Spirit; incorporation into the body of Christ; a sign of the Kingdom – all pointing to the fundamental understanding of baptism as participation in the baptism, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (BEM-B2; NMC 75 , 77)
- that baptism is appropriately seen as part of a process of Christian nurture that includes a) the growth of the child within a supportive Christian community, b) personal, public confession of Christ at an appropriate age, and c) faithful discipleship throughout one’s life (BEM-B12; NMC 76)
- that baptism not only calls church members to personal sanctification, but, in the words of BEM, is a motivation “to strive for the realization of the will of God in all realms of life” (BEM-B10; cf. 77)
- that “baptism is both God’s gift and our human response to that gift” (BEM-B8), a crucial claim that seems to be implied in NMC, but should be made more explicit

43. Churches continue to differ over baptismal practice and understanding in ways that appear divisive; but, as we suggested above, that may be because churches have yet to receive the emerging consensus to which their own theologians contributed.

44. Having said this, we do want to name an issue that has proved difficult in our context. Some churches in the USA use a formula other than that given in Matthew 28:19, “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” This practice needs further study, which could well be done in the context of the conciliar study on the apostolic faith in general and the WCC Faith and Order document, *Confessing the One Faith*, in particular.

Eucharist

45. The ecumenical convergence emphasizing the inherently corporate nature of the eucharist is important in our cultural context where individualism is so pervasive that Christians often regard the sacrament as an experience “between me and Jesus.” We appreciate the special mention in NMC 80 of 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 since a closer study of these chapters might help our churches examine ways in which their understanding and practice of communion may exacerbate or heal divisions in society (cf. NMC 81).

46. Ecumenical dialogue on the eucharist has produced an exceedingly rich body of convergence and, in some cases, even agreement. This has helped restore and strengthen the intimate connection between word and sacrament in many U.S. churches. NMC also stresses the “dynamic connection between baptism and Eucharist” (78). Given the ecclesiastical diversity in America, we understand this latter connection in the context of the Canberra Statement, for while the practice of baptism and the eucharist is normative for the Church, “we gladly acknowledge that some who do not observe these rites share in the spiritual experience of life in Christ.”[18]

47. This same diversity necessitates commentary on the title of the WCC document itself: The Nature and Mission of the Church. The American context has produced Christian denominational bodies that have nuanced classical understandings of the sacraments of baptism and eucharist. Some would understand these rites as definitive of the nature of the church, (the church exists where the sacraments are celebrated), while others understand the sacraments as fundamental to the church's mission, (the church does mission through baptism and eucharist). This fundamental dialectic is an integral part of the Christian churches' development on American soil.

Ministry

48. Ministry, as every ecumenist can attest, has been an especially thorny issue in the search for visible unity of the Church. Without minimizing the difficulty of such issues as apostolic succession and the threefold ordering of ordained ministry, we underscore the broader concerns that confront many, if not all, churches in our context. Protestant theologians John Cobb and Joseph Hough get at the heart of the matter when they contend that "the expectations for leadership in society as a whole have increasingly been adopted as normative for church leadership as well. Following the general pattern of bureaucratization, the churches, too, have focused on routinized problem solving in the organization and maintenance of their institutions as the chief locus of leader effectiveness"[19] – as if the Church were a business directed by a CEO. The professionalization of ministry, so much a part of our cultural mindset, means that persons in our congregations and parishes now regard ministry as something done by "experts" specially trained to accomplish it, thus relieving them of their own calling to ministry stemming from baptism.

49. Ecumenical dialogue that moves beyond Reformation-era disputes to these contemporary challenges could be of great value to all of our communions and give new energy to our work. Saying this is a reminder that ecumenism is a movement for renewal, as well as unity. Indeed, we celebrate the emerging consensus regarding ministry that has addressed historic points of division.

50. We also encourage ongoing study and reflection on ministry. Such an endeavor must consider two foundational points. First, it needs to name the Church's missional and apostolic nature as the source from which every ministry springs. Second, it needs to be attentive to the prophetic dimension of ministry and thus to the question of how ministry in and of the Church is related to struggles for peace, justice and human dignity in the world. It is ironic that ecumenical discussions of the sacraments have emphasized the prophetic task far more than have discussions of ministry.

Authority

51. Authority is a key issue in the American context. The National Council of Churches' policy statement, "The Authority of the Church in the World," names the problem this way: "...Christian faith has been reduced for many to a private quest for meaning... The Enlightenment's affirmation of the individual has led to a rampant individualism which locates authority only in the self, disparaging the idea of obedience, even if freely given, to that which comes from outside." [20] People believe that community exists for the individual's benefit, undermining the corporate character of faith and making it difficult, for example, to appeal to the Christian experience of oversight through the centuries as a basis for current practice. The very idea of the Church holding believers accountable has become suspect in our age.

52. Furthermore, authority has been severely undermined by actions of the churches and some of their leaders that make a mockery of the gospel, and by the spectacle of Christian disunity by which a cacophony of competing voices instead of common witness has severely undermined the Church's authority.[21] New forms of communication have flattened access to information, making the imperfections of church leadership more widely known, while at the same time providing possible new ways of creating communal authority and accountability. As painful as this may be, it presents an ecumenical opportunity. Because all churches in the United States have experienced these developments, a common effort to address the crisis of authority, to reflect on structures of oversight and decision-making could help bring our churches closer together. This is a moment to learn from one another as we search Scripture and examine our experience together.

53. Lastly, we found the structure of NMC section three on "The Life of Communion in and for the World" awkward. The focus of ecclesial ministry is the authority of God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Since the authority of Jesus' ministry and the humility of its exercise are the source and model for all ministry in the Church, it ought to precede consideration of the ministry of the faithful and ministry of the ordained.

IV. THE CHURCH IN AND FOR THE WORLD

54. Section IV of NMC, which serves as the document's theological conclusion, seeks to connect the previous sections' affirmations of the Church's nature with the Church's mission in and for the world. Nature and mission are inseparable. The Church does not exist solely for itself, but is a community called by God to foster the transformation of the world. Commissioned by the risen Lord to proclaim the gospel to all nations, the Church is missionary by its very nature. It participates in the *missio Dei*, the sending of the Son and the Spirit by the Father, for the redemption of humanity and the renewal of all creation. This trinitarian mission is the origin and sustenance of the Church's mission.

55. For the sake of this divine mission to a world so loved by God, even divided Christian communities act together to share the good news, alleviate human suffering, advocate peace and create a more just society. They too are called to discern how they might embody more fully the love of Christ and more deeply manifest in mutual accountability the unity of Christ's Church. The forms of such accountability – especially given the decentralized and congregational polities of many American churches – ought to be an urgent concern for all Christians.

56. Evangelization and service culminate in divine worship and praise. Worship (*leitourgia*), service (*diakonia*), proclamation (*kerygma*), witness (*martyria*) and repentance (*metanoia*) are inherently related. They stand or fall together, and ought not be played off against each other. Awaiting and laboring towards "a new heaven and a new earth," the pilgrim Church calls out in worship, 'Come, Lord Jesus' (Rev 21:1; 22:20). The Church's mission of redemption and transformation will be fulfilled when Christ returns in glory and God is "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).

CONCLUSION

57. This reflection paper invites the reader to engage in crucial conversation about the nature and mission of the Church. Just as the conversation of our commission has been "in context" (American, Conciliar, Faith and Order), so the reader is now invited to discover fresh insights about the nature and mission of the Church according to the particular context in which this is being read. We offer it

to local churches, regional gatherings, national communions and ecumenical bodies. We invite our reader into our journey of discovery.

58. Our journey began by probing the nature and the mission of the Church. The document we reference throughout, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, is a convergence text that seeks to give expression to a wide range of ecumenical agreements on ecclesiology in these decades that followed the groundbreaking document of the World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (1982).

59. The task we undertook began as a conciliar response to the WCC document. Yet during the quadrennium it evolved into a shared reflection on the nature and the mission of the church in light of this document. Fresh insights drawn from our conversation served to deepen and enliven the varieties of Christian witness we represent. We have a testimony to offer the churches in the United States – a fresh calling for visible unity in this rich diversity.

60. We therefore encourage a reading of ecumenical writings on ecclesiology and commend conversations about the nature and mission of the Church in congregational and ecumenical settings. We hope that a reading of this paper will foster an engagement with WCC efforts to define and celebrate the nature and mission of the Church.

61. A paper such as ours rarely demonstrates the clarity of a solo voice. Yet it represents a genuine ecumenical reflection, and we trust our discoveries will illumine a calling towards the visible unity of the Church. Indeed this outcome is now the greater purpose of our work.

62. As our work draws to completion, the World Council of Churches is finalizing the revision of *The Nature and Mission of the Church*. We offer this paper to the WCC not as the response that was originally planned, but as a contribution to the ongoing study of ecclesiology in the council and in the churches around the globe. In the same spirit we share it with the churches in the USA, as a testimony to the full and visible unity to which we are called during a time of dramatic fragmentation and yet inspiring opportunity.

ENDNOTES

[1] Commission on Faith and Order, *The Nature and Mission of the Church. A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, (Faith and Order Paper 198), Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005. This document is also on the WCC website,

http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p2/FO2005_198_en.pdf.

[2] The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA is also cited as “NCCCUSA” and “NCC” in this paper.

[3] References to “America”, “American”, “US” and “USA” in this paper refer to the United States of America.

[4] What follows draws on Brian R. Paulson, "The Context of American Christian Life," a study paper written for this Faith and Order dialogue.

[5] For information on this movement see "Faith and Order" by Günther Gassmann in Nicholas Lossky and Others, eds., *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, (second edition), Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2002, pp. 461-463. For information on the first conference see H. N. Bate, ed., *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference*, Lausanne, August 3-21, 1927, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1928.

[6] National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, Lorelei F. Fuchs, SA, Ann K. Riggs and R. Keelan Downton, compiler, editors, *Faith and Order Commission Handbook*, p.12, on the NCC website, <http://www.nccusa.org/pdfs/FaithAndOrderHandbook.pdf>.

[7] This statement is currently in the drafting stage, and its publication is forthcoming.

[8] Commission on Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, (Faith and Order Paper 111), Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982. This document is also on the WCC website, http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/WCC-main/documents/p2/FO1982_111_en.pdf.

[9] See from the World Council of Churches Ninth Assembly (Porto Alegre, Brazil, February 2006) *Called To Be the One Church. An Invitation to the Churches to Renew their Commitment to the Search for Unity and to Deepen their Dialogue*, Document 43 in Jeffrey Gros, FSC, Thomas F. Best and Lorelei F. Fuchs, SA, eds., *Growth in Agreement III: International Dialogue Texts and Agreed Statements, 1998-2005*, (Faith and Order Paper 204), Grand Rapids, MI/Geneva: Eerdmans Publishing Company/World Council of Churches, 2007, pp. 606-610; see especially ¶7. This document is also on the WCC website, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/porto-alegre-2006/1-statements-documents-adopted/christian-unity-and-message-to-the-churches/called-to-be-the-one-church-as-adopted.html>.

[10] See Commission on Faith and Order, "The Unity of the Church as 'Koinonia': Gift and Calling" [Canberra Statement] 18, in Thomas F. Best and Günther Gaßmann, eds., *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*, (Faith and Order Paper 166), Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1994, pp. 269-271; The statement is also cited as Canberra Statement and the book as Santiago.

[11] During two quadrennia (2000-2003 and 2004-2007) the National Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission studied the concept of communion (koinonia). The concept per se was the focus of the first four-year period. The second round concentrated on the meaning of "full communion" by examining dialogues and agreements between churches that understand full communion as expressive of the unity sought between and among churches. The papers produced by the members

of the Full Communion study group and invited contributors are posted on the NCC website, along with a report of the findings of this eight-year study, (hyperlink forthcoming).

[12] In the Commission on Faith and Order's report, *Sharing in One Hope: Reports and Documents from the Meeting of the Faith and Order Commission, Bangalore 1978*, (Faith and Order Paper 92), Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1978, see under "Reports on Growing Together in Unity" the following sections: "The Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith," pp. 243-246; "Towards an Ecumenical Consensus on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," pp. 247-256; and "Towards Common Ways of Teaching and Decision-making," pp. 257-260.

[13] The statement is from the Report of Section II: Scripture, Tradition and Traditions of the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order in Montreal (1963). See P. C. Rodger and Lukas Vischer, eds., *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963*, (Faith and Order Paper 42), Geneva/London: World Council of Churches/SCM Press, 1964, ¶45, p. 52, and is repeated in the Preface to BEM (unnumbered ¶14), p. ix. This statement is also in Michael Kinnamon and Brian Cope, eds., *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, Grand Rapids, MI/Geneva: Eerdmans Publishing Company/World Council of Churches, 1997, p. 139.

[14] Commission on Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990: Report on the Process and Responses*, (Faith and Order Paper 149), Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1990, p. 145.

[15] World Council of Churches, *Faith and Order By-laws §3.1* (electronic copy from the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission, 22 June 2011).

[16] BEM, Preface ¶20 [unnumbered], p. x. BEM is drawing on the WCC's 1975 assembly's instruction to the churches "to receive, re-appropriate and confess together... the Christian truth and faith, delivered through the Apostles and handed down through the centuries," in David M. Paton, ed., *Breaking Barriers: Nairobi 1975: The Official Report of the Fifth World Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Nairobi, 23 November - 10 December, 1975*, London/Grand Rapids, MI: SPCK/Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976, p. 66.

[17] To draw such attention the volume reporting the findings of this study was republished last year. See Commission on Faith and Order, *Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)*, (Faith and Order Paper 153; Revised Edition), Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2010, which is a reprint of the original 1991 edition with two more recent prefaces.

[18] Canberra Statement 3.2, in Santiago, p. 270.

[19] Joseph C. Hough and John B. Cobb, Jr., *Christian Identity and Theological Education*, Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985, p. 78.

[20] The statement is on the NCC website,
<http://www.ncccusa.org/pdfs/authorityofthechurch.pdf>, where the quotation is on p. 2.

[21] "The Authority of the Church in the World,"
<http://www.ncccusa.org/pdfs/authorityofthechurch.pdf>, p. 3.