



Queensland
Churches Together

The Church Towards a Common Vision

A Study Guide

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INTRODUCTION

This important document of the World Council of Churches is the result of many years of ongoing dialogue of representatives of many denominations. It builds on the 1982 Faith and Order document 111, “Baptism Eucharist and Ministry.” It is a stage along the way of achieving “the constitutional aims and self-identity of the WCC as a fellowship of churches who call each other to the goal of visible unity” (vi). This is not the final word on the nature of the Church. This document is offered to the churches for comment and is thus an invitation to ongoing dialogue in the search for reconciliation and visible unity. It is a stage along the way as the Church is led by the Holy Spirit.

The document invites us to examine the present statement of agreement and to “*reflect upon (our) own understanding of the Lord’s will so as to grow towards greater unity (Eph 4.12-16)*” (2).

The underlying premise of the document is that humanity “*bears an inherent capacity for communion with God and one another*” and that the Trinity calls the Church into fellowship with God and to participate in the divine mission of restoring a broken world. The Church is called to assist in restoring “*God’s purpose in creation,*” which was damaged by sin. In responding to this call, the Church is called to structure its life so that those who comprise the Church experience and reflect the divine communion that is the very being of God the Holy Trinity (1).

There are several foundational ecclesiological premises in the document, and these are recurring themes that form a thread that runs through the document. The first premise is that the Church is a communion, expressed as ‘*koinonia*’. The second is that the Church is ‘sent’ by God and is thus ‘missionary’ by nature. The

missionary nature of the Church is also an expression of *koinonia* inasmuch as *koinonia* contains the understanding of participation – in this case the Church participates in the fellowship and mission of God the Holy Trinity. The third premise is that both the Church and God are described using the word ‘mystery’. There is much that is known of God and the Church but God and the Church remain beyond description in many ways and can only be experienced through fellowship and participation.

The document speaks of the ‘mystery of the Church (12), the ‘mystery of Christ’ (22), the ‘mystery of salvation’ (22), and the ‘mystery of the Trinitarian life of God’

The document suggests two objectives. The first is renewal: challenging the churches to live more fully the ecclesial life. The second is theological agreement: churches calling one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship.

Chapter 1 God's Mission and the Unity of the Church

This chapter identifies God's mission as the fundamental identity of the Church. It is described in theological, scriptural, Christological, Trinitarian, historical, anthropological and ecumenical terms.

In *theological* terms, a Christian understanding of the Church and its mission is grounded in "God's great design for all creation" (1). "God's plan to save the world (*Missio Dei* – the Mission of God) is carried out through the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit. This saving activity of the Holy Trinity is essential to an adequate understanding of the Church" (3).

In *scriptural* terms, God's intent for creation, the "inherent capacity for communion (*koinonia*)," made manifest in the creation of man and woman (Gen 1:26-7), was "thwarted by human sin and disobedience" (Gen 3-4; Rom 1:18-3:20). "Each of the four gospels closes with a missionary mandate" (2) "This command by Jesus already hints at what he wanted his Church to be in order to carry out this mission. It was to be a community of witnesses...a community of worship...a community of discipleship" (1&2). God's fidelity in the face of human sin finds its fullest expression in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In *Christological* terms, the Incarnation and paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, restores the dynamic and capacity for communion. This mission of Christ continues "in the prophetic and compassionate ministry" of the Church. "At the heart of the Church's vocation in the world is the proclamation of the Kingdom of God inaugurated in Jesus the Lord, crucified and risen" (4).

In *Trinitarian* terms, this communion, “whose source is the very life of the Holy Trinity, is both the gift by which the Church lives and, at the same time, the gift that God calls the Church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity in hope of reconciliation and healing.” The Holy Spirit equips the Church with the gifts needed for this missionary purpose (3).

In a *historical* sense, the Church is founded upon the earthly ministry of Jesus. It takes its mandate from the person of Christ. The Church has lived out this commission throughout the last two millennia of human history. The “Church has always been dedicated to proclaiming in word and deed the good news . . . , celebrating the sacraments, especially the eucharist, and forming Christian communities” (5). “This effort has sometimes encountered bitter resistance; it has sometimes been hindered by opponents or even betrayed by the sinfulness of the messengers.”

In an *anthropological* sense, “one challenge for the Church has been how to proclaim the Gospel of Christ in a way that awakens a response in the different contexts, languages and cultures of the people who hear the proclamation” (6). This cultural proclamation has been both beneficial by incorporating local “cultural heritage” of “beliefs and literature”, and at times, complicit in colonisation and the destruction of local cultures (6). “God’s grace, more powerful than human sinfulness, was able to raise up true disciples and friends of Christ.” The proclamation of the Gospel continues in the midst of “rapidly changing circumstances” (7). New ways of proclaiming the Gospel are necessary: “The ‘emerging churches,’ which propose a new way of being the Church, challenge other churches to find ways of responding to today’s needs and interests in ways which are faithful to what has been received from the beginning” (7). Where church membership is declining, some suggest that the

modern era requires a “re-evangelisation” in some circumstances (7).

In an *ecumenical* sense, “Christian unity” is essential to the mission of the Church. “Visible unity,” as an expression of the fundamental *koinonia* of the Church, remains a significant challenge as it may require “changes in doctrine, practice and ministry” (9). Engaging in a dialogue on the precise meaning of – and even the possibility of defining “the Church of Christ”, remains a key ecumenical task (10). In this regard, the document identifies three core questions:

1. What is God’s will for the unity of this Church?
2. Are there any characteristics that all churches have in common?
3. What part does local culture and experience of belief play in forming a church?

Chapter 2 The Church of the Triune God

A Discerning God's Will for the Church

The opening section of the second chapter is titled 'Discerning God's Will for the Church.' However there is no clear attempt to express what that will might be, other than a statement that the Holy Spirit guides the Church through successive generations, thus creating a *'living Tradition'* (11).

The section continues with a statement of the New Testament's affirmation of the validity of the diversity of expressions of the Church. There are a *range of images and insights* of the Church in the New Testament (12). Several of these images are then examined throughout the chapter.

B The Church of the Triune God as *Koinonia*

The initiative of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

The first and foundational image examined is *koinonia*. As *koinonia*, the Church mirrors the very life of the Triune God who called it into being and into communion (*koinonia*) (11). The section emphasises the fact that 'the biblical notion of *koinonia* has become central in the ecumenical quest for a common understanding of the life and unity of the Church'. The case for *koinonia* as the foundational concept of the Church is strongly supported scripturally and theologically and has wide ecumenical acceptance.

'The Church is by its very nature missionary' (13) and must witness in its own life the communion that God desires for the whole world.

The Prophetic, Priestly and Royal People of God

Another important affirmation of the nature of the Church called by God is that it is 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy

nation, God's own people' (1 Peter 2:9-10). This image looks back to the Old Testament, to the call of Abraham and Israel, God's promise and the message of the prophets. The Church as a priestly people is called to live sacrificially, offering itself to God. In its call to witness in the world, the Church exercises a prophetic function. The call to live a priestly and prophetic life is given to all members of the Church, and the tradition in most churches is that some are ordained to assist others in responding to and living out this call.

Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit

Two more New Testament images of the Church are offered here; the Church is the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit. People are made members of the body of Christ through baptism. The work of the Holy Spirit is to equip the baptised with ' manifold gifts ' that will assist them to contribute to the life of the body. The analogy of the building is used in the epistles – ' temple of the Lord ' (Eph 2:21-22) and spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5).

The One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church

This ancient description of the Church comes from the council of Constantinople in 381AD and is the result of the Early Church's lengthy reflecting on the words of scripture.

Oneness is to be understood as unity. The unity of believers is reflective of the unity of the divine persons of the Trinity (1 Tim 2.5), especially the unity of Jesus and the Father (John 17). A lack of unity among believers impedes the authenticity of the message and mission of the Church.

Holiness is and always has been an essential dimension of the relationship of the people of God with God. The people of Israel were called to be holy because God was holy. Holiness is a basic

dimension of the Church also (Eph 4.4-7). Holiness implies integrity – the words and actions of the Church must accurately reflect God.

This document offers two approaches to **catholicity**. “*The Church is catholic because of the abundant goodness of God who desires all people everywhere to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth*” (1 Tim 2.4). Catholicity means ‘complete’ or ‘full’. There is an extensive or geographical sense in catholicity; all people everywhere are loved by God and called into new life in Christ. God’s concern extends to all areas of life. There is also the sense that catholicity refers to completeness or fullness in a theological and spiritual sense; the Church has been given the “fullness of life and truth”, so that it can be in communion with God and to serve God. “Where the whole mystery of Christ is present, there too is the Church catholic”. Where division exists, then “the essential catholicity of the Church is diminished” (22).

The **apostolicity** of the Church is its sent-ness. The Father sent the Son and the Son sent the Church and promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to maintain the sent-ness of the Church and to equip it for service (Eph 2.20, Rev 21.14). The Church is thus a communion that participates in the divine mission of the Trinity.

This section concludes with an acknowledgement that different church traditions approach the issue of apostolicity differently. Apostolicity is a matter of continuity. Some churches see greater significance in a person to person connection with the original apostles – an apostolic succession. Others see continuity as a matter of ongoing faithfulness to the teaching and tradition of the original apostles, whether or not a person to person continuity can be demonstrated.

C The Church as Sign and Servant of God's Design for the World

Ideally, the Church should be a living sign of what God intends and wills, for the whole of creation. Importantly it should demonstrate that what God desires for all creation is possible! Thus the integrity of the Church as communion (*koinonia*) is critically important, as it should be a model of what God can achieve through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Church must be at the same time both sign and servant. The word 'servant' is used only in the section subheading. Later in this section the words 'means' and 'instrument' are used to describe the same function of the Church in God's plan. 'Sign and instrument' is an expression that is used in the Roman Catholic document *Lumen Gentium* and also in the WCC document 'The Holy Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church'.

The Church must actively seek to assist in the achievement of what God wills for all people and creation – communion with God through Jesus Christ. Only when the Church cooperates with and yields to the Holy Spirit, can it be the open and inviting community that mirrors the welcoming openness of the Trinity.

While the Church must be a reflective sign of the Trinitarian communion, it must also engage with and participate in the divine communion. In the same way it is not enough for people to look at the Church to understand the Trinitarian God who called it into being. People must enter into the Church and experience the 'mystery' of relationship with Christ (Eph 1.9, 3.4-6).

Some people use the term sacrament in reference to the Church (27). In the same way that baptism and holy communion are sacraments of the Church, so the Church itself can be seen as sacrament. The document speaks of sacrament in terms of a

‘sign’ of God’s will and a ‘means’ of enabling it. In this sense, the sacraments point to the activity of God. The word ‘sacrament’ however goes beyond this understanding and means a pledge or promise of better things to come.

D Communion in Unity and Diversity

This section speaks of the diversity of cultures and people who comprise the Church. The Church has always been a unity of diversity and must remain so always. Although not stated, this is another aspect of the participatory communion that the Church enjoys; the Church as *koinonia* is reflective of the Trinitarian *koinonia* of Father Son and Holy Spirit. The diversity and particularity of the world’s cultures and languages must be present in a voluntary and constructive unity that speaks of the diversity and integrated nature of the earlier mentioned images of the Church – body and temple.

The journey of the Church has seen the discerning of essentials (Council of Nicea 325), belief in which is required of all churches and their members. There has however also been a long held understanding of ‘adiaphora’ in the Church, *adiaphora* being a theological term meaning things that are neither mandated nor forbidden. While agreement in essentials is required, there is permission to differ in opinion in matters that are not considered essential to the life and faith of the Church. This section reminds us however that there have been historical limits to belief and behavior, in the sense that unacceptable belief and practice has often been identified and forbidden by the Church.

E Communion of Local Churches

This final section of chapter 2 raises some critically important questions about the nature of both catholicity and communion. This is done in terms of a discussion of ‘local’ church. A local church is said here to be “wholly the Church but not the whole

Church” (31). Where the local gathered church contains all the essentials then it is catholic, it is complete and “wholly the Church”. There is not yet agreement about how local, regional and universal levels of ecclesial order relate to one another.

Local churches however can not remain simply local instances of churches that are “wholly Church”, complete in themselves. Just as baptised people are made members of the body of Christ, and must willingly remain in communion with one another, so local churches will want to be in communion with one another. This will mean that any understanding of a universal church can only have validity when it is a voluntary communion of otherwise-complete local churches.

Questions:

- 1 Try to identify ways that your local church embodies koinonia?
- 2 How is ‘catholicity’ seen in your local church?
- 3 How does your local church live out its ‘apostolicity’?
- 4 In what ways can your local church be both ‘sign’ and ‘servant’ of our Trinitarian God?

Chapter 3

The Church: Growing in Communion

A Already but Not Yet

The Church anticipates the Kingdom of God, but the Kingdom is not yet realised. Something of the mystery of the Church is grasped only when we recognise that the Holy Spirit is the agent in establishing the Kingdom and guiding the Church (33).

On the one hand, as the communion of believers, the Church is *already* the community God wills, as seen in the signs of its gospel life. On the other hand, the Church is *not yet* itself, and is subject to change and to cultural factors, both positive (development) and negative (decline) (34).

As a pilgrim community the Church contends with the reality of sin. Christian churches can have quite different ways of seeing this: some stress that the Church is sinless, as the Body of the sinless Christ; others stress the possibility of a sinning church, and even of systemic sin which affects the institution itself. The difference in views may depend on whether sin is seen primarily as moral imperfection, or as a break in relationship (35).

Christ has promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church (cf. Matt. 16:18). Christ's victory over sin is complete and irreversible, and the Church always shares in that victory. However, both collectively and individually, believers are vulnerable to the power of sin, and all churches recognise the need for self-examination, penitence, conversion, reconciliation, and renewal. Holiness characterises the Church, and sin contradicts its identity (cf. Rom. 6:1 -11) (36).

B. Growing in the Essential Elements of Communion: Faith, Sacraments, Ministry

The journey to full communion requires that we agree about fundamental aspects of the life of the Church. Unity in legitimate diversity will require communion in apostolic faith, in sacramental life; in one and mutually recognised ministry; in structures of conciliar relations and decision-making; and in common witness and service to the world. Previous dialogues (*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*) have advanced these understandings (37).

Faith

There is widespread agreement that the Church is called to proclaim in each generation the apostolic faith, evoked by the Word of God, inspired by the grace of the Holy Spirit, attested in Scripture, transmitted through the living tradition of the Church, and confessed in worship, life, service, and mission. Although interpreted in the context of changing times and places, it must remain in continuity with the original witness and its proclamation through the ages (38).

Ecumenical dialogue shows that a great deal unites believers. In 1991 the text *Confessing One Faith* showed substantial agreement on the meaning of the Nicene Creed. In 1998 *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels* explored the relationship of Scripture and Tradition. The churches generally agree on the importance of Tradition in the generation and interpretation of Scripture, but we still have to work on understanding just how this interpretation takes place. The document is clear that three elements will have to come together: 1) the faith experience of the whole people of God; 2) the insights of theologians; and 3) the discernment of the ordained ministry. The impressive achievements of ecumenical dialogues have been largely at the level of theologians, and now

we must ask how the churches and their leaders can be brought more fully into the ongoing process of rethinking and reinterpreting their tradition in conversation with one another in the unity of God's Church under the leadership of the Spirit (39).

Sacraments

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (1982) marked a high degree of agreement on the sacraments of baptism and eucharist. There are still unresolved issues: who may be baptised; the presence of Christ in the eucharist; and the relation of the eucharist to Christ's sacrifice on the cross. There are also differences about the sacramental nature of other rites celebrated in some communities, and the absence of rites of baptism and eucharist in communities which nevertheless affirm that they share in the sacramental life of the Church (40).

The growing convergence on baptism recognises that through baptism with water in the name of the Triune God Christians are united with Christ and the Church. Baptism gives new life in Christ and participation in his own baptism, life, death and resurrection, and incorporates believers into the body of Christ. There is less agreement about the nature of confirmation/chrismation (41).

The communion into which the newly baptised enters is brought to fuller expression and nourished in the eucharist, so the two sacraments have a dynamic and profound relation. The eucharist, like baptism, is inseparable from a life of service and witness: it demands reconciliation and sharing, solidarity with the outcast, becoming signs of Christ's love, and bringing into the present a new and transforming reality (42-43).

Different Christian traditions diverge about calling baptism, eucharist and other rites "sacraments" (stressing that God's saving

work is communicated in the action of the rite) or “ordinances” (stressing that the action of the rite is performed in obedience to Christ’s word and command). However, most traditions see these events as both *instrumental* (God uses them to bring about a new reality) and *expressive* (of an already-existing reality) (44).

Ministry within the Church

Ordained ministry

All churches agree that Jesus, our high priest, offered his redeeming sacrifice “once for all” (Heb 7:27; 9:12; &c.), but differ on the implications. Some maintain that ordained ministry has a special relationship with the unique priesthood of Christ and is therefore distinct from, even if related to, the royal priesthood of the Christian community (1 Pet 2:9). Others do not consider ordained ministers as “priests”; some do not accept ordination as a sacrament; and there is disagreement over the restriction of ordination to men only (45).

There is no single pattern of ministry in the New Testament. Many forms of ministry were blessed with the gifts of the Spirit. Some early writers insisted on the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter, and deacon, which is considered normative by many churches today, but other patterns have also been adopted, especially since the Reformation (46).

Most Christian churches have a formal structure of ministry frequently reflecting—but more or less explicitly—the threefold pattern of *episkopos-presbyteros-diakonos*. Some do not see gospel faithfulness as bound to succession in ministry, and see the historic episcopate as vulnerable to abuse (47).

The gift of authority in the ministry of the Church

All authority in the Church comes from her Lord and head. Jesus’ entire ministry was characterised by authority at the service

of human beings, and he shared this authority with the disciples. Their successors in the ministry of oversight (*episkopé*) exercised authority in the proclamation of the Gospel, the celebration of the sacraments, and in pastoral guidance (48).

The distinctive nature of Christian authority is seen in the authority of Jesus, who was crucified, emptied himself, obediently accepted death on a cross, who came to serve not to be served, and washed his disciples' feet. Its context is eschatological: to guide the Church to the reign of heaven. It is a service of love, without domination or coercion (49).

Authority in the Church must be distinguished from power. Ecclesial authority comes from the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit, and so reflects the holiness of God. Other sources of authority reflecting the holiness of God include scripture, tradition, worship, councils and synods. A certain authority has also been recognised in the lives of saints, the witness of monasticism, and in the various ways in which believers have lived out the truth of the Gospel. A certain kind of authority may also be recognised in ecumenical dialogues and the agreed statements they produce (50).

The authority which Jesus shares with those in ministries of leadership is neither only personal or only delegated by the community. It is a gift of the Spirit destined for service in love. Its exercise includes the whole community whose reception of ordained leadership in a spirit of faith testifies to its authenticity. Authority can call for obedience, but the response is meant to be voluntary cooperation and consent. Therefore the search for the authentic meaning of the Gospel will incorporate the insights of those dedicated to biblical and theological studies, the guidance of those with a ministry of oversight, and the collaboration of the whole community in the discernment of God's will. Decision-

making in the Church seeks and elicits the consensus of all and depends on the guidance of the Holy Spirit (51).

Authority in the Church and Its Exercise **The Ministry of Oversight (episkopé)**

The diversity of gifts and ministries in the Church requires a ministry of co-ordination and oversight. All communities, whether episcopally ordered or not, see the need for this ministry of *episkopé*, which is in the service of continuity in apostolic faith and unity of life, and which needs to be exercised in personal, collegial, and communal ways (52).

Such oversight includes the quality of “synodality” or “conciliarity”, which should be a feature of church life at local, regional, and universal levels, for it reflects the mystery of the trinitarian life of God (53).

The Authority of Ecumenical Councils

When the Church comes together someone must summon and preside over the gathering in a spirit of love and service. Since antiquity forms of *primacy* have existed at various levels in the Church within a context of consultation and collaboration, but in practice plagued by competition between leaders. A primacy of decision-making and teaching was gradually claimed by the Bishop of Rome, and while acknowledged by many churches in the early centuries, was also subject to significant controversy (54-55).

Recent dialogues have raised the question of “a universal ministry of Christian unity”. Pope John Paul II invited “patient and fraternal dialogue” about this ministry. Despite areas of disagreement, some members of other churches have expressed openness to further consideration of how such a ministry might assist both the unity and distinctiveness of local churches around

the world. It is an ecumenically sensitive issue, requiring an understanding of the essence of a ministry of primacy to be exercised in communal and collegial ways. However, not all Christians agree that a universal ministry of primacy is necessary or even desirable. Should a universal ministry of primacy be considered part of God's will for his Church (56-57)?

Questions:

1. How can different viewpoints about the sacraments be seen to be differences more of emphasis than doctrinal disagreement?
2. How challenging as obstacles to unity are diverse views on ordination and ministry? How can they be overcome?
3. How important is the trifold ministry for a united church? In what sense is it essential to unity?

Chapter 4

The Church: In and for the World

“The Church was intended by God, not for its own sake, but to serve the divine plan for the transformation of the world (58).”

“The Church’s mission in the world is to proclaim to all people, in word and deed, the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ (59).” The Church is called by Christ in the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the Father’s reconciliation, healing and transformation of creation. Thus a constitutive aspect of evangelisation is the promotion of justice and peace (59).

In the current context, Christians find themselves aware of other world religions, and are called to “appreciate whatever elements of truth and goodness are present in other religions” (60). There is “serious disagreement” in understanding God’s will of salvation for all people in such a context. Is salvation possible for those who do not believe in Christ?

As the “Church does not stand in isolation from the moral struggles of humankind as a whole”, the issue is not only about promoting “individual moral values”, but “also the social values of justice, peace and the protection of the environment, since the message of the Gospel extends to both the personal and the communal aspects of human existence” (62).

“The world that “God so loved” is scarred with problems and tragedies which cry out for the compassionate engagement of Christians. The source of their passion for the transformation of the world lies in their communion with God in Jesus Christ (64).” Hence at times the Church “must become a voice for those who are voiceless”, “work for a just social order”, and “promote the values of the kingdom of God by working together with adherents of other religions and even with those of no religious belief” (64).

“The Church is comprised of all socio-economic classes; both rich and poor are in need of the salvation that only God can provide ... Together with all people of goodwill, the Church seeks to care for creation, which groans to share in the freedom of the children of God (cf. Rom. 8:20-22), by opposing the abuse and destruction of the earth and participating in God’s healing of broken relationships between creation and humanity (66).”

Questions:

1. Within today’s context of increased awareness of the vitality of various religions throughout the world, how will acknowledging their presence and importance impact on the mission of the Christian church?
2. How might the churches discern together what it means today to understand and live in fidelity to the teaching of Jesus?
3. How can the Church better become an advocate and deliverer of social justice?
4. How can the Church increase the awareness of the need to protect creation and the environment?

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