

## Text on ecclesiology: 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

WCC Assemblies have adopted texts offering a vision, or identifying the qualities, of “the unity we seek”.<sup>1</sup> In line with these texts the 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly in Porto Alegre has adopted this text inviting the churches to continue their journey together, as a further step towards full visible unity.

The purpose of this Invitation to the Churches is two-fold: (a) to reflect what the churches, at this point on their ecumenical journey, can say together about some important aspects of the Church; and (b) to invite the churches into a renewed conversation - mutually supportive, yet open and searching – about the quality and degree of their fellowship and communion, and about the issues which still divide them.<sup>2</sup>

#### I

1. We, the delegates to the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, give thanks to the Triune God, Father; Son and Holy Spirit, who has brought our churches into living contact and dialogue. By God's grace we have been enabled to remain together, even when this has not been easy. Considerable efforts have been made to overcome divisions. We are “a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfil their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”.<sup>3</sup> We reaffirm that “the primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe”.<sup>4</sup> Our continuing divisions are real wounds to the body of Christ, and God's mission in the world suffers.

2. Churches in the fellowship of the WCC remain committed to one another on the way towards *full visible unity*. This commitment is a gift from our gracious Lord. Unity is both a divine gift and calling. Our churches have affirmed that the unity for which we pray, hope, and work is “a *koinonia* given and expressed in the common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognised and reconciled; and a common mission witnessing to the gospel of God's grace to all people and serving the whole of creation”.<sup>5</sup> Such *koinonia* is to be expressed in each place, and through a conciliar relationship of churches in different places. We have much work ahead of us as together we seek to understand the meaning of unity and catholicity, and the significance of baptism.

#### II

3. We confess one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church as expressed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381). The Church's oneness is an image of the unity of the Triune God in the communion of the divine Persons. Holy scripture describes the Christian community as the body of Christ whose interrelated diversity is essential to its wholeness: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:4-7).<sup>6</sup> Thus, as the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit, the Church is called to manifest its *oneness in rich diversity*.

4. The Church as communion of believers is created by the Word of God, for it is through hearing the *proclamation of the gospel* that faith, by the action of His Holy Spirit, is awakened (Rom. 10:17). Since the good news proclaimed to awaken faith is the good news handed down by the apostles, the Church created by it is *apostolic*. Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets the Church is God's household, a *holy* temple in which the Holy Spirit lives and is active. By the power of the Holy Spirit believers grow into a holy temple in the Lord (Eph 2. 21-22).<sup>7</sup>

5. We affirm that the apostolic faith of the Church is one, as the body of Christ is one. Yet there may legitimately be different formulations of the faith of the Church. The life of the Church as new life in Christ is *one*. Yet it is built up through different charismata and ministries. The hope of the Church is one. Yet it is expressed in different human expectations. We acknowledge that there are different ecclesiological starting points, and a range of views on the relation of the Church to the churches. Some differences express God's grace and goodness; they must be discerned in God's grace through the Holy Spirit. Other differences divide the Church; these must be overcome through the Spirit's gifts of faith, hope, and love so that separation and exclusion do not have the last word. God's "plan for the fullness of time [is] to gather up all things in him" (Eph. 1:10), reconciling human divisions. God calls his people in love to discernment and renewal on the way to the fullness of *koinonia*.

6. The *catholicity* of the Church expresses the fullness, integrity, and totality of its life in Christ through the Holy Spirit in all times and places. This mystery is expressed in each community of baptized believers in which the apostolic faith is confessed and lived, the gospel is proclaimed, and the sacraments are celebrated. Each church is the Church catholic and not simply a part of it. Each church is the Church catholic, but not the whole of it. Each church fulfils its catholicity when it is in communion with the other churches. We affirm that the catholicity of the Church is expressed most visibly in sharing holy communion and in a mutually recognised and reconciled ministry.

7. The relationship among churches is dynamically interactive. Each church is called to mutual giving and receiving gifts and to *mutual accountability*. Each church must become aware of all that is provisional in its life and have the courage to acknowledge this to other churches. Even today, when eucharistic sharing is not always possible, divided churches express mutual accountability and aspects of catholicity when they pray for one another, share resources, assist one another in times of need, make decisions together, work together for justice, reconciliation, and peace, hold one another accountable to the discipleship inherent in baptism, and maintain dialogue in the face of differences, refusing to say "I have no need of you" (1 Cor. 12:21). Apart from one another we are impoverished.

### III

8. All who have been baptised into Christ are united with Christ in his body: "Therefore we have been buried with him by *baptism* into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). In baptism, the Spirit confers Christ's holiness upon Christ's members. Baptism into union with Christ calls churches to be open and honest with one another, even when doing so is difficult: "But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15). Baptism bestows upon the churches both the freedom and the responsibility to journey toward common proclamation of the Word, confession of the one faith, celebration of one eucharist, and full sharing in one ministry. There are some who do not observe the rite of baptism in water but share in the spiritual experience of life in Christ.<sup>8</sup>

9. Our common belonging to Christ through baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit enables and calls churches to walk together, even when they are in disagreement. We affirm that there is one baptism, just as there is one body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of us all (cf. Eph. 4:4-6). In God's grace, baptism manifests the reality that *we belong to one another*, even though some churches are not yet able to recognise others as Church in the full sense of the word. We recall the words of the Toronto Statement, in which the member churches of the WCC affirm that "the membership of the church of Christ is more inclusive than the membership of their own church body. They seek, therefore, to enter into living contact with those outside their own ranks who confess the Lordship of Christ".<sup>9</sup>

### IV

10. The Church as the creation of God's Word and Spirit is a mystery, sign, and instrument of what God intends for the salvation of the world. The grace of God is expressed in the victory over sin given by Christ, and in the healing and wholeness of the human being. The kingdom of God can be perceived in a *reconciled and reconciling community* called to holiness: a community that strives to overcome the discriminations expressed in sinful social structures, and to work for the healing of divisions in its own life and for healing and unity in the human community. The Church participates in the reconciling ministry of Christ, who emptied himself, when it lives out its mission, affirming and renewing the image of God in all humanity and working alongside all those whose human dignity has been denied by economic, political, and social marginalisation.

11. Mission is integral to the life of the church. The Church in its mission expresses its calling to proclaim the Gospel and to offer the living Christ to the whole creation. The churches find themselves living alongside people of other living faiths and ideologies. As an instrument of God, who is sovereign over the whole creation, the Church is called to engage in dialogue and collaboration with them so that its *mission* brings about the good of all creatures and the well-being of the earth. All churches are called to struggle against sin in all its manifestations, within and around them, and to work with others to combat injustice, alleviate human suffering, overcome violence, and ensure fullness of life for all people.

## V

12. Throughout its history the World Council of Churches has been a privileged instrument by which churches have been able to listen to one another and speak to one another, engaging issues that challenge the churches and imperil humankind. Churches in the ecumenical movement have also explored divisive questions through multilateral and bilateral dialogues. And yet churches have not always acknowledged their *mutual responsibility* to one another, and have not always recognised the need to give account to one another of their faith, life, and witness, as well as to articulate the factors that keep them apart. Bearing in mind the experience of the life we already share and the achievements of multilateral and bilateral dialogues, it is now time to take concrete steps together.

13. Therefore the Ninth Assembly calls upon the World Council of Churches to continue to facilitate *deep conversations* among various churches. We also invite all of our churches to engage in the hard task of giving a candid account of the relation of their own faith and order to the faith and order of other churches. Each church is asked to articulate the judgements that shape, and even qualify, its relationship to the others. The honest sharing of commonalities, divergences, and differences will help all churches to pursue the things that make for peace and build up the common life.

14. Towards the goal of full visible unity the churches are called to address recurrent matters in fresh, more pointed ways. Among the *questions to be addressed* continually by the churches are these:

a. To what extent can your church discern the faithful expression of the apostolic faith in its own life, prayer, and witness and in that of other churches?

b. Where does your church perceive fidelity to Christ in the faith and life of other churches?

c. Does your church recognize a common pattern of Christian initiation, grounded in baptism, in the life of other churches?

d. Why does your church believe that it is necessary, or permissible, or not possible to share the Lord's Supper with those of other churches?

e. In what ways is your church able to recognize the ordered ministries of other churches?

f. To what extent can your church share the spirituality of other churches?

g. How will your church stand with other churches to contend with problems such as social and political hegemonies, persecution, oppression, poverty, and violence?

h. To what extent will your church share with other churches in the apostolic mission?

i. To what extent does your church share with other churches in faith formation and theological education?

j. How fully can your church share in prayer with other churches?

In addressing these questions, churches will be challenged to recognise areas for renewal in their own lives, and new opportunities to deepen relations with those of other traditions.

## VI

15. Our churches *journey together* in conversation and common action, confident that the risen Christ will continue to disclose himself as he did in the breaking of bread at Emmaus, and that he will unveil the deeper meaning of fellowship and communion (Luke 24.13-35). Noting the progress made in the ecumenical

movement, we encourage our churches to continue on this arduous yet joyous path, trusting in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whose grace transforms our struggles for unity into the fruits of communion.

*Let us listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches!*

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<sup>1</sup> The present Invitation to the Churches was produced at the request of the Central Committee of the WCC (2002), in a process organized by the WCC's Faith and Order Commission. A first draft was written at a meeting in Nicosia, Cyprus in March 2004; this was revised (on the basis of extensive comments received from WCC governing bodies, the Faith and Order Commission, and the Steering Committee of the Special Commission) at a second meeting in Nicosia in May, 2005. Faith and Order extends on behalf of the WCC its appreciation to the Church of Cyprus, which graciously hosted these preparatory meetings. A final revision took place at the Faith and Order Standing Commission meeting in Aghios Nikolaos, Crete, in June 2005.

<sup>2</sup> To assist this process, Faith and Order has produced and sent to the churches a new Study Document, "The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement", Faith and Order Paper No. 198.

<sup>3</sup> Basis, WCC (Constitution, I).

<sup>4</sup> Purposes and Functions, WCC (Constitution, III).

<sup>5</sup> "The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling", The Canberra Statement, 2.1.

<sup>6</sup> The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America, and are used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>7</sup> The Nature and Mission of the Church, § 23.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. "The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling", The Canberra Statement, 3.2.

<sup>9</sup> The Toronto Statement, IV.3