

Response to THE CHURCH: *TOWARDS A COMMON VISION*

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**DISCIPLES
ECUMENICAL
CONSULTATIVE
COUNCIL**

A World-wide Fellowship of the Disciples of Christ Churches

We are pleased to publish a response from the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council (DECC) to a recent World Council of Churches (WCC) Faith and Order Commission's theological convergence text, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. This response was prepared by theological professors and scholars, with input from representatives of various national churches of the Disciples of Christ from around the world. We were delighted that Rev. Dr. Thomas F. Best was able to give leadership to the process of response and the preparation of the report.

In submitting this document to the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC, it was our hope that these comments, reflections and suggestions might benefit Faith and Order in the next stage of its work in developing the important ecumenical convergence and consensus around the issues of the nature of the church and its mission.

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Overview and General Affirmations

The Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council (DECC) is grateful to the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches for *The Church: Towards A Common Vision*. The stated goal of the Commission in developing this text is the same vision and on-going goal of the Disciples—that is, the visible unity of the Church. The situation of ecclesial division with the church is, as a Disciples ecumenical pioneer Dr. Peter Ainslie III averred, “Christianity’s scandal—no mere ‘abnormality,’ but sinful.”

The DECC believes that *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (TCTVC), along with decades of ecumenical dialogue, engagement, and cooperation, advances lines of ecclesiological and theological convergence from the promise of *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (BEM). We, therefore, welcome this document as a significant marker on the long journey towards a vision of the visible unity of the one church “so that the world may believe.” (John 17: 21)

We affirm the understanding of the church as “the vision of God’s great design for all creation” (para.1), and the biblical base on which this statement stands.

We also affirm the strong emphasis on the mission of the church in this text, and agree that Christian unity is an imperative of faith in the service of more effective mission to God’s reconciling love. For Disciples, there is no impediment to recognizing other Christian traditions as “church.” We see mission as most effective when it is carried out locally, and beyond, as practically as possible; this often results in working jointly with other churches.

We affirm the call for “unity-in-diversity.” Our founding principle as a Christian community has been stated as “in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, diversity; in all things, love.” Along with other churches we admit that we have not always found it easy to agree even among ourselves what constitutes the “essentials” or “non-essentials;” this document presents a fresh call to humility as well as a fresh call to love.

Many Disciples are unfamiliar with the concept of the church as “sacrament.” More common ways among Disciples are to speak of

“giving witness; being participants in; or, being agents or instruments on behalf of God’s ultimate purposes of reconciling love.” However, there is much food for thought in the challenge to consider this language of ‘church as sacrament’ as we think about, and teach about, baptism and the Lord Supper, and to continue to explore the riches of God’s work in us as we take part in these acts of worship and obedience.

Our mutual life has been enriched by many encounters with the church life of other traditions. For example, our spirituality has been deepened by the stronger emphasis of some on the Spirit and the life of the Trinity which has balanced our strong emphasis on Christ. We have strengthened our forms of leadership and pastoral care of ministers by considering models of an episcopacy and oversight. We have thought more deeply about how each congregation (often understood as being “autonomous” in our Disciples’ polity) expresses its life as part of the body of Christ through commitment to councils and conferences of churches that balance autonomy with accountability to our fellow Christians.

Responses to Questions

1. To what extent does this text reflect the ecclesiological understanding of your church?

The text’s structure and key emphases, summarized in the Introduction (page 2) aptly reflect the ordering of topics for the Disciples by heritage and our on-going church discussions, dialogues and activities.

- The church is of God’s creation for God’s salvific purposes. Its unity and calling are God-given. Its historic disunity impairs the authenticity and effectiveness of its mission.
- The church is a communion of communions, reliant upon Scripture, Tradition and traditions (as well as human inquiry and experience) in order to discern how best to witness to God’s good news.

- The church is a pilgrim people, seeking to witness to and embody visible signs of God's love of the whole of creation.
- The text's chapter 4 , dealing with the church's life in the world as a sign and agent of God's love, is a welcome expansion of BEM's discussion of the church's ministry in and to the world.

2. To what extent does this text offer a basis for growth in unity among the churches?

For Disciples, this text invites serious exploration, and thoughtful and prayerful reflection, on our part and those of other communions with regard to differing current understandings of ecclesiological foundations and their implications.

3. What adaptations or renewal in the life of your church does this statement challenge your church to work for?

- The text prompts the Disciples to consider and re-consider the relatedness of the Scripture, the Tradition, and diverse traditions in order to advance the cause of Christian unity for the sake of making manifest the reconciling love of God in Christ Jesus.
- The text prompts Disciples to renew and extend efforts to engage with other communions in efforts to proclaim Christ in an interreligious context, to witness to the Gospel's imperatives of grace, and to respond to human suffering and need.

4. How far is your church able to form closer relationships in life and mission with those churches which can acknowledge in a positive way the account of the church described in this statement?

The Disciples have myriad relationships in life and with other churches acknowledging in a positive way the vision of the church

described in this statement. These relationships are widely varied, including congregational, regional and church-wide opportunities for joint efforts of ecumenical dialogue, worship, fellowship and service in the world.

5. What aspects of the life of the church could call for further discussion and what advice could your Church offer for the ongoing work by Faith and Order in the area of ecclesiology?

- This text’s statement on the topic “legitimate diversity” is a massive advance beyond historic conflicts of “orthodoxies versus heresies.” Even so, the polarity of legitimate/illegitimate diversity remains a front-loaded framing of the issue. Diversities are many and various—national, cultural, ethnic, economic, and certainly ecclesial, to name but a few. Some must be called “contrary to the Gospel,” and challenged on that ground. Many if not most others, however, are due to some historic or contemporary “hot-button” issue, doctrinal or ethical or even mere leadership personality clashes. Further reflection by Faith and Order regarding *not* what is illegitimate, but on the recognizable diversity within the Christian faith is perhaps the more productive approach.
- An “interreligious context” is by no means new, but it surfaces in contemporary times as a matter of great force. Further focus and guidance from Faith and Order on the issues relating to the Christian faith among other faiths of the world would be welcome.

Alerts for future work and consideration

One of the Disciples’ responders to *TCTVC* offered a statement that the DECC believes presents an important reflection on the text that should be taken into account as the Faith and Order Commission continues its work on this important effort of seeking theological convergence on the nature and mission of the church. This response is presented below:

“ When this Paper was published in 2013, I read it and thought it a good summary of where we were thirty years after *BEM*. Since I was not involved in any of the groups which might be responsible for preparing any kind of response, I put it on a shelf and thought no more about it.... Then about six months ago I overheard the tail-end of a conversation in which it was commented that the document was rather ‘inward-looking;’ so I re-read it to see why.

Immediately I noticed the balance of the document: two substantial main chapters (II and III), each around twelve pages long—‘The Church of the ‘Triune God’ and ‘The Church: Growing in Communion.’ Redaction criticism suggested that these were the original main chapters, being an exposition of ‘*koinonia*’ ecclesiology as a solution for (or at least a new way of looking at) some traditional Western problems. By its nature such an ecclesiology is primarily concerned with the fellowship within the bounds of the church, however understood. For my own part I find such an ecclesiology a useful tool for understanding the church, rather along the lines that the International Commission for Dialogue between the Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church explored in its second round in the 1990s on “Apostolicity and Catholicity.”

There are then two outlying chapters (I and IV), each around six pages long (i.e. half the length of the others): ‘God’s Mission and the Unity of the Church’ and ‘The Church: In and For the World.’ Each of these chapters has great potential for a full statement on ecclesiology, but the first is diverted by questions of Christianity and other faiths, which are not resolved or the direction of a solution indicated, and the second lapses into an all too brief statement of traditional ‘Life and Work’ concerns, updated for the 21st century. But, in my reading, it was also clear that any further development of the first chapter would sacrifice a smooth entry to the second, just as the fourth led uneasily into the Conclusion.

Essentially the Statement deals with European (and North

American) concerns, rather than those of the Church in the rest of the world. Although it should be helpful to that restricted (though still significant) area of the world, there is little sign of a readiness to address issues characteristic of those parts of the world in which Christianity is growing most rapidly, and where its diversity is intensifying....

What was new about BEM was the six volumes of responses, together with a subsequent assessment, BEM after twenty-five years (1997). Some of the most challenging of those responses came from churches in the non-Western world raising questions about the way in which BEM largely ratified the existing order of things in the West as normative.

But the wider church scene has moved on. The 'Five Marks of Mission' adopted by the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Communion (1988) have themselves become a normative tool for assessing church life in much of the UK, and in other countries as well. David Bosch's *Transforming Mission* (1990) embodied a new way of looking at mission that sought to emancipate it from neo-imperialist suspicions. More recently in the mid-2000s the book, *Mission-Shaped Church* has become a different way of ordering the priorities of church life. On such questions *The Church* is resoundingly silent. There is not even a reference to Rowan Williams's magnificent keynote address to the Porto Alegre WCC Assembly in 2007 about a new understanding of Christian witness in relation to other faiths. One is bound to wonder whether, if such an approach had been adopted in the Early Church, it would ever have grown significantly at all. A kind of de facto universalism seems to have invaded the thinking behind this part of the document, despite the fact that, for Protestants at least, the modern Ecumenical Movement had its origin in the Third World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910.

The 21st century needs a more specifically focused mission agenda for its ecclesiology, not only among the declining Churches in Europe and North America, but also to contextualize the permissible norms for diversity in those

areas where Christianity is growing most rapidly. The fears of the Orthodox in Eastern Europe of proselytism are understandable, but norms for diversity would be of help here too, and in any case Christianity is not an inherited religion. Such an agenda would also address those ‘exceptional’ areas in ecclesiology—Catholic religious orders, which have been to the fore in evangelization since the sixth century, or Protestant missionary societies in the West that fit uneasily into traditional ecclesiological structures. **What would a non-Western non-imperialist view of mission look like in the 21st century?** (more like St Patrick, or St Boniface?) How is the contrast between ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approaches to evangelization (which have significant ecclesiological implications) squared? What can we learn from anthropological studies of the relation between individuals and the communities to which they belong for processes of evangelization? What is the significance of the fact that the initial growth of various Western missions in Asia and Africa in the 19th century depended on recruitment from the sick and orphans for whom the churches cared?

None of this is intended to nullify the significance of the convergence registered in chapters II and III on *‘koinonia’* ecclesiology. But it is intended to point out some of the areas of weakness of the existing text (which, for example, makes no reference to the Jewish origins of Christianity and provides no criteria for distinguishing between that which may be rightly used from the Old Testament scriptures and that which is inconsistent with the new revelation in Jesus Christ in the construction of any ecclesiology).



Further Questions and Issues for Consideration

(1) Issues of reception obviously differ from communion to communion. Care to write as clearly and as directly as possible is evident, and especially in the language used to describe points where divergences block convergence. Even so, it is often hard to tell if

and when various terms and phrases are to be taken as descriptive or normative, as literal or some ecclesiological doxological metaphor. The text (perhaps deliberately?) often shifts from a critical to an uncritical use of Scripture, telling at one moment, e.g., *that according to Acts* this was said or done, and then at another moment the text states *that Jesus said or did* . . .

(2) Likewise variable are statements of what the Church (capital C) is and what it is *called* to be and do. Often the text very patiently explains that there is much churchly or scholarly agreement on some point; often it just states a point with a Bible citation in parenthesis. It takes a reader many pages to figure out what the term “the Creed” refers to (as though there is just one and everyone knows it) and even at the document’s end it’s not clear how many of the early Christian creeds (Nicene, Niceno-Constantinopolitan, Chalcedonian, Athanasian) are “*the* Creed.”

(3) For Disciples, a consensus/convergence document has to be accessible and resonant with people other than those trained in formal church or academic discussion. This Faith and Order document’s potential as an instructional and educational resource is high. Suggestion: Perhaps there could be a consensus/convergence document for official ecclesial consideration, as well as a separate educational resource for use in church school classes and various other training sessions.

(4) Searching for exactly the best words and phrases to express the deepest mysteries and convictions of the Christian faith is a labor of Christian love. Faith and Order’s dedication over the years has offered to Disciples, and other communions, insights and challenges, advisories and opportunities for our church’s commitment to God’s calling to faithful mission and service. Yet perhaps the task of the Christian unity we seek as churches is to press for consensus/convergence regarding where we feel bound by faith to agree to disagree.

(5) While the DECC member churches are united in their deep appreciation for the significant advance represented by *TCTCV* in naming and identifying core theological understandings of the church and its mission, we recognize the urgency at this stage in our history of pursuing work on a host of issues relating to the visible

unity of the church -- in particular, in identifying potential structures of ecumenical discernment and decision-making in the life of the church. We also would state that every Christian community today is challenged by the fast-changing social and ecclesial context to develop more adequate structures of communion and visible unity.

Conclusion

For the DECC, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* provides a mature reflection on what it means to be the church and to live out, together, the call to mission. Around the world, Disciples churches have invested much time and many resources over many years into efforts in both multilateral and bilateral conversation and relationships. In many places, these efforts have borne much fruit that must now be harvested. Once harvested, these results must be put into practice: “what *practical steps* can churches take today to make their unity in Christ more visible, and more effective, in the world?”

We heartily commend this document to our churches, especially to our seminaries and theological schools, in the hope that they will be shaped by it, drawing practical consequences from it in structuring their life, their ministry, and their relationships with other Christian communities. We believe that the consensus reflected in *TCTCV* can provide a solid foundation for new steps toward the mutual recognition and future reconciliation of other churches and communions within the one Church of Christ and for our common Christian witness and mission in the world.

