

World Council of Churches
COMMISSION ON FAITH AND ORDER

*Faith and Order Plenary Commission
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ECCLESIOLOGY PROJECT

John Hind

At the first meeting of the present Standing Commission in Toronto 1999 it was decided to revise the text of Faith and Order Paper No. 181 "The Nature and Purpose of the Church" in the light of the responses received from member churches. The hope had been expressed that positive ecumenical benefits could be gained if the text could develop into a convergence text on the church analogous to the Lima text on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. The project also has particular importance in the light of the request that there should be a concise statement on the church at the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre in Brazil in 2006.

If "Lima" is a model, however, where in the process leading up to BEM should the present document "The Nature and Purpose of the Church" be located? Does it correspond to "Accra" or "pre-Accra"? Then, what is the relationship between the Commentary in BEM and the boxes in F&O Paper No. 181? To what extent are the latter "issues to be resolved", in the expectation that they can be resolved, and to what extent are they fundamental disagreements, and if so how church-dividing are they?

The Commission established an ecclesiology working and drafting group to prepare a revision of the text and a series of consultations both to inform its work and to offer wider reflection on three critical issues: "Does the Church have a sacramental character?", "Authority and authoritative teaching in the Church" and "Ministry and Ordination in the Community of Women and Men in the Church."

The drafting group has met regularly since Toronto and has reported at every meeting of the Standing Commission. Its mandate was to make a "light" revision of "The Nature and Purpose of the Church", that is to say to take F&O Paper No. 181 as the starting point while responding positively to the criticisms which that text has received. Criticisms concerned such diverse subjects as the title of the study, the language and form of the text and its accessibility, the order of the material and the range of biblical scholars consulted, the extent to which regard had been taken of the bi-laterals. The group also had to evaluate the significance of the fact that in the early years of its work responses had been received by churches, institutions and individuals representing a limited number of confessions and regions of the world.

On behalf of the ecclesiology working and drafting group, I would like to draw your attention to three particular issues.

In response to a number of suggestions we are proposing to change the title to "The Nature and Mission of the Church," and to emphasise the missiological character of the church at key points in the text.

Because many responses identified the need to speak from the experience and reality of the Church, in order to balance the more "abstract" aspects of the text, we have agreed to include examples of actual examples of church life ("cameos").

We also intend to ensure that the proportion of the text as a whole reflects the various emphases which are important in a rounded view of the church and avoids the temptation for

ministry, whether in its personal, collegial or communal aspects, to dominate ecclesiological texts.

In its handling of these themes as well as in the rest of its revision of the text, the drafting group hopes that those who have sent responses will feel that their concerns and comments have been given due weight.

Despite considerable development of the text since 1999, what is before this Commission is not yet a "final" or even a "penultimate" text; rather it is a document well on the way to a final version. Responsibility for the version to go to Porto Alegre will rest with next year's meeting of the Standing Commission which will be much helped by discussion at this Plenary Commission.