

REFORMED WORLD



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Introduction

Páraic Réamonn

“The church exists wherever the gospel of God’s grace and human freedom, of justification and justice, is proclaimed and received in faith, and where the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper are administered according to Christ’s will. The church is the communion (*koinonia*) of all believers, who are members of a body whose sole head is Jesus the resurrected. It is because of what the Reformation said and did about the church that the Alliance has embraced with enthusiasm the cause of visible Christian unity, which it understands in this Reformed sense.” – *The Alliance beyond 2004*, par 70.

“The Alliance beyond 2004” is a draft prospectus for the future of the Alliance fellowship after the 24th general council (Accra 2004). It has already gone to member churches with an invitation to respond and will shortly go out to delegates and other Accra participants as well.

That the Alliance is an ecumenically committed Christian world communion is no news to anyone who isn’t actually Rip van Winkle. That our ecumenical engagement is grounded in our confessional heritage is, however, not a note that we have often sounded quite so deliberately as here.

We may gloss the point by borrowing from Michael Weinrich the notion of a horizon. For a horizon has two poles, objective and subjective. And if the objective pole of our ecumenical engagement is the *oikoumene* – not just the universal church, but the whole inhabited earth – the subjective pole is rooted firmly in our specific histories as Reformation churches.

Recognizing this saves us from the twin traps of irritation and surprise: surprise, when other Christian traditions fail to embrace with enthusiasm our perfectly reasonable ecumenical views; and irritation, when they attempt to foist upon us their own entirely unreasonable convictions. In short, it saves us from the illusion that there is only one way to be ecumenical and, in so doing, frees us to be ecumenical in our own Reformed way.

As the following essays suggest, our Reformed commitment to the message of justification and justice gives us something distinctive to say and do, and thus to contribute to the wider ecumenical movement: both critically, in resisting the absurd and intolerable conditions that others seek to impose on full communion or other forms of visible unity, and constructively, in insisting on the one unity that ultimately matters – the unity under God of a fallen and redeemed humanity.

Confessing unity A Reformed perspective on ecumenism¹

Michael Weinrich

In our ecumenical endeavours we face a quandary. There are not just differences in theological doctrine and different traditions of church life and thought: there are almost as many different ecumenical visions within ecumenism as there are church traditions involved.

In fact, this is scarcely surprising. Ecumenism is a question of ecclesiology. It is closely connected with the churches' different self-understandings of themselves as church. It is chiefly their ecclesiologies that divide the churches. We may expect to find very similar differences, therefore, in the understandings of ecumenism that spring from these ecclesiologies and the different self-descriptions to which they give rise.

I try in what follows to outline the ecumenical vision from a Reformed viewpoint. In the foreground stand the theological grounding of this vision and its intimate connection with Reformed ecclesiology.²

A confessing church

The calling and promise of the church always lie far beyond anything that can be seen in historical reality, even in the most perfect form of the church. The church does not live of itself, and can be a living church only by constantly listening anew to what God is saying, and shaping its life and form in response. The oft-quoted phrase *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* refers the church beyond itself, not back to itself – pointing to the word of God to which it must listen and respond and to which it is accountable. Because the church is essentially the creation of the divine word (*creatura verbi divini*), it must constantly seek to be just that.

This insight into the essentially relative nature of the church implies a particular approach to the formal *confessions* of the church. Just as, within history, no church can be fully what it is called to be, so too no confession can respond fully to God's call. Hence, in the Reformed tradition, it is assumed that confessing the faith not only is not completed, but never will be complete. This is not to disdain the ancient creeds of the church. They are, rather, highly valued: they serve as theologically grounded and historically tested guides to orient our own confessing. Precisely as such, however, they remain secondary and subordinate: they cannot relieve today's church of its responsibility to confess the faith here and now.

On this understanding, the church confesses, not by taking over the tradition, but primarily by responding to God's word within the horizon of the specific

challenges facing the church at this time and in this place. As the church's confession is directed not just to itself but also and above all to the world, clarity is crucial. The church is taking a public position in which it tries to make clear where it stands. If, instead of making the Barmen Declaration (1934), the church in Nazi Germany had merely recalled the Apostles' Creed, it would probably not have been able to convey the explosive effect of the concrete stance it was adopting. The same goes, for example, for the Belhar confession (1982) in relation to racism in South Africa. The church's existence as a *confessing* church ranks above its self-consciousness as a *confessional* church. The confessing event – confessing as a vital act – has priority over its confessional or denominational identity.

This brings us to a fundamental option of Reformed ecclesiology, with far-reaching consequences. The church recognizes no central hierarchy nor can it rest on a clearly defined body of doctrine. The congregation is not the smallest cell of a church to which it is subordinate, but sees itself as the seed from which a church grows – as the church in nucleus. This congregationalist enzyme has a catalytic effect on Reformed ecclesiology, enabling it to enter into the most varied living conditions with their different challenges. Openness in principle in formulating confessions is intended to give the churches flexibility in their specific contexts. It is a recognition that if confessions are not to evaporate into abstract generalities, they must always be spoken “in a relatively manageable space... by a concretely responsible community”.³ This is why we Reformed do not have a universal (world) confession. Instead, we allow a real legitimacy to diversity – a diversity constrained by its common basis in the biblical witness (itself very diverse), which suffices to secure the catholicity that the Reformed, indeed, value very highly. In the Reformed horizon, ecumenism is conceived in terms not of homogeneity, but of a biblically based catholicity.

A “traditioning” church

This insistence on confessing rather than confession is confirmed by further choices of emphasis. It is clearly reflected in the ways of dealing with the tradition of the church.⁴ Note that this is not a theoretical debate about whether or not importance is to be attached to tradition. All churches depend permanently on their tradition, without which they would have no common basis of communication to enable them to reflect in a meaningful way on the decisions required of them in their current situation. That granted, a great variety of approaches to tradition may nonetheless be imagined.

The Reformed churches think of tradition less as a treasure to be preserved, a heritage to be safeguarded, than as a source of encouragement and empowerment. Tradition is respected not for its own sake or because of its inspired character, but because it provides an indispensable and therefore inspiring tool for the continuing life of the church here and now. The emphasis

is on the future rather than the past, on *proving the value* of tradition rather than *preserving* it. Tradition is not the stronghold of an unchanging identity, but the challenge to keep renewing identity; protecting and safeguarding tradition cannot be our chief concern. The criteriological function of tradition is less important than its instrumental role. It is important, in the first place, not because it is a more or less sensitive authority for monitoring and controlling doctrine today, but because it helps the church – by giving it the instruments it needs to tackle, calmly and serenely, a mission that did not just begin with the church of today, but that it is called to continue here and now.

To echo the wording used above in relation to confession and confessing, we may say that the Reformed church's concern is not *tradition* but "*traditioning*", the continuing of tradition. It does not understand itself as a traditional church, but sees itself challenged to be a confessing church in ways that it must itself decide responsibly and, by so doing, continue the tradition. It understands itself as part of a living tradition that is capable of reacting to the changing questions and challenges facing the church. In this, it neither assumes that the decisions of the past are in principle theologically sound nor takes the arrogant view that it can do everything better. It allows for inadequacies and even mistakes in the tradition, as well as for its own shortcomings. However, it feels no need to go back over these inadequacies in detail, but instead looks in the other direction. It asks about contemporary relevance, which cannot be assumed automatically and for which it always bears a share of responsibility.

Tradition is not a safe haven in which to ride out the storms when doubts arise. Far from it: it is always only the starting point – sometimes perhaps even a questionable one – from which the church ventures forth to proclaim its own message loudly and clearly in the new way that is required by changing conditions.

To make the problem a little clearer, let me come back to the approach to the confession. When we speak of the confession of faith, we think first of the treasured and venerated formulas of the ancient church. It is almost impossible to mention the creeds without falling into a view of the past as reliable. It is no coincidence, it seems to me, that conservative Christians like to present themselves as (the true) guardians of the faith. But laying retrospective claim to the creeds does justice neither to the nature of the historical creeds nor to the confessing dimension that belongs to the nature of the church. It is true also of the formulation of the ancient creeds that, in the first place, the church had to respond to a definite contemporary challenge. To pick up our earlier distinction: when the church formulated confessions, it never did so primarily in order to *preserve* tradition but rather to *prove* its worth in a particular conflict that had to be resolved, and only then and on that basis to preserve it. What is obviously true of the Theological Declaration of Barmen (the Barmen confession) – that here we have a church reacting to a concrete historical challenge – is true of

almost all the confessions in church history. The perspective, always, is one of *proving the faith*, taking sides and pointing the way, which could not be done properly merely by reciting tradition but required the church to make its own act of confession, by trying to formulate publicly the responsibility laid upon it at that time. Only in retrospect do confessions become tradition. While they are being formulated, the concern is what is seen as the present responsibility with a view to the future. We would understand the creeds of the past much better if, in each case, we were aware of the concrete challenge to which it was responding, the dispute it was trying to resolve or the specific danger or temptation it sought to avert, so that we might have some idea of the dramatic events underlying the confessions that today we have largely reduced to liturgical recitation.

Reciting the confession in worship has become liturgically problematic. Even though it may not be the intention of the church to bow down before tradition, the church's past appears to be seen as more reliable than, say, the reading from the Old Testament or the letters of the New Testament. In the practice of worship with which I am familiar, the congregation remains seated for these readings but stands for the confession of faith and the reading of the gospel (or rather, a text from the gospels). Christian education still ensures that almost all members of the congregation know the creed *by heart*, but – as countless conversations have shown – that is not to say that they understand it *in their hearts*. In the Reformed understanding, this points to a problem that goes directly to the living substance of the church. If there is nothing in its traditioning that moves it forward, it runs the risk of turning tradition into a museum piece that may be revered but no longer has anything substantial to offer to the life of the church.

A teaching church

Closely linked with the questions of confession and tradition is the problem – equally contentious in the ecumenical movement – of authority. How a church understands the concept of authority determines the significance it attaches to its doctrine and the form in which it presents its teaching. It is, as we know, controversial among the churches whether their teaching should be expressed in dogmas, and what form it is appropriate for these dogmas to take. To be sure, all confessional families refer to theological teaching as dogmatics, but this obscures the fundamental differences that lie behind the common usage. What is chiefly in dispute here is how far it is possible, necessary or even obligatory to fix the truth of Christian faith in doctrinal formulations that are at least relatively durable and therefore authoritative.

The more authoritative they are, the more prescriptive these formulations become. However, authority is not inherent in the pronouncements as such; in each case, it has to be attributed to them by an authorized agency. It is the

church that declares certain pronouncements to be binding, and thereby intimates that it wants to let itself be measured by these standards. This presupposes an understanding of the church according to which it is authorized to issue such decrees.

Once established, such authoritative pronouncements continue in force because they cannot subsequently be repealed. If it were possible to revise their content, their binding character would from the outset be restricted, which in turn would deprive them of their decisive authority. It follows that, once the path of authority laid down in doctrinal decrees has been chosen, doctrine by its very nature can only be completed and extended and further differentiated, but never critically reviewed, let alone corrected.⁵ Theology, on this path, can maintain the flexibility that is needed to apply doctrines to each concrete situation only by great artistry – not to say sophistry – in interpreting and combining doctrines, while adhering to the letter of the text. A degree of casuistry is unavoidable: it is the logical consequence of an understanding of the truth shaped by legal thinking.

This shows that, if the ecumenical discussion among the churches is always dominated in each case by the strictest understanding of authority, it is not just a methodological problem. If, for example, the Roman Catholic Church has raised the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* to the status of binding doctrine for itself by signing it – which remains an outstanding event, whatever reservations there may be about the declaration itself – this is due entirely to the painstakingly negotiated wording of the text. There could be no question of revising the anathemas of the 16th century. All that could be done was to examine whether there were things that could be said in common about the doctrine of justification, going beyond the anathemas, which still remain valid.

If the Lutheran World Federation wanted to fall in line with the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of authority, it would effectively have to accept the 16th century anathemas, at least implicitly. Not requiring it to do so is a tacit acknowledgement from the outset that the Lutheran side is guided by a different understanding of authority from the Roman Catholic side.⁶

From a Reformed viewpoint, this raises a fundamental problem. We recognize no way to guarantee authority, apart from the criterion of evidence. A controversial point of doctrine cannot be settled by reference to a fixed body of doctrine, but in each new case has to be clarified afresh in the light of the facts. In disputed cases, even church doctrinal decisions cannot simply be defended by reference to any text; the content of the dispute has to be presented and the objective evidence for making the choice put forward for discussion. Of course, a decision has to be reached at some point and then a reference to tradition may prove convincing, but only if the matter recalled can be confirmed in the changed conditions. In this sense, the Reformed tradition also makes extensive use of the church's theological tradition and confessions in clarifying issues; but there

is no timeless requirement that formulations, simply as formulations, should be thrown onto the scales. They can be used only if they prove themselves in the new situation.

This is why there have been so many, often highly controversial tussles over doctrine in the Reformed tradition, disputes that have led time and again to a parting of the ways within the church. To the extent that human wilfulness has certainly also been in play, this state of affairs is to be deplored. On the other hand, however, the simple fact of a diverse church landscape is not to be decried in principle, so long as we do not lose sight of the modesty already discussed with regard to our being the church,⁷ and remain aware that the catholicity of the body of Christ goes far beyond the boundaries of our church, and could not in any case be institutionalized, not even by a united world church.

With regard to doctrine, the Reformed church is not a *doctrinal church* but a *teaching church* and as such must always also be a *learning church*. The church's teaching is at the service of today's preaching of the gospel and does not take place in the framework of a doctrinal structure that has to be preserved and constantly extended. Like theology, it is a "function of the church's praxis" (Karl Barth) that refers to a constantly changing reality and is therefore itself constantly changing. We delude ourselves if we think that clinging to the letter of the doctrinal decisions of the past can provide a reliable basis of stability in the midst of this change, or even a handle to hold on to. If anything, the opposite is true: the stability of the content depends on our being able to speak it in new ways – someone who always says the same thing will through time be saying something different. On this line of argument, the authority of doctrine correlates with how best, in our human understanding, the church may fulfil its responsibility for its particular mission at a given time. This responsibility can never be adequately fulfilled without recourse to existing doctrine; equally, it cannot be met by simply repeating set doctrinal formulations.

Reformed catholicity

Now we turn explicitly to Calvin. The decisive reason for Calvin's relaxed attitude to the actual plurality of the many regional churches lies in his understanding of catholicity and hence of the "holy singular" of the church. To put the point briefly, for Calvin the "profession of the faith" stands for the catholicity of the church. He had in mind the Apostles' Creed. Wherever this is said, the universal church can be seen, even when it may be said by only one person.⁸ The church here is strictly the church that is not at the disposal of human beings, which does not mean that there are no human beings in it, otherwise it would make no sense to speak of church at all. The church here is seen from the point of view of its divine foundation. This catholicity defies any institutionalization and places the latter on an essentially subordinate level. This catholicity is the catholicity of the faith that holds the body of Christ

together and the historical confession of that faith, for example in the Apostles' Creed. Every time the creed is spoken – here or there or worldwide – this is an audible sign of the catholicity of the church. Fortunately, only God can see into the hearts of those whose lips make this confession; it must suffice for us, in perceiving the catholicity of the church and hence recognizing it as church, that, according to what we declare, we agree on the fundamental tenets of the faith.

By not specifically naming the Apostles' Creed, Calvin wants to avoid the impression that the church believes in its confession. There are fundamental and therefore indispensable elements of the Christian faith, as set out in the creed; but, for the sake of God's honour and glory, the church must guard against canonizing them. Our commitment to God must be clearly seen to stand above our commitment to our insights about God. Calvin's extensive and entirely consistent dogmatic and catechetical efforts at clarification show that this is not meant to give *carte blanche* to theological charlatanism. On the other hand, his determined commitment to the unity of the church shows that the demand for the catholicity of the church is not just a cheap and empty phrase with no consequences.

Calvin expressly warns against an excess of zeal for the greatest possible homogeneity in the church's doctrine and order. The greater the emphasis on uniformity, the more the concern for form comes to predominate, even to the point of idolatry. It would be scandalous, Calvin said, if in matters where the Lord has left us freedom, so that we have all the more opportunities to build up the church, we should strive slavishly for sameness, instead of seeking the true edification of the church.⁹ What the church receives and must constantly receive afresh is always more important than what the church has or what form it takes. Like Luther, Calvin insists that the most important thing of all is for the church to continue under God's word.¹⁰ It is crucial that the church should seek constantly to communicate with God and his word, and not try to substitute this communication by maintaining a body of doctrine, whatever form this may take. What makes a church catholic is not what it has achieved, but its unflinching trust in what it must always receive anew. Catholicity, in the sense used by the Reformers, stands for the faithfulness of a God who does not leave his church – the universal company of those who confess his name – abandoned and alone.

There are above all two ecumenical reasons to support Calvin's understanding of catholicity, also in view of the human aspect of the church. *First*, with regard to the church's teaching and form, it opens up the necessary room for manoeuvre in the different regional conditions – today, no doubt, we would speak of contextuality and inculturation.¹¹ Calvin was prepared to recognize a multiplicity of small individual churches “disposed in towns and villages according to human need”.¹² The problems begin only when attempts

are made to interpret this purely practical local delimitation theologically in an exclusive sense. The reproach levelled against the church centred in Rome is precisely that it has artificially attached to its local delimitation a claim supposedly grounded in theology, so that catholicity is now captive to human pretensions and has effectively become sectarian. *Second*, this definition of catholicity strongly resists putting our trust in pure doctrine and so attacks the fiction of a certainty attained by means of theological doctrine. Since for Calvin, too, right doctrine is “God’s doctrine” and as such is aimed at life, the church remains dependent on a living relationship with God. It is God and not any human church authority that “rules” the church that is the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church”.

These considerations show that, on a Protestant understanding, it is theologically untenable to identify catholicity with a definite form of church, let alone a definite historical constitution of the church. In view of the now almost undeniable confessionalization of all the churches – including the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches – it remains to ask whether the ancient church’s concept of a visible catholicity has not become historically obsolete, so that today it works only as an anti-ecumenical symbol.

Confessing unity

In the ecumenical context, the idea of the invisible or hidden church as the church in which we believe regularly gets a raw deal. Evoking the hidden church may of course indicate a certain negligence towards the visible church and our responsibility for it. But the fact of the matter is that, even on close inspection, what the church is really about does not become visible. We can only believe that what is visible is indeed the *one, holy, universal* and *apostolic* church. None of these attributes can be identified directly with one clear form of representation. We do not read off the evidence for the requirements we attach to visibility from the external appearance of the church, but from what we understand this appearance to represent and, in the best case, reflect.

Visibility in the theological sense, in principle, cannot be what can actually be seen. That is why Karl Barth speaks about “a very special visibility” as a spiritual event.¹³

What is really at stake in the emphasis on the visible church cannot, by its very nature, become directly visible. It is faith, going beyond the external appearance, that endows the concretely visible church with the appropriate attributes. What is there to be seen can be seen only by the eyes of faith, which always see more than the eyes in our head.¹⁴

The true body of Christ remains hidden, and it is as such that it is real, as real as the risen Christ. He is the inaccessible reality of the church, the reality that allows and requires us to see in the actually existing church a reflection of the true church that has to be taken seriously and, in this sense, the true church

itself. There can be no question of looking for another church beside or behind the visible, historically constituted church. On the one hand, no church can make immediately visible what its existence as church is really all about. On the other hand, what the faith of Christ's church confesses can show itself nowhere else except in the church as it appears in history, even when we can scarcely point it out. This is precisely what Calvin had in mind in speaking so emphatically about the visible church.¹⁵

Reformed ecclesiology holds fast to the concept of the hidden church within the visible church for specifically ecumenical reasons – not least for comfort and encouragement in its determined commitment to the visible church.¹⁶ The problem of institutionalizing the church is in no way simply secularized. It has to do with the human side of the constitution of the church, which is not insignificant theologically. It is important that the church confesses the foundational divine side of the church's constitution, namely the election of the church effected in Christ, and tries as far as possible to keep this in sight in all its endeavours. In the visible church, seen from this point of view, are vested all the promises for the church that we confess in the creed, and without which the church has no importance at all.

The decisive reason for standing by the Reformers' option, as I see it, is that this is the only way to underline the priority in principle of the church founded in and by Jesus Christ over our attempts to make it manifest in history. This implies the very fundamental ecumenical insight that the body of Christ does not follow along behind, confirming our attempts to realize the church after the event, as it were. It is always out ahead, and it is we who lag behind with our reservations.¹⁷ Just as the risen Christ is always out ahead of us mortal men and women, so that we have every reason to believe although we cannot see him, so too his body, the body of the risen Christ, is always out ahead of us – irrespective of all the conceivable possibilities of claiming a theological difference between the two.

Against this background, speaking in a theological perspective about the church means *confessing the church*. The church can dare to be only because its being is given to it – anything else sooner or later must face the question about the source of the confidence that allows us to strut the stage. This surely cannot be a self-confidence that permits us, as it were, to anticipate God and look for his approval. It can only be the confidence that the risen Lord lives today, that he was raised from the dead not just spiritually but, according to the witness of the New Testament, in the body (not in the flesh!) – impossible as it may be for us to imagine this “transformed” bodily presence (cf 1 Cor 15.35ff). The church's calling is always already its being constituted, so that the church can only speak of its calling in the same way as it speaks of its constitution in Christ. Only as a constituted, chosen church is it a called church. Its constitution is not the consequence of a perceived calling, to be fulfilled by human beings. On the

contrary, according to biblical logic, the calling is a consequence or implication of the constitution that has already taken place.

From this, the consequences for the ecumenical vision in the Reformed understanding are easy to guess. No church is in a position to lay down the conditions for church unity, so to speak, of its own accord. Rather, the unity of the church is one of the essential marks – already emphasized in the confessions of the ancient church – of what can be confessed as the body of Christ. Here too the first and fundamental thing is *confessing unity*. It is always out in front of us. This applies, to borrow Harding Meyer's language, not only to the ecumenical indicative, but also to the ecumenical imperative.¹⁸

Hence it follows that the mutual recognition of the churches as churches cannot be just the outcome of the often difficult efforts to reach an understanding, but should precede and shape them. In this horizon, it is theologically odd to see the unity of the church formulated in the confession as realized only in one's own church. Rather, we need the special eyes of faith, as mentioned above, to see beyond the obvious. Faith can see the church wherever God's reconciling action in Christ is confessed. In principle, the fundamental concern underlying our efforts at understanding cannot be whether we can forward the unity of the church – in whatever way – by making it visible (in the sense of obvious). Our overriding concern must be how seriously we ourselves take our own confession of the one church.

In this there can be no question of constantly looking back to the particular traditions of the different churches. Everything turns on how serious we are in allowing our confession to authorize us to go forward confidently into the future, in the knowledge that, in looking towards the other churches, our faith in the insight that we have been given in Christ will not desert us.

It is we who obscure the visibility of the church, and not some enigmatic way of God. It is our lack of faith that blinkers us so that we can only see our own church. All our expectations with regard to more visibility should be directed towards the hope of a stronger faith that will enable us to see "more" than what is staring us in the face. If the unity of the church is to be made more visible in history than it has been up till now, the only path to follow is one which recognizes unity not only as a precondition but also as an actual reality. All other paths will always bring us back to ourselves and our own wilfulness.

Notes

1. This is a revised and expanded version of my article "Kirche bekennen" in *Ökumenische Rundschau* 52 (2002), pp.145-156.
2. For more on the subject, Michael Weinrich, *Kirche glauben: Evangelische Annäherungen an eine ökumenische Ekklesiologie* (Wuppertal: Foedus-Verlag, 1998); also my article "The Openness and the Worldliness of the Church" in Christine Lienemann-Perrin, Hendrik M Vroom and Michael Weinrich, eds, *Reformed and Ecumenical* (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), pp.1-23.

3. Eberhard Busch, "Die Nähe der Fernen – Reformierte Bekenntnisse nach 1945" in Michael Welker and David Willis, eds, *Zur Zukunft der Reformierten Theologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener-Verlag, 1998), pp.587-606, at p.590. In English, "The Closeness of the Distant: Reformed Confessions after 1945", in David Willis and Michael Welker, eds, *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), pp.512-531, at p.515.
4. It is important in this context to remember that, in the Protestant understanding, Holy Scripture is not part of the church's tradition, but is set over the church as its fundamental source of guidance and critical standard (*fons et iudex*).
5. On this, Michael Beintker, "Das Problem der Revidierbarkeit kirchlicher Aussagen in ökumenischen Dialogen" in Michael Weinrich, ed, *Einheit bekennen: Auf der Suche nach ökumenischer Verbindlichkeit* (Wuppertal: Foedus-Verlag, 2002), pp.49-75.
6. Admittedly, it is hard to say what that Lutheran understanding of authority is, because basically it agrees with the path of authoritative doctrinal statements.
7. See the section on the confessing church, above.
8. *Institutio* IV 1,9.
9. *Opera Selecta* I, p.432.
10. *Institutio* IV 2,4.
11. Cf for example, Mercy A Oduyoye and Hendrik M Vroom, "One Gospel – Many Cultures. Case Studies and Reflections on Cross-Cultural Theology", in *Currents of Encounter* 21 (Amsterdam/New York, 2003).
12. John Calvin, "Reply to Cardinal Sadolet" (1593) in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, Library of Christian Classics, trans JKS Reid (London/Philadelphia: SCM Press/Westminster Press, 1954) pp.219-256. Calvin here (p.230) goes so far as to place the papal church on a level with the Anabaptists, because neither follows the word of God, but puts individualistic positions in the foreground.
13. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), p.654.
14. This double way of looking at the church is similar to what happens with nature, which can also be seen in two ways. What we can see is nature's outward form with all its fascinating power. When we speak of nature as the creation, however, we depend on the eyes of faith, which here too see "more" than can actually be seen, because they know of the Creator.
15. See Michael Weinrich, "Welche Kirche meinen wir? Die Theologie und die verfasste Kirche" in Jürgen Ebach, Hans M Gutman and Magdalene L Frettlöh, eds, *Bloß ein Amt und keine Meinung? - Kirche*, Jabboq 4, (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2003), pp.214-272, at pp.240-259.
16. The dialectical tension between visibility and invisibility has, incidentally, been one of the basic elements in ecclesiology since the time of Augustine.
17. Cf Mk 10.32.
18. Harding Meyer, *Ökumenische Zielvorstellungen*, Ökumenische Studienhefte 4 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), pp.17ff.

The price of gifts A Congregational inheritance¹

Bernard Thorogood

One of the more depressing moments in ecumenical discussion arrives when the representatives of a denomination start speaking of what they might lose in any union scheme. Fears begin to take over. We might lose our tradition of ministry. We might lose our independence. We might lose our prayer book – and so on.

The opposite point, the moment of hope, is when those participating have enough confidence to suggest what they might bring and offer. It is in that spirit that I want to comment on the gifts that Congregationalism, that small segment of the church universal, has brought into the Christian family. It has always been a small segment, and has never had the big battalions. Yet I am thankful to have been brought up within that tradition and ordained to ministry within it, and now to know that it has contributed to the life of the Uniting Church in Australia. In looking at this tradition I have to be very selective. But I am also critical, because the riches and gifts all come at a cost; there are no unalloyed blessings in churchmanship; there is no free ecclesiastical lunch. So I am pointing to some of the outstanding and gracious gifts in our background story and the price we have paid for them.

Trust the local

We know that the early Independents in England were radical in their day because they could not accept a church life that was nationally ordered and commanded and regulated. And yet that had been the common mode of being church. From the early days of the post-Constantinian church the assumption had been that royal conversions and group conversions and tribal conversions were the mode of the Holy Spirit, so that group or tribal churches resulted. Conformity was the general expectation and practice right through the hard centuries. So during the Reformation the mainstream of Lutheranism carried forward the same conformity, still revealed today in the remnants of state tax support for the church in Germany and Scandinavia. This was very clearly the assumption of the English churchmen of the 16th century.

“If you will have the Queen of England rule as monarch over all her dominions, then you must also give her leave to use one kind and form of government in all and every part of the same, and so to govern the Church in ecclesiastical affairs as she doth the Commonwealth in civil... For the effect of dissent is to divide one realm into two and to spoil the Prince of one half of her jurisdiction and authority.”²

This was how the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Whitgift, put it in 1574. That was the very common opinion in Europe at that time and the radicalism of the early Independents was the total rejection of that assumption. The realm is not the church. The tribe is not the church. The nation is not the church. The church is the gathering of those who are committed to Christ and under the rule of Christ; and wherever that gathering may be, there is the church of God. The primacy is with the local. This was not a departure from the main Reformation emphasis on salvation through grace and faith. Indeed it was said in the 17th century that most Independents could subscribe happily to 36 of the 39 articles of the Church of England – which was more than many Anglican clergy could. But it was a revolt against the *Volkskirche* – the national church. The concept of national uniformity was so deeply embedded that even after the Commonwealth and the proliferation of sects (which Cromwell took to be a sign of spiritual vitality), kings and bishops still determined to get back to one legal state form of Christianity.

This ultimate respect for the local has stayed with us. It is a dynamic understanding of the nature of the church. It often took as the motto the text that where two or three are gathered together in the name and spirit of Christ, there is Christ in the midst (Mt 18.20). If that is true, then the local gathering is the vital presence of the risen Christ in the world. If that is true, then belonging to that local fellowship is a most serious and creative event in any life. And if that is true, then the local gathering has within it all the gifts and graces needed for salvation. God has trusted each local fellowship to represent the way, the truth and the life that visited us in Jesus Christ.

We can see that the emphasis on trusting the local fellowship meant also a rejection of the superior authority of popes and bishops, just as it pushed aside any thought of the king or queen or civil government having authority over the church. If subject to Christ, why allow the church to be subject to human rulers who are not at all holy; or to synods that have no greater access to the Holy Spirit than does the local congregation? In those early years of Independency the local fellowships were at great risk, and many paid with their lives, and it appears such an unequal struggle. On one side all the powers of the state and the state church, the laws of the land, the judiciary, the military, the bishops, the court and the wealthy – and on the other these little gatherings meeting in the most insignificant houses with nothing to defend them except conviction. Yet the theme lived on and lives still, for it holds a treasure – the local congregation is where we are loved, where we are prayed for, where we are healed, where we sing praise, where we serve the community, where we are baptized and receive the bread and the wine.

That is where it happens – this life of faith. If there is no spiritual life there, no synod or assembly or church office can create it; and if there is spiritual life there, no one can squash it.

Trust the local.

My own experience of all this as a boy and a teenager in a Sussex country town formed my own introduction into the life of discipleship. The seriousness of becoming a church member when I was 14 stayed in my mind. The power of the great hymn writers has touched me ever since. And for me the model of what pastoral ministry is all about was the man who led me from childhood acceptance to teenage commitment – George Douglas Evans, rosy cheeked, upright, rather slow in speech and judgement, tireless in cycling around the countryside. He put up with all the arrogant opinions of teenagers and commended me for ministerial training.

Trust the local – the theme has travelled widely and came to us in Australia to form part of the mix that is now the Uniting Church. The constitution of the church as it developed from the 1977 act of union was a considerable shift away from the congregation as the final place of spiritual authority. The Methodist and Presbyterian orders regarded the councils of the church regionally and nationally as having major authority, and that tradition was very largely adopted. So we have lived with the pattern of interrelated councils – elders, parish councils, presbyteries, synods and assemblies. But more recently the Congregational principle seems to be creeping back and the local church council today has a very broad range of responsibility for the ministry and mission of the church, and, it seems to me, that range has increased. I am not sure whether our synod³ really means this to happen, but I think it is evident.

There is another dimension to this theme. There is today a willingness to trust the local in the field of theology, a trust that is new. When I was going through my own training Barth and Brunner and Bultmann were the great Protestant authorities and in college were often referred to as the “holy trinity”. We thought that they brought to us a universal theology, just as Roman Catholics had thought of Thomas Aquinas as the universal doctor of the faith. But of course we were blinkered in our view and now we can see that across the globe the people of Christ are forming their own theological understandings of what Christ means, what he reveals, and what he calls us to do. We are at the end of a hegemonic theology. We see now that the European theologians from whom we learnt and to whom we are all deeply indebted were fashioned partly through the European concept of individualism. The whole massive emphasis on individual salvation that we find in all the evangelical preachers from Wesley to Billy Graham derives not only from the tradition of Paul but also from the European development of the Enlightenment that stressed individual rights. From other parts of the world we are today being corrected or balanced by local theologies and so in a fresh way we are led to trust the local.

Obviously there is a down side to all this and it is best that we acknowledge it. To place all our confidence about the nature of the church in the local congregation is to conceal or to minimize the wholeness of the fellowship.

Perhaps I may put it this way. The body of Christ has Christ as the head and many members with different functions – but there has to be a skeleton and a nervous system if those members are to work. A few toes lying around don't help anyone! The body needs connectedness. Independent congregations may have the very heart of the matter but they will surely miss the necessary functions of the whole and may, all too easily, set out on a path that leads away from apostolic faith to some local product. So to trust the local for Christian doctrine is a high-risk strategy.

I saw one aspect of this in my own ministry in the Pacific Islands. We had been remarkably successful in stressing the local church but we failed – and I failed – to bring an equal stress on the unity of the church in the world. We had been good Congregationalists, and the price was paid. I see that today in Australia. The islanders who come here to live and become part of our Australian community have had very little thought about joining the church that is here. They do not see that the church that is already here is in any way their church. They have been intent and devoted in bringing with them their own island church and establishing it – and so we are seeing not only a Samoan, a Tongan and a Cook Islanders church, but churches that are the offspring of individual islands like Penrhyn or Aitutaki – tiny communities but carrying with them their very own church. They have been Congregational in spirit and in form. So we see the price that is paid – it is the disjointedness of the family of Christ.

Congregationalists have been very aware of this high price. So they compensated. Even in the early years they sought fellowship between local congregations. In England and in Australia this led to the forming of Congregational unions as state and national bodies with care for what we might call external relations with other churches and with governments, care also for the oversight of ministerial standards. But there was watchfulness that the unions had no authority over the church meeting in each locality. In Britain the process went further, to form the Congregational Church in England and Wales – almost a contradiction in terms! – in order to create a parallel body with other churches negotiating for union.⁴ Internationally we had the International Congregational Council (1891-1970), a body for fellowship and mutual assistance that came into its own during and after the tragedies of the second world war.

And everywhere around the world Congregationalists have been at the heart of church union development – in America, Britain, South and North India, China, Madagascar, Jamaica, Zambia, Australia, Papua New Guinea. Why is this so? Partly because we recognized the price of our gift. We brought to the table this golden gift of the responsibility of the local church and we sought the medicine for our deficiencies in new connectedness, new shapes of the body, new life for the whole. But we were there at the inauguration of unions for another reason and that brings me to gift number two.

No credal closure

It was a common jibe against Congregationalists that they believed anything or they believed nothing. If asked, "What is the doctrine of the Congregational church?", many would not be able to reply. That was the accusation. And it had a little grain of truth in it. For from the early years there was a great reluctance to confine faith to a single set of words that all members had to accept. It was not then, and never has been, that the creeds were rejected as wrong. As I noted above, those early Independents were not at all revolutionary in their basic doctrine. But they were doubtful and critical about using a creed as the measure of Christian discipleship, and this stayed in the Congregational spirit through the centuries.

The logic went like this. In scripture we are given the word of God, and that has authority to guide us in all matters of faith. The creeds of the church are not of that same character; they are products of the church in language that is limited by the culture of the time; they may be beautiful expressions but they are not binding, not final, and certainly not infallible. It would therefore be wrong to impose a creed as a test since Jesus never imposed such a thing; he only sought the commitment to follow the Christ-way. So many of us with that tradition behind us would still say that the historic creeds of the church are witnesses to the faith but should not be used as the final expression or the test of faith.

Indeed, the more I read about the formation of the Nicene Creed, the more it seems to me the production of an immediate situation in the fourth century. The council was an arena for polemics; those gathered there heard threats and counter-threats; they all trembled under the gaze of the emperor Constantine in the chair, sitting in his purple robe and scarlet boots. He required agreement. So agreement on the text came; there were only two dissenting votes in the 300 – and those two brave dissenters are never heard of again.

Now out of all that comes a creed that is wonderful and has meant much to Christians across the world. But it is just one way of expressing what we believe. It is written in terms of Greek thought we cannot fully share. Yes, we love it as one witness to faith; but no, it is not the final statement for ever and ever.

There is thus a great deal of intellectual freedom in the Congregational tradition, much theological exploration. Some of it moved away from the central western tradition, in the United States towards Unitarian understandings, and in England towards a woolly liberalism; and then we had to be called back towards the central Christian tradition by theologians like RW Dale, PT Forsyth and RS Franks, by Nathaniel Micklem and John Whale, by George Caird and CH Dodd – all standing firmly in the theological mainstream. Such continuing debate between orthodoxy and adventure seems to me essential for the liveliness of the Christian tradition. From time to time Congregationalists betrayed this liberty, for example in parts of New England in America where they held much

political power and could become as intolerant as the regime from which their grandparents had escaped. But in the 19th and 20th centuries it is a reality, this live theological discussion that is not captive to any written authority other than scripture.

This is a gift that we have brought to the ecumenical table. At times when Anglicans might have had to refer to the creeds or the 39 Articles or the Lambeth quadrilateral; or when Methodists had to turn to Wesley's sermons or the minutes of conference; or when Presbyterians felt bound by the Westminster Confession – then Congregationalists could meditate on the gospels.

It was rather smug. It could be the conjurer declaring, "Look, no hands." For such freedom has a cost.

We see this first in frequent failure to teach the faith systematically and comprehensively. With no creed and no catechism, each local church and each minister could plan Christian education as they wished and as they were able. In a few cases this was splendidly done. But in many, it was a rather casual affair, depending entirely on who happened to be available and what their talent might be. The second risk was always that a strong voice in the locality could skew the direction of the local fellowship, and that voice might be biased in a very personal direction. It is surely proper to claim that the local church is under the rule of Christ but wholly improper that it should be under the sway of the person who can talk longest and loudest in the church meeting. A third risk has been that Congregationalism has often appeared to those in the Catholic tradition as being a fringe body, only barely within the circle that Catholics call church. For if it does not give full assent to the ancient creeds, how do they know it is fully Christian in faith?

Congregationalists were very aware of these risks and they compensated. They wrote statements of faith, and some of them were very fine. Just for a taste, here is a passage from a declaration of faith published by the Congregational Church in England and Wales in 1967:

No Christian is holy as Christ is holy; freedom from sin is not yet complete in Christian experience. In themselves human beings are not worthy of life in full fellowship with God, nor capable of it. They need continual forgiveness and renewal as their means to freedom. They need power from God, sufficient to transform what they are, to sustain what they become and to strengthen them for new deeds of faith and obedience. Through God's grace these needs are met, not once only but again and again in the lives of those actively committed to Christian discipleship. Christians therefore share that joy in living which the eternal God has in himself.⁵

When the need was clear, Congregationalists could write down a statement of faith as biblical and persuasive as in any part of the church. Even so, it was only offered to the local churches as one expression of faith, and never as a test

of faith. I believe this is the right position to hold. There is no credal closure, for all our creeds are human expressions and never contain the breadth of the mystery of God's revelation.⁶

Membership is ministry

One of the radical positions of the early Congregationalists was a revolt against the type of priesthood that had for centuries become a closed and privileged class in the Roman tradition. They claimed that just as the church as a whole is the body of Christ, so the individual members within the body are the servants or ministers of Christ's gospel. This gave membership its high status in Congregational thought. If you are ready to become a member, then you are also becoming responsible for the life and mission of the local fellowship, you share in all its work and its decisions. Of course there are different talents and callings within the whole, and there are some called to become ministers or pastors as their whole life work; yet they are distinguished by their gifts and the character of their training and their function rather than by status; they remain members of the church. I still remember that when a new minister was called to our local church – I suppose around 1940 – he was received by the deacons as a member on transfer from his previous church, and not until that had happened did he preside at the communion table. That confirmed the classical Congregational position. Membership of the body is the great privilege. This has repeatedly been crystallized in the principle of the priesthood of all believers.

The radical nature of this position is seen best if we contrast it with a statement from the conservative wing of the Roman Catholic Church. Here is a 1905 pastoral letter from the Prince Bishop of Salzburg:

Most beloved, where is there in the whole world a power to equal this? How high, how sublime, how altogether wonderful is the power of the priest in forgiving sins. The Catholic priest, I say once more. Protestant pastors have not the priestly ordination through which their great power is transmitted according to the ordinance of Christ... Where in heaven is there such power as that of the Catholic priest? With the angels? With the Mother of God? Mary conceived Christ the Son of God in her womb and bore him in the manger at Bethlehem. Yes. But consider what happens at Mass. Does not the very same thing happen, so to speak, under the consecrating hands of the priest, at the moment of consecration? Once did Mary bring the divine child into the world. But lo! the priest does this not once but hundreds and thousands of times as often as he celebrates.⁷

Set the Congregational tradition alongside that eloquence and the gulf separating us becomes apparent. We have never for one moment believed in a priesthood with such distinctive spiritual powers. Our ministry was given the training and the authorization to fulfil a pastoral and teaching office, but no

sublime powers flowed through our fingers. We know ourselves better than that.

The main criticism of our stance has been that if the priesthood is of all believers then the likelihood is that it will be lost: everyone's business becomes nobody's business. Our claim is that we have not abolished priesthood but we have broadened it to cover the dedication of the whole people of God to their calling. But in fact we have to admit that sometimes the priestly nature of the church had indeed been lost. It was quite possible for a local church to discover that its ministry no longer dealt with the reality of sin and confession and had forgotten the cure of souls. Congregational ministry could be encouraging, enlightening, and caring without being sacramental. It was the great theme of PT Forsyth to remedy this, and in this respect he was a Barthian before Barth, although his writing, as someone said, is like fireworks in a fog. We need the priestly element in ministry for the full expression of Christ's healing presence.

Yet the basic proposition stands. It is one of the convictions that is borne out in my experience that in each congregation there are people who are far better models of Christ than I am; they have ministered to me. And it was largely out of this understanding that the Congregational church was able to move into the ordination of women ministers of word and sacrament as long ago as 1917, well ahead of the field. For if women could be members, teachers and deacons, there was no reason that could hold back ordination. I am thankful that in the last half-century the opposing Catholic and Protestant views have come just a little closer to each other. It was Vatican II that brought forward the main meaning of "church" as the people of God and not the hierarchy. That is a considerable shift. On our side and within the united churches, I think we have come to see that the calling to give the whole of life to ministry does set people apart to a particular discipline of life, service and prayer. We shall, I believe, come closer still to one another when we all recognize that it is not the hierarchy nor the congregation nor the synod that makes a person a minister; it is God alone who gives the faith and the talents and the inward call to a member of the church. The church, through all of its organs, can only recognize and train and authorize and support what the Spirit is doing.

Over the horizon

The last of the gifts that the Congregational tradition brought to the common table was the world reference and application of the gospel of Christ. Here, as you would expect, I pay my tribute to the London Missionary Society.⁸ It preceded the Congregational unions in England and in Australia; and it was a midwife to both. It was fuelled by networks of volunteers in the congregations. From its birth in 1795 it was courageous, pioneering and not diverted by failures or by successes. Its Fundamental Principle reveals a sound grasp of Congregational churchmanship.

It is not the object of the Society to send Independency, Presbyterianism, Episcopacy, or any other form of church order and government (about which there may be difference of opinion among serious persons) but the Glorious Gospel of the Blessed God to the heathen, and... it shall be left, as it ever ought to be left, to those whom God shall call into the fellowship of his Son, from among them to assume for themselves such form of church government as to them shall appear most agreeable to the Word of God.

There is a clear “trust the local”, there is “no credal closure” but continuing debate, and there is “membership is ministry”, for all believers share in great decisions. It was a principle that stood soundly for 150 years and gave me personally much strength in my own life among Island churches of the Pacific as they found their way to autonomy. Yet it is a curiously naive principle, and in two ways. Can the gospel be so neatly divorced from churchmanship? No one in the Catholic tradition would think so. Theology is all of a piece, and what we believe about the church has to conform to what we believe about the Bible, the Christ and the kingdom of God. We are no longer able to offer the gospel without the church, and I doubt if in practice the missionaries ever were able to do so.

Then it is naive also in imagining that the western missionary would not be the kingpin, the person who would in fact decide the shape of the new churches that would be formed. This was the person with knowledge, experience and the Bible. So while the principle gave a hearty vote for the local church it also gave untrammelled power to the missionary. In most places it was the missionary who chaired every meeting and whose voice carried the day. Many were very careful about this, but the LMS had its oddities and its autocrats too.

But it was through this agency of a missionary society that the Congregational churches had a vision of the world reach of the gospel. Reports from overseas and personal deputation speaking by missionaries formed the imagination of young people. I think we can say that the LMS saved Congregationalism from the narrow vision and parochialism that independency could easily encourage. Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians shared the same kind of broad horizon through their own societies; what made the LMS distinctive was the rejection of any denominational empire. I can only say from my experience that I found in the great LMS family many of the finest spirits of Congregationalism – liberal and evangelical, practical and thoughtful.⁹

This nurture of the universal church has been a very major gift: what is the price of the gift? There was a very obvious and personal price in human lives – our martyrs, and the many cut down by sickness, facing loneliness and long family separation. The LMS history is peppered with heroism and salted with tears. But there is a more inward and widespread cost for the church as a whole – it is that the parent-child relationship set the mental reference for both the

sending and the receiving churches, and that assumption became set in concrete. Many faith communities around the world were brought to birth through the agency of the missionary society, and this was a wonderful work of God. But those churches were treated as infants. The parents supervised and fed them and sent them to school. As I look back it seems extraordinary that a society with these principles should have tutored the Polynesian churches for 100 years before ensuring that they had fully indigenous leadership. What were we doing all that time? It could not be said that among Polynesian Christians there were no skilled leaders, or that there were none with grace and courage, or that the people did not know the Bible. They were as well informed as any average English or Australian group of church members. But during such a long period this had become the mindset. We, here in the western world, have the wisdom and the spiritual gifts; they are receptive. It is now hard to reverse that image but it has to be done.

I think it can only be done in the broader frame of church relationships, in which we meet those from other continents as equals and setting aside all financial power. We must not lose the broad horizon – that is also a present risk for the Uniting Church – but we can be useful to the churches around the globe only if we recognize that all are givers of spiritual insights, all have talent to share, all are needy, all are fragile, all are sisters and brothers given to us by God. We are therefore necessarily within the ecumenical fellowship. We trust the local and embrace the universal.

I am not a Congregationalist today. But I am not an ex-Congregationalist either – like an ex-serviceman who has become a civilian. Rather I am a post-Congregationalist. I have travelled on with this tradition as it has flowed into united churches. We are thankful for the gifts that have come to us in this stream. Are they worth the price that has been paid? For me they are, for I believe these gifts are offered on the ecumenical table to become fruitful in the whole of Christ's church.

In the end it is not given to us to make the judgement. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, whether we build with gold, silver and fine stone, wood, hay or straw, all will be revealed in the fire of judgement of God at the end.¹⁰ But I believe that on the table of the Lord there will be some shining Congregational gold.

Notes

1. Based on a paper presented to the historical society of the Uniting Church in Australia in New South Wales.
2. John Whitgift, *Works*, ed J Ayre (Parker Society, 1851-3), volume I, p.388.
3. The synod of New South Wales.
4. In 1972, the Congregational Church united with the Presbyterian Church of England in the United Reformed Church.

5. "A Declaration of Faith" in David Thompson, ed, *Stating the Gospel: Formulations and declarations of faith from the heritage of the United Reformed Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), pp.197-247, at p.245. Cf Lukas Vischer, ed, *Reformed Witness Today* (Bern: Evangelische Arbeitsstelle Oekumene Schweiz, 1982), pp.114-160, at p.158.
6. It is worth comparing the paragraphs on the creeds in the basis of the United Reformed Church in the UK, where Congregationalists were in a majority, to the similar paragraph in the basis of the Uniting Church in Australia, where Congregationalists were a small minority. URC 18: "The United Reformed Church accepts with thanksgiving the witness borne to the Catholic faith by the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds." UCA 9: "The Uniting Church enters into unity with the Church through the ages by its use of confessions known as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene creed. The Uniting Church receives these as authoritative statements of the Catholic Faith, framed in the language of their day and used by Christians in many days, to declare and guard the right understanding of the faith." I wonder what sort of authority is implied there? That we all believe the virgin birth as historical fact?
7. Quoted by JS Whale, *The Protestant Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), p.260.
8. Bernard Thorogood, ed, *Gales of Change: Responding to a shifting missionary context: the story of the London Missionary Society, 1945-1977* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1994).
9. If I think only of Australians, what remarkable people were Eleanor Rivett, Mac and Nan Partridge, Frank and Nina White, Harold Gaze, Eric Ure, Norman Cocks, Maynard Davies, Hedley and Peggy Bunton and many more.
10. 1 Cor 3.11-15.

Contributors

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Living unity? On the ecumenical movement and globalization¹

Dirk J Smit

How is the ecumenical movement interpreting, evaluating and, where necessary, challenging globalization?² Equally, what is happening to ecumenism as a result of globalization? How is the ecumenical movement being challenged by globalization?

Ecumenism has always been concerned with the world, whether in earlier centuries or during the self-consciously ecumenical 20th century. The Greek word *oikoumene* means the whole inhabited earth: from its inception, therefore, the World Council of Churches (WCC) understood its focus as “everything that relates to the whole task of the whole church to bring the gospel to the whole world”.³ This ecumenical concern for the world is based on a normative vision of what the world is, could be, should be, and will become. Its global concern is integrally embedded in its faith, in its convictions concerning the origin and destiny of the world.

In recent years, attempts have been made to use the metaphor of *oikos* (household) implied in the term *oikoumene* to develop this vision further.⁴ Ecumenical leaders and theologians relate the *oikoumene* of the church to the *oikonomia* or fullness of the life of the trinitarian God, to be reflected in the life of the church;⁵ the global political and economic realities, critically discussed from the perspective of the political economy of the Holy Spirit;⁶ the habitable earth and, in fact, the whole of creation and ecology.⁷ The *oikos* of church, political economy and earth all together form part of the *one household of life* in the economy of the living triune God.

In search of koinonia

Throughout the 20th century, the two major ecumenical strands, Faith and Order⁸ and Life and Work,⁹ both attempted to give fuller content to the “household of life”.

In both cases, it is possible to trace successive visions, images, slogans and programmes.

Faith and Order

The focus of Faith and Order, broadly speaking, has been on the visible unity of churches in the world, both globally and locally. The ecumenical vision of the unity to be achieved has, however, shifted over the years. Several descriptions of the goal (*Zielvorstellungen*) have replaced, complemented or contradicted one another, including “united, not absorbed”, “a communion of communions”,

“reconciled diversity”, “covenant”, “sister churches”, “organic union”, “conciliar fellowship” and “conciliarity”.¹⁰

For obvious reasons, Faith and Order always understood that “efforts towards manifesting the unity of the church” and “efforts towards common witness and service in the world” should be held together.¹¹ Several studies therefore sought to reflect on this relationship, including “The unity of the church and the unity of humankind” and “The community of women and men in the church”. Ongoing criticism prompted a study programme on “The unity of the church and the renewal of human community”, which led to the 1990 text *Church and World*.

This document begins with an analysis of the human situation and the Christian response, describing the world today in terms of opportunities and dangers, hopes and anxieties, both local and global. Living in this world, Christians and churches share in these anxieties and hopes. Called to “become what it is”, the church knows that “this striving is not for the sake of the church alone”: “it is in and for the world that God calls the church”.

The purpose of *Church and World* is therefore “to affirm and explore this interrelation of two fundamental ecumenical tasks: the search for the visible unity of Christ’s church, and the search for common Christian proclamation, witness and service as expressions of God’s mission and love for a world crying out for renewal”.

The guiding questions and the main argument of the document, however, remain ecclesiological. The (identity and task of the) church is understood within the perspective of the kingdom of God (as God’s creative, redeeming and sustaining rule), as both mystery (with emphasis on the reality of the church as body of Christ) and prophetic sign (with emphasis on the church’s role as instrument of God’s grace given to a world crying out for healing and renewal), pointing (doxologically) towards an eschatological realization of God’s saving purpose for all humankind.

Life and Work

The focus of Life and Work, broadly speaking, has been on furthering justice in the world. Again we see a series of diverse and sometimes competing visions, including the idealistic and often activist symbol of “the kingdom of God in society” in the early years; the notion of “a responsible society” just after the second world war; the calling of the church “in periods of rapid social change” in the early 1950s, and in (technical and social) “revolutionary situations” during the 1960s; a church working with enthusiasm and optimism, together with the world, for “development” during the early 1970s, only to become disillusioned and therefore active in the struggles of “liberation ecumenism” from the underside of history; a church dedicated to a long-term just, participatory and sustainable society (JPSS) between 1977 and 1983; and since 1983 a

comprehensive church process to work for justice, peace and the integrity of creation (JPIC).

These successive visions for the struggle for justice in the world obviously depended to a large extent on the context in which the ecumenical church found itself. The changing nature of the world called for changes in the nature of the engagement and priorities of the church. It is therefore only to be expected that accelerating globalization should have a similar effect.

For those involved in Life and Work, ecclesiological issues, including the visible unity of the church, were often regarded as irrelevant, sometimes even obstructive, but in any case secondary. At most, ecclesial unity was sometimes regarded as necessary for practical reasons, to strengthen the collective efforts of the churches in the face of the enormous social, political and economic challenges they faced. The first Life and Work conference (Stockholm 1925) already admitted that “the sins and sorrows, the struggles and losses of the Great War and since have compelled the Christian churches to recognize, humbly and with shame, that ‘the world is too strong for a divided church’”.¹² Later, South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu alluded to this when he said that “apartheid is too strong for a divided church”.¹³ The interest in visible unity was functional and practical. The primary focus was ethical rather than ecclesiological.

A major meeting in the Life and Work tradition, aiming “to engage member churches in a conciliar process of mutual commitment (covenant) to justice, peace and the integrity of creation”, was held in Seoul in 1990.¹⁴ The two expressions “conciliar process” and “covenant” are ecclesologically very significant and together demonstrate the underlying intention to commit churches in a unified and in some sense mutually binding manner to confront the life-and-death issues of the day. However, the result was again lack of integration between the two sets of concerns.

Koinonia

During the last decade voices grew stronger – from both sides – that these two emphases belong together and that the tension between the struggles for unity and justice should be overcome. In different quarters the conviction grew that *koinonia* – the Greek word indicating communion, community, sharing, fellowship, society, participation, solidarity, *Gemeinschaft*, but precisely because of the crucial differences caused by any translation deliberately kept untranslated in the earlier study documents¹⁵ – could serve as a vision integrating these two concerns.¹⁶ In the Canberra statement, the seventh assembly of the WCC (Canberra 1991) already used the notion of *koinonia* to set the unity of the church in the broader context of God’s design.¹⁷

The fifth world conference of Faith and Order (Santiago de Compostela 1993) drew out and developed this Canberra vision.¹⁸ The notion of *koinonia*

structured its proceedings, providing its overall theme – *koinonia* (understanding *koinonia* and its implications, including its biblical witness and perspectives from tradition) – and three subthemes – *koinonia* in faith (“confessing the one faith to God’s glory”), life (“sharing a common life in Christ”) and witness (“called to common witness for a renewed world”).

Two documents from this world conference are of special importance for understanding the role of *koinonia* as an overall and integrating vision: a preparatory document, widely discussed and often revised, but eventually called *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*,¹⁹ and the final message, “On the Way to Fuller *Koinonia*”.²⁰

Describing the search for communion in a time of change, the preparatory text explains: “The pilgrimage towards *koinonia* in faith, life and witness takes place in an ever changing world and ecumenical situation... Some believe that the real global revolution of our epoch is only just beginning.” And this is followed by a detailed description of the phenomena usually understood as globalization.²¹

There can be little doubt that globalization played a major role in bringing the ecumenical movement to the point where it is seriously striving to combine ecclesiological and ethical concerns under the vision of *koinonia*.²² There have always been those in ecumenism who suffered under this unresolved tension and often open – also bureaucratic – animosity, and who always wanted to bridge this divide.²³ The urgency of recent efforts, however, is due to “a fundamental shift in historical consciousness, felt in both spheres of ecclesiology and ethics... that presuppositions that have been taken for granted in the past, regarding both the church and its self-understanding as well as the forming of ethical judgments, are beginning to crumble”,²⁴ an awareness that changes are taking place in the world that challenge the ecumenical church in basic ways.

Ecclesiology and ethics

The deliberate purpose behind this recent focus on *koinonia* is therefore the attempt to bring ecclesiological and ethical concerns together in a new and fruitful way. In the 1990s, Unit I (Faith and Order) and Unit III (JPIC) of the WCC jointly organized three consultations within the framework of an ecclesiology and ethics project. Since the three consultation reports are *Costly Unity*, *Costly Commitment*, and *Costly Obedience*, the project has been described as a litany of “costlies”.

Costly unity

The explicit purpose of the first meeting (Rønne, Denmark, 1993) was serious dialogue about “long-lived tensions and divisions”, this “cleft... exposing a history of differences which runs the length of the modern ecumenical movement”.²⁵

To dissolve the tensions, the report proposes to see the church as *moral community*. “It all comes to the same point: the church not only has, but is, a social ethic, a *koinonia* ethic.”

“The being (*esse*) of the church is at stake in the justice, peace and integrity of creation process,” it argues, and “*koinonia* is an apt term for both”. The major part of the document consists of an exposition, under different headings, of the nature of such *koinonia* and its implications.

“Cheap unity” avoids morally contested issues lest they disturb the unity of the church. Costly unity is discovering the churches’ unity as a gift of pursuing justice and peace, and often exacts a price.

Church as moral community begins with the moral meaning of the sacraments themselves. The sacraments as people-shaping rites can lead into sacramental living. The bridge between ecclesiology and ethics is to be found in the experience of worship and the deepening of spirituality.

This report contributed to the important role as an integrating notion that *koinonia* would play a few months later at Santiago de Compostela. Already, however, a second joint meeting was planned, partly because the idea of the church as a moral community was unclear and led to many questions and criticisms.

Costly commitment

This second meeting took place at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute, Jerusalem, in 1994.²⁶ Part of the problem with the description of the church as moral community, it reported, is that this may seem like a description of what is already and always the case, particularly when it builds on the experiences of the sacraments, worship and spirituality. This would not sufficiently account for the many differences between churches, and for their lack of ethical involvement.

Accordingly, the report emphasizes the calling, the vocation, of the church. The churches – even as moral communities – are called to *commit* themselves to one another, recognizing that they need one another on their ecumenical journey. Such commitment is an essential foundation for their common reflection and action. It becomes increasingly clear – the report claims – that the road to costly unity leads necessarily through a *costly commitment* of the churches to one another. Those who have previously been wary of “moral reductionism” should commit themselves to the ethical character of the church. Those who have been deeply engaged in ethical praxis only should commit themselves also to church renewal.

The report emphasizes the crucial importance of this ecumenical commitment for being the church – and asks whether churches can still call themselves “church” if they are not committed to this joint process. To flesh out the too-abstract notion of a moral community, it suggests notions of moral

formation and moral *discernment*. Moral formation, as part of the churches' overall task of spiritual formation, would train church members in discernment, helping them to analyse ethical issues from the perspective of the gospel; preparing them best to participate in the light of their faith in the moral struggles, complexities and challenges of the present day; and thus making it possible for the churches to contribute to the moral wellbeing of the societies in which they live, for example through informed participation in public debate on specific ethical issues. The fraying of the moral fibre in many societies – says the document – makes this role all the more urgent today.

Although the major part of *Costly Commitment* is devoted to developing “the language” of moral formation and discernment and demonstrating in how many ways such language could prove useful to understand *koinonia*, it concludes that much more needs to be done in this regard. That happened at the third and final consultation.

Costly obedience

The final meeting was held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1996.²⁷ The theme of moral formation was further pursued by asking “what it might mean to speak of the church as a global communion of moral witnessing”.

The obedience to which the church is called is often costly, the reports says. It may require the churches to position themselves in relation to the issues of particular times and places in ways which call for courage, perseverance and sacrifice. Such faithfulness may even come to the point of martyrdom.

Again, the report finds it necessary, if difficult, to interpret the particular time and place, and does that in terms of globalization.²⁸ In the light of this description, it then discusses the meaning of moral formation in the world, the churches' moral failure in face of nationalistic, ethnic and economic violence, the grounding of the church's moral formation in baptism and the eucharist, and finally the idea of an ecumenical moral communion and the possible role of the WCC in such an endeavour.

In summary, this study – at least partly caused by the impact and challenge of globalization on ecumenism – sought to explore the link between what the church *is* and what the church *does*, and brought both these aspects under critical scrutiny and reflection. The *koinonia* to which the *oikoumene* is called, which involves communion in faith, in life and in witness, takes the form of costly unity (which means that faith involves discipleship) and calls the churches to costly commitment to one another, as well as to costly obedience, facing the struggles for life of every age.

Matters arising

It has become clear that, in the face of globalization, the ecumenical movement is challenged to consider at least three sets of questions anew. They deal with

the nature and calling of the church, the nature of ethics, and the theological competence of the church.

The church

It is still an open question whether the attempts to integrate ecclesiological and ethical concerns have been successful. It is understandable why criticism of the study and its achievements was forthcoming from different perspectives. More attention to the relationship between identity and responsibility is needed.²⁹

It is helpful that the WCC has increasingly taken the different concrete forms (*Gestalten*) of the church more seriously, although not yet in a very systematic fashion.³⁰

At least six forms should be distinguished when considering the identity and calling of the church and the relationship between the church and globalization: the church 1) as ecumenical church, whether global, national, regional or local, 2) as denomination or confessional tradition, 3) as (mostly local) congregations, 4) as worshipping communities, 5) as individual believers in the fullness of their personal, private and public lives and 6) as believers participating in initiatives and actions, together with others, whether Christian or not, committed to the same cause. All six have received attention in the recent studies and documents.

1. The impact of globalization has perhaps been the most dramatic on the understanding of the ecumenical church. A concrete illustration is “the several years of sustained theological reflection” as “an ongoing journey of self-reflection on the nature and purpose of the ecumenical movement”, leading to the comprehensive policy statement “Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches”, presented to the eighth assembly in Harare.³¹ Ecumenism is most certainly in a time of transition.³²

Among the many important issues to be considered here is “reception”,³³ sometimes called the single most difficult issue for ecumenism. When and how do churches, congregations and believers adequately receive the studies, documents, and decisions produced at the ecumenical level?³⁴

2. The nature, role, importance and future of denominations and confessional traditions have been addressed in recent documents in new ways, with a new awareness of their significance. The visible structures of a church, its polity and order, its bureaucracy and everyday activities, can witness to or contradict the gospel. To take the actual church (*die wirkliche Kirche*) seriously, we have to take seriously the relationships between message and structure (*das Verhältnis von Botschaft und Ordnung – als Grundproblem evangelischen Kirchenverständnisses*), between truth-claims and forms of life (*Wahrheit und Existenzform*).³⁵ Indeed, a polity is already an ethic.³⁶

3. In a time of weakening ecumenical and even denominational commitment, the role of local congregations has become extremely important. This is perhaps where the effect of globalization – called “glocalization” by leading theorist Roland Robertson³⁷ – is felt the most vividly. This is, however, at the same time the place where a sense of household and belonging could be fostered and where the spiritual and moral formation so sorely needed could take place, if at all.³⁸

4. In a remarkable way, recent ecumenical reflection has emphasized the role of worship. Traditionally, the ecumenical and liturgical movements went hand in hand. Several essays by Methodist ecumenist Geoffrey Wainwright in *Worship with One Accord* tell the story of this close connection,³⁹ as does the rest of his theological work.⁴⁰ Worship also almost always played a major role in the activities of the ecumenical movement. In recent years, however, a new awareness of the importance of worship – the eucharist, but also understood in a broader sense – for formation has become visible.⁴¹

5. That the church also – ultimately, according to some Protestant views – consists of individual believers has seldom been the main focus of attention in the ecumenical movement, precisely because of its understandable concern with national and transnational involvement and activities. Under the impact of globalization and late modernism – in such forms as spreading secularization, radical individualism, and destructive pluralisms – the realization is growing that believers have important roles to play in building up (a diverse number of) households of life in the contemporary world.

6. Finally, several recent ecumenical documents raise serious ecclesiological questions regarding experiences – including those of real *koinonia* – while participating, outside the traditional spheres of the church, in diverse civil and public initiatives and activities,⁴² together with people of other persuasions and religious convictions, but sharing the same moral commitments.⁴³

Ethics

It is also extremely helpful that the ecumenical movement has been challenged to consider the complexity of morality and ethics more fully than often before, when it seemed fairly clear what Christians, irrespective of tradition or confession (since “doctrine divides but service unites”), should be doing in the world.

Challenged to analyse and understand why Christians and churches disagree with one another on moral issues, the ecumenical movement has distinguished different moral quests and approaches – by way of vision, value, virtue, or obligation – and pointed to different moral environments, sources for and pathways to moral deliberation, and authoritative means of moral

discernment.⁴⁴ All these insights represent valuable progress on the way to responsible church life – including formation, decision-making, witness and involvement – in the new globalizing world.

Theological competence

The church's involvement – particularly that of the ecumenical church – in public affairs, whether internationally, nationally or locally, is too often seen as merely endorsing or supporting specific ideological or interest groups. The church often lacks credibility. Many people, including church members, have become sceptical of its role in public life – whether it is supportive and legitimating, critical and prophetic, or activist and advocatory. Even theologians involved in ethics are often seen as nothing more than “social scientists with religious interest”.⁴⁵

The church is, therefore, challenged to act on the basis of its own theological competence.⁴⁶ The church should rethink its contribution, its communication and its commitments.

1. What theological perspective and contribution can the church offer? What does the church as church *know*? However controversial they may be, recent attempts to link ethics to ecclesiology, even to Trinitarian theological insights and convictions, offer challenging beginnings.

2. How does the church speak about public – also “glocal” (Robertson) – issues? To whom does she speak? With what kind of authority? With what kind of expectation? Acknowledgement that the church is in the process of learning to speak in new, and more acceptable, responsible and hopefully meaningful ways in the new world is one of the valuable insights gained.⁴⁷ The thorny issue of teaching authority has always been on the ecumenical agenda, but its importance for ethics has suddenly become central.⁴⁸

3. What does the church do about these challenging glocal issues? How does the church get involved? And even more fundamentally, how credibly does the church demonstrate its own convictions in its own structures, life and activities? Remarkably enough, a certain optimism regarding the ecumenical church precisely in the face of globalization can be detected. The North American Lutheran and ecumenical ethicist, Larry Rasmussen, reminds us that “few communities are better poised geographically or by virtue of their vocation. Spin the globe and stab your finger to stop it and you probably put your first digit through the roof of somebody's church somewhere. When we most need institutions that are as local as the neighbourhood and as global as the planet itself, we have at least one transnational body already on the job whose very calling it is to gather all, on equal terms, into caring community across barriers

that divide.”⁴⁹ In South Africa, it is often said that on the national level no organization has a greater potential than the church to play a meaningful role in civil society – in social welfare, education, and many other spheres of life.

Globalization, community and ecumenism

It is widely held that modern societies often lack meaningful experiences of solidarity, fellowship, support and care. From different perspectives and for diverse reasons, social critics, commentators, analysts, politicians, philosophers, and sociologists since Tönnies and Durkheim have all bemoaned the lack of community in typically modern societies.

Globalization claims to produce a new experience of *Weltgemeinschaft*, a new sense of belonging and identity. Such slogans as “global village” and “world civilization” and descriptions of globalization as “the way in which relations of power and communication are stretched across the globe, involving compressions of time and space *and a recomposition of social relationships*”⁵⁰ point in this direction. What is at stake is the significance of our age for individual and social morality and its consequences for the formation, maintenance and alteration of personal identity.⁵¹

Robert J Schreiter, a North American Catholic scholar, explores the challenges and opportunities of globalization under the significant title *The New Catholicity*. Schreiter sees communication – including issues of culture, identity, and social change – as the new element in an enlarged concept of catholicity. The church should respond to globalization by adding communication to the two traditional elements of “extension throughout the world” and “fullness of faith”.⁵²

Katholikos means “that which belongs to the whole” or “that which comprehends the whole or the totality”. One may argue that catholicity is the issue today precisely because globalization presents itself as a form of catholicity, claiming universality in space, culture and time; fullness of truth; unity and wholeness; and rule and authority.⁵³

From a religious and moral perspective, one may argue that the real challenges embedded in globalization are not so much to what we *do*, but to who we *are*, who we are becoming, what the nature of the communion is that we experience. Are these the kind of people we want to be, the kind of communion we want to be part of? Ultimately at stake is the kind of *koinonia* we are, the nature of the household and the households we belong to.

It is precisely for this reason that globalization is challenging the ecumenical movement to rethink its traditional ecclesiological and ethical concerns in the perspective of *koinonia* and *oikos*. Outgoing WCC general secretary Konrad Raiser develops Paul’s image of *oikodomé*, mutual upbuilding:

The central challenge today, both for the understanding of the church and for ethics, is to promote the rebuilding of sustainable communities...

Underlying this is the quest for a new ethics of life in relationships, and the concept of *oikodomé* could give direction to this quest. *Oikodomé* as the building up of the community aims to strengthen the church as a fellowship of hope, solidarity and trust in which the rules of a new life-centred culture and ethic can be developed and practised.⁵⁴

This challenge requires that ecumenism develop its own theological understanding of community, in order to analyse and where necessary engage the kind of community offered by globalization. The informative contribution by Heinrich Bedford-Strohm in which he attempts to do exactly this with regard to typically modern societies, especially Germany, serves as a helpful illustration of the task that lies ahead.⁵⁵

A South African postscript

In 1982, the (then) Dutch Reformed Mission Church drafted a confession of faith, rejecting the theology of apartheid in the light of its own understanding of the Christian gospel.⁵⁶

The Confession of Belhar followed a threefold logic. God is praised as the giver of unity to the church who calls the church to practise this unity; as the reconciler of believers with Godself and with one another who calls them to practise this reconciliation; and as in a special way the God of the suffering, the downtrodden, and the oppressed who calls the church to follow him in this. Doxological statements about God thus lead to ecclesiology and then to ethics.

On the basis of convictions living in their hearts, these believers rejected apartheid theology, ideology and practice (although apartheid was deliberately nowhere mentioned) in the name of *living unity*, *real reconciliation* and *caring justice*, even if this should lead to costly obedience, as confessed in a concluding section.

Looking back, it is obvious that the remarkable impact of Belhar – at least amongst the members of what is now the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) – was due to the realization that living unity, real reconciliation and caring justice belong together integrally. We cannot achieve one without the others.

This is precisely the challenge that has confronted post-apartheid South Africa. It is even possible to argue that this society went through three successive phases of transformation in which these issues were at stake.

The first phase was the after-Babel period in which a deeply fragmented society had to establish and cement a newly found unity in the form of a constitutional democracy. The second phase was the Mandela period – a period symbolized by the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its chair, Archbishop Desmond Tutu – in which people had to become reconciled with one another and themselves, and with their past memories, present situations and future expectations. The third and current phase is one of real

transformation and renaissance towards economic justice, self-respect and dignity.

It is also clear that the later phases did not replace the earlier ones. Living unity and real reconciliation remain just as urgent challenges as caring justice.

If the insights gained from the developments in the ecumenical movement in the face of globalization are valid, URCSA could contribute to ecumenical and public moral discourse in South Africa, in the first place, by making use of its own theological competence in speaking the language of unity, reconciliation and justice and reminding itself and others that these three belong together. URCSA should also address questions concerning its communication of these convictions and concerning its own life, witness and activities in the service of unity, reconciliation and justice.

URCSA has already contributed through the Belhar confession to ecumenical and public discourse on caring justice, both in South Africa and in the wider ecumenical movement.⁵⁷

URCSA may also need on the basis of its own confession to witness to the continuing need for real reconciliation. In the ecclesiology and ethics study, some voices, particularly from the margins, reminded us from time to time that “costly reconciliation” should not be forgotten.⁵⁸ URCSA would agree. “You cannot aim at unity without working for reconciliation, you cannot expect reconciliation to happen without justice.”⁵⁹ The three belong together, and in situations with a history of oppression, exclusion, violence and suffering, working for reconciliation may be costly indeed.

Facing globalization and its own claims concerning community, however, it is perhaps time for URCSA to recall its own explication of living unity, of *koinonia*.⁶⁰ Living unity according to the Christian vision calls for more than globalization seems able to offer. Living unity calls for more than the unity of democratic structures, whether legal, political and bureaucratic, and the unity of globalization, whether driven by the market or by technology and communication. In themselves these structures and processes do not guarantee the kind of living unity, of *koinonia*, that the church longs for, the world is in need of, and we believe we are called to serve.

Notes

1. This article is based on a paper read during an interdisciplinary consultation in Tutzing, Germany, in June 2000, on “Consequences of Globalization for Germany and South Africa”, jointly organized by the Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa (EFSA) and the Evangelische Akademie, Tutzing. I focus mainly on the World Council of Churches, but a broader interpretation of the ecumenical movement would yield a similar picture.
2. The movement has engaged in several major projects on themes normally related to globalization: the dramatic worldwide shifts in economics, mass communication and technology; the integrity of creation; civil society; and respect for context,

- culture, difference, and locality. On economics, see eg *Economics: A matter of faith*, CCPD Documents 11 (Geneva: WCC, 1988), *Christian Faith and World Economy Today* (Geneva: WCC, 1992), and “The Debt Issue” and “Globalization” in Diane Kessler, ed, *Together on the Way: Official report of the eighth assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 1999), pp.177-182, 183f.
3. See Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition* (Geneva: WCC, 1991), p.84 with reference in footnote 14.
 4. According to Konrad Raiser, *ibid.*, p.87, Ernst Lange was the first to use “household” as a translation of “oikoumene”: Lange, “The Malaise in the Ecumenical Movement: Notes on the present situation”, *The Ecumenical Review* 23, 1971, p.8. Since then, many people and studies have done that in great detail, see eg Thomas F Best and Martin Robra, eds, *Costly Commitment: Ecclesiology and ethics* (Geneva: WCC, 1995), pp.43-45.
 5. In his speech at the Vancouver assembly, general secretary Philip Potter explicitly linked the form of the church as a fellowship to the metaphor of “house” or “household”. Since then, many people have developed this idea further. In his important interpretative essay on the Harare assembly, Lewis S Mudge uses this as the key to unlock and understand the present state of the discussion: “Towards a Hermeneutic of the Household: ‘Ecclesiology and Ethics’ after Harare”, *The Ecumenical Review* 51, 1999, pp.304-314.
 6. See eg Julio de Santa Ana, Konrad Raiser and Ulrich Duchrow, *The Political Economy of the Holy Spirit* (Geneva: 1990).
 7. See eg the informative study by Ernst Conradie, *Hope for the Earth: Vistas on a new century* (Bellville, RSA: University of the Western Cape, 2000).
 8. See eg the informative study guide by the Dutch Reformed and ecumenical scholar Martien E Brinkman, *Progress in Unity? Fifty years of theology within the World Council of Churches: 1945-1995* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1996).
 9. For the early years before the formation of the WCC, see Paul Abrecht, “Life and Work” in Nicholas Lossky et al, eds, *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC, 2002), pp.691f. After 1948 it continued as a separate unit of the council, with many desks responsible for a large number of important programmes and projects.
 10. See eg Dirk J Smit, “Kerkeenheid in die Ekumene”, *Apologia* 7, 1992, pp.43-52; Harding Meyer, *Ökumenische Zielvorstellungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996).
 11. *Church and World: The unity of the church and the renewal of human community*, Faith and Order Paper 151 (Geneva: WCC, 1990), p.vii.
 12. Edward Shillito, *Life and Work: The universal conference on life and work held in Stockholm, 1925* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1926), p.96.
 13. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “Towards *Koinonia* in Faith, Life and Witness”, in Thomas F Best and Günther Gassmann, eds, *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia* (Geneva: WCC 1994), p.96.
 14. See *Now is the Time: Final document and other texts* (Geneva: WCC 1990).
 15. The Dublin text, a draft intended for discussion, still only transliterated the Greek “so as to avoid slanting its meaning” (p.4). For an excellent discussion of the different meanings and uses in biblical contexts, see John Reumann, “*Koinonia* in Scripture: Survey of biblical texts”, in *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*, pp.37-69.

16. For the recent popularity of the notion of *koinonia* in ecumenical circles, see George Vandervelde, "Koinonia Ecclesiology – Ecumenical Breakthrough?" *One in Christ* 29, 1993, pp.126-142; Susan Wood, "Ecclesial Koinonia in Ecumenical Dialogues", *One in Christ* 30, 1994, pp.124-145. Also very insightful is George Vandervelde, "Koinonia between Church and World", *Exchange* 26/1, pp.2-39.
17. See Günther Gassmann and John A Radano, eds, *The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Ecumenical perspectives on the 1991 Canberra statement on unity*, Faith and Order Paper 163 (Geneva: WCC, 1993).
18. The official report: Thomas F Best and Günther Gassmann, eds, *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia* (Geneva: WCC, 1994).
19. Published separately as Faith and Order Paper 161 (Geneva: WCC, 1993), but also included in *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*, pp.263-295.
20. In *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*, pp.225-227. The three section reports are found on pages pp.229-262.
21. *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness* (Geneva: WCC, 1993), pp.7-8.
22. Ecumenism is one facet of the integration and internationalization that have long been a feature of human history, most notably during the periods 1870-1920 (when such inventions as the steamship, telegraph, railroad and telephone eradicated natural borders) and from 1945 to the present (which has seen massive increases in the flow of goods and information). These were also the periods during which the activities of the ecumenical movement expanded most rapidly.
23. The metaphor of "bridging" is often used to describe the task ahead; see eg "Introduction" in Thomas F Best and Martin Robra, eds, *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical ethical engagement, moral formation and the nature of the church* (Geneva: WCC, 1997), pp.vii-xii.
24. See eg Konrad Raiser, "Ecumenical Discussion of Ethics and Ecclesiology", *The Ecumenical Review* 48, 1996, pp.3-10.
25. For a full report, Thomas F Best and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, eds, *Costly Unity: Koinonia and justice, peace and creation* (Geneva: WCC 1993).
26. For a full report, Thomas F Best and Martin Robra, eds., *Costly Commitment: Ecclesiology and ethics* (Geneva: WCC 1995); the papers are also available in *Ecumenical Review* 47, 1995, pp.127-187.
27. For the basis document discussed at the meeting, Lewis S Mudge, "Ecclesiology and Ethics in Current Ecumenical Debate", *Ecumenical Review* 48, 1996, 11-27; for the papers presented by John W de Gruchy, Margot Kässmann, Vigen Guroian and Duncan B Forrester, *Ecumenical Review* 49, 1997, pp.356-383; for the statement, *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, pp.50-89.
28. "We are rapidly becoming a global community, yet a community constituted by dehumanizing economic and political relationships... The planetary scale of our human struggle presents challenges beyond any the churches have faced before. Moral issues, formerly seen as having to do mainly with personal conduct within stable orders of value, have become radicalized. They have to do with life. Before we can speak of a 21st-century 'global civilization', life together on this planet will need shared visions and institutional expressions for which we have few relevant precedents. As Christians we speak of an *oikoumene*, or inclusive horizon of human belonging, offered by God in Jesus Christ to the human race. Following the

scriptures, we call this a ‘household of life’, a ‘heavenly city’ where justice, peace and care for creation’s integrity prevail. But what may it mean to live lives in the here and now which manifest the first fruits of these gifts and act in anticipation of their fulfilment?

“Christian faith, today as in the past, risks being captured for ethnic and nationalistic purposes. It risks being called on to help protect the privileges and ways of dominant classes. Our brief sojourn in South Africa has suggested to us that the former apartheid regime’s theologically constructed defence of racial separation could become an unacknowledged precedent for violence by the rich nations of the northern hemisphere, facing as they do immigration pressures and economic demands from the south and the continuing threat of counter-violence from multitudes of the still-wretched of the earth.

“If the church is to fulfil its calling to be a sign of God’s reign in such a situation, it is imperative that it begin to understand itself as an ecumenical moral community. Hence the importance of the theme of moral formation. The church needs to ask how – with all its theological, liturgical and sacramental resources – it can *be* a community of relevant moral witness for such a world.” *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, pp.51-52.

29. Several questions come to mind, eg whether churches can still call themselves churches if they do not engage themselves in ecumenical efforts, *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, pp.28-29; whether they are still churches if they do not follow their ethical calling in the world; whether it is helpful to speak of ethical heresy, eg *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, pp.5ff.
30. Wolfgang Huber, *Kirche* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag), pp.44-58.
31. The document and a discussion in *The Ecumenical Review* 51, 1999, pp.96-113.
32. See the title of Konrad Raiser’s essays, already published in German in 1989, on a paradigm shift in ecumenism, *Ecumenism in Transition* (Geneva: WCC, 1991). Since then Raiser has regularly made significant contributions in this regard, often in *The Ecumenical Review*, but also in the more popular work *To be the Church: Challenges and hopes for a new millennium* (Geneva: WCC, 1997).
33. See “The World Council of Churches as marker and space-maker for an ecumenical moral communion” in *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, pp.76-87.
34. Piet J Naudé and Dirk J Smit, “Reception – an ecumenical crisis or opportunity for South African churches?”, *Scriptura* 73, 2000/2, pp.175-188 (with literature).
35. The references in parentheses are to different essays by Wolfgang Huber in his collection, *Folgen christlicher Freiheit* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag 1983), all developed in conversation with Barmen and Bonhoeffer. These ideas have played a crucial role in the church order of the new Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, established on the basis of the Confession of Belhar (1986), in the tradition of Barmen.
36. *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, p.45.
37. Robertson preserves attention to both locality and globality, also called particularism and universalism, by arguing for “a massive, twofold process involving the interpenetration of *the universalization of particularism and the particularization of universalism*”. Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social theory and global culture* (London: Sage, 1992), p.100.

38. See eg the discussions of “the local and the global” and “diversity and unity” in *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, pp.13-15.
39. Geoffrey Wainwright, *Worship with One Accord: Where liturgy and ecumenism embrace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
40. See Dirk J Smit, “Spirituality, Worship, Confession, and Church Unity: A story from South Africa” in David S Cunningham, Ralph Del Colle and Lucas Lamadrid, eds, *Ecumenical Theology in Worship, Doctrine, and Life: Essays presented to Geoffrey Wainwright on his sixtieth birthday* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.271-281.
41. For related discussions from a South African perspective, see Dirk J Smit, “The Church and Civil Society”, unpublished paper, EFSA conference, 1996, and “Liturgy and Life? On the importance of worship for Christian ethics”, *Scriptura* 1997/3, pp.259-280. Cf Duncan Forrester, *The True Church and Morality: Reflections on ecclesiology and ethics* (Geneva: WCC, 1997).
42. See eg the discussion of “relationships with movements and groups” in “Costly Unity”, *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, pp.15ff.
43. For many, the question is obviously whether these movements do not represent the *real* church. “It is an empirically verifiable observation that commitment to and working for particular moral causes creates community among people. The experience of JPIC again and again has been that people have been gathered into a fellowship which can be described as *koinonia*. Involvement in these struggles of human community generates this *koinonia* and often enlightens doctrine. An ‘ecclesiological’ power is at work here, frequently moving participants to rich liturgical expression and raising deep religious questions for them, questions of faith and commitment. The power of the Holy Spirit is present here – this is the testimony.” *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, pp.4, 33-36. During the struggle against apartheid, many South Africans, including ministers, had similar experiences and faced similar questions.
44. See *The Ecumenical Dialogue on Moral Issues: Potential sources of common witness or of divisions*. A study document of the joint working group between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC (Geneva: WCC 1996); also published in *The Ecumenical Review* 48, 1996.
45. In the cynical words of Stanley Hauerwas, “On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological”, *Against the Nations* (Minneapolis: Winston-Seabury Press, 1985), p.28.
46. This is an underlying theme in Wolfgang Huber, *Kirche in der Zeitenwende: Gesellschaftliche Wandel und Erneuerung der Kirche* (Gütersloh: Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung).
47. Cf eg the insightful study by British ecumenical theologian Keith Clements, *Learning to Speak: The church’s voice in public affairs* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995).
48. For an instructive overview of earlier discussions, see Anton Houtepen, “Teaching authority” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, pp.1093-7.
49. Larry Rasmussen, *Moral Fragments and Moral Community: A proposal for church in society* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), p.150.
50. Ali Mohammed, ed, *International Communication and Globalization* (London: Sage, 1997), p.3.
51. Chris Arthur, *The Globalization of Communications* (Geneva: WCC 1998), pp.1-3.

52. Robert J Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the global and the local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).
53. For an excellent introduction to the traditional view of catholicity, see Willie D Jonker, "Catholicity, unity and truth", in Paul G Schrottenboer, ed, *Catholicity and Secession: A dilemma?* (Kampen: Kok, 1992), pp.16-27.
54. Konrad Raiser, "Ecumenical discussion of ethics and ecclesiology", *Ecumenical Review* 48, 1996, pp.9ff. Raiser is making use of Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, *God's Spirit: Transforming a world in crisis* (Geneva: WCC/New York: Crossroad, 1995).
55. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, *Gemeinschaft aus kommunikativer Freiheit: Sozialer Zusammenhalt in der modernen Gesellschaft. Ein theologischer Beitrag* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1999). In a first major part, he considers from a sociological perspective the often presumed lack or changed nature of community (*Gemeinschaft*) in modern societies. He discusses Tönnies, Durkheim, Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim's theory of individualization and a wide variety of empirical surveys. In a second major part, he uses a theological-ethical approach, asking about the nature of Christian love as basis for community. Starting with the popular although now discredited distinction between *agape* and *eros*, he moves on to some burning questions. In a final section, he argues for a form of community in modern societies that builds on the notion of "communicative freedom" in dealing constructively with pluralism. In this way, he develops the ideas of civil society, reciprocity and public church, informed by theological competence but directed at urgent contemporary social questions.
56. For information, see Dirk J Smit, "Das Bekenntnis von Belhar: Entstehung, Inhalt, Rezeption, Relevanz", *Das Bekenntnis von Belhar und seine Bedeutung für die reformierten Kirchen in Deutschland* (Detmold: Lippische Landeskirche 1998), pp.17-33.
57. URCSA has for example been deeply involved in the study that led to the decision of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to initiate a *processus confessionis* regarding world economic injustice and ecological destruction at its 23rd general council (Debrecen 1997). See Dirk J Smit, "A time for confession? On the WARC project 'Reformed Faith and Economic Justice'", unpublished paper, Theological Society of Southern Africa, 1999. Several churches outside Southern Africa have also taken the Belhar confession seriously, including the Uniting Protestant Church in Belgium, the Reformed Church in America, the Reformierter Bund (and its members) and the Evangelische Kirche der Union. In 2003, the EKU became part of the Union Evangelischer Kirchen in der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (UEK).
58. See eg Elizabeth S Tapia's closing comment in "Reflections of a Filipina Christian", *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, pp.112-117.
59. Russel Botman, in his speech to the synod of the Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU), May 2000, in Berlin, on the theme "With Barmen beyond Barmen".
60. "We believe
 - that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another;
 - that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ;
 - that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously

a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain;

that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe; that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the Church and must be resisted;

that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practise and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one Name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ; that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity;

that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God;

that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church.

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutization hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation;

which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace whilst believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation;

which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin; which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be consideration in determining membership of the church."

The Alliance in dialogue, 1970–2003

Alan PF Sell

For more than thirty years the World Alliance of Reformed Churches has been involved in international bilateral dialogues with other Christian world communions.¹

It is entirely appropriate that in the interests of good stewardship of resources, and before taking further steps, we should pause and reflect upon the journey so far. We need to thank God for the progress made in deepening relations with our friends of other Christian traditions, and we need honestly to appraise ourselves to see whether we have done all that we might to harvest the fruit of the dialogues to date.

The motivation in all of our conversations with other Christian world communions is the desire to manifest that unity in Christ into which God has, by grace, already called us, so that the church truly becomes a sign of the ultimate reconciliation of all things (“the whole inhabited earth” – not just the churches) in God. Calvin declared that “there is no other bond of church unity than the fact that Christ, the Lord, has reconciled us with God the Father and has gathered us out of the dispersion into the communion of his body, that so we may grow together through his word and spirit into one heart and soul”.²

However much our Reformed history has been blighted by inner-family secessions (a fact that makes our protestations of catholicity to our dialogue partners less than fully convincing), at our best we have understood that the Reformers did not set out to create new churches, but to reform the one church of Christ according to the word of God.

It is not surprising, then, that during the Prague 1956 executive committee of the World Presbyterian Alliance John A Mackay felt able to call for a meeting, first held in the following year, that developed into the annual meeting of secretaries of Christian world communions.³ In these gatherings the secretaries and other participants laid a foundation of personal relationships and mutual knowledge of the several communions on which the future dialogue programme could be built.

A spur towards bilateral dialogue came from the second Vatican council, which prompted the Roman Catholic Church to reach out in conversation with other Christian families.

The first phase of the Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogue ran from 1970 to 1977, while conversations co-sponsored with the Lutheran World Federation also began in 1970.⁴ From that time to the present the Alliance has been a partner in international bilateral dialogues with eleven Christian world communions.

Dialogue in question

The path of bilateral dialogue has not always run smoothly. Let us address at the outset some questions concerning the ways in which dialogues are conducted.⁵

Representation

Some have queried whether the Alliance's dialogue teams adequately represent the family as a whole and particular categories within it. Clearly, the Alliance could not sponsor dialogue teams in excess of two hundred members so that every member church participated directly in every dialogue: a measure of mutual trust is called for.

As to "the family as a whole", our Alliance turns upon the fact that in one way or another (whether by sixteenth-century origins or later missionary or revivalist activity) we find our roots in the Bible as recovered in a major wing of the European Reformation. But this leaves ample scope for variety. Whether we think in terms of liturgy, polity, attitudes towards classical confessions, or ethical stances, there are considerable differences of theory and practice among us⁶ – to such a degree that some of our dialogue partners have been known to wonder with whom, precisely, are they in dialogue?⁷ When recruiting a dialogue team we need to ensure that at least some members are thoroughly conversant with these diverse tendencies.

As to the representation of "particular categories", Jane Dempsey Douglass has lamented the paucity of women in Alliance dialogue teams.⁸ Strenuous efforts have been made over the years of dialogue to rectify this, but it is easier said than done. One relevant consideration is that a number of member churches (not all of them in the developing world) do not at present ordain women, still less entrust them with theological teaching. Indeed, some of our more prominent western member churches have admitted women to the ministry only a few decades ago, and few member churches, large or small, did so before 1917. My impression is that, happily, the situation is improving in many places, and that more and more member churches are, on the biblical grounds that Dr Douglass specifies,⁹ coming to understand that our oneness in the Christ who breaks down barriers (Galatians 3.28) entails the seeking of justice for all in the fellowship, in order that the gifts granted to all by God may be fully exercised.

Sins of omission

Some have felt that the dialogue reports omit matters of importance. For example, Dr Douglass regrets the absence of "awareness of women or issues concerning women" from the dialogues with the Baptists and the Methodists, and this despite the fact that women were present in the Methodist-Reformed dialogue.¹⁰ This might be taken as implying either that the women participants in the latter dialogue failed in their duty, or that the men decided not to pay heed to their

contributions. Neither is the case. Each dialogue has its own terms of reference, and the Methodist-Reformed dialogue sought to address the specific question, How far, if at all, should the traditional theological differences between Methodists and Reformed (notably those surrounding evangelical Arminianism and Calvinism) continue to be church-dividing?¹¹ By contrast, there is a substantial section on the ordination of women in the Anglican-Reformed report – as might have been expected, given that “ministry” was a prominent theme in the discussion.¹²

Particular terms of reference mean that in any dialogue there will be many live issues that will not be discussed. For the same reason we should expect that some participants will be acknowledged experts on the technical issues concerned, while others will keep the participants anchored in reality by speaking from various regions concerning the relations of the dialogue partners at the grassroots. This, in turn, raises another representational point: the dialogue partners are not equal in size, and are unequally distributed around the world. While Roman Catholics are widely dispersed, there are many parts of the world where the Mennonites, the Disciples of Christ and the Oriental Orthodox, for example, are not to be found. It is important that at least some members of any dialogue team have personal knowledge of the other partner.

Language

Often when the drafting of a final report is imminent one or more team members (almost invariably from the United States) will, sometimes to the puzzlement of participants whose first language is not English, raise the question of the language to be used in the report.¹³ In so far as this is a plea that “inclusive language” be employed where males and females are jointly referred to, the point is widely taken. It does seem to me a requirement of the gospel that we should not use language that might be taken as implying that we are ignoring half the human race.

The less commonly agreed aspect of the problem relates to the language used of God. On the one hand, there are those who feel that to use masculine personal pronouns when referring to God reinforces patriarchy and tempts people into thinking (wrongly) that God is male. For the same reasons some of the same people substitute such formulations as “Creator, Christ, Sustainer” for the traditional trinitarian language of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. On the other hand, there are those who contend that especially when New Age ideas and sundry gnosticisms are prevalent it is important that Christians use language that makes it clear that the Christian Godhead is not male or female, but personal; they feel that substitutions for Father, Son and Holy Spirit result in the loss of the idea of the inner personal relations of the Trinity; and they resent what they perceive as an editorial “thought police” – especially one that originates in a land that proclaims freedom of speech in its constitution.

It would be foolish to pretend that full accord will swiftly or easily be reached across this divide, but my impression is that in many circles there is greater willingness than hitherto to grant that neither side need treat the other as outcasts, the sectarian spirit is to be shunned, care should be taken not to ride roughshod over the sincerely held, principled, views of those with whom we may disagree, and we should think twice before supposing that we can draw substantive theological conclusions from the grammatical conventions of particular languages.

Duplication

Some urge that concern with bilateral dialogues somehow undermines, or needlessly duplicates, wider ecumenical work as undertaken by the World Council of Churches. This challenge has been addressed on numerous occasions,¹⁴ and the general conclusion seems to be that, whereas the council is ideally placed to promote such multilateral studies as *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* with a view to seeing what degree of convergence or consensus obtains among its wide range of members, it cannot speak for its individual members on the ground, all of whom belong to Christian world communions, which therefore need to be in conversation with each other as well. In other words, the bilateral programmes of the several Christian world communions are complementary to, and are not in competition with, the activities of the WCC.

The fruits of dialogue

Lastly, there are those who contend that after all the effort the results have been few. I should like to address this through a consideration of the form, content and reception of dialogue, and then offer some concluding reflections.

The form of dialogue

To a considerable degree the balance in the several reports between theological reflection and practical suggestions is directly related to the degree of historic and current proximity of the partners in dialogue. The Reformed have closer historical and geographical links with some of their dialogue partners than with others.

With their friends whose distinctive life originates in the European Reformations – the Lutherans, the Anglicans, the Mennonites and the Baptists – they have so much in common that thoroughly practical recommendations for closer relations are feasible. The same applies to such later arrivals on the ecclesiastical scene as the Methodists and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ): indeed, in some cases unions of various groupings of these six traditions have already occurred.

Where the Roman Catholic Church is concerned, some of the Reformed may feel that they know that body only too well and do not much care for it. Even the

more tolerant among the Reformed cannot overlook the history of mutual recriminations – even condemnations. There is thus a need for the patient mutual exploration of issues on the part of these two communions with a view to better understanding, to the eventual reconciliation of memories, and, meanwhile, to such cooperation as may be possible.

In the case of dialogue with the Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox, many of the Reformed find themselves on a steep learning curve, for these traditions are not well known to them. (The reverse is also true.) What assists here is the growth in mutual respect and trust that flows from the earnest consideration of such basic tenets of the faith as the Trinity and christology.

In dialogue with the Pentecostals, the Holy Spirit is naturally to the fore.

Finally, the first dialogue session between the Alliance and the Seventh-Day Adventists was an occasion for mutual sharing with a view to detecting the degree of common ground existing between parties both of whom had changed in attitude over the years and were now able to view each other with less suspicion than hitherto.

In the variety of circumstances thus described we have a key to explaining the diverse terms of reference of the several dialogues, and the fact that some reports contain more immediately applicable recommendations than others.¹⁵

The content of dialogue

The dialogue reports provide a rich source of theological reflection upon a wide range of topics, and a number of them recommend steps that may be taken towards closer unity.

Dialogues with our nearer neighbours

Following conversations in 1970 and 1975 between representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Alliance,¹⁶ a full-scale international dialogue produced the report *Towards Church Fellowship* (1989). Building on such regional findings as the *Leuenberg Agreement* (1973), the participants stated their common faith and urged their global constituencies “to declare full communion with one another”, understanding this to entail that the historic mutual condemnations no longer apply, that full pulpit and altar/table fellowship and the mutual recognition of ministers of word and sacrament be established, and that growth in unity through shared church life and mission be encouraged.¹⁷

Called to Common Witness and Communion (2002) is the report of a joint Lutheran-Reformed working group established in 1999 “to follow up the positive results” of the 1989 report

It surveys Lutheran-Reformed developments in recent years, explores what is involved in developing visible structures of communion, and describes the deepening cooperation between the LWF and WARC. It recommends that the

LWF and WARC establish a joint study project on structures of church communion, and sponsor a common history of the relations between Lutheran and Reformed churches.

There is no need, it says, for further dialogue on the classical differences which in the past kept Lutheran and Reformed churches apart. The challenge for the two Christian world communions today “is not to discuss whether communion is possible, but to help churches in our families to move towards declarations of communion, to advance in communion, and to celebrate unity as God’s gift to us all. A new set of tasks needs to be faced: to encourage churches that are in altar and pulpit fellowship to deepen their relationship, to invite churches that are not yet in altar and pulpit fellowship to move towards it, and to consider ways in which, at the world level, the two communions may intensify their common life and witness.”¹⁸

In the Anglican-Reformed report *God’s Reign and Our Unity* (1984) the quest of unity is firmly set in the context of mission, and of the conviction that the unity of the church cannot adequately be considered except in relation to the unity of humanity. The factors separating Anglicans and Reformed are discussed, the familiar themes of baptism, eucharist and ministry are rehearsed, with special reference to bishops and elders. The report contains pertinent questions for discussion, and among its nine recommendations is the following: “We recommend that where churches of our two communions are committed to going forward to seek visible unity, a measure of *reciprocal* communion should be made possible; for communion is not only a sign of unity achieved, but also a means by which God brings it about.”¹⁹

On March 5 1983, a historic service was held in Zurich Cathedral, attended by representatives of the Mennonite World Conference, the Baptist World Alliance and our Alliance, during which the Reformed repudiated and regretted the historic condemnations they had uttered against the Anabaptists and sought the help of their erstwhile opponents in fostering reconciliation and renewed fellowship. In 1984, a consultation in Strasbourg between representatives of the Alliance and the Mennonite World Conference resulted in the document *Mennonites and Reformed in Dialogue* (1986). Either side offers family portraits, the question of the historic condemnations of Anabaptists by the Reformed is addressed, and appendices on peace and justice are included. A second phase of dialogue took place in Calgary in 1989. Here the traditionally “neuralgic” questions of baptism, peace and the state were discussed in detail, with responses from members of other Christian traditions. In the recommendations the Reformed are challenged “to revive and practise that understanding of the church as God’s covenant people, within which the integrity of infant baptism is actualized”, while the Mennonites are challenged “seriously to examine their attitude towards Christians baptized as infants who wish to exercise their church membership in a Mennonite church, in relation to the questions of

the nature and mode of baptism, and in the light of the gospel which has made us one". Further recommendations urge reflection on the present state of just war theory and on "Christian participation in the responsible use of coercive power".²⁰

Dialogue with the Baptist World Alliance (1973-77) yielded the booklet *Baptists and Reformed in Dialogue* (1984), which includes the dialogue report, the report of a group that evaluated the dialogue, a letter to the member churches of the two Alliances, some suggestions for further study and action, and reflections by a Mennonite scholar. Among the topics discussed are Scripture, the nature of the church (with special reference to wider councils and local autonomy), the church's ministry and mission and, of course, baptism. As to the last, the participants wonder

whether Christians of Reformed and Baptist convictions who are members in good standing of their churches could recognize one another as both occupying the position of those who have received and responded to the grace of God in baptism as this grace is understood in the New Testament. Such a mutual recognition could only arise from:

- (i) an agreed understanding that a complex of elements, including baptism with water in the name of the Trinity, public profession of faith and admission to the Lord's Supper, are all parts of the reception of and response to this grace of God;
- (ii) the acceptance (still problematic) that this complex of elements could find place in the life of any individual *either* contemporaneously in the act of believer's baptism, where profession of faith, water baptism and communion come together in time, or over a period of time, short or long, in which (infant) baptism, profession of faith (at "confirmation" as it is often called), and admission to communion follow one another as separable stages in a process.²¹

The Reformed-Methodist conversations, held in 1985 and 1987 with participants nominated by the World Methodist Council and the Alliance, focused upon those doctrinal points (grace and perfect salvation among them) that have traditionally kept the two traditions apart. The discussion of these took place in the context of the call to confess the gospel today, and the conclusion clearly stated is that "the classical doctrinal issues that we were asked to review ought not to be seen as obstacles to unity between Methodists and Reformed".²²

In the light of this finding suggestions are made with a view to fostering closer relations on the ground.

In 1984 a preparatory meeting was held between representatives of the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council and the Alliance.²³ In 1987 a full international dialogue session resulted in the report *Towards Closer Fellowship* (1988). The participants set down the faith that Reformed and Disciples share and pay particular attention to the nature of the church, baptism and ministry.

The paragraphs on baptism include one that is entirely in keeping with the aspiration expressed in the Baptist-Reformed report:

the difference between infant and believers' baptism becomes less sharp when it is recognized that both forms of baptism embody God's own initiative in Christ and express a personal response of faith made within the believing community. Personal confession of faith normally takes place either at the time of baptism in the case of the believer, or at a later time by those who are baptized as infants.²⁴

On the basis of these discussions the participants conclude that "there are no theological or ecclesiological issues which need to divide us as churches";²⁵ and they make a number of practical recommendations concerning the way forward.

Five international meetings between Pentecostals and Reformed were held between 1995 and 2000. The stated objectives were to foster mutual understanding and respect, to identify points of theological agreement, disagreement and convergence, and to explore possibilities of common witness. The participants heard and discussed papers on spirituality and biblical interpretation, the Holy Spirit and the church, the Holy Spirit and mission in eschatological perspective, and the Holy Spirit, charisma, and the kingdom of God. The final report, *Word and Spirit, Church and World*, comprises elements from these papers and discussions.²⁶ It becomes clear that while Pentecostals and Reformed take their stand on the Trinity, and understand the church as being the creature of the Word and the Spirit, called to mission in, while not being of, the world, at certain points there are differences of emphasis. For example, some Pentecostals hold that the ability to speak in tongues is ultimately available to all believers, while many "distinguish between speaking in tongues as a gift of the Holy Spirit (not available to all) and speaking in tongues as a sign or evidence (potentially available to all) that one has been baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1.8, 2.1-4)".²⁷ Again, dispensational theology has influenced many Pentecostals, and an emphasis upon the second coming of Christ is prominent among them. Some of them interpret reality dualistically – the Spirit over against the "world" – while others understand the Spirit as inviting Christians to engage in the reforming and transforming of society. The participants "wish to encourage others in their respective communities to join in this mutual exploration".²⁸

Dialogues with more distant communions

Two phases of dialogue (1970-77 and 1984-90) have so far been completed with the Roman Catholic secretariat – now the pontifical council – for promoting Christian unity, while a third (1998-2002) is shortly to report. In the report of the first phase, *The Presence of Christ in Church and World* (1977), participants do not shirk their responsibility of articulating their disagreements over church

order, the teaching authority of the church and the eucharist; but some notable sentiments indicating convergence of views are also expressed. It is agreed that all who follow Christ have the task of witnessing corporately to the gospel, and that “the church catholic is really represented and exists in the local church”.²⁹ It is further agreed that the church “has its authority to the extent that it listens to the word Christ speaks to it ever afresh”.³⁰ But where the communication of what is heard is concerned there is a significant difference between the two parties: “so far as instruction is concerned, for the Reformed it is the community as a whole that is responsible and that delegates qualified people; whereas for the Catholics there is a distinctive responsibility of the pastoral ministry: the latter is rooted in the believing community but does not derive its authority from an act of delegation on the part of the latter.”³¹ The agreed statement that “the Christian who looks back on his own life will say that Christ was active in it, leading him to repentance, conversion, and faith, even before he was aware or made any conscious response”,³² seems to encapsulate the Pauline understanding of election, and to have implications for paedobaptism. As to church and world, the sobering point is made that “the church exposes its fundamental orientations and controlling loyalties by the way it lives, no matter what it says to the contrary”.³³ In a paragraph advising that the localness and the catholicity of the church be held together, the important affirmation is made that “it is only by participating in the local community that we share in the life of the universal church”.³⁴ In the section on the eucharist the once-for-all-ness of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross is proclaimed, and it is agreed that the sacrament is “a memorial of the Lord’s death and resurrection”, “a source of loving communion with him in the power of the Spirit”, and “a source of the eschatological hope for his coming again”.³⁵

In the report of the second phase, *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church*, Reformed and Roman Catholic reviews of relations in the period from the Reformation to the present day are presented. These point to the need for the reconciliation of memories (which entails dealing with mutual condemnations uttered in the past) between the two communions. The participants confess their shared faith, emphasizing the sole mediatorship of Christ, justification by grace through faith, and the inescapability of the church as the community of the justified. The doctrine of the church is then more closely examined, and the differences of emphasis that result from the Reformed stress upon the church as *creatura verbi* and the Roman Catholic understanding of the church as a sacrament are noted. It is suggested that these modes of expression may be seen as complementary. While Roman Catholics believe that the church “subsists” in their communion, the question remains “to what degree they can recognize that the church of Christ also exists in the Reformed churches”.³⁶ Another “neuralgic” point, carried over from the first phase of the dialogue, is encapsulated in the question, “Is the laying-on of hands [at ordination] a

sending on a mission, a passing on of a power, or an incorporation into an order?"³⁷

In 1977 Professor TF Torrance, acting on behalf of the Alliance, broached the possibility of Orthodox-Reformed conversations with the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I.³⁸ This resulted in meetings in 1979, 1981 and 1983 between the Alliance and the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The papers presented during these sessions concerned Orthodox-Reformed relations, and the doctrines of God, ecclesial authority and the Trinity.³⁹ Against the background of this promising beginning the Patriarchate of Constantinople invited all the autocephalous Orthodox churches to engage in official dialogue with the Alliance. The sessions began in 1998, and continue. The jointly agreed policy was to focus upon fundamental aspects of the Christian confession, and to date the result has been the publication of agreed statements on the Holy Trinity (accompanied by a common reflection on the doctrine) (1992) and on christology (1994). The statement on the Trinity draws upon biblical and patristic sources, and in further explanation of it the participants underline the point that the statement turns upon the fact that "it is only through God that God may be known".⁴⁰ They also make it clear that "the doctrine of the Holy Trinity expounded here is: one God, three persons, not three persons, one nature".⁴¹ They claim that their statement

cuts across mistaken polarized views of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity according to which Latin theology moves from the oneness of God to the three persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, while Greek theology moves from the three persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit to the oneness of God. What is provided by the agreed statement of the Orthodox theologians of the east and the Reformed theologians of the west is pre-eminently a statement on the tri-unity of God as trinity in unity and unity in trinity.⁴²

The statement on christology focuses upon the affirmation in the Nicene Creed that "it was 'for us and our salvation' that the eternal Son of God became flesh, lived, died and rose again".⁴³ It is suggested that while the Orthodox set out from the mystery of the incarnation understood as encompassing the entire saving economy proclaimed in the Bible, and the Reformed proceed from the scriptural witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the two approaches are not incompatible. Both sides "agree that their teaching about trinity and incarnation reflects the encounter with the reality of God as revealed in Christ".⁴⁴ The agent in this encounter is the Holy Spirit who, among other things "brings about the communion of all believers both with the head of the body of Christ and between themselves".⁴⁵ In view of the significant agreements so far reached, it is hoped that discussions of church, ministry and sacraments may follow.

The dialogue with the Oriental Orthodox churches began in 1992 and continues. Its objectives are to foster mutual understanding and fellowship

between the two families. Christology is a central theme in this dialogue, and in an agreed statement on christology the Formula of Union of AD 433 is declared to be compatible with the christological doctrines of both dialogue partners. Further,

Both sides agree in rejecting the teaching which separates or divides the human nature, both soul and body in Christ, from his divine nature or reduces the union of the natures to the level of conjoining. Both sides also agree in rejecting the teaching which confuses the human nature in Christ with the divine nature so that the former is absorbed in the latter and thus ceases to exist.

In offering this statement, we recognize the mystery of God's act in Christ and seek to express that we have shared the same authentic christological faith in the one incarnate Lord.⁴⁶

The two sides agree on "the normative function of holy scripture for the life of the church... Holy scripture and its correct interpretation, guided by tradition, witnesses to the Word of God in our different contexts."⁴⁶ As to mission, the Reformed participants affirm that "united by the Spirit to the risen Christ, our participation in the mission of the Triune God flows out in service and witness to the world",⁴⁸ while their Oriental Orthodox colleagues declare that "the church, as the living body of Christ, constantly called together and renewed by the Holy Spirit, worships the triune God on behalf of all God's creation. This is mission in its totality."⁴⁹ They do, however, proclaim the Word of God so as to "bring about and foster the signs of the rule of God in human history", and they believe that "the church's prayer and pastoral care, struggle for justice and search for communion are all vital expressions of her participation in the mission of Jesus Christ, her Lord and saviour".⁵⁰ Indeed, "the ultimate form of the church's mission is to carry the whole creation in all its brokenness and misery before the transforming presence of the triune God in a perpetual act of praise and thanksgiving".⁵¹

In 2001 the first dialogue session took place with the general conference of Seventh-Day Adventists. The report states the common ground between the two traditions. Among the points noted are acceptance of "the Bible as the rule of faith and practice, the supreme witness to God's saving grace in Christ"; the Trinity; God's reconciling work in Christ: "By the work of Christ God's holiness is honoured and our sins forgiven"; the calling of the church to proclaim salvation and to work for "healing, and deliverance from spiritual and economic poverty". The participants affirm their belief that they "stand in the succession of those who, through the ages, have faithfully proclaimed the gospel of Christ". For them the Lord's Supper is "integral to the church's worship and witness", and they acknowledge their debt to the Reformation's biblical emphases upon salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.⁵²

The report tackles the mutual misunderstanding and suspicions that have

hitherto marred their relationship. Among clarifications from the Adventist side are that their church, organized in 1863, has never set dates for the second coming of Jesus; they understand the death of Christ on the cross as providing the once-for-all atonement for sins, and “their distinctive view of the high priestly ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary teaches that he is applying the ongoing benefits of his atonement, not adding any value to it”. While Adventists highly prize the writings of Ellen G White for their counsel, devotional content and biblical reflection, they “hold firmly to the principle of *sola scriptura*”. Hence all other writings, including Ellen White’s, are to be tested by the Bible. Adventists do not teach that they alone will be saved, and while they have been reluctant to engage in political activities designed to challenge social structures, they “have always been engaged in social betterment as part of their understanding of the gospel”.

The Reformed participants were called upon to clarify their position regarding predestination. They replied that predestination is a religious term that is not to be elided with “determinism” and that “God’s electing grace is not to be construed fatalistically, but in the context of God’s indiscriminating love whereby *all* are called to salvation, to which call they make their own, enabled, response”. Along this line the sting can be drawn from the historic Calvinist-Arminian debates, it being understood that the former were seeking to honour God’s sovereignty in salvation, the latter to uphold human responsibility before God. Adventist queries concerning the relative lack of interest among the Reformed in eschatology, and the overemphasis on the part of some Reformed Christians on socioethical activities at the expense of gospel proclamation, were also addressed.

The participants also consider mission in the world as it is. Poverty, HIV/Aids, violence, ecological destruction, religious freedom and gender biases are discussed, and the necessity of raised consciousness in relation to all of these matters is urged.

This dialogue session was a learning process for both parties, and the desirability of further discussion on such topics as biblical interpretation, the sabbath, church discipline and the meaning and significance of Christ’s high priestly ministry was noted.

The reception of dialogue⁵³

There are practical difficulties in the way of the reception of dialogue findings. The reports are costly to produce and costly to mail. During my period as theological secretary of the Alliance I wrote two letters every year to general secretaries of member churches and deans or presidents of the nearly four hundred theological colleges, seminaries and university faculties with which at that time we had connections. Once a year I wrote to the librarians of all such institutions. I reported on the Alliance’s theological work, and normally

whenever a dialogue report was to hand I enclosed it. But one cannot ensure that general secretaries will pass reports to the appropriate person, that deans or presidents will ensure that their professors of systematic theology will have access to the reports, or that librarians will actually catalogue and shelve them.⁵⁴ More broadly, the nature of the Alliance is such that its members are under no obligation to receive, implement, or even read the findings of the panels that work on their behalf.

Over and above the practicalities there are contextual, theological and demographic factors that inhibit reception. Some representatives of some Alliance member churches feel that bilateral dialogues are a “western” hobby far removed from their own concerns.⁵⁵ This concern has a practical and a historical aspect. It is entirely understandable that churches whose members live in life-or-death situations – and many do – should regard the digestion of dialogue reports as a luxury for which they have little time. Churches – especially in Africa, Asia and the Pacific – also point out that the dialogues are concerned with the healing of divisions whose roots are in the west, divisions that have been imposed upon them by missionary endeavour. During the Alliance’s 1992 review of its dialogue programme, African representatives “felt that the dialogues presently going on within the context of WARC are inter-European. They are concerned with issues of theology and practice (praxis) that are not alive in Africa. They seem abstract and largely imposed.”⁵⁶ Thus, while they encourage their western friends to sort these matters out, “they feel that their agenda is quite different”.⁵⁷ But on the very next page the African representatives declare that “traditional denominational distinctions were found to be standing in the way of bi-and/or multilateral ‘conversations’ in Africa”.⁵⁸ To the extent that this is so, it would seem that the dialogues are, after all, relevant in Africa, for they have the goal of removing such obstacles. Above all, can we really say that the dialogues are of no relevance so long as, in all the countries of the world, the people of Christ are divided at the table of the Lord? However we have come by the divisions (and we have *all* inherited them from our Christian history, short or long), do they not need to be removed?

There is more than one way of finding the dialogues irrelevant.

There are Reformed Christians in many parts of the world who have a different understanding of the nature of the church and hence of ecumenism. They emphasize and rejoice in the spiritual unity of the church invisible and see no great urgency to address the disunity of the church visible. But as John Whale once cheekily remarked, “It would be an Irish result if the only discernible mark of the church were its invisibility.”⁵⁹

Again, there are “conservative evangelicals” for whom unity must be in the truth; and since they disagree with “liberal” or “ecumenical” Christians on specific doctrinal matters and/or on their understanding of scripture, they cooperate (or not, as the case may be) only with those of like mind and see no

point in bilateral dialogues. But what is the evangel or gospel that these Christians wish to conserve? It sometimes seems as if it is a rather individualistic piece of good news, namely, that God sent his Son to die on the cross in order to save my soul. No doubt he did, but this as part of his sovereign purpose to call out one covenant *people* for his praise and service, uniting them to Christ and therefore to each other as branches of the Vine. If this is what God has done, then the actual disunity of his people is a challenge to be addressed, and bilateral dialogues are a sincere effort in this direction.

Yet again, in some parts there is a more theologically diverse individualism that manifests itself in a variety of ways. Individuals, under the influence of consumerism, shop around for a church in which they feel “comfortable” (baneful word!) regardless of theological considerations, while particular local churches and even denominations may be so well blessed with resources of various kinds that they feel no urgent need of fellowship with the wider family of Christians.⁶⁰

Perhaps the most straightforward reason for the lack of interest of some member churches in particular dialogues is that the dialogue partner is not present in their region. Even where both are present one partner may be much larger than the other, and this can have an inhibiting effect; and in some cases the partners may be on different sides in political conflicts.⁶¹

In all of these ways, and many more, Reformed Christians may persuade themselves that they have no need of, or are not in a position to take advantage of, the findings of bilateral dialogues. I nevertheless believe that the reports of the bilateral dialogues contain a wealth of material the assimilation of which would make for the strengthening of the witness of Reformed churches in many places, and in some cases would stimulate the taking of practical steps towards closer relations with our friends of other communions.

Concluding reflections

I hope it has become clear, even from the highly selective survey that I have been able to present, that in the bilateral dialogue reports the Alliance and its diverse partners have covered a wide range of doctrinal and practical points. Quite apart from any results in terms of unity on the ground, there is a body of material here that should find its way into appropriate theological courses, not least those attended by Reformed candidates for ministry. Moreover this material should not be siphoned off into optional courses on ecumenism, which are so frequently taken only by the “converted”, but should appear in general doctrine courses taken by the majority.

For the most part the reports are written clearly and with conviction: this is not bland “committee theology”. Few punches are pulled, and continuing disagreements are honestly recorded. But on many of the traditionally “neuralgic” points convergence is apparent and in some cases consensus is

reached. It is also quite remarkable, given the diversity of the dialogue teams, that there is such a high degree of consistency between the dialogue reports. It is true, as Karel Blei has shown, that some reports omit what others include (the eldership here, the idea of covenant there) when the topic under consideration cried out for their inclusion,⁶² but I have found very few cases of one report flatly contradicting another.

The fact must be faced that, for the reasons suggested above, too frequently the dialogue reports lie dormant. If it is odd that some Christians query the very idea of dialogue, it seems still odder that others, officially committed to the goal of manifesting the unity God has granted us all in Christ, do little to harvest the results of dialogue. I am here thinking particularly of the dialogues with our near neighbours. It is a matter for rejoicing that the dialogues with the Lutherans, Methodists and Disciples of Christ have declared that no theological obstacles to full communion exist. Yet on the ground, while some united churches have come into being, elsewhere there has been little movement, despite the fact that in an increasing number of places Reformed Christians already worship jointly with these partners at the local level. Whereas some churches have seized the opportunity of devising a church order in which both paedobaptism and believers' baptism are available as alternatives, it is particularly unfortunate that only 22 member churches of the Alliance and Baptist World Alliance responded to the Reformed-Baptist dialogue report in which that possibility was proposed for consideration. All of which causes one to wonder whether a knowledgeable Reformed enthusiast could be found in every member church who would assume the role of monitoring the take-up of dialogue findings and liaising with the department of theology in Geneva.

Concerning those whom history has given to be our near neighbours, some of whom are already united with us in some parts of the world,⁶³ it is not surprising that the dialogue reports concentrate upon particular "neuralgic" issues – baptism, ministry and the like – and propose practical steps that might be taken to foster full union. This narrowing of concern occurs on the basis of a degree of familiarity with one another such that we do not have to expound the Trinity or christology to each other. But where the more distant communions are concerned this fundamental theological work has been essential, and its fruit has been significant.

But this leads me to express my view that, taking the dialogue reports as a whole, there is one fundamental doctrine in particular that, while it has been frequently alluded to, has not had detailed attention directed to it. I refer to the doctrine of the Christ's atoning work at the Cross. If convergence could be recorded – still better, if consensus could be reached on this issue between the Alliance and its dialogue partners – I suggest that this would place questions of ministry, sacraments and the like in proper perspective. As I have elsewhere asked, "What are the ecclesiological implications of God's unmerited grace

which has accepted even us?”⁶⁴ To begin to answer my own question: I believe that one implication would be that we would allow nothing to keep us from fellowship at the table of the Lord with all who by grace are in Christ – and anything that threatened to prevent such fellowship would immediately be perceived and repudiated as sectarian. In the words of the eirenic John Howe (1630-1705), “Without all controversy, the main inlet of all the distractions, confusions, and divisions of the Christian world hath been by adding other conditions of church communion than Christ hath done.”⁶⁵ It is in the light of the reconciliation wrought on the cross that we see our ecclesiological “small print” for what it is.

Notes

1. There are, in addition, two trilateral dialogues between Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed, on *The Theology of Marriage and the Problems of Mixed Marriages* (Geneva: WARC, 1976) and on indulgences (2001); a quadrilateral dialogue also involving the Methodists on the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (2001); and a series of multilateral “Prague Conversations”, initiated in 1986 and continuing, on the “First, Radical and Second Reformations” – see Milan Opocensky, ed, *Towards a Renewed Dialogue: The First and Second Reformations* (Geneva: WARC, 1996) and Milan Opocensky and Páraic Réamonn, eds, *Justification and Sanctification in the Traditions of the Reformation* (Geneva: WARC, 1999). Conversations have also been held between representatives of the Alliance and the African Instituted Churches; see “African Christians talk together” (*Update* 12/1, May 2002, p.12). The dialogue reports are available on the WARC website (www.warc.ch/dt/er11), with an introduction by the Alliance’s current theological secretary, Odair Pedroso Mateus; many of them are also available in the two volumes, Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer, eds, *Growth in Agreement* (Geneva/New York: WCC/Paulist Press, 1984) and Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer and William G Rusch, eds, *Growth in Agreement II* (Geneva/Grand Rapids, MI: WCC/Eerdmans, 2000). It has been a privilege to be associated with a number of these dialogues, and I thank Dr Mateus for the invitation to offer some reflections upon this significant aspect of the Alliance’s theological work.
2. Letter of Calvin to Sadolet, quoted by GW Richards, *Proceedings of the World Presbyterian Alliance*, XIII, 1929, p.291.
3. See Marcel Pradervand, *A Century of Service: A history of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 1875-1975* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1975), p.202.
4. The strenuous efforts and kindly guidance of Richmond Smith, theological secretary during the first thirteen years of bilateral dialogue, should not go unremarked.
5. I have been around long enough to have said some of these things before: for example, in “The Role of Bilateral Dialogues within the One Ecumenical Movement”, *The Ecumenical Review* 46/4, October 1994, pp.453-60.
6. See further, Alan PF Sell, “The Reformed Family Today: Some theological reflections”, in Donald K McKim, ed, *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp.433-41.
7. There are significant differences between the Alliance, a fellowship of Reformed churches each having its own confession(s) of faith – or not, and those Christian

world communions that are structured in a more conciliar fashion. Not least is that the Alliance's recommendations come to its members with moral authority only. Karel Blei has wondered whether the time is ripe for the Alliance to transform itself into a more structured fellowship. See HS Wilson, ed, *Bilateral Dialogues* (Geneva: WARC 1993), p.15. This is a delicate matter, for there are member churches who remain within the fold only because the Alliance is *not* a formal conciliar structure. It may not be irrelevant to recall on the one hand that in its very earliest days the World Presbyterian Alliance found it quite impossible to devise a confession of faith to which all its members would assent; while on the other hand today's Alliance was able to discipline member churches over apartheid without being a tightly-structured conciliar body. See Alan PF Sell, *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology*, pp.71-3, 233-5.

8. See her paper in *Bilateral Dialogues*, p.40.
9. *Ibid.*, p.35.
10. *Ibid.*, p.36.
11. See *Reformed and Methodists in Dialogue* (Geneva: WARC, 1988).
12. See *God's Reign and Our Unity* (London: SPCK and Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1984), pp.62-5. Integrity prompted the comment that "There is a substantial minority of Reformed Christians who do not accept women ministers. Even where there are women ministers there has been little serious consideration of the distinctive contribution that women might make in the ordained ministry." (pp.62f) The question of the ordination of women was raised, but not pursued, during the second phase of the Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogue. See *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church* (Geneva: WARC, 1991), p.49. The question of ordination has yet to be broached in dialogues with the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches.
13. See, for example, *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church*, p.iv n.1.
14. See, for example, Günther Gassmann, "Nature and Function of Bilateral and Multilateral Dialogues and their Interrelation", *Mid-Stream*, 25/3, July 1986, pp.299-308.
15. I suspect that there are points to be made about the varied psychodynamics of the several dialogues – but I forbear!
16. See *Reformed World* 33/7, September 1975, pp.314-20.
17. *Towards Church Fellowship* (Geneva: LWF/WARC, 1989), p.28.
18. *Called to Communion and Common Witness* (Geneva: LWF/WARC, 2002), p.17.
19. *God's Reign and Our Unity*, p.82. Cf *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology*, pp.137-42.
20. Ross T Bender and Alan PF Sell, eds, *Baptism, Peace and the State in the Reformed and Mennonite Traditions* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1991), p.238. This phase of the dialogue represented a pioneering attempt to forward the Alliance's work by utilizing the resources of a university Institute for the Humanities – in this case, Calgary's. The two world bodies constituted their dialogue panels and covered the travel costs of their participants, while the institute provided the physical facilities and organized funding.
21. *Baptists and Reformed in Dialogue* (Geneva: WARC, 1984), pp.19f. Cf *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology*, pp.142-5.
22. *Reformed and Methodists in Dialogue* (Geneva: WARC, 1988), p.14.

23. Papers designed to introduce the families to one another were presented and topics for future consideration were noted. See Alan PF Sell, ed, *Reformed and Disciples of Christ in Dialogue* (Geneva: WARC, 1985).
24. *Towards Closer Fellowship* (Geneva: WARC, 1988), p.11.
25. *Ibid.*, p.14.
26. *Reformed World* 50/3, September 2000, pp.128-156.
27. *Ibid.*, p.144.
28. *Ibid.*, p.153.
29. *The Presence of Christ in Church and World* (The Vatican: Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and Geneva: WARC, 1977), p.8. Cf *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology*, pp.132-7.
30. *Ibid.*, p.10.
31. *Ibid.*, p.13. I think that Reformed communities recognize and ordain those whom God calls and equips, and whose sense of call is tested within the community. In other words, the above statement seems to elevate democracy at the expense of the divine initiative.
32. *Ibid.*, p.16.
33. *Ibid.*, p.19.
34. *Ibid.* Though there may, of course, be different understandings of "local".
35. *Ibid.*, p.27.
36. *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church*, p.46.
37. *Ibid.*, p.49.
38. There had already been Reformed-Orthodox conversations in Romania (from 1964), the United States and Canada (1968) and Hungary (1972). See Lukas Vischer, "Introduction" to *Agreed Statements from the Orthodox-Reformed Dialogue* (Geneva: WARC, 1998), p.8.
39. The papers are published in TF Torrance, ed, *Theological Dialogue between Orthodox and Reformed Churches* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985).
40. *Agreed Statements*, p.18.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, p.20.
43. *Ibid.*, p.23.
44. *Ibid.*, p.21.
45. *Ibid.*, p.24.
46. *Oriental Orthodox-Reformed Dialogue: The first four sessions* (Geneva: WARC, 1998), p.52.
47. *Ibid.*, p.53.
48. *Ibid.*, p.54.
49. *Ibid.*, p.55.
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*
52. See the *Report of the International Theological Dialogue between the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches* (2002), also available on the WARC website: www.warc.ch/dt/er11/22.html
53. For a variety of views of reception, see *Ecumenical Trends*, 15/7, July-August 1986; cf Lukas Vischer, "The Process of 'reception' in the Ecumenical Movement", *Mid-Stream* 23/2, 1984, pp.221-233.

54. I have visited a number of libraries to which I know I have sent materials only to find no trace of them.
55. In fact it would be most encouraging if certain western churches paid any attention at all to dialogue reports!
56. This comment was made before the dialogue with the African Instituted Churches began in 1998, but similar sentiments are expressed from various quarters.
57. *Bilateral Dialogues*, p.70.
58. *Ibid.*, p.71.
59. JS Whale, *Christian Doctrine* (London: Collins Fontana, 1957), p.134. [The Irish editor takes exception to this remark, but tolerantly allows it to stand.]
60. For a helpful brief study of individualism in one country see Dennis N Voskuil, "Individualism and Evangelism in America", *Reformed Review* 41/1, Autumn 1987, pp.21-28.
61. These points are noted in *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church*, p.54.
62. Karel Blei, in *Bilateral Dialogues*, pp.7-9.
63. So that it would have been embarrassing, to say the least, if the Reformed-Methodist report, for example, had concluded that the traditional doctrinal differences between Methodists and ourselves ought still to be church-dividing.
64. *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology*, p.240.
65. John Howe, *Works*, ed Henry Rogers, 1862-3, V, p.226.

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