

17. The Faith and Order Committee: Section C

Response of the Methodist Church in Great Britain to The Nature and Mission of the Church (WCC Faith and Order Paper 198)

The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement (World Council of Churches, 2005; Faith and Order Paper 198) (NMC) is a contribution to continuing ecumenical reflection on the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. This World Council of Churches' Faith and Order study document builds on the theological foundations established in previous texts, including *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (commonly referred to as BEM, 1982), *Confessing the One Faith* (revised 1996), *Church and World* (revised 1990), and in particular *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (1998). The text of NMC has been sent officially to the churches for evaluation and response; study groups and individuals are also invited to offer comments and reactions.

The Methodist Church offers the following to the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches as its response to NMC. The full text of NMC may be downloaded from: www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p2/FO2005_198_en.pdf

The Purpose of the Text

1. *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (World Council of Churches, 2005; hereinafter referred to as NMC) is a contribution to continuing ecumenical reflection on the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

This World Council of Churches' Faith and Order study document builds on theological foundations established in its previous texts, including *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (commonly referred to as BEM, 1982), *Confessing the One Faith* (revised 1996), *Church and World* (revised 1990), and in particular *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (1998).

2. Taking into account reactions from the churches to these previous Faith and Order papers, 'this present document [NMC] is an attempt to express what the churches might now claim together about the nature and mission of the Church; and, within that perspective, to state the remaining areas of difficulty and disagreement' (§123). As 'A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement', NMC does not claim to be a consensus text as such, though it seeks to state accurately the current degree of ecumenical convergence concerning the nature and mission of the Church.
3. The main body of text, consisting of 123 numbered paragraphs, 'represents common perspectives which can be claimed, largely as a result of the work of the bilateral and multilateral discussions of the past fifty years and of the changed relationships between the churches in this period' (§6). Inserted at various points in the document are 'shaded boxes' containing additional unnumbered paragraphs that identify 'areas where differences remain both within and between churches' (§6).

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4. In responding to *NMC*, the churches are invited to discover how much in fact they hold in common in their understanding of the Church and to reflect on the extent to which their continuing differences are genuinely church-dividing. 'In the perspective of growing convergences, the hope is that churches will be helped to recognise in one another the Church of Jesus Christ and be encouraged to take steps on the way towards visible unity' (§6). This unity is described in terms of 'the communion between local churches, in each of which the fullness of the Church resides' (§65). 'The goal of the search for full communion is realised when all the churches are able to recognise in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church in its fullness and express this in a reconciled common life' (§66, §122; citing the Canberra Statement).
5. To assist in the process of reaching an ecumenical consensus, the churches are specifically asked to respond to the following questions: *Does this study document correctly identify our common ecclesiological convictions, as well as the issues which continue to divide us? Does this study document reflect an emerging convergence on the nature and mission of the Church? Are there significant matters in which the concerns of your church are not adequately addressed? Insofar as this study document provides a helpful framework for further ecclesiological discussions among the churches:*

– How can this study document help your church, together with others, take concrete steps towards unity? – What suggestions would you make for the future development of this text? (§8)

General Comments in Response to the Text

6. The Methodist Church of Great Britain 'claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ' (Deed of Union (1932)) and in the course of the past fifty years has increasingly recognised the need to articulate afresh its theological understanding of the Church in dialogue with partner churches. As a result of their longstanding involvement in ecumenism, British Methodists can positively affirm *NMC's* statement that 'the experience of the BEM process and an increasing interest in ecclesiology in many churches provide fresh insights into how many Christians understand being the Church' (§3). The most recent British Methodist statement on the Church, *Called to Love and Praise: The Nature of the Christian Church in Methodist Experience and Practice* (1999; hereinafter referred to as *CLP*), draws both on the fruit of ecumenical dialogue and Methodism's own theological perspective on the Church.
7. The distinctive history and experience of Methodism as a movement raised up by God to 'spread scriptural holiness throughout the land' informs its theological perspective on the

Church. Methodists instinctively regard Christian mission as the primary lens through which the life of the Church is to be investigated and ordered. So theological reflection on the Church is not for its own sake but for the sake of God's mission to the world. Accordingly, Methodists believe that the life of the Church, its structures of ministry and institutions, must clearly reflect and serve God's missiological and soteriological purpose. These basic ecclesiological convictions stem from John Wesley's reflection on the nature of the Church: 'What is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God, and to build them up in His fear and love? Order, then, is so far valuable as it answers these ends; and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth' (Letter 'To John Smith', (1746)).

8. British Methodists therefore read *The Nature and Mission of the Church* in the light of their characteristic theological perspective on the Church, shaped by their particular history and experience. In adopting what might appropriately be termed a soteriological hermeneutic, Methodists recognise that every approach to understanding and articulating the nature and mission of the Church has strengths and weaknesses because the Church is a mystery that is fully known by God alone. In the spirit of 'receptive ecumenism', British Methodists are committed to a process of mutual sharing among the churches of our

respective insights into understanding the nature and mission of the Church for the greater enrichment of our respective traditions on the way to eventual full communion.

9. By deliberately avoiding an abstract theological method, *NMC* represents something of a fresh approach to ecumenical reflection on the Church. In particular, from a Methodist perspective it is good to note that mission 'is one of [the] guiding themes in this study' (§4) and that mission 'belongs to the very being of the Church' (§35). What is equally significant is that this affirmation is said to be 'a central implication of affirming the apostolicity of the Church' (§35). Historically, the Church's apostolicity has been described in various ways that have divergent implications for understanding the nature and mission of the Church. By choosing to make the apostolic mission 'central' to what is meant by apostolicity, *NMC* establishes a promising theological framework for addressing the remaining differences between the churches concerning how they may be able to recognise one another's apostolicity (and correlatively their catholicity).
10. Methodists will readily agree with the proposition in *NMC* that 'Mission is not an abstraction but is lived in response to the grace of God as God sends his Church in faithful witness in the actual situations of each society' (§4). It is noteworthy that, in offering *NMC* to the churches for study

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and comment, the Faith and Order Commission 'especially encourages reflection based on actual stories of Christian life and witness in different parts of the world so that both the particular and the universal features of the Church can be more clearly understood' (§4). *NMC's* emphasis on theological reflection based on the experience of churches in their contemporary mission in a particular cultural context resonates with the Methodist approach to understanding the nature of the Church.

11. Being open to 'actual stories of Christian life and witness' that will help us understand the nature of the Church involves some kind of theological method in which evidence is sifted and evaluated. Yet *NMC* says virtually nothing about the theological method envisaged, which remains unarticulated and implicit. For instance, *NMC* distinguishes between 'particular' and 'universal' features of the Church without explaining how such a distinction arises. Nor is the reader told how these features are to be discerned in 'actual stories of Christian life and witness'. Ecclesialogically, a great deal would seem to hinge upon how the particular and universal features of the Church are identified and the precise theological relationship between them. Identifying *a priori* a set of universal features risks turning the Church into a theological abstraction in which it is simply assumed that a blueprint of its nature and mission can be known in advance and then mapped onto every local situation at least insofar as its essential features are concerned.
12. Despite its intention to avoid such theological abstraction, *NMC* is structured in a way that potentially precludes meaningful 'reflection based on actual stories of Christian life and witness in different parts of the world'. There are four parts to the text: I The Church of the Triune God; II The Church in History; III The Life of Communion in and for the World; IV In and for the World. Treating 'The Church of the Triune God' before consideration is given to 'The Church in History' suggests that the nature and mission of the Church can be known theologically prior to its concrete existence in human history. The impression given that the Christian experience of mission has little to contribute to understanding the nature of the Church is reinforced by the fact that Part II, 'The Church in History', makes no reference to the actual historical existence of the Church.
13. Of course, it must be acknowledged that the Faith and Order Commission is neither proposing nor endorsing any particular method of theological reflection on the nature and mission of the Church. It seeks only to identify 'common ecclesiological convictions' and 'an emerging convergence' concerning the Church (§8). All the same, the way in which common ecclesiological convictions are stated and connected with one another in a structured way inevitably involves

some kind of theological method that rests on presuppositions that may need to be explored before a firm foundation can be secured for substantive agreement.

14. It is salutary for churches to note the high degree of ecumenical convergence registered in *NMC* which suggests that pessimism about the ecumenical movement's apparent lack of success is unfounded. Nevertheless, by confining unresolved differences to a relatively small number of shaded boxes at various points in the main text, the study document may inadvertently give the impression that these can be resolved within the framework established by the current degree of convergence. Yet some unresolved differences are more basic and resistant to securing agreement than would appear from reading *NMC*. Ecumenical convergence stated in general terms can be helpful but its limitations may subsequently be exposed when specific issues are investigated. A particular danger is that common ecclesiological convictions, when narrowly defined and prised from their proper setting within the life and teaching of particular churches, may in fact serve to disguise underlying differences. Moreover, churches may interpret differently the implications of a particular shared conviction. Therefore, the value of 'an emerging convergence' on the nature and mission of the Church rests upon the extent to which a particular set of common ecclesiological convictions

constitute a theological framework in which unresolved differences can be resolved. Whether *NMC* will in fact provide a 'helpful framework for further ecclesiological discussions' (§8) is difficult to predict in advance and any limitations will only emerge in the course of future dialogue.

Commentary on Part I: The Church of the Triune God

15. This part is divided into three sections: (A) The Nature of the Church; (B) The Mission of the Church; and (C) The Church as Sign and Instrument of God's Intention and Plan for the World. Given the ecumenical consensus that the Church is 'sign, foretaste and instrument of the kingdom' (cf. *CLP* §1.4.1), the omission of any reference in section C to the Church itself as a 'foretaste' of God's Intention and Plan for the world is surprising, especially since sections A and B prepare the reader to expect this theme to be developed. Section A refers to the Church as 'a foretaste and instrument for the redemption of all created reality' (§12). Referring to 'the Good News of the reign of God', Section B states that '[Christians] are called to live its values and to be a foretaste of that reign in the world' (§35). Overall, however, there is little sense in the study document that the Church *itself* is a foretaste of the Kingdom. Indeed, the reader may gain the impression that the Church, though a 'Sign and Instrument of God's Intention and Plan for the World' is not itself a central objective of the divine mission.

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16. That the Church is sign and instrument of the Kingdom is certainly reflected in the text: 'Through its worship (leitourgia); service, which includes the stewardship of creation (diakonia); and proclamation (kerygma) the Church participates in and points to the reality of the Kingdom of God' (§36). But in what ways are leitourgia, diakonia and kerygma a foretaste of God's kingdom? Moreover, important as they undoubtedly are, these categories do not necessarily exhaust the ways in which the Church can be said to be a sign, instrument and foretaste of God's Kingdom. For Methodists, the category of 'covenant community' is equally important (*CLP* 2.1.1; 5.5) in understanding God's Intention and Plan for the world. Understanding the nature of the Church requires deeper reflection on the nature of Christian community than is presently found in *NMC*, especially at a time when the experience of many people in Europe is of the fragmentation of secular communities.
17. For British Methodists, the starting-point for theological reflection on the nature and mission of the Church is the revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (*CLP* §2.1). This same Trinitarian context is very evident in Part I of *NMC*, especially in Section A: 'The Church is thus the creature of God's Word and of the Holy Spirit. It belongs to God, is God's gift and cannot exist by and for itself. Of its very nature it is missionary, called and sent to serve, as an instrument of the Word and the Spirit, as a witness to the Kingdom of God' (§9). By articulating so clearly a Trinitarian framework for understanding the nature and mission of the Church, the study document makes a significant and welcome contribution to ecumenical reflection on the Church.
18. The biblical theme of 'communion' or *koinonia* has featured prominently in recent ecumenical dialogue in relation to the Trinity and the Church. This same theme is found in *NMC* (§§24-33), where *koinonia* is described as 'being reclaimed today as a key to understanding the nature and mission of the Church' (§24). In gathering all creation under the Lordship of Christ through the instrumentality of the Church, God's design is 'to bring humanity and all creation into communion' (§34). Furthermore, the Church is 'a reflection of the communion in the Triune God' (§34). A great deal depends upon what it means for the Church to *reflect* the communion in the Trinity. Whilst the use of *koinonia* language has been a helpful development in ecclesiology, it is unwise to draw too tight an identification between the life of the Church and the interior life of the Trinity. In particular, describing relations within the Church in terms of the relations between the Trinitarian persons is fraught with difficulty because it presumes to know more about the inner life of the Trinity than has been revealed and also because it assumes that personhood means much the same thing in relation to

the Trinity as it does in the Church. It is all too easy to impose a particular model of relationships onto the Trinity and thence onto the Church. There is a growing body of opinion amongst academic theologians which holds that greater caution is needed in the use of *koinonia* language in describing the relationship between the Trinity and the Church. *NMC* might usefully draw on these critiques which are not particularly evident in the text.

19. As *creatura Verbi et creatura Spiritus* the Church is said to be 'centred and grounded in the Word of God' and 'the communion of the faithful' (§10-11). However, Christians disagree about the relationship between Word and Spirit in the Church, and how that relationship is expressed in its institutional life. The study document identifies unresolved issues concerning 'The Institutional Dimension of the Church and the Work of the Holy Spirit': (a) 'whether the preaching and the sacraments are the means of, or simply witnesses to, the activity of the Spirit through the Divine Word, which comes about in an immediate internal action upon the hearts of the believers'; (b) 'the institutional implications and presuppositions of the Church's being *Creatura Verbi*'; and (c) 'the theological importance of institutional continuity, particularly continuity in episcopacy'. This is a helpful summary of the unresolved issues concerning the institutional dimension of the Church in relation to the work of the second and third

persons of the Trinity. Equally, these same issues illustrate how apparently subtle differences in understanding the mission of the eternal Word in relation to the mission of the Holy Spirit can result in divergent ecclesiologies that are difficult to reconcile – an observation that *NMC* would have done well to make so as not to underestimate the current level of disagreement among Christians concerning the nature of the Church.

20. A related issue, not explicitly identified in *NMC* but one requiring further study, concerns the different ways in which it is usual to refer to 'the Word of God'. *NMC* quotes from *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church* (Reformed-Roman Catholic Dialogue, §96) to describe the ways in which the Word of God 'has become manifest in history'. Thus '... it is the Word of God made flesh: Jesus Christ, incarnate, crucified and risen. Then it is the word as spoken in God's history with God's people and recorded in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as a testimony to Jesus Christ. Third, it is the word as heard and proclaimed in the preaching, witness and action of the Church' (§10). *NMC* glosses over the ecclesiological implications of the differences between these ways of referring to 'the Word of God'. Our understanding of the nature of the Church will be shaped to a significant degree by the theological account given of the relationship between 'the Word of God' incarnate in Jesus Christ, the Word recorded in the

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Scriptures and the Word proclaimed in the preaching, witness and actions of the Church. Any description of the Church as *creatura Verbi* must take account of the different ways in which it is common to refer to 'the Word of God'. For instance, if the Church is a *creatura verbi*, does having the Scriptures in common suggest there should be a higher degree of mutual recognition among the churches as such than is in fact presently the case?

21. More generally, the use of Scripture in *NMC* raises significant issues. Section A draws on the principal Scriptural images of the Church: the People of God; the body of Christ; the temple of the Holy Spirit; *koinonia*/ communion. *NMC* affirms that 'A fully rounded approach to the mystery of the Church requires the use and interaction of all biblical insights (in addition to those mentioned, "vine", "flock", "bride", "household" and "covenant community"), each of which contributes something vital to our understanding. These images counterbalance each other and compensate each others' limitations' (§17).
22. In view of the stated intention "to honour the totality of the Biblical witness" (§17) the omission of any consideration of these alternative biblical images is surprising. For instance, the image of the Church as the bride of Christ counterbalances the strong identification between Christ and the Church implied by the image of the body. Again, the rich image of the vine is commonly neglected in studies of the Church in the New Testament. For Methodists the covenantal language found in the Scriptures is important in understanding the nature of the Church and its omission in *NMC* is particularly regrettable. Admittedly, the four biblical images considered in the study document are standard ones that commonly feature in ecumenical conversations, and Methodists recognise and accept their contribution to understanding the Church. Indeed, there is nothing in *NMC*'s treatment of these particular 'Biblical Insights' (§§14-33) with which Methodists would take exception. Nevertheless, an ecumenical consensus on the Church which draws only on a limited selection of Scriptural images is of doubtful value because it omits images that may contain important correctives.
23. A consequential issue concerns the role of Scripture in how Christians understand the Church. 'The biblical understanding governing [*NMC*] is based on the common conviction that Scripture is normative and therefore provides a uniquely privileged source for understanding the nature and mission of the Church. Subsequent reflection must always engage and be consonant with the biblical teaching' (§15). However, 'normative' and 'consonant' are slippery terms in theology. As a 'uniquely privileged source' how precisely does Scripture

function as 'normative' in theological reflection on the Church in relation to the 'living tradition of the Church' and the 'interpretation of Scripture over the course of history' (§15)? *NMC* does not appear to envisage any tension between these elements but this fails to take seriously the history of separation and division in the Church because of disagreement about the relationship between Scripture and Tradition.

24. The Church, since it is a mystery, is both a visible and an invisible reality. However, *NMC* pays little attention to the invisible reality of the Church and the differing theological accounts of its relationship to the visible reality. According to the study document, 'The Church can never be fully and unequivocally grasped only in its visible appearance. Therefore the visible organisational structures of the Church must always be seen and judged, for good or ill, in the light of God's gifts of salvation in Christ, celebrated in the Liturgy (cf. Heb 12:18-24)' (§45). But what would it mean in practical terms for the Church's visible organisational structures to be 'judged in the light of God's gifts of salvation in Christ'? To the Methodist way of thinking, the fruitfulness of Christian mission evidenced in terms of holy living is decisive in judging the legitimacy of the visible organisational structures of the Church. Is *NMC* proposing that the Christian spiritual life becomes the decisive criterion for mutual 'recognition' among the churches? If

so, Methodists would welcome such a development.

Commentary on Part II: The Church in History

25. As already noted above, despite Part II being entitled 'The Church in History', its treatment of history is somewhat attenuated. *NMC* refers to 'the Church' whilst glossing over the historically divisive issue of where it actually exists concretely in the world. Moreover, little attention is given in Part II to the synthesis of history and eschatology in understanding the nature of the Church. As 'an eschatological reality', the Church is 'not yet the full visible realisation of the Kingdom' (§48). As 'an historical reality', the Church 'is exposed to the ambiguities of all human history and therefore needs constant repentance and renewal in order to respond fully to its vocation' (§48). In its 'human dimension' the Church is affected by 'the conditions of the world', namely: 'change'; 'individual, cultural and historical conditioning', and 'the power of sin' (§50). 'The Church *in via*' (Section A) witnesses 'a continual tension in the historical life of the Church between that which is already given and that which is not yet fully realised' (§52). 'The Church is called to return continuously to the apostolic truth and to be renewed in its worship and mission stemming from its apostolic origin' (§56). All this suggests that both the past and the future are important for understanding the nature of the

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Church. But where the emphasis is placed in the synthesis of history and eschatology has implications for theological method in investigating the nature of the Church. In particular, to what extent are those essential features that belong to the nature of the Church already given and therefore something to be recovered by a return to the past, and to what extent are they not yet fully given and therefore a gift to be received from the future? How the churches answer this question will have important implications for their criteria for mutual recognition.

26. A shaded box considers 'Church as Sacrament?' Drawing on its participation in the BEM process, the Methodist Church of Great Britain affirms that 'The Church is both the creation of the Word of God, and also the "mystery" or "sacrament" of God's love for the world' (CLP 3.1.10). However, 'sacrament' is not a univocal concept in Christian theology. The two propositions 'The Church is a sacrament' and 'The Eucharist is a sacrament' do not rest on exactly the same understanding of 'sacrament' in terms of sign and instrumentality. The churches might usefully investigate further what it means to apply the term 'sacrament' to the Church itself. Methodists would not want to restrict the use of sacramental language of the Church exclusively to the liturgical assembly, believing that the life of the local church concretely expressed in community, fellowship and service is also sacramental in nature.
27. Another shaded box considers the related subject of 'The Church and Sin'. Acknowledging the different accounts of sin in relation to the Church, the Faith and Order Commission asks whether all churches might not be able to agree on the following proposition: 'The relationship between sin and holiness in the Church is not a relationship of two equal realities, because sin and holiness do not exist on the same level. Rather, holiness denotes the Church's nature and God's will for it, while sinfulness is contrary to both'. Whatever its merits, the convergence proposition is of questionable value. In particular, it is doubtful whether any theological account of sin in the Church would seriously propose that sin and holiness are two 'equal' realities. What would 'equal' mean in this context? Moreover, it is difficult to envisage what might be meant by sin and holiness existing 'on the same level' in the Church. The use of a depth metaphor appears to invite churches to agree that sin occurs at a less significant 'level' of the Church. But surely the substantive issue is neither the 'level' at which sin occurs in the Church nor its status vis-à-vis holiness, but rather the precise nature and extent of its effect upon the Church as sign, instrument and foretaste of the kingdom. This is an issue that requires further investigation.
28. It is not clear what understanding of the Church's unity is being proposed in the study document.

The universal Church is described in terms of a communion of local churches but the text is ambiguous about the institutional implications. According to *NMC*, 'The communion of local churches is sustained by the living elements of apostolicity and catholicity: Scripture, baptism, communion and the service of a common ministry' (§66). These various 'bonds of unity' serve the continuity of the whole Church and sustain the local churches in 'a communion of truth and love' (§66). At the same time, 'The goal of the search for full communion is realised when all the churches are able to recognise in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church in all its fullness' (§66; quoting from the Canberra Statement). The issue here is whether the Church's unity requires institutional expression in terms of shared instruments of governance and oversight. Reference to 'the service of a common ministry' implies some form of institutional unity; otherwise it is difficult to envisage how a ministry could meaningfully be described as 'common'. On the other hand, identifying the ecumenical 'goal' as full communion among local churches that recognise one another as such need not necessarily imply any instruments of institutional unity (though §122 includes 'a reconciled common life' among the goals of full communion). It would be helpful for *NMC* to state more clearly its understanding of the Church's unity.

Commentary on Part III: The Life of Communion in and for the World

29. This is the longest part of the document. There are eight sections: A Apostolic Faith; B Baptism; C Eucharist; D Ministry of All the Faithful; E Ministry of the Ordained; F Oversight: Personal, Communal, Collegial; G Conciliarity and Primacy; H Authority. The title chosen for Part III recognises that the life of the Church is not for its own sake alone but is also 'for the world'. Thus the life of the Church serves its mission to the world.
30. The short preamble refers to 'baptism and Eucharist as means of grace to create and sustain the *koinonia*. These and other means serve to animate the people of God in their proclamation of the Kingdom and in their participation in the promises of God' (§67). In addition to the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, Methodists identify various means of grace in the Church. Whilst Christians may disagree about the number of sacraments and what constitute 'other means' of grace, wider reference to the economy of grace is desirable in an ecumenical convergence statement about the nature and mission of the Church. A broader consideration of the means of grace in *NMC* would provide a theological framework in which to overcome historic differences concerning the number of sacraments.

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31. The sections on the apostolic faith, baptism, the Eucharist, Ordination, and Conciliarity and Primacy fairly and accurately set out the current state of ecumenical convergence on these topics. Promisingly, the degree of ecumenical convergence that has been attained in most of these areas is considerable. In the case of Conciliarity and Primacy, however, the Faith and Order Commission acknowledges that 'There is still much work to be done to arrive at a preliminary convergence on this topic.' At the end of most sections, shaded boxes identify substantive issues that have yet to be resolved. These contain a fair and accurate summary of outstanding differences which will benefit those engaged in ecumenical dialogue on behalf of their respective churches.
32. The title of Section D, Ministry of All the Faithful, does not accurately reflect its description of how lay people contribute to 'the life of communion in and for the world'. The text itself suggests only that 'Strengthened by the Spirit, Christians are called to live out their discipleship in a variety of forms of service' (§83). There is no explicit statement that lay people exercise ministry in the Church by virtue of their empowerment by the Holy Spirit and their proper participation in the ministry of Christ as prophet, priest and king. Whilst it may not be appropriate to describe all forms of service in terms of ministry, Methodists believe that God calls individual lay people to exercise ministry in the Church in various forms, some of which may require them to be selected, trained and tested by the Church. From a Methodist perspective, the failure of *NMC* to state unambiguously that lay people as such are called and equipped by God to exercise ministry in the Church is a regrettable omission.
33. Section E, Oversight: Personal, Communal and Collegial, is similarly disappointing in its description of the contribution of lay people to the communal exercise of oversight. Whilst 'All the baptised share a responsibility for the apostolic faith and witness of the whole Church' (§96), lay people appear to have no more than a passive role in oversight. It is only partly reassuring that 'The responsibility of those called to exercise [personal] oversight cannot be fulfilled without the collaboration, support and assent of the whole community' (§90). For 'collaboration, support and assent' are elusive terms which do not necessarily imply active participation in the actual structures and processes of oversight. According to *NMC*, the communal exercise of oversight (like its personal and collegial forms) refers 'not only to particular structures and processes' but also denotes 'the informal reality of the bonds of *koinonia*, the mutual belonging and accountability within the ongoing life of the Church' (§94). However, by saying nothing about structures and processes, the text gives the impression that

the contribution of lay people to communal oversight is normatively expressed through more informal bonds of *koinonia*. In contrast, British Methodists have a strong sense of mutual belonging and accountability enshrined constitutionally in the annual Conference – a communal structure of oversight in which lay people participate on equal terms (and in equal numbers) with ordained ministers by virtue of their baptism. Thus it is significant for Methodists that the study document does not explicitly state that lay people participate formally in governance: 'The communal dimension of the Church's life refers to the involvement of the whole body of the faithful in common consultation, sometimes through representation and constitutional structures, over the well-being of the Church and their common involvement in the service of God's mission in the world' (§96). British Methodists would prefer *NMC* to state explicitly that lay people are active participants in the structures and processes of communal oversight in the Church.

34. Section H on Authority is probably the least satisfactory in the entire study document since its treatment of a historically divisive subject is cursory. According to *NMC*: 'All authority in the church comes from God and is marked by God's holiness. This authority is effective when holiness shines from the lives of Christians and the ordered Christian community, faithful to the divine teachings. All the sources

of authority recognised in varying degrees by the churches such as Scripture, tradition, worship, synods, also reflect the holiness of the Triune God' (§107). This somewhat idealistic description of authority in the Church takes no account of how authority is actually exercised or experienced in the life of the Church. Christians strongly disagree among themselves about precisely where authority in the Church is located, its possibilities and limitations, its nature and forms, its agents and instruments. In view of this disagreement it is surprising that no issues requiring further study are identified by means of a shaded box.

Commentary on Part IV: In and for the World

35. Given their particular history and emphases, Methodists readily agree that 'One of the greatest services Christians offer to the world is the proclamation of the Gospel to every creature' (§110). But the undeveloped corollary that 'Evangelisation is thus the Church's foremost service to the world' (§110) invites comment. In particular, Christians might usefully discuss what is meant here by 'evangelisation' and how it constitutes 'proclamation' of the Gospel. This is not to give credence to the false antithesis between so-called Catholic evangelisation and Protestant evangelism but rather to draw out the implications for inter-faith relations. *NMC* somewhat airily declares that 'There is no contradiction between evangelisation and respect for the

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values present in other faiths' (§110). This bland statement is unsatisfactory inasmuch as it over-simplifies the mission of the Church vis-à-vis other faith communities and ignores the inter-religious tensions that exist in many parts of the world. Reference to 'the values present in other faiths' ignores the truth claims of other world religions, which can no more be classified as a set of 'values' than can the Christian gospel. Now that very many churches exist in a multi-faith context locally and regionally, Christians can no longer articulate their understanding of the nature and mission of the Church without also giving some theological account (however brief) of people of non-Christian faith in 'God's Intention and Plan for the World'. Disappointingly, *NMC* contains no reference to inter-faith dialogue or relations. This is a major omission which should be addressed in any future revision of *NMC*.

Response to Questions posed in *NMC*

36. *Does this study document correctly identify our common ecclesiological convictions, as well as the issues which continue to divide us?* A detailed response would require careful comparison with official British Methodist statements on the Church, particularly *Called to Love and Praise*, as well as the Methodist doctrinal standards and the reports of ecumenical dialogues and agreements in which British Methodists have been participants. Nevertheless, it can be said with confidence that *The Nature and Mission of the Church* correctly identifies a range of common ecclesiological convictions as well as a number of substantive issues that continue to divide Christians.
37. *Does this study document reflect an emerging convergence on the nature and mission of the Church?* The study document reflects an emerging consensus on the nature and mission of the Church insofar as this is stated in a number of rather general statements. The limitations of this emerging convergence have been pointed out in the commentary.
38. *Are there significant matters in which the concerns of your church are not adequately addressed?* From a British Methodist perspective, the following matters are not adequately addressed in the study document: (1) the contribution that lay people make to the life of the Church by virtue of their baptism and empowerment by the Holy Spirit; (2) authority and reception in the Church; (3) the means of grace; (4) the Christian life as one of holiness; (5) the Church as community.
39. *How can this study document help your church, together with others, take concrete steps towards unity?* In its present form and as a fairly dense theological text, *NMC* will be most useful within British Methodism in shaping the future agenda of bilateral dialogues with our principal ecumenical partners. In particular, its concise

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statement of the theological issues that continue to divide Christians in understanding the nature of the Church is an aid to continuing dialogue.

40. *What suggestions would you make for the future development of this text?* The study document should make greater reference to other faith communities and inter-faith relations.

Conclusion

41. On behalf of the Methodist Church of Great Britain, the Methodist Conference: thanks the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission for its diligent work in producing *The Nature and Mission of the Church*; welcomes this latest study document as a significant and helpful contribution to continuing ecumenical dialogue on the Church; and offers

this response as a constructive contribution to informed discussion of the text and its wider reception among the churches.

42. With the reservations and comments set out in the foregoing paragraphs, the Methodist Church of Great Britain affirms and endorses the ecumenical consensus stated in *The Nature and Mission of the Church* as consistent with its own understanding of the Church as expressed in its official teaching and current faith and order statements.
43. Finally, the Methodist Church of Great Britain reaffirms its commitment to continuing ecumenical dialogue concerning the nature and mission of the Church towards the eventual goal of full visible unity among all Christians.

***RESOLUTIONS

- 17/4. The Conference adopted the Report.
- 17/5. The Conference commended this report, and the document on which it was based, to British Methodists for study, reflection and appropriate action at all levels of the Church's life.