

## **The Church: Towards a Common Vision (FO214) - a short study guide**

### *Explanatory note*

This short guide is for anyone interested in reading *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Faith and Order Paper No.214). It could be used by people either reading on their own or as part of a study group.

The guide is made up of 4 sections

- 1) an introduction to the text and the importance of the doctrine of (i.e. about) the Church for Christian unity;
- 2) some suggestions about how to read the text and the questions it addresses to the churches;
- 3) a glossary/guide to some of the more technical or controversial words and ideas contained in the text.
- 4) an index to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*

### **PART 1 - INTRODUCTION**

*The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (sometimes abbreviated to TCTCV) is a document from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. Published in 2013, it was the result of many years' work by representative theologians from Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal and Roman Catholic Churches asking what can be said together about the Church and how closer mutual understanding might contribute to overcoming the obstacles standing in the way of unity between the divided Christian communities.

This short guide is for any readers of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. There would be many advantages in studying the text in an ecumenical group, especially learning to see things through other people's eyes, but this guide could equally be used by members of a parish or congregational or ecumenical group, and, with some adjustment, by those reading on their own. My aim is to encourage readers of TCTCV to be enthusiastic about how far the divided churches have already come in their mutual understanding of the place of the Church in God's plan. At a time when many Christians are wondering about the future of the ecumenical movement, we also want to make a small contribution to the re-imagining of unity.

Although it is designed to help readers reflect on a text, our real subject is the Church itself.

For most Christians, the Church is an article of faith: "We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church." This applies both to those who regularly use the Niceno-Constantinopolitan and Apostles' Creeds in their worship and regard them as standards of faith and to members of other communities in which this fourfold description of the Church is implicitly or explicitly foundational.

But although different Christian communities use the same words, they may not always understand them in quite the same way. Sometimes these differences are among the biggest obstacles to the unity of Christians. Both parts of the title of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* are significant. Calling it "*The Church*" implies that the Church is something that really exists and which it ought to be possible to speak about in an agreed way even if we do not agree what we believe about it. "*Towards*

*a Common Vision*” suggests that we are far from such agreed understanding; indeed we do not yet agree about what we see when we look at the Church.

This is why it claims to be a “convergence” rather than a “consensus” text. Its authors believe they have discovered some real coming together in shared understanding, but that this still falls far short of full agreement.

It cannot be stressed too much that *TCTCV* is not an agreed statement about the Church. Therefore, we should not ask, “Does this document say exactly what I/my church believes about the Church?” but rather “Can this document help me/my church understand better why finding agreement about the Church is important for Christian unity and learn what aspects of the subject still need to be resolved?”

*The Church: Towards a Common Vision* is not a theoretical document emerging from a purely academic study of the Church, but is the outcome of almost 30 years work by Christian theologians, lay and ordained, for whom the Church is not an abstract idea, but the living context of their own Christian discipleship. Like its famous predecessor “*Baptism Eucharist and Ministry*” this text is designed to support the separated Christian churches in their quest to realise the unity for which Christ prayed.

What Jesus meant by this prayer and what the writers of the New Testament epistles meant by their frequent exhortations to unity are critical questions. Ecumenists often talk about the “goal of unity”. But what is that goal? Answers fall somewhere along the spectrum from a unity between believers that is known to God alone (“invisible” unity) to what is sometimes called “organic” or “full visible” unity. This is an important question, because it touches what we believe about the will of God and the work of Jesus. Once again we need to be aware that even though they use the same words people may not always mean the same. And *vice versa*: differences in language sometimes conceal an underlying agreement.

This is an “ecumenical” text in the sense that its authors come from a wide range of different and separated Christian churches. They are all theologians appointed by their respective churches and ecclesial communities. As the Historical Note (p.41ff) makes clear, the document has been subject to wide consultation and its previous versions (*The Nature and Purpose of the Church* and *The Nature and Mission of the Church*) have been extensively revised and reshaped in the light of responses and criticisms received.

Inevitably the text contains many words and expressions that may not be in everyday use or which may be understood differently by different people. This is why the third section of this guide consists of a glossary: a series of reflective comments on some of these words and expressions.

## **PART 2 - SUGGESTIONS FOR READING THE DOCUMENT**

This section suggests a number of different ways in which the document could be studied, and some people, (individuals and groups) will simply want to read and discuss it as it stands, working through it chapter by chapter. Others might like to use one or other of the suggestions below. Whatever method is adopted it might be helpful to begin by identifying what readers themselves bring to the text, that is, to consider what presuppositions or existing understanding and ideas they have about the Church. Local and ecumenical groups could ask two or three members of different denominations to come to the first meeting prepared to say briefly (no more than 5 minutes each) what they think about the Church from the perspective of their own congregation, denomination or locality.

This could lead into a general discussion about such questions as:

- What are the essential things for a church to be a church? Some people may have experience of a “Fresh Expression”: what lessons can be learned about what makes such a venture a “church”?
- What scriptural passages would people identify as being most important in understanding what the Church is and what it is for?
- What do people think their own church (denomination or tradition) has to offer the whole Church?
- What do they think they have to learn from others?
- What are the things everyone agrees are important for the Church to be the Church, and where do views differ most? (This may be an interesting question for members of the same denomination as for an ecumenical group!)
- Can people identify examples of where the Church is most faithful (and effective) in serving the mission of God in the world?
- How aware are people of their unity in Christ in their own experience, including in their own local situations? Where and how is it expressed and where and how is it strained? (Why is it sometimes easy to collaborate in practical things like supporting the local food bank, but more difficult to discuss moral or doctrinal questions?)
- What do members feel would make them be more aware of their existing unity “in Christ”, and help them find a deeper unity?

### **Suggestion 1**

**Read and discuss the Historical Note, the Preface and the Foreword before going on to the text itself. This will help you set the document in the context of its own background and of the ecumenical movement as a whole.**

As well as the text itself, the published document contains a Foreword by the General Secretary of the WCC, a Preface by the Director and Moderator of the Faith and Order Commission, and, at the end, a historical note explaining the process leading to the present text. These are not part of the text itself, but are important for understanding its context and background. While it is right to concentrate on the Introduction (p 1-3), Chapters I-IV (p5-37) and the Conclusion (p39, 40), some readers will find it helpful to start with this additional material.

The Historical Note in particular explains the background and shows how *TCTCV* arises from the justly famous earlier text from the Faith and Order Commission, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (FO Paper 111 1982) and from the responses to it received from the churches. Some idea of the interest that text aroused may be seen in the fact that already in the 1980s over 150 official responses were

received from churches (as well as others from individual theologians, theological schools and councils of churches); by the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *BEM*, the text had been reprinted 39 times!

A detailed analysis (*Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry 1982-1990*) identified the need for “common ecumenical perspectives on ecclesiology” as among the “major issues demanding further study.” *TCTCV* was preceded by two earlier texts, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (FO Paper 181, 1998) and *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (FO Paper 198, 2005). Both these texts were subtitled “A stage on the way to a common statement.” Responses to these interim texts however revealed that a common statement might be somewhat further away than had been hoped. Hence the more modest subtitle of the present text!

The text of *TCTCV* itself begins with a short Introduction which includes a request to the churches to make an official response in the light of five questions. Although these are “official” questions to the churches, and are therefore expressed in rather formal language, they could also be a useful framework for anyone studying the text.

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

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

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

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

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

The introduction also explains the structure of the text and the theme of each chapter:

I            How the Christian community finds its origin in the mission of God for the saving transformation of the world. The Church is essentially missionary, and unity is essentially related to this mission.

II            The salient features of an understanding of the Church as Communion, gathering the results of much common reflection both about how Scripture and subsequent tradition relate the Church to God and some of the consequences of this relation for the life and structure of the Church.

III           The growth of the Church as the pilgrim people moving towards the kingdom of God, especially upon several difficult ecclesiological questions that have divided the churches in the past.

IV           Ways in which the Church relates to the world as a sign and agent of God’s love, such as proclaiming Christ within an interreligious context, witnessing to the moral values of the Gospel and responding to human suffering and need.

## **Suggestion 2**

**Read each chapter of the text with the five questions in mind. (These can be adapted appropriately for different contexts, e.g. congregational or ecumenical groups.) Here are the questions, in each case followed by a possible more direct re-wording.**

To what extent does this text reflect the ecclesiological understanding of your church?  
(How far do you find your own understanding of the Church reflected in this chapter?)

To what extent does this text offer a basis for growth in unity among the churches?  
(What contribution could this chapter make to the search for Christian unity?)

What adaptations or renewal in the life of your church does this statement challenge your church to work for?  
(Does this chapter suggest any areas in which you think your own church needs to be changed or renewed?)

How far is your church able to form closer relationships in life and mission with those churches which can acknowledge in a positive way the account of the Church described in this statement?  
(What difference would it make if different churches found they agreed with the picture of the Church given in this chapter? Can you imagine your own church becoming closer to other churches if you really can agree on these things?)

What aspects of the life of the Church could call for further discussion and what advice could your church offer for the ongoing work by Faith and Order in the area of ecclesiology?  
(How far does this chapter answer the questions you have? What further work would you like to have done on the subject matter of this chapter?)

In discussing these questions it will be helpful to bear in mind an important principle of ecumenical dialogue. This has been described as follows: “the notion of convergence implies that theology is understood as having a direction, as going somewhere, rather than involving a mere repetition by each partner of long cherished dogmatic formulae. While not denying that serious issues have indeed divided the churches, commitment to the possibility of convergence entails acknowledging that emotive and polarized language has played a large part in continuing the separation of the churches. The process of convergence involves a willingness to leave behind the language of past polemic in the search for common understanding. All the dialogues look for ways of reconciling antithetical positions, avoiding the terms in which the antithesis was originally put forward. This method suggests that whatever may have been the case in the past is now no longer necessarily so. While there can be no justification in theological dialogue for glossing over differences, it is accepted that the pursuit of restatement is possible. That is, not more irenic restatements of where we once were, nor even restatements of where we are now in our separation, but restatements of our common Christian heritage. The dialogues, therefore, avoid controversial language and attempt to re-examine and re-appropriate our common heritage offered to us in the Scriptures and Tradition.” (From “Towards a Church of England Response to BEM and ARCIC”, a report to the General Synod of the Church of England in 1985 GS661)

In discussing these questions it will also be helpful to bear in mind another important principle of ecumenical dialogue - or, for that matter, of any conversation aiming at greater mutual understanding and closer fellowship. Inevitably when people or communities become estranged from each other, they begin to develop ways of thinking, speaking and behaving that add to the original causes of separation and so make mutual understanding and reconciliation more difficult.

They often start speaking in newer and more negative ways about each other and so diverge further and further. As time goes by, the original issues are no longer or no longer the only grounds for division. Without denying the painful experiences of history, reconciliation between churches requires examination of the living faith of the churches and the ways in which this is expressed in order to discover what they have in common and what is really keeping them apart. As trust grows, it becomes possible to think together about the painful experience of separation and the fantasies each may harbour about the other. As most Christian churches claim the Scriptures and other ancient common traditions, and also trust in the present guidance of the Holy Spirit, a particularly helpful ecumenical method is what is called in French “ressourcement” - going back to the sources together and looking at our differences in the light of what we have in common. This shared relearning of the Gospel will often involve gratitude for new discoveries and penitence for past mistakes. It may also lead us to appreciate more clearly how God has been faithful to his people through all the vicissitudes of history.

### **Suggestion 3**

**Concentrate on the thirteen paragraphs printed in italics which draw attention to particular issues where further discussion is needed. In each case, ask whether the paragraph accurately identifies outstanding problems. Could the group suggest ways of resolving them? Perhaps some alleged problems are not as difficult as suggested. On the other hand, are there some problems in inter-church relations that are not mentioned? How would group members express those difficulties?**

Fundamental issues on the way to unity (Chapter 1 p.8)  
How continuity and change in the Church relate to God’s will (Chapter II p.14)  
The expression “the Church as sacrament” (Chapter II p. 16)  
Legitimate and divisive diversity (Chapter II p.17)  
The relationship between local and universal Church (Chapter II p.18, 19)  
Sacraments and ordinances (Chapter III p.25)  
Ordained ministry (Chapter III p.26)  
The threefold ministry (Chapter III p.27)  
Authority in the Church and its exercise (Chapter III p.29)  
The authority of Ecumenical Councils (Chapter III p.30)  
A universal ministry of unity (Chapter III p.32)  
Ecumenical response to religious pluralism (Chapter IV p.34)  
Moral questions and the unity of the Church (Chapter IV p.35, 36)

### **Suggestion 4**

**Paragraph 7 (p.7, 8) highlights some particular challenges facing Christians today. How far do you recognise these challenges and how do you think the Church could face them most effectively?**

### PART 3 - GLOSSARY

**Apostle, apostolicity:** The word “apostle” means “one who is sent”. (1) Fundamentally this refers to Jesus, who was sent by the Father. (2) Next it refers to the “chosen witnesses” sent by Jesus who himself was sent by his Father. (3) Applied to the Church throughout the ages, it reminds Christians that the Church rests on the witness of the first apostles to Jesus who was himself sent by the Father, and (4) that the Church itself shares in that sending, to serve God’s purpose “which he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1.9, 10). To describe the Church as “apostolic” involves all these elements. Most difficulties about the use of the term concern the relationship between 1, 2, 3 and 4!

**Apostolic succession:** Acts 2.42 states that the early Christian community remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles. Most Christians agree that this remains one of the characteristics of their faith today. There are however differences about how being “faithful to the apostles’ teaching” here and now connects to being “faithful to the apostles’ teaching” throughout the ages and in other parts of the world today. All agree about the identity (or continuity) of teaching; some also regard the chain of authentic and authorised teachers as an important element.

**ARCIC** The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, established by Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Michael Ramsey, in partial fulfilment of the recommendations of the Malta Report 1968. The goal was “the full, organic unity of our two Communions.” ARCIC has had 3 “phases” and has produced a long series of “agreed statements” (agreed, that is, by the Commission and submitted to the respective authorities of the Holy See and the Anglican Communion.)

**“Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry” (BEM):** Many Christian divisions involve differences about some of the elements of church life that have been essential for most Christians since New Testament times. This is why it is important to find sufficient agreement about baptism, the Lord’s Supper and the ministry. “Sufficient” has been used because one of the questions is how much agreement about the understanding and practice of these rites is necessary for unity and how far it is possible to “agree to differ”. This has been a concern of the Faith and Order Movement from the outset (and, since 1948, of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches). A high point was the publication in 1982 of the so-called Lima Text, *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry*. This document encouraged reflection on how far the separated churches already agreed and might grow closer, and challenged those churches that could recognise their own teaching in the text to reconsider their relationships with other churches that also did so. As the churches responded to this text it became apparent that another question lay behind how these particular rites are understood especially by those churches that regard them as “constitutive of the Church” (i.e. part of what makes the Church the Church) - namely how the separated Christian communities think about the Church itself. That is what is meant by “ecclesiology”. The present text *TCTCV* is an attempt to respond to that question.

**Bilateral dialogue:** dialogues between two churches or confessions. To be distinguished from “multilateral dialogue” in which more churches are involved. Typically bilateral dialogues have a more immediate aim of changing the relationships between the partner churches.

**Catholicity:** The Greek expression *kath’olou* means “as (or according to) the whole”. In other words it implies wholeness. This is often translated as “universality”. “World-wide” is a less satisfactory translation as it misses the dimension of “throughout the ages”. A classic definition was given by St Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth century: “The Church is called catholic because she is everywhere in the whole inhabited world, from one end of the earth to the other; and because she teaches universally and perfectly all the doctrines which ought to come to human knowledge, whether to do with visible or invisible things, with the realities of heaven or the things of earth; and because she

brings people of every kind under the rule of true piety, whether they be rulers or subjects, learned or unlettered; because she universally cures and heals every kind of error of committed by soul or body, and because she possesses within herself every kind of virtue that can be named, in deeds and words and in all kinds of spiritual gifts.”

**Church/church/churches:** Although it is hard to be completely consistent, ecumenical texts try to use the word Church (with a capital/upper case C) when they are referring to the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church” of the creeds. The word “church” (with a lower case “c”) may mean a particular or local church. In the present divided state of Christianity the terms “church” and “churches” (lower case “c”) are also frequently applied to “denominations “ or “confessions”, although not all Christian communities are happy with this usage. (By ecumenical convention however, “To participate in a council of churches ... does not imply that all members regard all other members as churches in the same way in which they regard themselves.....Such courtesy is not merely pragmatic, but can contribute to a spiritual encounter between different communities in which as trust grows it becomes possible to face the theological issues together.” In other words it is both practical and polite to allow communities to use their own language to describe themselves.)

In the New Testament itself the word usually translated as “church” (*ekklesia*) comes from a root meaning “to call out” or “summon to a meeting”. In the NT as well as applying to the Church, it is also used for secular assemblies of various kinds, for example in Acts 19 where it refers both to a special meeting of craftsmen (v.32) and to a duly constituted civic meeting (v.39). Although this might suggest that *ekklesia*/church means a congregation, or an assembly when it is actually gathered (as it does for example at I Cor 11.18), it can also have an institutional meaning, that is to say a permanent community as well as an occasional congregation. (A modern comparison might be the Northern Ireland Assembly. This parliament has a permanent existence, and its members are MLAs whether actually in session or not).

As well as the gathered congregational sense mentioned in the last paragraph, the word *ekklesia* is used in a number of different senses in the New Testament. In Matthew 16.18, for example, “the Church” seems to envisage a reality greater than a particular local community. Compare Jn 17.20, where, although Jesus does not use the actual word, he prays “not for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word.” In the epistles and in Revelation “churches” are usually congregations in particular places. In Ephesians 1.22,23 the Church is described as Christ’s body, “the fullness of him who fills all in all.”(cf Col 1.18) This helped pave the way for an understanding of the Church as a supernatural reality, of which all actual churches are manifestations.

The New Testament does not contain a developed doctrine of the Church (or any other key Christian doctrines) but reflection on the NT evidence takes us to most of the central questions of the subject. What did Jesus mean when he said he would build his Church on the rock of Peter or of Peter’s faith? How does this community (or assembly) relate to the community of Israel? What is the relationship between the “universal” and the “local” (and how both are to be defined)?

**Communion:** This is a translation of the New Testament word *koinonia*, another translation of which is “fellowship”. Its root meaning is sharing in common or participation; hence it can refer to the principle of sharing, to what is shared or to the consequences of sharing. Some examples of these different uses:

- “the communion/fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (e.g. II Cor 13.13). This could mean either the fellowship created by the Holy Spirit or fellowship with (or in) the Holy Spirit (or possibly both!);
- the fellowship or sharing among the disciples (Acts 2.42)



- the solidarity that flows from this - as, for example, the contribution to the needs of the poor among the saints in Jerusalem (Rom 15.26);
- the sharing of the body and blood of Christ (I Cor 10.16), thus leading to the expression “holy communion” applied to what is for most Christians the central act of Christian worship;
- these different meanings come together when “communion” is used to describe the life of the Church itself and relations between churches and their members. Even when they do not use the word, most churches have a sense of who is fully in their fellowship, and of their relationship to other communities. This is what is meant when the expression “being in communion with” is used; a similar idea is expressed by phrases like “offering the right hand of fellowship” or “being in connexion”. For many churches the link between understanding the Church as a communion and the sacrament of Holy Communion is particularly close. Some families of churches describe themselves as “communions”, for example the Anglican Communion. In the present divided state of Christendom, it is hard to avoid language like “full”, “partial” and “impaired” communion. A helpful development in recent years has been the recognition that Christians in their separated churches are in real but imperfect communion with each other. A major theological problem remains, however: if Christ is the source of our unity, how can those who “in Christ” not be in communion with each other? Resolving this is the aim of the ecumenical movement. Because it introduces such an illogicality to the heart of the Gospel community, it is a tragedy when Christians do not feel their disunity to be a matter of urgency, even something that challenges their faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

**Consensus:** This refers to the unity of heart and mind to which Paul often exhorted his churches. It is closely related to the idea of unanimity (being of one mind, heart or will). Theologically this presupposes that the truth of the Gospel and the ability we have to receive it are a revealed gift of God and do not depend on our individual opinions. It rests on what is sometimes described as the *sensus fidei*, an instinct for the Gospel possessed by all believers. “Consensus decision making” is favoured by some churches (and by the World Council of Churches) as a more faithful way of discerning the will of God than majority voting methods. Applied to the decisions of Ecumenical Councils or to “ecumenical texts”, the word consensus is a way of saying “this is the faith of the Church”, and not “this is what most of us think.”

**Convergence:** This refers to the way in which a common reappraisal of our common origins can enable better mutual understanding between the churches and help them move closer together. It presupposes that previously they were on at best parallel but even possibly divergent paths. Convergence is thus a sign of hope, although to use the term acknowledges that we are some way off from consensus. A “convergent text” is applied to an ecumenical text that is able to register progress with a hope for more complete agreement in the future.

**Council** Meeting in “synod” or “council” was from an early date one of the ways in which the early churches discerned whether they shared the same faith (as well as making practical decisions to regulate various aspects of church life). From the early fourth century some councils came to be recognised as “ecumenical”, signifying that they were, in principle at least, assemblies that represent the fullness the Church, filling the whole inhabited world (ecumene). Churches that acknowledge the authority of Ecumenical Councils do not necessarily agree about how many they recognise.

An Ecumenical Council presupposes the Church’s unity/uniqueness. It is not therefore the same as a modern “Council of Churches”, which starts from the twin realities of a common desire for visible

unity and the present experience of disunity. The situation is further complicated by the fact that different churches take different views of the difference between these two kinds of council

**Diakonia** Diakonia (Greek = service) is, with leitourgia (= worship cf liturgy) and martyria (= witness) one of three activities which may be regarded as features of the Church in all places and all times even though they are expressed a wide variety of different ways. When Jesus said “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom” (Mk 10.45) he not only indicated the way his disciples should behave, but also linked service to self-offering. This link gives Christian service a “doxological” character and also implies that authentic Christian worship must always be marked by concern for human need. This is reflected in many churches by the ministry of “deacons” with both a liturgical and a charitable function (with the emphasis tending more in one direction or the other according to the church in question.)

**Dialogue** Inter-church dialogues may be bi-lateral (involving two partners) or multi-lateral (involving many different churches or confessions.) While some form of unity is the ultimate goal of most “ecumenical” dialogues, this is more likely to be the immediate aim of bi-lateral dialogues because these can concentrate on the particular issues at stake between the “traditions” involved. There are approximately 40 official bi-(and in some cases tri-) lateral dialogues at the international level, and many more regional dialogues. More details can be found on the WCC and CTBI websites. Multi-lateral conversations are normally of a wider theological character and do not have the intention of changed inter-church relations in the short term. They may nevertheless help clear the ground for better relations between two or more of the churches involved. A good example of the latter would be the work on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* by the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC. They may however create a changed climate in which some participating churches find themselves able to move towards unity. BEM asked the churches to consider “the consequences your church can draw from this text for its relations and dialogues with other churches, particularly with those churches which also recognize the text as an expression of the apostolic faith.” A similar question is asked by TCTCV: “How far is your church able to form closer relationships in life and mission with those churches which can acknowledge in a positive way the account of the Church described in this statement?” The reports and agreed statements from most dialogues at the world level have been collected in three volumes “Growth in Agreement I, II, III” (WCC Publications 1984, 2000, 2007)

**Ecclesiology:** This may mean (1) the study or understanding of the Church as an article of faith, (2) the comparative study of how different Christian communities understand the Church in this sense or even how they understand themselves in relation to it.

As a theological term, ecclesiology should not be confused with the use of the same word to describe the study of church buildings, decoration, art, furnishings and music. All these however usually reveal some particular understanding of the Church.

**Ecumenical:** Most people use this word to describe inter-church relations, usually in the context of the churches’ quest for unity. Thus the “Ecumenical Movement” is the totality of efforts, thinking, prayer, organisation and projects designed to improve relations between the churches for the sake of unity. It presupposes the divisions between Christians and seeks to heal them. Dependent on people’s views on some other issues addressed in this study guide (see for example, Unity, Ecclesiology) the ecumenical movement is trying either to make an existing unity more visible and effective or to create (or re-create) a unity that does not currently exist - with a number of intermediate positions!

Behind this modern usage, and rather hidden by it, lies a much more ancient Christian use of the word. The word “ecumenical” comes to us from the Greek term “ecumene (oikoumene)”, meaning

the “inhabited world”. Its root is the Greek word “oikos” meaning “house”. We can get a clear understanding of what this meant in the early Church from St Irenaeus at the end of the second century. He wrote that “the Church, having received this preaching and this faith [i.e. from the apostles], although she is disseminated throughout the whole world, yet guarded it, as if she occupied but one house.” In other words, the original idea of ecumenism was not divided churches seeking unity but of how the one Church filled the whole world and how each particular or local church represented the whole. We can get a sense of the difference by reflecting on the English words “unity” and “uniqueness”.

**Eschatology:** This means the doctrine of the “last things” or the “end time.” Some Christians emphasize the work of Christ and sending of the Spirit on the Church as having inaugurated the last days, other emphasize “our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ” (Titus 2.13). Most churches recognise the “already” and “not yet” quality of the age in which we live. Even now “our citizenship is in heaven.”

**Faith and Order:** Finding sufficient agreement in matters of faith (belief, doctrine) and church order (structure, ministry, authority) has long been recognised as an important aspect of the churches’ quest for unity. What constitutes “sufficient” is itself one of the matters for agreement. Moreover, churches differ in their understanding of the areas where agreement must be complete and where “legitimate diversity” may be possible. In matters of doctrine, some communities seek strict verbal identity, others look for agreement in the substance of faith while allowing for a diversity of expression. In matters of church order, some believe that God has given a particular form of ministry, for example, while others think this is an area where different patterns need not keep the churches apart.

As a movement Faith and Order (like the Ecumenical Movement as a whole) traces its origins in part to the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910. Missionaries were aware of the damage disunity and competitiveness could do to the proclamation of the Gospel. It was recognised however that this involved questions for the separated churches as such. The Faith and Order Movement has played a key role in helping the churches reflect on these matters. In 1948 the Movement was one of the strands which came together to form the World Council of Churches.

**Holiness** The most basic use of the word “holy” in the Bible is applied to God, and refers to God’s apartness. God’s people are to be “holy” because God is “holy”. They are “set apart” from all that is alien to God’s righteousness. This has clear moral implications, but it is important to remember this background and not regard “holiness” as merely a matter of moral rectitude. The ethical way of life that should characterize Christians follows from the fact that they have been “set apart”; it cannot be properly understood apart from it.

**Koinonia:** See “Communion”

**Mission (see also Apostolicity):** The word “mission” derives from the Latin verb “to send”, just as “apostle” reflects the corresponding Greek verb. Christianity is a missionary (or apostolic) religion because the Church is the result of the sending of Jesus and the Spirit by the Father. Mission is therefore the character of the Church as well as its origin. It is a mistake to think that mission is essentially something we do. Mission involves living, proclaiming and collaborating with all God does for the salvation (wholeness and holiness) of creation. God’s mission, in which we are called to participate involves worship (leitourgia) in fulfilment of the first and great commandment to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength”, service (diakonia) in obedience to the one who came “not be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” and witness (martyria) including testimony to the truths revealed by God (evangelism), “making disciples of all

nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe all that [Jesus] commanded.” Many church divisions reflect differences in understanding the relationship between these elements.

**Reception** This refers to the way in which Christ’s people come to recognise a particular idea, doctrine or text as a true expression of the faith. Trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Christians recognise this process at work, for example, in the formation of the canon of Holy Scripture, in the doctrinal definitions (dogmas) of the Ecumenical Councils, and, more recently, in the way in which some ecumenical texts have been recognised as authoritative.

**Recognition:** This term is quite often used in ecumenical texts. People speak of the “mutual recognition” of churches, or the “recognition” of ministries. As the word “recognition” and its verb “recognize” are used in a variety of ways in modern English, it is important to clarify what they mean in particular contexts. Here are some rather different uses of the words.

- (1) When we say we “recognize” people we have met before, we mean they are familiar to us, we know who they are, because of their faces, their features, the way they speak or behave.
- (2) Or we might use the word to mean “we accept something is the case”.
- (3) We might also say, perhaps of a musical performance, that we recognize the quality of the performers; in this case we mean something like we can sense how accomplished they are.
- (4) Rather more strongly, we sometimes read newspaper reports of a trial in which a defendant says “I do not recognize the authority of this court”, in other words “I don’t accept its right to pass judgment on me.” (Although in this case, it probably won’t make much difference to the outcome!)

All these four uses occur in TGTCV.

- (1) Para. 9: “Visible unity requires that churches be able to recognize in one another the authentic presence of what the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople (381) calls the “one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church.”
- (2) Para. 36 “All recognize the continual need for Christian self-examination, penitence, conversion (metanoia), reconciliation and renewal.”
- (3) Para. 50: “Throughout history the Church has recognized a certain authority in the lives of the saints, in the witness of monasticism and in various ways that groups of believers have lived out and expressed the truth of the gospel”.
- (4) Para.41: “the mutual recognition of baptism”.

There is however an even stronger use of the word, although it is closely related to (4). When, for example, the United Nations “recognizes” a new state, some practical and legal consequences immediately follow. This is what we might call a “performative” effect of “recognition” - in other words it actually does something, it creates a new situation. Mutual recognition of baptism and ministry may do more than acknowledge that these rites are valid as far as their own communities are concerned; it may also imply that these rites are also valid for one’s own community. So for, example, many churches acknowledge baptism performed with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit to be valid even if performed in a community different from one’s own. In some cases this may imply “joint” membership. Recognising the orders of another church might mean that an ordained minister may be received into active ministry without re-ordination.

It is important to understand what we mean when we use the language of “recognition” and to check out with others what they mean.

**Sacraments/sacramentality:** Not all churches regularly use this language. For those that do, a sacrament is a religious ceremony that is believed to embody and even convey God's grace. This view reflects the biblical revelation that God saw all he had made and said that it was very good, and that in Christ "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." In other words, sacraments are God's own way of using the already good things he has created as means of his presence and gift. For some Christians the word "sacrament" usually refers to particular rites and ceremonies, especially those that are most closely linked to the "new creation" of all who are "in Christ." Others prefer to think of sacramentality more as a matter of its earlier Greek equivalent "mystery" and thus not so much as a matter of particular ceremonies as about the whole wonderful way in which God makes it possible for us to share his life. Seen in this way, the various sacraments are particular instances of the biggest mystery of all, that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." St Leo the Great once said in a sermon that "What was visible in the incarnation has passed into the sacraments." Although views of the sacraments, their character and number, have become a cause of division between (especially western) churches, most Christians acknowledge baptism and the eucharist as privileged events or moments for an encounter with Christ. Churches differ as to what other rites should be described as sacraments. Some who hesitate about the sacraments do however regard the Scriptures in this way. So this does seem a fruitful area for ecumenical discussion. One particular area of current discussion is whether the Church as such should be described as sacramental.

**Tradition:** By ecumenical convention, Tradition (capital "T" or "Holy Tradition") means the living presence and activity of the Holy Spirit, reminding Christians of all that Jesus taught them and leading them into all the truth. It rests on the understanding expressed by St Paul when he wrote "What I received, I also passed on ("traditioned") to you." By contrast, "traditions" are accustomed ways of doing things; "conventions" or "customs" would be alternative words for the same idea. In this sense, "Tradition" is "the faith delivered to the saints", which we may learn to understand better and adhere to more faithfully but is essentially unchanging, while "traditions" are human customs that can vary from place to place and time to time. Discerning one from the other is not an easy task! An important moment in ecumenical history was the fourth world conference on faith and order at Montreal (Canada) in 1963 which asked "How can we distinguish between traditions embodying the true Tradition and merely human traditions? How can we overcome the situation in which we all read scripture in the light of our own traditions? Does not the ecumenical situation demand that we search for the Tradition by re-examining our own particular traditions?"

**Unity:** Jesus prayed that his disciples might be one, as he and the Father are one, so that the world may believe. The unity of Christians is therefore a matter of theology and a matter of mission. The churches are not all agreed on the nature of this unity, what is required for it, whether it already exists and simply needs to be made explicit and visible or whether it has yet to be revealed, and how it is to be realised. For those communities which see the church primarily in terms of a local gathered congregation, unity is above all a matter of the lived fellowship between believers, whereas for those seeing the Church as the single universal Body of Christ, unity is just as much a matter of the communion between particular communities. Membership in the WCC does not commit churches to any particular model or goal of unity although "The primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe". (Harare Assembly of WCC 1998) Such a statement suggests some principles, but almost every phrase is open to different interpretations.

***An index to The Church: Towards a Common Vision***

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