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Abstract

**ECUMENICAL STUDY ON ECCLESIOLOGY
Main Objectives and Methodology**

David K. Yemba

During the course of this twentieth century, events and meetings have been held, books and articles written, agreements signed, etc...about the Church: its nature, faith, life, unity and mission. Yet, Christian traditions remain in the state of division; though most of them manifest a growing interest in becoming in the world what they are in essence: the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, etc... It has been observed that most of the divisive issues experienced in the churches have their root in the ways these churches understand and interpret the nature of the church and practice church mission in the world.

Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches has embarked on a major study on ecclesiology since 1989. In fact this study is a continuation of the process Faith and Order Commission started in the previous studies, namely, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM), *Apostolic Faith and Unity and Renewal* studies. What is now known as Ecclesiology Study intends to bring together, in addition to these three studies, ecclesiological elements from bilateral dialogues between churches and their World Communions and any materials related to this project. The Ecclesiology Study is a step in the broader task of Faith and Order movement whose aim is "to proclaim the oneness of the church of Jesus Christ and to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, in order that the world may believe".

The purpose of this paper is to give a survey of this ecumenical study which is conducted at the level of multilateral dialogue. Attention will be drawn to three essential points: historical background with regard to the need shown by the churches to embark on ecclesiology studies in an ecumenical perspective, the main objectives of the project and envisaged methodology to achieve these objectives.

The paper does not treat a specific issue or aspect of Wesleyan ecclesiology, however it intends to bring an ecumenical dimension to discussion concerning Wesleyan ecclesiology and related issues.

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The purpose of this paper is to give a survey of Ecclesiology Study undertaken by Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches since 1989. Although the topic of this does not deal directly with Wesleyan ecclesiology or its subsequent historical ecclesiologies, it intends to bring, however, an input from ecumenical perspectives to our discussion concerning the ways Wesleyan traditions perceive the nature and mission of the church. Therefore the scope of the paper will consist of indicating, at this stage of the study, historical background, the main objectives of the project and envisaged methodology.

The ending twentieth century can be described in summary, as a century of radical changes in the world and in our scientific knowledge of this world. This is particularly true when one looks back and evaluates the degree of progress made in areas of natural sciences and their unpredictable application, of social communication and ambiguous relationships it continues to create, of political organizations with economic systems as indispensable allies, etc... In fact it is during this century that for the first time in the history of humankind, according to our knowledge, the world became a theatre of two world wars, in which atomic bombs were used. Peoples and places are still marked by the consequences of these terrible wars. We are witnesses of the progress of sophisticated technology which leads human beings to know more and more about our planet but also what space and the whole solar system have in store. However, along with this tremendous progress there are also unprecedented social upheavals and unrest never experienced before. The serious ecological crisis of our times is another indication how great is the ambiguity of modern progress.

I come from a part of the world where, in this area of human achievement, progress is not a central issue. African history is full of horrible pages with accounts of slavery, colonialism and new-colonialism. Even now Africans struggle for their right to dignity and better life and for democracy. The talking-point on the African continent at the end of this century is "development". Governments and non governmental organizations have ^{this} concept on their agenda. They cherish the concept of development with all kind of adjectives attributed to it: social, sustainable, integral, etc. In any case the progress realized by our century, with its

positive and negative effects, continues to affect considerably our daily personal and communal lives.

The church, although by its source is understood as not being of this world, is in this world. All these changes in the world have a considerable impact in the life of the church and of its members. The ending century can also be described, as the century of the church¹ from a theological scholarship viewpoint but also when one considers what has been achieved within ecumenical movement. With perhaps exception of the fourth century, never before in the history of Christianity ecumenical relations, conferences, councils, programmes and associations have been on the agenda of churches, church leaders and individual theologians as they are in our times. Never before contentious disagreements of the past among Christian traditions have been considered in more reconciling perspectives than what we are contemplating today.

That is the case with Roman Catholic church and other churches.² The same reconciling attitude has been noticed among the so called "non-Chalcedonian" churches of Oriental Orthodox family and Eastern Orthodox churches. These churches recognize the importance and possibility of moving towards restoration of full communion. In our broken world churches realize how important the unity of the church is if they have to take up challenges the contemporary changes put out to their ministry and mission.

1. What new possibilities of mission will be opened for us by such fellowship?
2. What diff is visible unity of Body of X going to make to world not grasped by us; in Faith and Order, as a Commission of the World Council of Churches and also as a Movement, ~~at our work~~

has its membership from around the world comprising those from Anglican, Protestant, Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. Its aim is "to proclaim the oneness of the church of Jesus Christ and to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, in order that the world may

¹ Cf. Otto Dibelius, *Das Jahrhundert der Kirche*, Berlin, 1925.

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I-IV, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936, ss.

_____, *Die Kirche zwischen Ost und West*, Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, A.G., 1949.

(*L'Eglise entre l'Est et l'Ouest*, French trans. Geneva: Roulet, 1949).

Hans Kung, *Die Kirche* (English trans. *The Church*, London: Burns & Oates, 1978).

J.-M.-R. Tillard, *Eglise d'Eglises. L'ecclésiologie de Communion*, Paris: Cerf, 1987.

_____, *L'Eglise locale. Ecclésiologie de Communion et Catholicité*, Paris: Cerf, 1966.

² See Encyclical letter Ut Unum Sint Vatican, 1995 by the Pope John Paul II, especially in the Holy Father exhortation to Roman Catholic believers and to brothers and sisters of other churches and ecclesial communities concerning the necessity and commitment to Christian unity, pp. 114-117.

3. Why does this make belief possible (removes false scandal)

believe".³ Faithful to this aim and carrying out the functions with regard to this aim, Faith and Order conducts series of theological studies and meetings in order to serve as an instrument of the churches in their research to manifest the visible unity of the Body of Christ. It is in the course of these meetings that important decisions are made to plan, according to the needs of the churches, programmes of Faith and Order activities.

Thus, at the end of its meeting in Budapest, Hungary, held in 1989 the Faith and Order Plenary Commission of the World Council of Churches took a resolution to embark on a major study on ecclesiology.⁴ By the same resolution the then Standing Commission (today the Board of Faith and Order Commission) was tasked to prepare a plan of the study to be undertaken and to develop the project as a whole. The plan and its development should take into account the report of the Budapest meeting and any other materials relevant to this ecclesiology study. But before this action was taken the members of the Commission thoroughly discussed background papers on the ecclesiology study proposal in group discussion as well as in plenary sessions. At that initial stage papers and discussions which followed aimed at reflections on the church and how these reflections can shape ecumenical perspectives on ecclesiology. It became more and more clear in the course of discussions that a major study on this topic was definitely needed. The study shall, it was felt, integrate ecclesiological contents of previous and ongoing studies undertaken by Faith and Order. The project should include among other elements, a rich variety of biblical imagery about the church, origin and source of the church, goal of unity and its diverse models and the missionary nature of the church.⁵

Since then a series of international consultations⁶ and Faith and Order regular meetings⁷ have been organized to deal with, among other things, the implementation of the project

³ By-laws of the Faith and Order Commission,

⁴ Thomas F. Best ed., *Faith and Order 1985-1989. The Commission Meeting at Budapest 1989*, Faith and Order Paper No. 148, Geneva: WCC, 1990.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 202-219.

⁶ Before the Budapest meeting in 1989 an international consultation was held at Pyatigorsk, Russia, November 22-29, 1988 to discuss "Basic Ecumenical Perspectives on Ecclesiology". Already in 1987, the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches requested Faith and Order to undertake "a fresh consideration of the concepts and forms of the 'Unity We Seek' and to prepare a draft statement to be submitted to the 1991 WCC Assembly at Canberra". A Faith and Order consultation at Etchmiadzin, Armenia, USSR, in July 1990, prepared such a statement and presented it to the Faith and Order Standing Commission for transmission to the Canberra Assembly. The Assembly approved the amended statement under the title *The Koinonia of the Church: Gift and Calling* which is later on known as the Canberra Statement. See *Minutes of the Meeting of the Standing Commission 1990 at Dunblane, Scotland*, Faith and Order Paper No. 152, Geneva WCC, 1990 pp. 26-31. During the Etchmiadzin consultation a draft outline of "Ecumenical Perspectives on Ecclesiology" was prepared

which is now known as Ecclesiology Study. Meanwhile, the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches took place in 1991, at Canberra, the capital city of Australia under the theme "Come, Holy Spirit - Renew the Whole Creation". Two years later, the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order was held in the historical Spanish city of pilgrims, Santiago de Compostela, in 1993.⁸ These two important church events enriched considerably the discussions with regard to the importance of the project and gave in turn orientation to the study.

MAIN OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Faith and Order has always been concerned with ecclesiological issues. Each study or programme undertaken by this movement has to deal with one aspect or another of this specific area of theological education. There is quite a number of reasons why a comprehensive framework of ecclesiological elements emerged so far in ecumenical work is needed. The history of contemporary ecumenical movement, especially the results of discussion from world conferences on Faith and Order, provide such elements.⁹ Churches and institutions of ministerial formation have manifested and continue to show a growing interest in common understanding of the nature, mission and unity of the church. There is a general observation that most of controversial issues among Christian traditions in the past had their roots in the ways these Christian traditions understood and interpreted the nature of the church and practiced the mission of the church. In light of this general observation but also of this growing interest, what are main objectives for this study on ecclesiology? I will briefly outline three of them.

and commented on. Three other core group meetings on Ecclesiology Study took place in Dublin in May 1994, Barbados in November of the same year and in Annecy, September 1995.

⁷ After Dunblane 1990 the Standing Commission met for its annual meetings in Cret-Berard, Switzerland 1994, Aleppo, Syria 1995, Bangkok, Thailand 1996 and Notre Dame de Fontgombault, France 1997 where in turn new steps were made towards a more mature text of the study.

⁸ Canberra Statement became the central reference of the Ecclesiology Study as a text which has received authority of the WCC Assembly. As to Santiago de Compostela conference, its theme "Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness" was discussed in light of new understanding of Koinonia as the kind of unity the churches seek.

⁹ Cf. Paul A. Crow and Günther Gassmann, *Lausanne 1927 to Santiago de Compostela 1993. The Faith and Order World Conferences and Issues and Results of the Working Period*, Faith and Order Paper No. 160, Geneva: WCC, 1993. See also Günther Gassmann, ed. *Documentary History of Faith and Order 1963-1993*, Faith and Order Paper No. 159, Geneva: WCC, 1993.

Firstly, Ecclesiology Study intends to discern and bring together ecclesiological elements scattered in the work of Faith and Order, particularly in responses churches have given to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, BEM. When this convergent document was approved at Lima in 1982 and then sent to the churches to solicit their official responses, it included in its preface a series of specific enquiries soliciting comments from the churches:

- the extent to which your church can recognize in this text (BEM) the faith of the Church through the ages;
- 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;
- the guidance your church can take from this text for its worship, educational, ethical and spiritual life and witness;
- the suggestion your church can make for the ongoing work of Faith and Order as it relates the material of this text on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry to its long-range research project 'Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today.'¹⁰

The six volumes¹¹ of responses and comments made by the churches show the degree of interest the Lima document aroused among the churches. But these volumes show also how the reactions to the same document constitute a test to identify the areas of agreements and topics which are still obstacles on the way towards the visible unity of the church. Churches' responses to BEM through evaluation of these responses culminated by a call to Faith and Order to give required attention to the area of ecclesiology, as pointed out in a comprehensive summary and evaluation of the process of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* study:

In the response to BEM we find positive references to a number of ecclesiological aspects which could contribute to future work of Faith and Order on ecclesiology. Many churches emphasize the corporate nature of the sacraments which express and build up the communal character of the church on all levels of its life. Many also welcome a Christo-centric and Trinitarian perspective for the understanding of the church, which implies a corrective of an ecclesiology which is primarily concerned with the church as a historical institution... With these common perspectives, however, certain areas remain in need of further study. These include the following: the role and place of the church in God's saving action - especially in relation to the sacraments; the rootedness of the church in the faith of Israel and the covenant of God with Israel; the essential characteristics or marks of the church; the relationship of the ordained ministry to the priesthood of the whole people of God; the ministries of women; forms of the ordained and lay ministry; apostolic Tradition and

¹⁰ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, Geneva: WCC, 1982, p.x.

¹¹ Max Thurian, ed. *Churches Respond to BEM*, vols. I-IV, Faith and Order Paper 129, 132, 135, 137, 143, 144, Geneva: WCC, 1986-88.

4. What basic ecclesiological principles have emerged?

episcopal succession; the teaching authority and decision-making process; the relationship of the local and universal dimensions of the church,... Because of issues such as these many responses to BEM requested that ecclesiology be made a major study in future Faith and Order work. It also requires the search for basic ecclesiological principles which could provide common perspectives for the churches' different ecclesiologies and serve as a framework for their convergence. These principles could be appropriately applied in different contextual situations in the life of the churches¹²

In addition to the process of these three key elements of church life, there are also two other main studies of great importance done by Faith and Order in recent years. They are *Unity and Renewal*¹³ and *Apostolic Faith*¹⁴ studies. The study documents of these are still with churches, ecumenical groups and theological institutions therefore the thorough evaluation of these two studies has not started yet. Nevertheless, as far as the *Apostolic Faith* study is concerned, the reactions to a shorter version of this study are already indicating how among other things, the Apostolic faith is essential to understand the nature and mission of the church¹⁵. Both *Unity and Renewal* and *Apostolic Faith* studies continue to play a significant role in major programmatic focus of Faith and Order work. The theme of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order and discussions this theme aroused in Santiago de Compostela confirm this assumption¹⁶.

Secondly, Ecclesiology Study, in addition to ecclesiological elements discovered in these three studies, is an opportunity to deepen churches' understanding of dialogues. The increasing number of these dialogues among Christian traditions at the end of this century (and of this millennium) constitutes another area of exploration in the life of the churches. The three studies already mentioned are achievements of dialogues at multilateral level. There are also a good number of dialogues at bilateral level. These conversations raise issues which require further study in the areas of ecclesiology in general and of the unity of the church in particular. However, there are also questions of purpose of dialogues and relationship among them. As

¹² *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. Report on the Process and Responses.* Faith and Order Paper No. 149, Geneva: WCC, 1990, pp. 147-48.

¹³ *Church and World. The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community.* Faith and Order Paper No. 151, Geneva: WCC, 1990.

¹⁴ *Confessing the One Faith. An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381).* Faith and Order Paper No. 153, Geneva: WCC, 1991.

¹⁵ *Towards Sharing the One Faith.* Faith and Order Paper No. 173, Geneva: WCC, 1996.

¹⁶ See Thomas F. Best and Günther Gassmann, eds. *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia. Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order.* Faith and Order Paper No. 166, Geneva: WCC, 1994, pp. 137-42 and 254-62.

far as objectives of Ecclesiology Study are concerned some of these questions must be looked at in the context of research for visible unity of the church. For instance, what are major ecclesiological perspectives which emerge in the recent results of conversations Christian World Communions have been embarked on? How are these conversations between individual churches and their World Communions related to the goal of unity of the church? What is the relationship between bilateral and multilateral dialogues as experienced so far? Those are some questions which need further discussions and clarification. At the most recent meeting on Forum on Bilateral Dialogues, held at Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, Switzerland, October 8-13, 1994, with the theme "Reception", several recommendations were made. One of them was that:

Faith and Order Commission should continue the BEM process beyond the compilation of the series of six published volumes of responses and the preliminary report (Group 3, recommendation)¹⁷.

Thirdly, and finally, Ecclesiology Study will bring a substantial contribution in research on the unity of the church. Furthermore, this study will be a great contribution to shaping the future course of the ecumenical endeavours. In one of his recent publications,¹⁸ Konrad Raiser, the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, started by observing a number of areas where uncertainty invades the ecumenical movement: uncertainty in the area of the goal of ecumenical movement and uncertainty in methods used so far to fulfill this goal. His exhaustive analysis concludes that ecumenical movement is going through a process of transition. There is a shift which is taking place within the movement and two test areas of this shift in ecumenical debate selected by Konrad Raiser are "the ecclesiological significance of the WCC" and "conciliar process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation"¹⁹. The question of ecclesiological significance of the World Council of Churches and the discussion which is going on concerning "A common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches" show how ecclesiology study is important at global level.

The three main objectives, if they are achieved, could lead Ecclesiology Study towards the convergence of ecclesiological perspectives within modern ecumenical movement.

¹⁷ *Minutes of the Meeting of Faith and Order Standing Commission 5-12 January 1995, Aleppo, Syria*, Faith and Order Paper No. 170, Geneva: WCC 1995, p. 150.

¹⁸ See Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition. A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* Geneva: WCC, 1991.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-20.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The process to achieve, in long-term, the objectives briefly described in the precedent pages shall provide answers to the questions like: to whom the Ecclesiology Study is prepared for? In other words who is the addressee of the study? What methods are to be used in the course of this study? What is the target?

It is generally noticed that before the World Conference on Faith and Order at Lund 1952 the methodology used in ecumenical ecclesiological studies was dominated by comparative approach. The unity of the church was looked at from a comparison angle of ecclesiologies of different Christian traditions in describing and compiling them. Now there is a new approach which emerged from recent ecumenical studies, around the concept of the unity of the church understood as *Koinonia*²⁰. The following steps offer an idea of the outline of methodology which is being used at this initial stage of the study.

Firstly, one must answer the question concerning the addressee. It is clear from the referred Faith and Order studies and meetings that churches are to react to and receive the results of this study. The process of reception will therefore be long.

Secondly, as to the general process, it consists of a) international consultations on various topics directly or indirectly related to ecclesiology, including the continuation of the three main studies of Faith and Order already mentioned; b) integration of bilateral dialogues in the process of multilateral dialogues; c) development of collaborative studies with other WCC Units to see how these collaborative studies can feed into Ecclesiology Study; d) development and involvement of regional consultations as started in the preparation process of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order;²¹ e) and exploration of further involvement of younger theologians and pastors in the work of ecumenical movement in general and of Faith and Order in particular.

²⁰ See Geoffrey Wainwright, "Church", in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva: WCC, 1991, 159-67.

²¹ See Thomas F. Best and Günther Gasman, eds, *Regional Consultations in Preparation for the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela, August 1993: Summary of Reports*, Faith and Order Paper N., 162, Geneva: WCC, 1993.

Thirdly, since Ecclesiology Study is a programme, the following specific studies and interrelated studies are scheduled with respect to their respective agendas: "Apostolicity and Apostolic Faith Today", "Ministry and Authority", "Ecumenical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Communicating the One Faith in *Koinonia*", "Unity of the Church and Nationalism, and Ethnic Identity", "Towards *Koinonia* in Worship and Spirituality", "The Church as *Koinonia* of Women and Men". Among the Faith and Order collaborative studies "Gospel and Culture" in collaboration with Unit II of the World Council of Churches; "Ecclesiology and Ethics" with Unit III, this is a continuation of the study on *Koinonia* and Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation; "Evangelism, Religious Liberty and Proselytism" with Unit II as substantial input to and continuation of the study on *Unity and Renewal*.

Fourthly, Ecclesiology Study, exploring *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* aims at deepening reflections around the three following sections: "The Church of the Triune God", "The Church in History" and "The Church as *Koinonia*". In each of the three sections the focus will be on what the churches can say together and what remains as obstacles which require further considerations.

Ecclesiology Study intends to develop a statement for convergence as was the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. It is expected that an interim short text may be prepared to be tested in ecumenical constituencies as was the Accra text for the Lima document.

Where
this at
now?
