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An Ongoing Faith and Order Initiative in Defining the Ecumenical Goal

In this paper, the work of Faith and Order in pursuing the oneness of the Church and full visible unity will be explored as a process of defining the ecumenical goal from New Delhi 1961 to Santiago de Compostela 1993. In this first part, definitions of unity which Faith and Order contributed to three assemblies and one conference of the World Council of Churches (WCC) will be presented in an effort to track the possibility of an emerging inter-confessional convergence on this central concept.

The three WCC assemblies are the ones that met at New Delhi in 1961, Nairobi in 1975, and Canberra in 1991. The Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order at Santiago de Compostela in 1993 is the most recent meeting.

Then, in the second part, some remaining challenges will be examined as follows: Incompleteness of the Reception Process; Eucharistic Separation Contradicting Koinonia; and Ecclesiological Issues Still Being Addressed.

I. Defining the Ecumenical Goal

The Faith and Order (F&O) quest for convergence on the Eucharist, together with baptism and ministry, is part of a larger ongoing effort to define the ecumenical goal. The goal already finds some definition in the bylaws of the Faith and Order Commission which point to “the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ” and the “goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship.”

This search for a clarification of the ecumenical goal is summarized by Günther GASSMANN, who cites and quotes numerous Faith and Order statements on the theme of “unity” in his *Documentary History of Faith and Order 1963–1993*.



At its Bangalore meeting in 1978, the Faith and Order Commission agreed that in order to reach visible unity, three requirements must be met. The churches must reach: common understanding of the apostolic faith; full mutual recognition of baptism, the Eucharist and the ministry; and agreement on common ways of teaching and decision-making.

Out of all the numerous theological reflections on unity printed in GASSMANN'S *Documentary History*, three statements of World Council of Churches (WCC) assemblies are given special attention through his placement of them at the beginning of the book.

They are the following: New Delhi 1961: Section III on Unity; Nairobi 1975: Section II on What Unity Requires; and Canberra 1991: The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling.

In addition to these, the research that follows will also investigate the ecumenical goal as it is defined at the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order at Santiago de Compostela, in 1993, under the theme *Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*.

One of the tasks in reviewing these ecumenical definitions is to identify any overarching trends of thought that might suggest an emerging commonality of expression in the quest for visible unity.

One Fully Committed Fellowship

The New Delhi Section Report on *Unity* was the result of a previous report prepared by the Commission on Faith and Order during its meeting at St. Andrews, Scotland, in 1960. One fact that makes the New Delhi report unique is that, within its 19 pages, it contains a succinct one-paragraph definition of unity that has been compared in its complexity to a Pauline sentence. Because of its importance and brevity, this New Delhi statement is printed here in full:

“We believe that the unity which is both God’s will and God’s gift to God’s Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls God’s people.”¹

One reason that the New Delhi Statement is significant is that its use of the term “one fully committed fellowship,” introduces a concept that is echoed at Nairobi, Canberra, and Santiago de Compostela, and down to the present time.

The New Delhi commentary uses the Greek word *koinonia* to help define “fellowship,” stating that this word has been chosen because “it describes what the Church truly is. *Fellowship* clearly implies that the Church is not merely an institution or organization. It is a fellowship of those who are called together by the Holy Spirit and in baptism confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.”

This section concludes with the assurance that “fellowship” does not “imply a rigid uniformity of structure, organization or government,” and adds: “A lively variety marks corporate life in the one Body of one Spirit.” Thus, there is a strong recommendation of “unity in diversity.”

It was 14 years later, during the Nairobi Assembly in 1975, that an explanation of the Nairobi vision of unity as conciliar fellowship interpreted both the New Delhi and the Nairobi definitions as advocating full organic unity.² The New Delhi definition is affirming the model of *organic unity*. The implication of a structural merger is in contrast with the model of “full communion.”

1 VISSER T'HOOFTE Willem A. (ed.), *The New Delhi Report: The Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches 1961*. London, 1962. 116.

A Conciliar Fellowship of Local Churches

In continuity with the New Delhi statement's accent on "one fully committed fellowship," the Section II Report, *What Unity Requires*, at the Nairobi Assembly in 1975 also lifts up the term "fellowship," that is, "a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves united".

Continuity with New Delhi is further maintained by identifying similar essentials for unity, e.g., "same baptism," "same Eucharist," recognition of "each other's members and ministries," a "common commitment to confess the gospel of Christ," and "the fulfillment of their common calling."

But it is also highly significant that the Nairobi definition of our common ecumenical goal affirms the Trinitarian basis for unity (Section 7) that is also a part of the full New Delhi statement (Section 1).

Thus, the Triune God becomes a theological emphasis for realizing the unity of the Church, a development that becomes more specific at Santiago de Compostela, as demonstrated below in the summary on that conference.

Koinonia: Gift and Calling

While the Vancouver 1983 Assembly of the World Council of Churches that followed Nairobi 1975 did not formulate a statement on church unity, it is the Canberra Assembly in 1991 that adopted *The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling*.

This pivotal ecumenical document is the result of a request by the WCC Central Committee in 1987 that Faith and Order undertake a fresh consideration of the concepts and forms of the unity we seek. Prior to the Canberra meeting, Faith and Order prepared draft statements in July and August of 1990 for submission, revision and adoption at the 1991 assembly.

What becomes immediately apparent is that the key word "fellowship" in the New Delhi and Nairobi statements now gives way to the English synonym *communion* and the Greek *koinonia* as the primary motif for defining the ecumenical goal.

The word "communion" appears 15 times in the two-page statement, and a new term, "full communion," is defined by this prerequisite: "when all the churches are able to recognize in one

another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church in her fullness." The expression "full communion" seems to replace the "full conciliar fellowship" that was contained in the Nairobi statement.

As at New Delhi and Nairobi, Canberra affirms a Trinitarian basis for unity that includes diversity, and also identifies similar essentials for unity that were mentioned at the previous assemblies.

Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness

One of the most significant facts about the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order at Santiago de Compostela, Spain, 3–14 August 1993, is that the meeting took place 30 years after the previous World Conference at Montreal in 1963.

This long time span indicates that the Commission on Faith and Order now and in recent years has relied on smaller study groups, consultations and forums to accomplish its ongoing crucial task.

The other important feature of the Santiago Conference is that the ecumenical goal is defined primarily as *koinonia* and *communion*, in keeping with the categories that were shown to be emerging from the WCC assemblies at New Delhi, Nairobi, and especially Canberra, as indicated above.

This trend is shown in the theme of the conference, *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, and also in the title of the Message at the end of the official report, *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*.

An example of the seriousness with which the conference addressed the theme is the exhaustive thirty-page presentation on *Koinonia in Scripture: Survey of Biblical Texts*, delivered by John REUMANN of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

Many other papers with an accent on *koinonia* developed this Biblically-based ecumenical model further. Noteworthy among these is the keynote address, *The Church as Communion: A Presentation on the World Conference Theme*, by Metropolitan John ZIZIOULAS of Pergamon, a prelate of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and professor of King's College, London, and the University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

One of his insights centered on "God who is in God's very being *koinonia*," and because "God is Trinitarian," God is "a relational Being by definition," which suggests that "ecclesiology must be based on Trinitarian theology if it is to be an ecclesiology of communion."³

This focus on the Triune God in connection with the ecumenical goal – also evident to some extent at New Delhi, Nairobi and Canberra – is more deliberately affirmed in the Report of Section II

2 PATON DAVID M. (ed.), *Breaking Barriers, Nairobi 1975: The Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Nairobi 23 November–10 December, 1975*. London, 1976. 60.

at Santiago, *Confessing the One Faith to God's Glory.*" It says: "The Holy Trinity is the most sublime instance of unity in diversity, where there is diversity of the persons, but complete unity of essence."

It is suggested that the criterion for determining "legitimate" and "illegitimate" diversities is the "truth of the Gospel (Galatians 2,5–14)" that enables "the complex process of discernment by which legitimate diversities are reconciled and illegitimate expressions rejected."

Trinitarian language and repeated references to *koinonia*, *visible unity*, *fuller koinonia*, *deeper koinonia* and *communion* appear in the conference Message that concludes with a prayer addressed to the "Holy and Loving Trinity." Surprisingly the term *full communion*, cited in the Canberra Statement, does not appear in the Santiago Message.

Visible unity in diversity, with a Trinitarian basis, are both implied and embraced in a relationship of *koinonia*, or *communion*, among the churches. At the center of this relationship is God, Who is a *koinonia* of love, revealing the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

II. Three Remaining Challenges

The emphasis now is to underline and highlight significant agreements and convergences that have been reached interconfessionally. But some remaining challenges will also be identified in connection with what Faith and Order has accomplished in achieving Eucharistic convergence and in defining the ecumenical goal.

The "real communion" disclosed will now be balanced by a brief presentation of what continues to make this communion "imperfect." The three factors selected are: incompleteness of the reception process; Eucharistic separation that contradicts *koinonia*; and ecclesiological issues that are still being addressed.

Incompleteness of the Reception Process

The fact that 186 official responses to the Baptist, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM, 1982) have been carefully gathered by the Faith and Order Commission and published in six volumes indicates the dedication of the World Council of Churches to the process of reception, as described above.

Max THURIAN, the editor of the six-volume compilation, reported

3 BEST Thomas F. – GASSMANN Günther (eds.), *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela 1993.* Faith and Order Paper 166. Genève, 1994. 104.

in Volume I that "on the whole the Lima document is positively welcomed, even if clarifications are called for on specific points."⁴

But some remaining challenges due to the incompleteness of the reception process are indicated in the following sample of reports and comments. Paragraph 1.3 of the Canberra Statement on "Koinonia" acknowledges the "theological convergence" that has allowed the churches "to recognize a certain degree of communion already existing between them," but then points to this challenge:

"Nevertheless churches have failed to draw the consequences for their life from the degree of communion they have already experienced and the agreements already achieved. They have remained satisfied to co-exist in division."

Mary TANNER, former Moderator of the Faith and Order Plenary Commission, asked this challenging question at the Santiago Conference: "Unless *all* our churches find ways of turning the ever-growing pile of ecumenical texts into shared life, will not new divisions appear between those who do find ways to progress and those who do not?" She also urges the churches to seek "only that agreement which is *sufficient and required.*"⁵

Two years after Santiago 1993, John Paul II seems to echo Mary TANNER's concerns in *Ut Unum Sint*, stating that "a new task lies before us: that of receiving the results already achieved. These cannot remain the statements of bilateral commissions, but must become a common heritage." He also speaks of a journey toward a visible unity that is *necessary and sufficient.*

Reflecting on the significance of BEM's reception by the churches fourteen years after the document was published, André BIRMELÉ – a Lutheran member of the Faith and Order Commission – says "The text set in motion perhaps the most important reception process in the modern ecumenical movement."

But then he adds this critique as an indication of some of the remaining challenges: "One sees again and again that the churches have often misunderstood the document and have simply compared it with their own confessions. One has confused a dialogue result with a confession of faith." He concludes: "So it is not surprising that one must then speak of a non-reception of the Lima document."⁶

4 THURIAN Max (ed.), *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" Text.* Faith and Order Paper 129. Genève, 1986. Vol. I. 9.

5 TANNER Mary, *The Tasks of the World Conference in the Perspective of the Future.* In BEST Thomas F. – GASSMANN Günther (eds.), *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela 1993.* Faith and Order Paper 166. Genève, 1994. 22–23.

In its *Report on the Process and Responses*, the Faith and Order Standing Commission indicates an awareness of the incompleteness of the reception process. Following a series of consultations on the responses to BEM, the Commission gives testimony not only to remarkable achievements, but to some remaining challenges: “There are those churches and Christians who have not participated in the BEM process or who have been fundamentally critical of it.”

The Report then mentions “areas of difficulty which remain in need of further clarification and reflection. There are areas of disagreement in understanding and practice which persist despite discussion, study and prayer.”

Specific examples of unresolved issues are cited, such as “the relation of word and sacrament, the understanding of sacrament and sacramentality, the threefold ministry, succession in ministry, ministry of women and men, the relation of Scripture and Tradition, and ecclesiology.” Thus, the unfinished work of Faith and Order continues so that the “imperfect communion” will become more perfect.

Eucharistic Separation Contradicting Koinonia

Despite the significant interconfessional agreement that has been reached on the meaning of the Eucharist and also in defining the ecumenical goal as *koinonia*, this *koinonia* is in fact contradicted by the separation of so many churches at the Table of the Lord.

A very concrete illustration of this is the painfully contrasting experiences of various Christian delegates and visitors attending the three most recent assemblies of the World Council of Churches.

During the Vancouver Assembly of 1983 and the Canberra Assembly of 1991, there was a common celebration of the Eucharist, using the “Lima Liturgy,” based on the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* convergence statement.

But the Harare Assembly of 1998 scheduled separate Sunday celebrations in local churches that included the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Greek Orthodox and Coptic Orthodox traditions.

An overview can acknowledge Eucharistic hospitality in the Church of England, Lutheran–Episcopal interim Eucharistic sharing in the USA, and similar agreements among the Anglican churches of Britain and Ireland, together with Lutheran churches in the Nordic and Baltic countries, as well as full pulpit and altar

fellowship between Lutheran and Reformed churches in Europe as a result of the Leuenberg Agreement of 1973.

But a Faith and Order report, which had been requested by WCC General Secretary Konrad RAISER, also documents the restrictions in Eucharistic sharing that are part of the disciplines, especially of the Roman Catholic and Oriental and Eastern Orthodox churches.

Thus, the report lifts up this general observation: “In respect of communion at ecumenical gatherings, celebration in common involving members of the Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox traditions has not been approved officially by all the respective church authorities.”

Then it adds this ecclesiological reflection, that for some churches “it is not only agreement on Eucharistic doctrine that is necessary, but also agreement on other aspects of the faith, such as ministry and the nature of the Church that must be achieved before the full communion, of which partaking in the Eucharist is a sign, can come about.”

A concluding remark in the Bangkok report supports the writer’s contention that this Eucharistic separation is a contradiction of the *koinonia* that has been discovered and affirmed interconfessionally: “Unless these issues are resolved, or until there is satisfactory consensus, all churches will not be in communion with each other.”

Ecclesiological Issues Still Being Addressed

Certain ecclesiological issues continue to come to the surface that pose a challenge for reaching the ecumenical goal shared by the Faith and Order Commission and the World Council of Churches as a whole: visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ.

Already in the multilateral Lima text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982), a major section of this document is devoted to ecclesiological topics such as: the church and the ordained ministry; the ministry of women and men in the church; functions of bishops, presbyters and deacons; succession of the apostolic ministry; and towards the mutual recognition of the ordained ministries.

In the first of the six volumes (1986) that contain responses to the Lima text, commonly referred to as BEM, Max THURIAN, the editor, included a summary of “The Ecclesiology of the Lima Document.”

Something similar was done in the *Report on the Process and Responses*, published in 1990, which includes “Perspectives on

6 BIRMELE André, *Reception as an Ecumenical Requirement: The Example of the Theological Dialogues between Christian Churches*. In FALCONER Alan (ed.), *Faith and Order in Moshi: The 1996 Commission Meeting*. Faith and Order Paper 177. Genève, 1998. 64–65.

7 *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Board, 7–14 January 1996, Bangkok, Thailand*. Faith and Order Paper 172. Genève, 1996. 135–136.

Ecclesiology in the Churches' Responses," under the heading "Major Issues Demanding Further Study."

All this indicates a consciousness by the Faith and Order Commission that its unfinished task must now involve an agenda that addresses specific issues, such as "a Christocentric and Trinitarian perspective for the understanding of the Church."

Another such issue could be "possibilities for a common vision of the Church on the basis of an already existing, albeit imperfect, unity," relating "ecclesiology to the challenge and promise of God's Reign for the sake of the world."

The list can further include "the relationship of the ordained ministry to the priesthood of the whole people of God," "the ministries of women," and "apostolic Tradition and Episcopal succession."

Finally, other topics might be "the service of unity among the churches at a universal level with its implication for teaching and decision-making," and "an ecumenically oriented ecclesiology of *koinonia*."

It was issues like these, which were raised by churches in their responses to BEM, that stimulated Faith and Order to initiate a study of ecclesiology. In keeping with what could be called an emerging Faith and Order ecclesiological "trajectory," it is useful to note the following developments from 1990 through 1998:

The *Canberra Statement* (1991) recognizes that "the challenge of this moment in the ecumenical movement as a reconciling and renewing movement towards full visible unity is for the Seventh Assembly of the WCC to call the churches to move towards a mutual recognition of ministries."⁸

The Santiago de Compostela World Conference on Faith and Order (1993) recommended that the commission "take up again the study *How does the Church Teach Authoritatively Today?*, and also "the question of a universal ministry of Christian unity," as well as "further work on the ecclesiology underlying BEM."

During the Moshi meeting (1996) of the Faith and Order Commission, various topics centering on ecclesiology and the Church appear on the program, including the one on "Ecclesiology and Ethics."

The Faith and Order Director, Alan FALCONER, has continually proposed that some remaining challenges, which he calls an "ecumenical crisis," require "a new methodology" and "a new ecclesiology."

The new methodology would go beyond "comparison and consensus" and would involve also "conversion." The new ecclesio-

8 KINNAMON Michael (ed.), *World Council of Churches, Signs of the Spirit: Official Report, Seventh Assembly, Canberra, Australia, 7-20 February 1991*. Genève, 1991. 174.

gy is and should be a self-emptying, that is, "kenotic ecclesiology."

FALCONER calls this a "transformation" to enable "accepting each other" and "re-ordering our lives and institutions" to "give a sign to the wider humanity of community through the embrace of a life-style of kenosis."⁹

Three years after the publication of the *Ut Unum Sint* encyclical, the Faith and Order Commission issued its response (1998). Of special interest for tracking the commission's ecclesiological trajectory are these quotations:

"As the Faith and Order commission pursues its work on ecclesiology, we are happy to discover that the issues we are grappling with are also raised in *Ut Unum Sint*. In particular, as was requested at the fifth world conference on Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostela (1993), we intend to study the question of primacy. We are glad to receive (paragraph 79) a clear indication that the question of primacy is one of a series of important issues for fuller study."

But the Faith and Order response to *Ut Unum Sint* also surprisingly announces that "we must continue to investigate, in terms of the position of some member churches, the prior question whether there is need, or is not, for a universal primacy in the organizational dimension of the life of the Church of God on Earth."¹¹

It was also in the year 1998 that Faith and Order's ecclesiological trajectory culminated in the publication of *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*.

Its importance as a resource for the continuation of the study process is realized when reviewing its ambitious table of contents: (I) The Church of the Triune God, (II) The Church in History, (III) The Church as *Koinonia* (Communion), (IV) Life in Communion (including Oversight" and "Primacy), (V) Service in and for the World, and (VI) Following Our Calling: From Converging Understandings to Mutual Recognition.

In 2000, the new Standing Commission on Faith and Order was expected to work toward the "production of a consensus statement on the nature and purpose of the Church," after reviewing the responses to the 1998 document made by "churches, theological institutes and persons who are working specifically in the areas of ecclesiology, and regional ecumenical councils and national councils of churches."¹²

9 BEST Thomas F. – GASSMANN Günther (eds.), *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela 1993*. Faith and Order Paper 166. Genève, 1994. 243-245.

10 FALCONER Alan (ed.), *Faith and Order in Moshi: The 1996 Commission Meeting*. Faith and Order Paper 177. Genève, 1998. 51.

11 *Ut Unum Sint: A Response from Faith and Order*. The Ecumenical Review 1998/50. 251.

Walter KASPER, recently appointed as cardinal and president of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity (PCPCU), commends this new consultative process, and expresses the hope that it will find positive reception similar to that of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.

He suggests there that “real progress will only be possible if we have the courage to tackle the root problems, and if (in the original sense of the word) we have the strength to think ‘radically’.”¹³

Conclusion

An emerging definition of visible unity as “fellowship,” *koinonia*,” “communion” and “full communion” are demonstrated in the statements of three assemblies of the World Council of Churches and a major Faith and Order Conference.

But the incompleteness of the reception process, the *koinonia*-contradicting separation at the Lord’s Table, and unresolved ecclesiological issues point to some remaining challenges. Again, it is a “real but imperfect communion.”

Yet, an ongoing reception process, plus a more focused ecclesiological study, indicate some new ecumenical possibilities. There is an optimistic, hopeful attitude that is expressed in the Budapest Statement by the Faith and Order Commission that suggests a spiritual venture for seeking greater agreement on the issues that divide the churches:

“It is done slowly, with the pain and patience which such labour demands. It urges us to listen to the other’s story with compassion, to share the other’s experience with empathy, and to bear the other’s burdens with mercy. In a renewed and sober hope that does not grow weary we look forward to the way ahead, asking that on that way Christ may be glorified by the Church’s service of God in the fullness of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴

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¹² World Council of Churches, *Faith and Order Goals and Activities*.

In <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/faith/goal-e.html>.

¹³ *Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of Baptism*.

The Ecumenical Review 2000/52. 538.

¹⁴ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: the Continuing Call to Unity. A Statement by the Faith and Order Commission Addressed to the Churches, Budapest, August 1989*. In DESCHNER John – GASSMANN Günter (eds.), *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982–1990. Report on the Process and Responses*. Faith and Order Paper 149. Genève, 1990. 155–158.