

AGREED STATEMENT

The Church as Communion in Christ (1983-1992)

Introduction

1. After the completion of the first stage of the dialogue between the Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church (1977-81) and its agreed account, *Apostolicity and Catholicity* (1982), it was understood that the current state of ecumenism required serious study of the nature of the Church. This came from our conviction that the Christian identity in itself and Christian mission in the world are inseparable from a clear and deep understanding of the Church.

2. The choice we made to focus on the Church coincides with the choice made by many ecumenical dialogues today: the Anglican-Roman Catholic, Orthodox-Roman Catholic, Anglican-Reformed, and Disciples-Reformed International Commissions, and the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission in the U.S.A. The same focus is found in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and the Joint Working Group of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. This is a sign of our day that reveals the ecumenical movement to be in the midst of a deep probing of the

link between ecumenism and the nature of the Church.

3. For this second stage of discussions, our dialogue met ten times: in Venice, Italy (1983); Nashville, Tennessee (1984); Mandeville, Jamaica (1985); Cambridge, England (1986); Duxbury, Massachusetts (1987); Gethsemani, Kentucky, (1988); Venice, Italy (1989); Toronto, Canada (1990); Rome, Italy (1991) and St. Louis, Missouri (1992). In every meeting we prayed together, we met with members of local congregations, and we studied and discussed together the similarities and differences that characterize our two communities. In our meetings we focussed on how the Church as communion is linked to the new creation that God wills. We studied the visibility of the Church's communion (*koinonia*) as revealed in the celebration of the Eucharist and maintained through continuity with the apostolic tradition. And we focussed on the role of the ministry and the involvement of the whole Church in maintaining the faith of the apostles.

I. The Specific Nature of this Dialogue Within the Ecumenical Movement

4. The dialogue between the Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church has a specific character. This character may be described in sociological categories by saying that it comes not only from an encounter between a catholic and a protestant ethos,¹ but more particularly from the ways in which Disciples understand themselves to express a protestant ethos and Roman Catholics understand themselves to express a catholic ethos.

5. Generally in a catholic ethos great emphasis is placed on sacraments and liturgy. The corporate character of the faith in both the definition of doctrine and its continuing affirmation in the life of the Church is stressed. Episcopal oversight, rooted in apostolic con-

tinuity and succession, is regarded as necessary for the preservation of the Gospel and the life of the Church.

6. Generally in a protestant ethos great emphasis is placed on the proclamation of the Word, the necessity of the judgment of each individual's conscience as it is bound by the gospel, and the individual's responsibility for the appropriation of the Word of God. Episcopal oversight may be considered desirable for the well-being of the Church but not essential. Sometimes it has been denied that a specific form of oversight originates in the will of Christ for the Church. The test of church structures is the extent to which they are faithful to the gospel and facilitate authentic proclamation and Christian living.

7. These general differences between a catholic and a protestant ethos explain important differences between Disciples and Roman Catholics. Not only are their theological traditions and ecclesial structures different but they have ways of appropriating the Christian mystery in daily life that are not the same. Nevertheless on some vital issues what they share in common is more determinative for them than their belonging to a protestant or a catholic ethos. The customary vocabulary of division between protestant and catholic does not apply exactly to the specific priorities of Disciples and Roman Catholics.

8. The Disciples movement emerged out of nineteenth-century Protestantism but it had nothing to do with a deliberate break from the Roman Catholic Church and lacked the memories of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century controversies. Moreover some of its most specific concerns were criticisms of the way in which contemporary Protestantism understood and lived out fidelity to the apostolic witness. It came from the desire to lead the Church towards a unity rooted in the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper. Alexander Campbell was convinced that "the union of Christians is essential to the conversion of the world," an insight which has lost none of its force in the twentieth century.² The Roman Catholic Church too proclaims that it has a specific mission for the unity of the world, and affirms that this unity is signified and given by the eucharistic communion. It too teaches that the restoration of unity among all Christians is linked with the salvation of the world. Indeed Disciples and Roman Catholics pursue these goals in ways deeply marked by their different histories. But they have to discern whether all these affirmations and convictions are not in fact the expression of a very profound communion in some of the most fundamental gifts of the grace of God.

9. This is why, after a certain agreement had been expressed in *Apostolicity and Catholicity*, Disciples and Roman Catholics continued their dialogue in order to discover the degree of communion they already share. Their goal is to be together, growing in this communion and fostering it, and to be with all Christians (as the First Letter of Peter puts it) "God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (I Peter 2:9 NRSV).

10. To be honest and not lead to a "cheap ecumenism" this dialogue required two important and complementary investigations. It was necessary first to discuss clearly the issues on which, because of their history and ethos, Disciples and Roman Catholics are different. But then it was necessary to discern in what measure these differences are really divisive. Are they only two diverse ways of mani-

festing or living out the same basic conviction? If that should be the case, another question has to be asked: how would it be possible to express visibly this existing communion? More precisely: what kind of changes would be required to enable this existing communion to contribute to the full restoration of Christian unity?

Differences in Christian Faith and Life

11. At first glance the historic differences between the Roman Catholic Church and Disciples of Christ seem to make the division between them irreconcilable. Roman Catholics have understood themselves in the context of the continuous history of the Church: Disciples have understood themselves in the context of their origin as a reform movement (developing out of the Presbyterian Church) committed to find a way to overcome denominationalism. Hence where Roman Catholics have seen the Church throughout its history as continuous with the teaching of the apostles, Disciples have considered that some discontinuities in the life of the Church have been necessary for the sake of the Gospel. Roman Catholics have found in creeds and doctrinal definitions a sign of the assistance of the Holy Spirit to bind the Church into one and to lead it into all truth. Disciples have wanted to remain faithful to the apostolic Church of the New Testament with its vision of unity in Christ, but have been distrustful of many of the creeds, confessions and doctrinal teachings within Christian tradition, finding in the way they have been used a threat to unity. This has led them to be suspicious as well of the structure of episcopal authority which Roman Catholics believe is a necessary means for maintaining continuity with the apostles and with their teaching. Roman Catholics have been convinced that the college of bishops in communion with the See of Rome, teaching in conjunction with other ordained ministers and with the whole Church, is a necessary means of preserving the Church in continuity with the apostles.

12. The celebration of the Eucharist (also called the Lord's Supper or Mass) has been central to both Roman Catholics and Disciples, but the Eucharist has been understood in different ways.

13. For Disciples the centrality of the Lord's Supper has been highlighted by its celebration every Lord's Day. In obeying the Lord's commandment, "Do this in memory of me," Disciples have understood themselves to be in communion with the faithful in all places and all ages. Hence they have called all the baptized to the communion table and in particular have eschewed any formal creeds that kept Christians from taking communion together. However, they generally did not recognize the validity of infant baptism until the present century. Understanding themselves as a believers' church after the

pattern of the New Testament church, the Disciples have practised baptism upon confession of faith in Christ and have looked upon faith more as a trusting attitude and a life of witness than as assent to doctrinal formulations. They have emphasized the role of the whole eucharistic congregation in witnessing to the apostolic faith, and they have felt free to designate, as part of their church order, members of the community other than ordained ministers and ordained elders to preside at the Eucharist, especially if no regular minister or elder should be present. In the practice of believers' baptism and in the recovery of the weekly celebration of the Eucharist, Disciples have claimed to be in continuity with the faith of the apostles.

14. In celebrating the Eucharist, Roman Catholics also have claimed to be in continuity with the faith of the apostles. Indeed, they have seen the celebration of the Eucharist as a way to enter into communion with the whole Body of Christ. They have emphasized that the Eucharist signifies the unity of the Church and so they have invited to the eucharistic celebration only those in communion with the bishop and through him in communion with all the local churches in communion with the Bishop of Rome throughout the world. They have practised infant baptism and have emphasized the role of the whole community in supporting and nurturing the faith. In using ancient creeds and traditional liturgies, Roman Catholics have understood themselves to be in continuity with the generations of Christians who have gone before them since the apostles. Faith for Roman Catholics is not limited to the assent to such formulations, but it cannot be recognized without such assent. While different members have different gifts in the life of the Church, only the bishop or an ordained minister in communion with him is empowered to preside over the celebration of the Eucharist.

15. Disciples have been readily critical of some developments in the history of the Church, even seeing in these developments errors needing correction, because of their awareness of human finitude. They have been inclined to recognize sin in many aspects of the institutional church. Roman Catholics have recognized sin within individual members of the Church but because they believe the Church belongs to Christ and has received the gifts of the Spirit that maintain it in holiness and truth, they are slow to find sin and error in the Church's actions and teachings, and quick to see continuity with the apostolic teaching.

16. Both Disciples and Roman Catholics approach Church teachings with appreciative yet critical eyes. Their two different general attitudes about the Church as an institution lead Roman Catholics to be more appreciative and Disciples to be more critical. For this reason they

differ on the relative weight given, on the one hand, to individual discernment and conscience and, on the other hand, to the communal mind. It can be said that Roman Catholics are convinced that, although they must decide for themselves, they cannot decide by themselves. Disciples, on the other hand, are convinced that, although they cannot decide by themselves, they must decide for themselves.

17. Indeed Roman Catholics and Disciples appear so different and live in such different ways that for many of their members the proposal that their differences could be overcome is nearly incredible.

A Convergence of Vision?

18. Through our dialogue we nevertheless discovered that, despite these real and continuing differences, our understanding of the Church converges on some notable points which both Disciples and Roman Catholics believe necessary for the visible unity of the Church. We are convinced that these convergences are important not only for our two traditions but also for all the communities in dialogue to achieve this goal.

19. We had already begun to discover this convergence in the first stage of our dialogue. In *Apostolicity and Catholicity*, we saw that our two traditions had sometimes pursued the same goal using different means. We became convinced that "the Spirit of God has already brought us into Christ and continues to move us toward full visible unity" (p.4). We recognized that "each Christian's faith is inseparable from the faith of the community" (p.9), and agreed that "every generation must come to faith anew through the power of the Holy Spirit and hand on this faith to succeeding generations" (p.10). We were convinced that "there can be only one Church of God" (p.11) which cannot be destroyed by divisions among Christians. We were able "to affirm the mutual recognition of baptism administered by Roman Catholics and Disciples, convinced that the oneness we received by the grace of God in baptism must find its completion in visible ecclesial unity" (p.8). We affirmed a common belief "that the Church takes visible shape in history and that one sign of this visibility is the common profession of the Gospel with reception of baptism" (p.11). The restoration of "the unique unity of the one Church of God is the goal," we agreed, and "we are already on the way" (p.11); we sought a renewed fidelity to actions that would intensify and deepen our relationship.

20. In the second stage of our dialogue together we deepened our conviction that we are one on some crucial issues; and the goal of this statement of convergence is to elucidate a shared vision of the Church. We do not intend to discuss the extent of communion between Disciples

and Roman Catholics. Nor will we focus, one by one, on a number of separate issues that have divided us. Instead we want to present our shared understanding of the whole plan of God to draw together and redeem the human family, and the essential role of the Church in manifest-

ing and bringing about this plan. By beginning with God's offer of salvation to the whole of humanity and the means God gives to remember and announce this offer, we have been able to discover that we share the same understanding of the basic nature of the Church.

II. New Creation and Communion

21. Christians confess that the same God who created human beings has also redeemed them. God has not abandoned humanity to its sinfulness but, through the plan of salvation, has given the possibility of forgiveness of sin and new life. This plan of salvation culminates in Christ Jesus. In the Spirit through the Son the Father gathers into fellowship all those who had been alienated. By drawing people out of isolation and into communion (*koinonia*) God makes a new creation—a humanity now established as children of God, a people who know themselves to have received forgiveness of sin and to have put away the old and put on the new, even as they await the consummation still to come (Rom. 8:18-25).

22. This activity of God—the forgiveness of sins and making a new creation—and the response to it in thanks and praise is fundamental to the experience and understanding of *koinonia*. Various meanings of *koinonia* are found in the New Testament. Paul uses *koinonia* to describe sharing in the Eucharist (1 Cor. 10:14-20). In breaking the bread and blessing the cup, Christians have *koinonia* with the body and blood of Christ. The communities which contributed to the collection for the saints in Jerusalem were bound in *koinonia* (or partnership) with them through the sharing of material goods (2 Cor. 8:3-4, Rom. 15:26-27; Phil. 1:5). Yet another use of *koinonia* stresses the fellowship of those who walk in the light because they are in communion with the Father and the Son, and consequently with one another (1 John 1:3,7).

23. To speak of communion (*koinonia*) is to speak of the way human beings come to know God as God's purpose for humanity is revealed. God in Christ through the Holy Spirit calls human beings to share in the fellowship within the divine life, a call to which they respond in faith. Thus, communion refers first to the fellowship with God and subsequently to sharing with one another. Indeed it is only by virtue of God's gift of grace through Jesus Christ that deep, lasting communion is made possible: by baptism, persons participate in the mystery of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, and are incorporated into the one Body of Christ, the Church.

24. The new creation is a foretaste of what will come in fullness through the Spirit at the end of time. The Spirit of God, acting in history, is the main agent of that communion which is the Church. Persons are brought into living relationship with the Father through the Son

by the power of the Spirit. Human relationships are thus set in a new context so that people may recognize one another as equally God's children and come to acknowledge the bonds that link them as a gift from God. People who have come to this new self-understanding see all other human beings as men and women whom God wills also to save. God's redeeming act in Christ demands that all humanity be united.

Eucharist and Continuity with the Apostolic Community

25. To be the communion God wills, the Church has to live in the memory of its origin, remembering with thanksgiving what God has done in Christ Jesus. That memory sustains and nourishes its life. The Church in fulfillment of its mission proclaims the good news of the gracious, saving acts of God as the Word of God is preached, the sacraments are celebrated, and the new life shared with God is given.

26. To live in this memory means for Disciples and Roman Catholics to be in continuity with the witness of the apostolic generation. The New Testament speaks of those called apostles in the earliest period in a variety of ways; and they played a unique and essential role in formulating and communicating the Gospel. The Church is founded on their proclamation. They began or nurtured the early communities, and they soon chose collaborators in the first generation of Christians to share the apostolic work of preaching, teaching, and pastoral guidance.

27. Both Disciples and Roman Catholics share an intention to live and teach in such a way that, when the Lord comes again, the Church may be found witnessing to the faith of the apostles. By preserving the memory of what the apostles taught, and by proclaiming and living it anew for the present day, both Disciples and Roman Catholics believe that they maintain continuity with the apostolic witness, forming a living tradition that is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20).

28. Memory, as in biblical usage, is more than a recalling to mind of the past. It is the work of the Holy Spirit linking the past with the present and maintaining the memory of that on which everything depends—the faith itself and the Church which embodies that faith.

Through the Spirit therefore the power of what is remembered is made present afresh, and succeeding generations appropriate the event commemorated. The Spirit keeps alive the sense of the faith in the whole community, and lavishes a variety of *charisms* that enable it to live in the memory of Jesus Christ. In the Eucharist especially, the Spirit makes Christ present to the members of the community.

29. Both Disciples of Christ and Roman Catholics celebrate the Eucharist regularly and frequently—at least every Sunday. Although they have differences in the understanding of the Eucharist, they are one in the conviction that the communion willed by God takes on a specific reality at the Lord's Supper. In fact, the celebration of the Eucharist renews, makes real and deepens visible fellowship with God. In the eucharistic gathering, they celebrate God's salvation given through Christ as a gift, a gift which empowers for service. To participate in the eucharistic celebration is to be reaffirmed in membership of the people of God, to be empowered by Christ through the Holy Spirit and so to be made a part of the work of reconciliation in the world.

30. The Eucharist is an act through which a divine reality otherwise more or less hidden emerges and is made present. What is revealed is the plan of salvation, the good news that Jesus Christ reconciles humanity to the Father. The Eucharist both symbolizes and makes present, together with the gift of Christ himself, the salvation offered through him. In it faith is freshly evoked and is further nourished in the participant; for the community the essential elements of Christian faith and life are expressed.

31. The Eucharist is a communal event. In it Christians are bound with Christ and with one another. It is the action that most fully expresses the fellowship that is the Church. Here also Christians know more deeply and strengthen the bonds that unite their local community with other local Christian communities. Furthermore, they find themselves impelled by eucharistic communion to extend themselves in care for all those in God's creation, especially those who suffer. Indeed, the Eucharist is essential to the being and mission of the Church of God in the world. Christians acknowledge that a test of their credibility to the world as a symbol of God's presence can be found in the quality of the communion among themselves and with others.

32. God in Christ invites to the Eucharist, and through the Holy Spirit binds together into one body, all who break the one loaf and share the one cup. At the Lord's table the unity of the Church is accomplished, for believers are joined to Christ and to one another. Thus, precisely because the celebration of the Eucharist is the

climax of the Church's life, disunity among Christians is felt most keenly at the Eucharist; and their inability to celebrate the Lord's Supper together makes them less able to manifest the full catholicity of the Church.

Teaching and Continuity with the Apostolic Community

33. Disciples and Roman Catholics are convinced that in their faith they must remain in continuity with the apostles, even if they understand what this demands in different ways. This common conviction challenges them to explore the ways in which each has remained in continuity with the apostolic community, and to explore as well the possibility that each might be enriched by gifts remembered and exercised more fully by the other. As they have come to understand each other better, they have realized that each continues to retain many of the ways in which Apostolic Tradition is maintained.

34. Both receive the Scriptures as a normative witness to the apostolic faith. Both agree as well that the history of the Church after the writing and formation of the New Testament canon belongs to the Church's continuity in Apostolic Tradition, even though they have different emphases in understanding the significance of that history. Both find within this history many developments which, because they are the work of the Holy Spirit, are normative for the Church. Both affirm that the Gospel is embodied in the Tradition³ of the Church.

35. When Roman Catholics and Disciples evaluate earlier formulations of doctrine, both are committed to continuity with the Church's history, though in different ways—a significant difference which requires further investigation. Both agree that doctrinal statements never exhaust the meaning of the Word of God and that they may need interpretation or completion by further formulations to be clear. Both also agree that fresh doctrinal statements may be needed to preserve the Gospel when it is endangered or to preach it in a new cultural context.

36. Human memory can be deficient and selective because of finitude and sin, and the pilgrim Church is affected by these limitations. But both Roman Catholics and Disciples are agreed that the Holy Spirit sustains the Church in communion with the apostolic community because Christ promised that the Spirit "will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 14:26 NRSV). The Spirit guides the Church to understand its past, to recall what may have been forgotten, and to discern what renewal is needed for the Gospel to be proclaimed effectively in every age and culture. This underlines the importance of reflection and study in the life of the Church to keep alive the memory.

37. Continuity with the Apostolic Tradition calls for fresh understandings or practices of discipleship, which the Church adopts in order to transmit the same apostolic faith effectively in new times and places. As the Church receives the Apostolic Tradition in different contexts and circumstances, the Spirit enables it to hold fast to the apostolic faith, and to discern authentic developments in its thought and practice. The Holy Spirit guarantees that the Church shall not in the end fail to witness faithfully to the divine plan.

38. Thus the Church not only remembers (in the biblical sense) what was done in the past, the saving act in Jesus Christ. Neither does it only remember what is promised in the age to come (cf para 28). At the very heart of the Church's memory, God's saving acts in the past provide a foretaste of transformation so that the future breaks in already to the present. Salvation seen from the perspective of the Scriptures reaches out from the past into the future.

The Gifts of the Spirit for the Church

39. The Holy Spirit not only gives the Church that memory which enables it to remain in the Apostolic Tradition, but is also present in the Church leading Christians and the whole community of the baptized deeper into the mystery of Christ. Both Disciples and Roman Catholics recognize this as a constitutive gift of God to the Church. Through the Holy Spirit the believer is drawn into union with the love of Christ for his Father, for humanity and for the whole of creation. The will of the believer is also led to unite itself with the will of Christ in obedience to the Father. Thus the individual believer is drawn into deeper communion with the movement of Christ's self-offering, embodied in the Eucharist. This in turn becomes the center of a life of witness to Christ.

40. A Christian receives the gift of faith within and for the communion (*koinonia*) which is the Church. Hence, the sense of faith (*sensus fidei*) in the life of an individual Christian is a reflection of the extent to which, by the same Spirit, each one shares in the life of the ecclesial body as such; it becomes an expression of the instinct for faith of the whole body. The inner dynamism of the gift of faith—the power of the Holy Spirit which draws believers into spiritual unity—sustains the interaction of the faith of the individual and the faith of the community.

41. The Spirit gives a variety of gifts or *charisms* which enable the Church as a whole to receive and hand on the Apostolic Tradition. At the heart of these are the gifts appropriate to worship, particularly in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. In the act of celebrating the Eucharist the whole community of the baptized is drawn together by the Holy Spirit in a visible unity of faith, hope and love.

Together with the *charism* of the one who presides at the celebration, many other charisms can be exercised in service of the Church in the central action of its life. Then there are charisms of Christian formation, such as the witness to the faith given by parents to their children, and by those who teach in schools and congregations.

42. Moreover the memory of the apostolic faith is maintained in lives lived according to the Gospel. The faithful have a sense of care for all humankind, responsibility for their well-being, and sharing in their suffering, sorrow and oppression as well as in their joy, good fortune and liberation. The charisms which enable the work of mercy—with the poor, the needy, the homeless, the sick and the aged—recall the whole community to the Gospel imperative of love.

43. In addition there are extraordinary gifts, which are found in the lives of people who give vivid witness to the Gospel and capture the imagination of the community of the baptized in such away that it is recalled to the Gospel and the apostolic tradition. These gifts, like all gifts, must be tested in the Church for authenticity.

44. Within the mutuality and complementarity of the different charisms which are given to and for the Church, there is a particular charism given to the ordained ministry to maintain the community in the memory of the Apostolic Tradition. Both Disciples and Roman Catholics affirm that the Christian ministry exists to actualize, transmit, and interpret with fidelity the Apostolic Tradition which has its origin in the first generation. It also has a special responsibility in serving and showing forth the unity of the Church. The intention of the apostolic community in establishing ministries in other places was initially to establish collaborators rather than to choose successors: what began as an expansion of communion over distance became later on an expansion over time. We have found this a helpful insight in enabling us to affirm a common understanding of the importance of succession.

45. Although historically Disciples came from those traditions which at the Reformation rejected episcopacy as the Reformers knew it in the Roman Catholic Church, Disciples have always recognized that the work of the ministry, shared in the local congregation by ordained ministers and ordained elders, is essential to the being of the Church and is a sign of continuity with the Apostolic Tradition. Roman Catholics believe that the bishop, acting in collaboration with presbyters, deacons and the whole community in the local church, and in communion with the whole college of bishops throughout the world united with the Bishop of Rome as its head, keeps alive the apostolic faith in the local church so that it may remain faithful to the Gospel.⁴ Both Disciples and Roman Catholics

affirm that the whole Church shares in the priesthood and ministry of Christ. They also affirm that ordained ministers have the specific charism of re-presenting Christ to the Church and that their ministries are expressions of the ministry of Christ to the whole Church. They believe that God has given to the Church all the gifts needed for the proclamation of the Gospel; but this does not mean that every member has received every charism or authority for doing so. Rather it is the corporate shaping of the whole people of God by the Gospel which enables them to hold fast to “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3, RSV). The ordained ministry is specifically given the charism for discerning, declaring and fostering what lies in the authentic memory of the Church. In this process this charism of the service of memory is in communion with the instinct for faith of the whole body. Through this communion the Spirit guides the Church.

The Church

46. We thus discover that our diversities are real but not all of them are necessarily signs of division. Roman Catholics and Disciples have more in common than might be expected after the exposition of their differences. We are now sure that in confessing together that the Church is communion, we are in agreement on a very crucial issue, which is not isolated from many central issues of the faith. We agree—together with many other Christians—on important truths:

- a person is saved by being introduced into this communion of believers, described in the New Testament by images of the body of Christ, the temple of God, the vine, the household of God;
- this communion is never given to the believer without the involvement of other believers, some of them being the ministers of the Church, having a specific responsibility for preaching the Word of God and presiding at the celebration of the sacraments. Through the Word and the sacraments the Church is the servant or instrument of God’s plan of salvation;
- this communion is ultimately with the apostolic community, whose memory is constantly kept alive and made present, especially thanks to the work of the ordained ministry, the witness of the holy and committed members of the community and the expression of the mind of the Church by all the members trying to be faithful to their vocation.

47. We therefore come to a very important agreement concerning the nature and mission of the Church. The Church of God is that part of humanity which through faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit responds to

God’s plan of salvation revealed and actualized in Jesus Christ. Consequently it becomes the community of all those who in Christ, by the gift of God, are bound into a communion with the Father and with one another. Its members are called to live in such a way that, in spite of their failures and their weakness, this communion becomes visible and is constantly in search of a more perfect realization.

48. This visibility is realized especially in the celebration of the Eucharist. There, gathered together and after having confessed their faith, the baptized people receive the body and blood of Christ, the Son of God who reconciled humanity to God in one body through the cross. There they enter into communion with the saints and members of the whole household of God. Moreover, what is celebrated at the Eucharist has to be actualized in a life of common prayer and faith, of faithfulness to the Gospel, of sharing the spiritual and even material goods of the community, and of commitment to the will of God that the saving work of Christ be extended as offer to all.

49. Participation in this communion begins through baptism and is sustained in continuing eucharistic fellowship. The Holy Spirit uses the Church as the servant by which the Word of God is kept alive and constantly preached, the sacraments are celebrated, the people of God are served by the ministers with responsibility for oversight, and the authentic evangelical life is manifested through the life of holy and committed members of Christ. This is why Disciples and Roman Catholics agree that the Church is the company of all the baptized, the community through which they are constantly kept in the memory of the apostolic witness and nourished by the Eucharist. The Eucharist is never celebrated and received by a member isolated from an ecclesial community gathered around its ministers. The Church is therefore at the same time the sign of salvation (to be saved is to be in communion) and the community through which this salvation is offered.

50. By this communion—which is the Church—an effective sign is given by God also to the world. This sign stands in contrast to the divisions and hatred within humanity. Even if it is always stamped by the deficiencies of its members, the Church of God demonstrates that the division of humanity created by the corruption of the human heart with its egoism and desire for possessions or power, has been overcome through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. A new life is made possible, the life of the children of God whose bonds of relationship are a gift coming from the Father.

51. Moreover, because Christians come to know that God wants all other human beings also to become mem-

bers of Christ, they are drawn to give themselves in loving witness and service to humanity. This service culminates when they commit themselves to the preaching of the Gospel, being obedient to the command of Christ, their Lord. The Church is in that way not only a sign of the new humanity God wants but also an instrument the Holy Spirit uses in order to extend salvation to all human situations and needs, in all places until the end of history.

52. Hence, we are able to affirm gladly the traditional conviction that the Church is at one and the same time an epiphany of the destiny which God wills for all humanity and a means to achieve that destiny. These inseparable functions of sign and instrument, epiphany and means, are contained in the expression “the Church is the sacrament of God’s design,” as used in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions. This phrase signifies that God

realizes the plan of salvation in and through the communion of all those who confess Jesus Christ and live according to this confession. We know, indeed, that this saving work is not limited to those who confess Christ explicitly, but that the benefits of Christ’s work are offered to all human beings. In hope we expect that these benefits may be accepted by many who do not fully confess the giver of their gifts. Nevertheless, we do believe that the Church, by making visible God’s reconciling work and being the servant of God in the accomplishment of this work, stands as a light on the mountain top, awakening the world to a recognition of its true destiny. The communion that is the Church allows people to witness what Christian faith confesses: there is salvation and it comes from God through Christ.

Future Work

53. We have not yet, indeed, discussed some of the most important points which continue to divide us. For we believe that these issues can be fairly and deeply treated only on the basis of the kind of agreement we have reached in the document we are now publishing. Moreover we are convinced that they are to be treated in conjunction with the work of other bilateral ecumenical dialogues, which are also struggling with them. They will be proposed for the agenda of our future discussions. Among them four have a very specific meaning for the visible unity of the Church:

a) First, our dialogue has made us aware of a point we need to consider more deeply: even if we agree on the signification and function of the Eucharist, we feel that we still have to discuss our traditional teaching and practice concerning the presence of the Lord in the celebration of the Supper, its sacrificial nature, the role of the ordained minister and the role of the community. This is important, given the emphasis that both Disciples and Roman Catholics put on the weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper and its link with the visible unity of Christians.

b) A second issue is the way we understand the funda-

mental structure of the Church gathered around the Eucharist and the catholic tradition’s understanding of episcopacy—given through a sacrament—as the institution necessary for an authentic Eucharist to be celebrated.

c) A third issue is the nature of the rule of faith in a changing history. In what sense is “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” expressed in the teaching of the Church throughout the ages?

d) Lastly, an issue which requires to be explored by all the churches and communities in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church is the primacy of the Bishop of Rome and the affirmation that it is founded in the will of Christ for the Church.

54. These are difficult issues. Nevertheless we believe—after these ten years of dialogue on the Church—that it will be possible to clarify many misinterpretations (on both sides) and possibly to discover ways of growing towards the kind of mutual *metanoia* (repentance) and coming together which will allow very profound communion in some of the most important gifts of the grace of God, and make possible important and irreversible stepson our road towards the full unity God intends.

December 7, 1992

Participants

Disciples of Christ

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Dr. M. Eugene Boring, Forth Worth, Texas, U.S.A. (1988-92)
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Dr. M. Jack Suggs, Forth Worth, Texas, U.S.A. (1983-87)
Dr. William Tabbernee, Enid, Oklahoma, U.S.A. (1989-92)
Dr. David M. Thompson, Cambridge, England
Dr. Robert K. Welsh, Indianapolis, Indiana, U.S.A. (Staff 1983-87)

Roman Catholics

The Most Rev. Samuel E. Carter, SJ, Kingston, Jamaica (Co-chairperson)
The Most Rev. Kevin McNamara, Dublin, Ireland (1983-87)
The Most Rev. Basil Meeking, Christchurch, New Zealand
The Rev. Michael Jackson, London, England (1988-92)
The Rev. Dr. Kilian McDonnell, OSB, Collegeville, Minnesota, U.S.A.
The Rev. Dr. John P. Meier, Washington, D.C., U.S.A.
The Rt. Rev. Mgr. John Mutiso-Mbinda, Vatican City (1986-92)
Dr. Margaret O'Gara, Toronto, Canada
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Notes

- 1 By *ethos* is meant the social, mental, religious and philosophical atmosphere surrounding a group and influencing its way of life.
- 2 A. Campbell, "Foundation of Christian Union," *Christianity Restored*, Bethany, Va 1835, 103-4 (more commonly cited in the 2nd ed, *The Christian System*, 1839, 115). Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), son of the Rev. Thomas Campbell, a Seceder Presbyterian minister from Ahorey, Ireland who emigrated to the U.S.A. in 1807, was President of Bethany College, West Virginia and one of the leading figures in the emergence of
- 3 Disciples of Christ as a distinctive religious movement.
- 4 The use of a capital *T* follows the definition agreed at the Montreal Faith and Order Conference in 1963: "By the Tradition is meant the Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the Church, Christ himself present in the life of the Church" (*Report of the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order*, para 39, p. 50).
- 5 cf Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, paragraph 22: Norman P. Tanner (ed), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, (1990), ii, 866.