

## 32. Catholic Association for Ecumenism and Ecumenical Forum for Catholicity

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After the publication of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)* (Faith and Order Paper No. 214) in 2013, a number of ecumenical seminars and meetings were organized in the Netherlands. Several churches, organizations and institutions initiated discussion of this important Faith and Order text: the Consultation Group Faith and Church Community of the Council of Churches, the Ecumenical Forum for Catholicity, the Catholic Association for Ecumenism, and Free University Amsterdam. Ton van Eijk, former chairman of the Council of Churches, translated the paper into Dutch. The Dutch translation was ready at the end of 2013 and was made available free of charge via the websites of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands and the Catholic Association for Ecumenism.

In 2014 and 2015, the Catholic Association for Ecumenism and the Ecumenical Forum for Catholicity, in cooperation with bishoprics and provincial Council of Churches, organized a series of five meetings about *TCTCV* for the purpose of making the text known and of discussing it with people locally active in ecumenism. Admittedly, the interest in these meetings was considerably less than was the case in the 1980s, when people in the forefront of the ecumenical movement, such as

Herman Fiolet and Anton Houtepen, gave many talks about the Lima Report *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (BEM)*. Herman Fiolet, former secretary of the Council of Churches, alone held 180 talks about the report. There is much less attention and enthusiasm for meetings about ecumenical texts now than there was in the 1980s.

A positive atmosphere characterized all the meetings. The number of participants varied between 25 and 80, of which many were priests, ministers and theologians of different churches. Each meeting included a slide show presentation about the creation of the document and its contents, and group discussions. To facilitate the group discussions, questions were provided for each chapter. The four chapters were discussed using these questions (see Attachment 1). The group size varied from 7 to 20 persons.

This paper summarizes the reactions which came to the fore in the group discussions.

### **1. A good basis for ecumenical dialogue about the nature and the mission of the Church**

The most important result of the meetings is perhaps that all the discussions about the document occurred in a positive atmosphere. *TCTCV*

appeared to provide a good basis for ecumenical dialogue between people from different churches as to the nature and the mission of the Church. For many participants, it was an eye opener that the text was based on the reactions to *BEM*. Many people have the impression, an incorrect one, that the ecumenical movement came to a standstill after *BEM*. In the document under discussion, the results of *BEM* are taken to hand and come to fruition in the quest for a common vision of the Church. From the reports it is evident that participants in the discussion listened closely to each other, both to the contributions on content and to stories of personal experiences. It appeared that some had experienced joy in reading the text. The document has a positive tone and a clear basis. Whereas some participants objected to having to read a theological document, others expressed satisfaction about that. It also came to the fore that some participants found support in this theological text for answering questions that might come up in day-to-day church life about what it means to be a Church.

## **2. A yearning for unity and the possibility of experiencing this unity**

Participants in the meetings were primarily people who had been working on ecumenism for years. Since the 1970s and 80s, partly inspired by the enthusiasm and the expectations induced by *BEM*, ecumenical services of scripture and communion have been celebrated frequently. People involved in this way are often critical about the way ecumenism has gone during the past fifteen years. Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church

specifically request pastors and parishes to conform to the Ecumenical Directory (1993), in which the guidelines for ecumenical cooperation are laid down. In addition, a trend towards a steadily declining interest in ecumenism can be discerned in churches in general as a result of individualization and the dominance of small, informal groups. There is little room for ecumenical experiments. Criticism about the present state of ecumenism turned up frequently in the discussions on *TCTCV*. People find it hard to accept that things that were possible before are no longer allowed. Others, however, saw this as a reason to argue for a change in the approach to the subject. Instead of being fixated on what is not possible, we should do what is possible. Ecumenism is flourishing again in places where that occurs. The yearning to experience the unity of the Church came to the fore frequently. There was a comment that we too often speak about the church in lower case, about the building and the organization. We need to be more involved with the Church spelled with a capital letter. The document under discussion is a good point of departure. The dialogue on this text leads to a better understanding of our own and each other's church and to self-examination.

## **3. Recognizing each other as the Church in brokenness**

Christians of many churches have found one another as brothers and sisters in Christ on the way to restoration of the *communio* in the one Church. In the Church community, unity in Christ also involves faith, sacraments, and regulations governing church life with the prospect of the kingdom of

God to come. *TCTCV* shows a great convergence in the vision concerning the Church. This consonance is expressed most strongly in the first two chapters and in the first part of Chapter III. With respect to the ordained ministry in the Church and moral questions, it appears to be impossible, as yet, to bridge existing differences. These are obstacles in the restoration of the one Church. Fortunately, on the matter of ordained ministry there are a few points of conciliation to report. The Faith and Order documents since Lima posit that the personal, collegial, and communal dimensions of ministry should be in balance in an ecumenical theology of ordained ministry. When one of these three dimensions is accentuated too much, something goes wrong. All churches could learn from this. The ecumenical meaning of ordained ministry based on these three dimensions connecting communities and churches could be further developed.

In the Netherlands, ecumenical cooperation is pursued by Catholic and Protestant churches. One of the points of pain in our situation is the fact that there is no recognition of each other as the Church. This was frequently expressed in the group discussions. "It is a problem for me that the Roman Catholic Church does not recognize the Protestant churches as a full-fledged Church and that the Orthodox Church asserts that it is the true Church, basing its claim on the first seven Councils." It is to be hoped that the agreement that has been achieved in the understanding of the Church, provided that it is affirmed by the members of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, will provide a basis for

churches to recognize one another as true forms of the Church of Christ. This would mean a great deal in the future of the ecumenical movement.

#### **4. Unity in legitimate diversity**

The ecumenical situation in the Netherlands is characterized by a great diversity of churches and denominations. This colorful diversity has a historical background. The diversity became even greater as a result of migrations to the Netherlands in the mid 20th century. Against this background, there is a great need for a common vision of the Church. The strength of *TCTCV* is that the document essentially describes in what way the Church is one but that, on the other hand, unity goes hand in hand with "a legitimate diversity." However, no matter how important this diversity is, in practice it is difficult to adopt as long as the limits of legitimate diversity are not defined. The question is: Where does legitimate diversity end and when is it a case of differences in beliefs that rupture unity? It is good to consider that great differences, discord, and even struggle can exist within the same denomination for a long time without creating a formal rupture of the bond of unity. Sometimes an ecumenical bond is stronger than the community experienced in one's own church in spite of differences in beliefs. In the group discussions the difference between legitimate diversity and division came up many times. In the ecumenical movement in the Netherlands we have difficulty distinguishing between legitimate diversity and differences in beliefs that create division. Many cherish the idea of a community that is welcoming and hospitable, where everyone may enter and no

one is excluded. In some contributions, however, the tension was clearly expressed: “It is a theme in my life. I am living in an ecumenical community consisting of Catholics and Protestants; I lived in Russia for twenty years before that. The main thing is living together in the Word: We try to live the gospel message among ourselves. But when everyone goes to his/her own church on Sunday, we feel the pain of division, yet the feeling of unity continues even more strongly. We believe that a time will come when we can drink together from the one cup.”

On this note, we are temporarily closing off an intensive and successful trajectory. We were not at all certain before starting this journey that we would be able to achieve some good discussions on *TCTCV* in our country. The interest, the openness, and the positive response to this document have surprised us and cheered us. As one of the participants put it, “We often have a plan that eventually breaks down. The fact that God has a plan gives us confidence that it will carry through!”

We look forward to the official reactions of the churches and hope that this document and the reception process will strengthen the community of churches.

The committee consisted of the following people:

Geert van Dartel, Rob van Uden (Catholic Association for Ecumenism)

Hans Kranenburg, Henk Schoon (Ecumenical Forum for Catholicity)

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## **Questions for the discussion about *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* at the meeting on 5 June 2015**

### *Chapter I*

The vision of the Church is embedded in the great story of God’s plan for all creation. That is what part A of chapter I is about. In part B an overview is given of the mission of the Church through the ages. Part C is about the importance of unity. At the end of the chapter, several fundamental questions are identified which need attention on the path to unity.

1. What is your understanding of the mission and the calling of the Church?
2. Is the unity of the Church a dream, a realistic possibility, or a reality?

### *Chapter II*

An important insight is that the Church as a community (*koinonia*) brings us into a living relationship with the triune God. Biblical images are used to express what the Church is: people of God, body of Christ, temple of the Holy Spirit. Since the Second Ecumenical Council held in Constantinople in 381, all Christian churches confess that the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. The great diversity of churches raises the question wherein the unity of the Church lies and how unity can be safeguarded.

1. What is your view of the relationship between belief in the triune God and the community of the Church? To what extent are the images used for the Church helpful?
2. In your view, what are the limits of legitimate diversity? In other words: On which points is unity actually necessary?

### *Chapter III*

As an eschatological reality, the Church waits for the coming of the Kingdom; as a community of pilgrims, the Church struggles with the burden of sin. The ecumenical movement exists within this tension. The growth toward a community of churches is centered in three areas: faith, sacraments and ordained ministry.

1. How do you, in our ecumenical context, experience growth in community with respect to faith, sacraments and ordained ministry?
2. What is your experience of authority in the Church? How do you view the relationship between authority and ordained ministry in the Church? Try to identify a profile of “the ideal bishop” or “the ideal pope.”

### *Chapter IV*

The Church does not exist for itself. God’s plan for creation involves the coming of the Kingdom. Religious pluralism requires an ecumenical answer with respect to the call to proclaim the gospel and to ethical issues.

1. Is more agreement and consensus about moral questions necessary among the churches?
2. What can churches do to change and renew our broken world?