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Høringsvar fra Den norske kirke: Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion 2016

Church of Norway Response to the LWF document

The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion

The National Council of the Church of Norway thanks the LWF for having initiated the study process on the self-understanding of the Lutheran Communion. Having come to us at a time of particular struggle for our unity and clarity of mission, we have found the questions posed by the working group to be pertinent for the purpose of ecclesial soul-searching. They have also helped us not to lose awareness of the spirit of unity that is within and among us as we move together as a confessional family and a global communion toward our Twelfth Assembly a year from now.

Part 1: The gift of communion (ecclesiological)

1. What concepts and ideas in the study document are most helpful for strengthening the identity of your church?

Unity as a gift and a task

We consider unity to be a gift, which we are called to share. This gift challenges us to stay together in spite of disagreements. Unity understood as a gift also provides freedom to seek solutions in order to bridge differences and live together as one church. Unity understood as a task means that this freedom cannot be understood as an encouragement to keep status quo. It must be seen as an encouragement to continue efforts to understand one another, reaching deep and unifying theological understandings of the ethical issues related to being church today. To keep status quo, or not to engage with the actual difficulties of the relevant questions, would be the same as not to consider the sufferings of those who are directly concerned by the disagreements. In this, there is also a danger of idealizing the suffering.

The document speaks about the church's unity as "a unity in visibility, diversity and dynamism", thereby seeking to specify some main characteristics of the complexity of church unity. By emphasizing unity in reconciled diversity, the document acknowledges that there must be room for plurality within the one church. By also emphasizing unity in visibility, the document calls for an active approach to unity. The call for visible unity challenges the church to actively

engage in the process of reaching reconciled diversity, which requires a certain dynamism.

We would also add here that the pilgrimage motif may be fruitful for approaching unity as simultaneously a gift and a task; the church is on its way to an eschatological unity and is on its way called to work for visible unity in reconciled diversity. The pilgrimage motif takes seriously that this work requires time and that we walk together in the process of exploring unity as a gift and a task. The WCC Faith and Order document, "The Church – Towards a Common Vision" includes important perspectives on the pilgrimage tradition, which Church of Norway responded to:

"The Pilgrimage perspective of the document challenges us to reflect on the church as a temporary entity, on its way towards its goal. For an established church it is easy to think in static terms. (...) Reflections on the church as *koinonia* and communion move the Church of Norway into a greater understanding of the church as a living and varied community."¹

Regarding the language of unity in visibility, diversity and dynamism it is important that the full expression, i.e. "unity in reconciled diversity", is maintained as much as possible. The meaning of the adjective "reconciled" has a Christological and Pneumatological foundation, which is also clear in the WCC/Faith and Order study documents on the "costly" nature of the church.² There is much substance here by which the LWF might be enriched as it proceeds with the present study process on its self-understanding. It would also be a good expression of the LWF's broad ecumenical commitment if it is in a position to embrace, for its own use, content of ecclesiological/ethical studies carried out in multilateral settings.

The gift through word and sacraments as the basis of communion in Christ
The Church of Norway would like to reiterate a point made by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, in their response to the LWF study document:

*Concerning the theological and existential understanding of the emerging communion, it is helpful to describe its development as a "gift". It is a sacramental gift of God – a gift and a task. His Holy Spirit leads us closer to each other through word and sacraments. This makes it easier for Lutherans to understand the nature and purpose of "communion ecclesiology" as a manifestation of the real presence of Christ in word and sacrament, and in believers' faith in Christ. The pure proclamation of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments and the divinely instituted ministry serving them belong to the core of Lutheran ecclesiology, along with faith and love as the fruits of the gospel's proclamation. It is therefore important and helpful to our understanding and identity to connect communion (*koinonia*) with Christ in word and sacraments "through faith and participation in his saving work" with "...[a] deep solidarity with one another [that] intrinsically includes the*

¹ Church of Norway's response to the WCC Faith and Order document, *The Church – Towards a Common Vision*, p. 5. (Temporary English version)

² Cf. WCC/F&O/JPC study documents, *Costly Unity, Costly Commitment, Costly Obedience*, published on the WCC web site 1 January 1997.

sharing of material and spiritual resources”, and that “...this impels mutual commitment and common life and action”.

Dialogue in a broader context

The task of establishing sustainable reconciled communities both within one’s own faith community and across ecumenical, religious and life stance boundaries requires an ongoing conversation with dialogical qualities, which stays close to the experienced reality of its participants. This entails establishing a shared space for reflection and self-reflection, as well as dialogical knowledge established in the in-between space of the traditions.

Understanding the cost of diversity

In the Church of Norway the question of same-sex marriage is currently the object of a challenging controversy. Both sides of the debate consider this issue to be a matter of being true to the gospel of Jesus Christ. For many, this question concerns the topic of pastoral care and the character and understanding of church communion. We therefore recognize the document’s statement that some ethical discussions, such as the issue of the blessing of same-sex relationships, cannot be seen as merely a socio-ethical issue, “but also as issues of church order and discipline that play a role in the proclamation of the gospel” (p.16).

We subscribe to the document’s emphasis on a close connection between ecclesiology and ethics. The interrelatedness of ecclesiology and ethics is due to the understanding of diakonia as part of the church’s being.³ As we are called to be one church, we are called to not be ignorant of those who suffer because of ethical controversies. We are called to live together and seek unity in reconciled diversity.

Unity is, as the document expresses, costly. But, we must ask, for whom? The document focuses on how unity may be costly for those whose views are challenged in ethical discussions. Although we agree that it is important to recognize that bearing with one another for the sake of unity is costly, we find it important to emphasize even more strongly the costliness for those whom the ethical controversies have implications in their lives. It is important to distinguish between those who consider themselves victims because their views are not recognized and those who consider themselves victims because the church’s ethical teaching has existential consequences for their lives. Working towards reconciled diversity it is important to facilitate conversations where the voices are heard of those who are the most concerned.

Mutual agreement is not a necessary premise for a sense or an experience of unity. Disagreements may be analysed and various strands identified in possible conflicts. Two different positions in a disagreement may be representing different opinions, analyses or reflections, but also different qualities: A position may be closed in the sense that it does not recognize other positions, or open in the sense that it acknowledges other possible positions.

³ *Diakonia in context : transformation, reconciliation, empowerment*, LWF Geneva 2009

The question of adiaphora

We embrace the document's considerations on the concept of *adiaphora* (p.16). Some ethical issues have such weight, and are seen as related to the gospel and to the nature of the church communion in such ways that it becomes crucial for these issues to be engaged with. This approach gives a voice to all those who may take different stands in an ethical controversy, but who also consider this controversy to be a topic that concerns the church's integrity as a communion.

Freedom and accountability

Central to the Lutheran faith is the understanding of the freedom of the Christian: "A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything. A Christian is servant of all, completely attentive to the needs of all".⁴ Freedom includes the freedom to have a different opinion. Service includes facilitating this freedom for the other. The document suggests that the interrelation between freedom and service can be understood as a tool to deal with differences within the church (p.23). This approach reminds us that in order to achieve church unity, as a unity that offers space for differences, considerations about how to deal with these differences must be part of our point of departure. To affirm one's own freedom as well as the freedom of the other may be easier when this is done jointly, in a mutual wish for serving the other in the spirit of freedom. This corresponds to the Lutheran understanding of being free and responsible (accountable) at the same time.⁵

Here, a topic for further discussion emerges on what the document mentions as "exploring our forgiveness". Can this hermeneutical reference be read as a genuine Lutheran approach to Christian unity? "Forgiveness" should then not be understood as contradictory to "accountability", but rather as part of a complex process towards reconciled diversity and visible unity. Accountability is yet another topic that raises the issue of who is to be considered the victim of disagreement.

When ethical controversies are being discussed in relation to church communion, they are often described as painful for the church in terms of how they threaten unity. As mentioned before, when addressing the painfulness of an ethical controversy, it is important that the suffering of the victims of the controversy – of those these controversies concern the most – is not forgotten. This suffering should therefore be explicitly mentioned in ecumenical documents on church unity. Naming the victims of a controversy may, however, be a matter of controversy in itself. Who has the authority to identify the victim of a controversy? As stated above, we would then recommend that to give a special voice to those whose lives are especially affected by the ethical controversy, would give a normative role to those who suffer as a result of negative existential consequences in their lives.

We are reminded of Jesus' words in Luke 11:46, of the mutual responsibility to share each other's burdens rather than exposing particular people or groups with additional pressure or exclusion.

⁴ Martin Luther, *On Christian Freedom*, 1520

⁵ *In Christ a New Community*, Report from the LWF Sixth Assembly, Dar-es-Salaam, 1977

In our Lutheran churches, our tradition is to establish a possibility for the believers to interpret the Bible and the teachings of the church in an ongoing reformatory process. This influences on the question of interpretative authority, of who has the right to not only interpret these texts, but to decide on whether the interpretation is legitimate and valid. Ethical critique of Biblical texts where these texts are perceived as challenging to the God-given integrity and value of human beings is always a possibility, insofar as the critique is based on the principles of Lutheran Biblical hermeneutics. It may also represent an act of taking responsibility for what the texts convey.

2. Does this document help your church to understand itself as part of the global Lutheran communion?

The Church of Norway has been a state church, and remains a majority church in its context. It may, still today, be considered a “folk church”, i.e. an important faith community in the history of a country, and recognized as a church serving the people of that country. In our context we easily focus on local challenges for our church. To be reminded of the greater context we belong to opens new perspectives on our challenges. The LWF document helps us to see ourselves as part of the universal church (cf. p. 3), and to remember that we are part of a greater community.

Also, visible unity in diversity can be understood as a critique of a merely abstract understanding of unity. It is useful to be reminded that the concept of visible unity in diversity contains the perspective that unity is always about people.

The ecclesiological nature of LWF organs and the member churches

However, Church of Norway would agree with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland in their response, that:

The concrete organisation of the world communion should also be seen as a sign of the character of the LWF's communion, and as an “expression and instrument of this communion” in the process of an increasingly “conciliar, mutually committed communion by furthering consultation and exchange among its member churches and other churches of the Lutheran tradition”. However, this also raises questions concerning the ecclesiological status of the LWF secretariat, council, church leaders' meetings, and assemblies in relation to member churches. This remains unclear, and represents a challenge to our understanding of the concrete meaning of our membership of the worldwide communion. It is clear that these organs possess some of the features of consistorial, conciliar, or synodical decision-making and episkopé within the LWF.

3. Share the theological themes arising in your church during the study process of this document.

Human dignity and human rights

One of the topics that was discussed in our study of this document, is the relationship between the church's commitment to church unity and the church's commitment to human rights. The document suggests that for the sake of church

unity we should recognize the freedom of others to have a different opinion from our own. As churches we operate in different contexts and some of our values are strongly influenced by the particular context we are situated in. Thus, some of the differences are due to contextual factors and belong to the diversity of the church. The question is, however, how to balance this recognition of contextual differences with the concern for human rights.

In our opinion, the church is obliged to contribute to work against all violation of human rights. Church unity is not only about reconciling people who already define themselves as part of the church. It is also about being an inclusive church that communicates openness towards the stranger. Thereby the church's work for unity reflects one of the main concerns of human rights – to secure those who fall outside established systems.

When working for closer church unity, challenges arise when human rights seem to be in opposition to biblical values, as interpreted by the churches, or even to be in opposition against other human rights. This is an area that needs further consideration.⁶

Working on human rights and their impact and challenges regarding various religious and life-stance value systems is presently ongoing in many different traditions as well as in interreligious dialogues. If the Lutheran communities more explicitly take part in this effort, it would also bring us closer to the ongoing work of others and foster fruitful discussions and exchanges.

Part II: Discerning and living out communion (relational)

1. Does the document help your church to relate constructively to diversity in its pastoral ministry?

The Emmaus journey as a methodological concept

We find it genuinely meaningful to regard ourselves as a church on a journey. Unity is the ultimate goal of the journey, but it is important to allow time for the journey. The understanding of being on a journey is linked, as described above, to the understanding of unity as a gift and a task. In this regard, the pilgrimage motif could be emphasized: the church on its way to visible unity.⁷

Thus, the document may help us to reflect on our nature and task in a more long-term perspective. The integration of the journey to Emmaus as a methodological concept is useful when trying to deal with disagreement, also within our own church. When unity is understood as a gift that we are called to share, and when we understand ourselves as being on a journey towards visible unity, we are encouraged to listen to one another, and to take the time needed to be together on the road towards visible unity. The dynamic of, on the one hand, accepting the freedom of the other to think differently, and, on the other hand, trying to

⁶ WCC Faith and Order-document, *Moral discernment in the churches*, WCC 2014

⁷ WCC Faith and Order document, *The Church – Towards a Common Vision*:
[file:///C:/Users/Sven/Downloads/The_Church_Towards_a_common_vision%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Sven/Downloads/The_Church_Towards_a_common_vision%20(1).pdf)

continuously come closer to one another, is a constructive theological solution to dealing with the challenge of disagreement.

Pastoral counselling

In a recent document from the Bishops' Conference in the Church of Norway on how ministers should manoeuvre in the religiously plural society Norway has developed into, one distinguishes between the radical openness of accept and support in contexts of pastoral counselling, and other parts of the church's work. We believe that the openness and acceptance in pastoral counselling should provide an inspiration to all the ongoing activities and processes in the church in order to establish an integrated openness and acceptance for people seeking the church.⁸

Unity and diakonia

Since many people suffer from disagreements within the church, it is crucial that the church continues to seek visible unity, and that it moves forward to achieve closer unity and increased mutual accountability. This accountability must also be linked to the understanding of diakonia as an intrinsic part of the essence of being church, as described on page 12 of the document.

2. What are the practical ways to deal with different interpretations of the Bible that can strengthen churches in communion?

We believe the question is being dealt with in other parts of this response.

3. Share examples of how your church is engaged in communion building and mutual relations.

“The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion” draws on the “Proposed Guidelines and Processes for Respectful Dialogue” (p. 16), a resource received by the LWF Council in 2007.⁹ The intention of the document was to secure open and honest conversations between the LWF member churches, and contributed to maintaining LWF as a communion of churches in the face of considerable disagreement on the issue of same-sex marriage. We appreciate the methodology chosen in the continued process, as expressed by the LWF General secretary, «that our process toward 2012 is undertaken in the spirit of [...] ‘Emmaus conversation’ [...] thus making clear that ours is a deeply spiritual discernment of our faith journey as a communion of churches [...]”. The exercise of listening is of crucial value to such a conversation.

In the midst of the on-going controversy on same-sex marriage, the Church of Norway has struggled to keep communion and continue to build relations in spite of strong disagreement. The matter has been discussed for more than two decades, and has caused a lot of pain. However, when the General Synod of 2007 dealt with the issue of same-sex partnerships, it decided to make provisions for the church to live with two views. As a result of the 2015 church elections, it became clear that a

⁸ Church of Norway Bishops' Conference: “Religionsmøte ved kirkelige handlinger. En veiledning fra Bispemøtet.»

⁹ The Lutheran World Federation: Marriage, Family and Human Sexuality. Proposed Guidelines and Processes for Respectful Dialogue. <https://www.lutheranworld.org/family-marriage-and-sexuality>

majority of the General Synod members would vote in favour of a liturgy for same-sex marriage. The Bishops' conference made a move to propose a liturgy for same sex marriage as an addition to the current marriage liturgy. In its final decisions, the General Synod in 2016 reiterated that the church does not agree on the matter, however, the disagreement is not of a church-dividing character. A majority voted for a liturgy which can be used by all couples. However, it does not replace the current liturgy, which means that it is possible for those who do not support a liturgy for same-sex marriage to choose the current liturgy. Although all couples have a right to marry in their local church, pastors have the freedom to abstain from marrying same-sex couples.

An interesting feature of the Synod's discussion has been the will to keep church unity. In spite of the theological disagreement on the actual matter, the Synod's decision caused a sense of relief, providing space for disagreement. Addressing the disagreement and still keeping church unity was a difficult exercise, but it contains a powerful message. When unity is seen as Christological concept, when unity is an external gift, it is our task to respect one another at the same time as we openly defend our theological views. This is a dynamic which is deeply connected to the concept of the Emmaus conversation and the pilgrimage motif.

When this is said, we would like to emphasise that visible unity of the church is entirely God-given, through the presence and blessings of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

We would hereby like to reiterate our opinion of "The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion" as a useful document for deepened reflections on what it means to be a Lutheran Communion, and to be a church living in a meaningful relationship with other churches. We are grateful for all the work and the reflections behind this initiative, and look forward to take part in the continued reflection process on Christ's call to unity, and our common task of living in communion with one another.

Yours sincerely,

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