

The Church: Towards a Common Vision – Faith and Order and the Renewal of Churches

Nordic Faith and Order Network, Sofia Orthodox Centre, Helsinki, 2 October 2014

Introduction: Renewal

Renewal has long been on the agenda of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The 1968 Uppsala Assembly—with its theme “Behold, I make all things new”—stated, “The Church is faced by the twin demands of continuity in the one Holy Spirit, and of renewal in response to the call of the Spirit amid the changes of human history.”

What is renewal? What are the signs of renewal? What are the signs of *needing* to be renewed? How is renewal related to tradition? In which ways is renewal related to ‘reform’, ‘change’ and ‘transformation’? Such questions are critical for churches around the world in relation to dramatic shifts in society, yet different experiences and expressions of renewal can also be church dividing. Thus, theological reflection on renewal invites the churches to seek a common understanding of renewal and a common recognition of its many forms.

Ecumenical movement as renewal

Ecumenism is a movement of renewal. Yet because it has been so successful, and takes place so slowly, it is easily taken for granted. Indeed, it has been so successful, that most of us cannot remember a time when we *not* ecumenical. We can be forgiven for not seeing how profoundly ecumenism has renewed the churches.

The sense of ecumenism as a movement of renewal goes back to its earliest days. The 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference had as one of its goals increased cooperation amongst the Western missionary societies. What happened was a vision of so much more, a vision of a united Church. It was a moment of conversion for the delegates. As one of the delegates, Anglican missionarybishop Charles Brent said at the end of the conference:

During these past days a new vision has been unfolded to us. But whenever God gives a vision He also points to some new responsibility, and you and I, when we leave this assembly, will go away with some fresh duties to perform.¹

He later said of this experience:

I was converted. I learned that something was working that was not of man in that conference; that the Spirit of God... was preparing a new era in the history of Christianity.²

¹ In Tislington Tatlow, “The World Conference on Faith and Order” in Ruth Rouse and Stephen Neill, eds., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, Volume 1, 1517-1948* (Geneva: WCC, 2004), 407.

² Alexander C. Zabriskie, *Bishop Brent* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1948), 145.

Brent would lead the Faith and Order movement in the same spirit of renewal. Hear the “Call to Unity” from the First World Conference of Faith and Order in 1927:

God’s Spirit has been in the midst of us. It was He who called us hither. His presence has been manifest in our worship, our deliberations and our whole fellowship. He has discovered us to one another. He has enlarged our horizons, quickened our understanding, and enlivened our hope. We have dared and God has justified our daring. We can never be the same again.³

Faith and Order as renewal

I like to meet members of Faith and Order who were present at Lima in 1982 when *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM) was approved as a convergence text. A question that I ask is whether in 1982 they had any idea about the impact BEM would have on the lives of the churches. The common answer is that while they expected theological agreement, they had *no idea* that BEM would become a source of renewal.

The churches that participated in the BEM process experienced a renewal around Christian initiation and the Eucharist. The BEM process gave rise to revised liturgical rites that bore an ecumenical family resemblance to one another. The reception of BEM led to renewed relationships between Christians who began to recognise themselves in the other churches, and who, perhaps for the first time, even desired to receive Holy Communion from one another.

What happened in the BEM experience became a paradigm of the constitutional purpose of Faith and Order: to serve the churches as they “call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe”. In short: renewal.

TCTCV and renewal

With or without a World Conference, Faith and Order is already engaged in renewal through its reflection on ecclesiology. The preface to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (TCTCV) outlines the two aims of Faith and Order in sending the text to the churches. The second yet more immediate goal of the reception of TCTCV is to test with the churches the theological convergence reached by the Commission. The responses will be analysed and published by Faith and Order, following the same process used for BEM.

Obviously, it is too early to predict what the responses to TCTCV will tell us. But one of the signs that give us hope is the high level of engagement the churches are giving to the text. The reception process was launched in March 2013. Here are some of the “outcome indicators” received by October 2014:

³ In H.N. Bate, ed., *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference - Lausanne, August 3-21, 1927* (New York: George H. Doran Company), 460.

- TCTCV exists in 17 languages.
- TCTCV was included in the WCC 2013 Assembly *Resource Book* in five languages.
- TCTCV was the topic of an ecumenical conversation at the Assembly, involving 50 people in four ninety-minute sessions, which produced a published report about their responses to the text.
- 48 churches have begun a formal response process.
- 14 councils of churches have started to study the text.
- 26 faculties of theology or seminaries are using it in teaching.
- TCTCV has been presented at 41 consultations or conferences.
- TCTCV has contributed to 11 bilateral dialogues, regional and international.
- TCTCV has been presented at 40 academic conferences.
- TCTCV has been presented in every WCC region.
- There have been 8894 visits to TCTCV on the WCC website; Google search gives 170,000 results!

These numbers represent only what churches have told us, what Faith and Order commissioners and staff members have reported, and what we have found in the Internet. But, it gives us hope!

The formal responses of the churches are expected by December 2015. They will either register a level of convergence amongst the churches, or not. If there is significant disagreement with the text, then either the lengthy Faith and Order process was flawed, or there really is no convergence on ecclesiology. Either way, the ecumenical venture would be in serious trouble.

On the other hand, if there is a significant convergence amongst the churches, then we are able to identify a “Common Vision”. Thus a major obstacle to the visible unity of the Church is overcome. Restored unity will not be an immediate result. Rather, growth toward mutual *recognition* of one another as churches and eventual mutual *reception* of one another as churches will have a new foundation in a mutually recognized ecclesiology. And at the very least, the ecumenical movement will not be blocked by fears of irreconcilable ecclesiology.

The reception of TCTCV and the renewal of ecclesial life

For Faith and Order, the primary and longer-term aim of TCTCV is renewal. In the questions for response by the churches, the third is about renewal: “What adaptations or renewal in the life of your church does this statement challenge your church to work for?” The longer-term reception will be living into the common vision, in the ways that churches lived into the vision of BEM. As the preface states:

There are at least two distinct, but deeply interrelated, objectives in sending *The Church* to the churches for study and official response. The first is renewal. As a multilateral ecumenical text, *The Church* cannot be identified exclusively with any one ecclesiological tradition. In the long process from 1993–2012, the theological expressions and ecclesial experiences of many churches have been brought together in

such a way that the churches reading this text may find themselves challenged to live more fully the ecclesial life; others may find in it aspects of ecclesial life and understanding which have been neglected or forgotten; others may find themselves strengthened and affirmed. As the churches become more of what they are, they will find themselves drawing closer to one another, and living into the biblical image of the one body: “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (TCTCV, viii).

This presentation is an occasion for me to play a little in my imagination with you about what a pastoral reception of TCTCV might look like in terms of renewal. These musings are my own, and reflect no intentional plan from the Commission. But, both TCTCV and the Commission inform my thoughts.

***Koinonia* and renewal**

TCTCV reflects a robust *koinonia* ecclesiology. One of the extraordinary things about TCTCV is that it proposes communion ecclesiology as a normative way of thinking about the Church. I do not think that *koinonia* is simply a neat theological principal that may ground a common ecumenical ecclesiology. I believe that if the churches live into a vision of the Church as communion, they will be renewed.

Although frequently translated as “communion” there is a preference in ecumenical ecclesiology for the original Greek word *koinonia*, which conveys a wider understanding. As TCTCV notes, “communion” derives from the verb meaning, “to have something in common,” “to share,” “to participate,” “to have part in” or “to act together,” or “to be in a contractual relationship involving obligations of mutual accountability” (TCTCV §13).⁴

I would like to explore some examples of what a reception of *koinonia* might look like in the broad categories of “faith” and “order”: the “faith” of the Church and the “ordering” of its life. I begin with how receiving *koinonia* theology with TCTCV might renew how we believe and teach about God, creation, sin, salvation, and Church.

Trinity

Theologically *koinonia* is centred on the communion of love within the eternal being of the Trinity, its source and its end: God in God’s own triune life is a communion/*koinonia* of persons. For a visual image, think of Andrei Rublev’s icon of the angelic Trinity. As a communion of love, this *koinonia* is moral; the communion of the Triune God is one of complete justice and peace. As a communion of love, it is creative and redemptive. The communion of the Triune God is inclusive and expansive, shared and showered on all of creation, inviting us all into the same communion of love with God.

⁴ *Koinonia* appears in passages recounting the sharing in the Lord’s Supper (cf. 1 Cor 10.16-17), the reconciliation of Paul with Peter, James and John (cf. Gal 2.7-10), the collection for the poor (cf. Rom 15.26; 2 Cor 8.3-4) and the experience and witness of the Church (cf. Acts 2.42-45).

The Trinitarian starting point is vital, because it describes communion as a gift flowing from the life of the God, not as a human achievement. The Trinitarian starting point is vital because it insists on a communion in unity and diversity.

- In what ways could our God-image be renewed through the lens of *koinonia*?
- In what ways could the experience of our relationship with God be renewed through receiving a theology of *koinonia*?

Creation

“In the beginning...God created the heavens and the earth.” Within a hermeneutic of *koinonia*, creation is the expression of the overflowing gift of love within the communion of the Trinity. This *koinonia* is at the heart and fabric of the cosmos. It is an unstoppable force that creates and sustains the universe.

This communion of love generates creation, and thus history. In Genesis human beings are created in God’s image; we thus bear an innate capacity and longing for communion with God, with one another and with all creation. Within a vision of creation shaped by *koinonia* theology, history is neither cyclical nor linear, but a spiral of communion from, with, and towards its source and living fountain, the Triune God.

- How do our understandings of ecology correspond with a theology of *koinonia*?
- How might Christian anthropology be renewed by a theology of *koinonia*?

Sin

Again, as a communion of love, the *koinonia* of the Triune God has a moral character. While we can affirm *koinonia* is at the heart of creation, a divine gift that we can neither create nor destroy, it is clear that it is a gift that can be denied, distorted, corrupted, and ignored, either corporately or individually. Within a framework of *koinonia*, what are those “thoughts, words and deeds” that limit, deny, distort or reject *koinonia* with another, or between communities? Here sin is the antithesis of *koinonia*, the antithesis of justice and peace.

Racism, sexism, casteism, colonialism or any kind of “ism” that oppresses or abuses others is a violation of communion. Hatred, revenge, or refusing to seek reconciliation denies communion. Violence, war, and killing become the most blatant refusals of *koinonia*. If creation itself is part of God’s expression of *koinonia*, then harming the earth is also a violation of communion. Lastly, from the perspective of communion, idolatry of any kind rejects *koinonia* with the Triune God.

- In our churches today, there are some who have an unhealthy fixation on sin, either of themselves or of others. There are others who refuse to think about it all. How might sin in relation to *koinonia* lead to a healthy middle point?
- What might a renewed season of Lent look like in terms of *koinonia*?

Salvation

The principle of *koinonia* is an interesting lens with which to consider salvation. As TCTCV crisply states: “The dynamic history of God’s restoration of *koinonia* found its irreversible achievement in the incarnation and paschal mystery of Jesus Christ” (TCTCV §1). If sin can be recast as the denial, distortion or rejection of *koinonia* with or for another person or community, then pardon, forgiveness and reconciliation are about restoration of communion. *Koinonia* is the goal of salvation!

There is something eschatological about forgiveness. Think about where it appears in the Creeds: at the very end, linked with the resurrection and the life of the world to come. Forgiveness can be seen as not identifying a person on the basis of his or her past or present, but granting that person a future relationship in communion in spite of his or her past or present. When we forgive others as God forgives us, we open a future for communion with another or others that would otherwise have been impossible. When forgiveness happens, it is an effective sign that the eschaton is already breaking forth in our lives.

- How might a theology of communion interpret the words “forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us”?

Church

There are many New Testament images to describe the Church: the body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and the prophetic, royal and priestly people of God. The biblical images are many; the reality is one. The controlling image used in TCTCV is, of course, the Church as *koinonia*.

Koinonia ecclesiology has gained an extraordinary ecumenical interest because it understands Church not merely or primarily as an institution or organization, but as the “communion” of all who are called together by the Holy Spirit and in baptism confess Christ as Lord and Saviour. They are thus already “in communion” with one another.

Communion is not just what the Church “is”, but also what it “does” in terms of mission. As TCTCV puts it:

Communion, whose source is the very life of the Holy Trinity, is both the gift by which the Church lives and, at the same time, the gift that God calls the Church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity in hope of reconciliation and healing (TCTCV §1).

Hence, the Church is sign and servant of God’s design for the world: “It is God’s design to gather humanity and all of creation into communion under the Lordship of Christ” (TCTCV § 25). Communion and mission are inclusive of the life of the Church, in fact, they define it; but the Church cannot exclusively contain them either. The Church is not the goal of communion; God is. Mission is *not* about bringing people to Church, but about the Church being caught up in the mission of God—the *missio Dei*—for the fulfilment of creation.

- How might an ecclesiology of communion renew understandings of “church” beyond a building, a denomination, or an institution?

- How might an ecclesiology of communion renew the mission of the Church?

There is so much more to say about *koinonia* and the renewal of the “faith” of the Church. But now I would like to talk about *koinonia* and the “ordering” of the Church, and how reception of *koinonia* ecclesiology might renew the churches as they live out their life and mission. In particular, the ecumenical movement of the future, the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, Prayer, and then to classical Faith and Order questions on Baptism and Eucharist. I do so cognizant that questions of “order” are always questions of “faith”.

The Ecumenical Movement

I think of renewal like one of those updates that I get on my computer or iPhone. I have just downloaded iOS 8.2 on my iPhone, and in a sense, it is renewed. I think of the ecumenical movement as an urgent update for the Church. But something wrong happened. Maybe we got disconnected from the Internet at some point, because it is an update that has only been 68% downloaded. It has accomplished much, and we are satisfied with the 68% download, and forget that more needs to be received. Again, the biggest challenge to the ecumenical movement is its own success. It has been received so well that we can barely remember the divisions of just a generation ago and so we are no longer scandalized by the divisions that remain. We can live with a 68% download. In fact, we are astonished—if not offended—by the idea there might be a vital 32% of renewal left to go.

- How can faith that “The dynamic history of God’s restoration of *koinonia* found its irreversible achievement in the incarnation and paschal mystery of Jesus Christ” (TCTCV §1), renew a vision of the Church as communion?
- In what ways might the remaining “32% download” renew the life and mission of the Church?

The ecumenical movement is an invitation to become more fully what we already are. It is an invitation to receive one another as Christ has received us; to make visible our unity or communion which is already given.

For the vast majority of Christians, the sign that the visible unity of the Church is fully realised is when all the churches are in Eucharistic *koinonia* with one another; such is also the constitutional vision of the WCC and of the Commission on Faith and Order. This vision of the goal of unity of the Church in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship is not an end in itself, but it is related to the mission of the Church as sign and servant of God’s design for the world, the *koinonia* of all.

The Pilgrimage of Justice and peace

At the Busan Assembly, the WCC committed itself to join with others on a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. There is a hidden ecclesiological presupposition here that TCTCV has already addressed in terms of communion.

TCTCV treats questions around the presence and mission of the Church in the world in terms of communion ecclesiology, for “communion is both the gift by which the Church lives, and the gift that God calls the Church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity” (TCTCV §1).

The climax of TCTCV’s reflection on *koinonia* is the final chapter, “The Church: In and For the World”, where the expression and consequence of the Church’s *koinonia* is *diakonia*. In care for the vulnerable, mission and evangelism, justice and peace, protection of the environment, interreligious cooperation, peacemaking, advocacy, healing and reconciliation, the Church fulfils its purpose as the sign and servant of God’s communion.

- How can an ecclesiology of *koinonia* renew our commitment to justice and peace?
- By contrast, what does a lack of commitment to justice and peace signal about our understanding of *koinonia*?

Baptism

One of the unexpected outcomes of the pastoral reception of BEM was the renewal of baptism. The first was a dramatic increase from the 1980s of the mutual recognition of baptism between churches, as they noted their convergences with one another in the published responses to BEM. This mutual recognition between churches continues to this day, and is a visible sign of communion between the churches. But BEM also asked the churches to renew their practices around baptism. There was a particular challenge to churches that practiced what the text called “indiscriminate baptism” of infants.

If the churches similarly receive TCTCV, what might the consequences be for further renewal of baptism? I am thinking especially of the accent on baptism and *koinonia*, which was not a feature of BEM. Baptism in the name of the Trinity roots our communion in God, irreversibly restored in the paschal mystery of Jesus. It becomes clear that baptism is not only something that happens to a person; it is an event that happens to community, whose *koinonia* expands every time it celebrates baptism.

- With whom does our baptism place us in communion?
- How can the link between baptism and *koinonia* be made more visible?

Prayer

One of the things that the baptised are to do is pray, and to pray for others. Why pray? How does prayer work? Does it work? Oliver Tomkins, Anglican bishop and former Moderator of Faith and Order, remembering the earliest days of the WCC wrote this about prayer:

I shall always remember the service in the Cathedral of St Pierre in Geneva during the first post-war meeting in 1946 of the Provisional Committee. There were three preachers - all of them having recently spent long years in prison. The first of them was Martin Niemoller who spoke of how, when he was finally arrested by the Gestapo and taken to prison, his old father had said to him: “Be of good cheer, my son. Remember that there will be Christians praying for you from Greenland to the

Pacific Islands”, and of how that knowledge, in the next eight years, many of them in solitary confinement, had kept him not only sane but even joyful. The second preacher was a Chinese who had been imprisoned in Japanese-occupied Shanghai throughout the Sino-Japanese war. He told of how, occasionally, his Japanese gaoler had proved to be a fellow Christian and, when they discovered it, they would kneel in prayer together in his cell. The third speaker was Bishop Eivind Berggrav, the splendid Primate of Norway, who for his part in leading the church resistance had been kept under house-arrest in the forest. He told of how the man who brought the rations to the cottage whispered through the window: “My old woman and I were listening to the BBC last night and we heard the Archbishop of Canterbury pray for you by name.” And Berggrav concluded: “God has been saying to us, during these war years, ‘My Christians, you are one. Now behave as if that were true.’” In that spirit, the World Council was born.⁵

I think *koinonia* ecclesiology offers a renewed rationale for intercessory prayer. In the ancient church, one of the signs of being in communion with a person, or with another church, was prayer for the other. I think most of us know from our own experience that *not* praying for another person (or being unable to pray for that person) remains a sign of broken communion.

- How might an ecclesiology of communion renew and clarify intercessory prayer?
- How might the words “pray for those who persecute you” be understood within a communion ecclesiology?

Eucharist

In the final paragraphs of TCTCV, Faith and Order suggests an image of *koinonia*:

The liturgy, especially the celebration of the Eucharist, serves as a dynamic paradigm for what such *koinonia* looks like in the present age. In the liturgy, the people of God experience communion with God and fellowship with Christians of all times and places. They gather with their presider, proclaim the Good News, confess their faith, pray, teach and learn, offer praise and thanksgiving, receive the Body and Blood of the Lord, and are sent out in mission (TCTCV §67).⁶

One of the reasons that theologians often prefer to speak of *koinonia* rather than “communion” is that the primary point of reference to the latter can too easily be limited to the celebration of the Eucharist, and more specifically to receiving *Holy Communion*. While Eucharistic communion cannot signal the totality of *koinonia*, the language of communion—the receiving of Holy Communion—does point to eating and drinking of the sacramental body and blood of Christ as a privileged moment of encounter of *koinonia* between a Christian and the Risen Christ within the Church.

⁵ Oliver Tomkins, “Amsterdam 1948: A Personal Retrospect and Assessment”, in *the Ecumenical Review*, 40.3-4 (1988), 319.

⁶ See the message from the Ninth Forum on Bilateral Dialogues (the Breklum Report), March 2008.

When we are in sacramental communion with Christ we are in sacramental communion with one another. For some traditions, receiving Holy Communion even in our state of division is a means to this sacramental communion. For other traditions, receiving Holy Communion together is the sign that all that has divided us has been restored and healed.

Receiving Holy Communion, cannot, however, be seen as the *only* Eucharistic experience or expression of our *koinonia* with Christ and with one another, even within the Eucharist itself. This is important for communities who seek to deepen or renew their Eucharistic spirituality. There is also a helpful ecumenical point important when Christians of different churches attend one another's celebrations of the Eucharist, and are confronted in often-painful ways with different practices around who may and may not receive Holy Communion.

The simple fact of gathering together as a community in and with the Triune God is the foundational sign of *koinonia*. This is signalled by beginning in the name of the Trinity, or with: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor 13.13). The Trinitarian greeting underlines that the communion of the gathered community is with the communion of the Holy Trinity.

Hearing the Word of God together is a sign of communion. I am always astounded when Christians—especially from traditions shaped by the Reformation—can dismiss ecumenical prayer as "just" a liturgy of the word. This Word, this Gospel, is the foundation of our common faith and hope, which TCTCV identifies as an "essential element of communion" (TCTCV §37). For many churches, it is the weekly encounter with Christ in the opened Scriptures, which forms the weekly encounter with Christ in the Church. I think the experience of the biblical Word of God as a bond of communion has been strengthened enormously by ecumenical or common lectionaries, common Bible study, ecumenical biblical scholarship, and ecumenical translations of the Bible.

- In what ways is our ecclesial communion with one another in the Scriptures made visible?
- In what ways do Christians obscure the Bible as sign of *koinonia*?

The Intercessions or Prayers of the People are liturgical expressions of communion, of the sort that Oliver Tomkins described above. But for whom do we pray? For what churches do we pray? The churches of the Anglican Communion, for instance, seem to have endless cycles of prayer, but behind them is the principle of prayer as an expression of *koinonia*.

- Through the lens of *koinonia* what do our petitions indicate about our varied relationships of communion?
- How is the communion in prayer reflected in making communion visible?

Just as prayer *for* one another is sign of communion, so is prayer *with* one another. Even in situations when we cannot share Holy Communion together, we can pray the Eucharistic prayer together, and proclaim the great Amen together. As the classical liturgies make clear, the Eucharistic prayer belongs to the whole Church in time and space: with angels,

archangels, and to the whole company of heaven. It is the prayer of the communion of saints in which we with them give thanks for the One who is, and was, and is to come.

The Eucharist, with all its diverse elements, points to a diversity of expression or visible signs of communion. To borrow an expression from Celtic Christianity, when we have a cognitive-affective experience of “communion”, we are in the midst of “thin places” between heaven and earth, between time and space, and between our day and the eschatological day, which is already breaking through when *koinonia* is made visible.

- How might Eucharistic celebration in its many expressions of *koinonia* train us to become mindful of the diverse experiences of communion in all areas of our lives?

Conclusion

The ecumenical movement has changed the face of modern Christianity in varying ways and in varying degrees around the world and across the churches. And it is still doing so. Theological or Faith and Order ecumenism has made its particular contribution. Because we are theologians, and mostly trained in the academy, it is too easy to suspect that the work we do is unrelated to the life of the Church, and its renewal. BEM has been proving this wrong for over 30 years. I believe that in our own generation, TCTCV has the same capacity.

The ecumenical movement has renewed the churches, as well as placing before them a vision of what God is calling us to be as a communion, a *koinonia*. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, has, I believe, a role to play within this longer ecumenical vision. And so I close with words from Bishop Charles Brent after his experience of Edinburgh 1910:

During these past days a new vision has been unfolded to us. But whenever God gives a vision He also points to some new responsibility, and you and I, when we leave this assembly, will go away with some fresh duties to perform.⁷

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⁷ In Bate, *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference*, 460.