



Lukas Vischer:

Is This Really „the Unity We Seek“? – Comments on the Statement on “The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling” Adopted by the WCC Assembly in Canberra

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2. Historical Context

Lukas Vischer worked with the World Council of Churches from 1961-1979, as Research Secretary, then as Director of the Commission on Faith and Order. In this article he comments on the new statement on *koinonia* (communion) of the Church, adopted at the 1991 WCC assembly in Canberra.

3. Summary

Agreement on the unity of the church is anything but self-evident. The statement of the 1961 WCC assembly in New Delhi stresses *unity in each place*; that of Nairobi 1975 develops the vision of a *universal fellowship*. In view of the 1991 Canberra assembly the Commission on Faith and Order was instructed to prepare a new statement. Recent developments should be considered such as several WCC studies and the conciliar process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. The most obvious feature of the Canberra statement is the emphasis on *koinonia* or *communio* – a term which was already used in New Delhi but now replaces consistently the term *unity*. A second feature is the reference to the creation, a third one the broad treatment of “unity and diversity”. A fourth feature is the conviction that unity can only be reached by intermediate goals.

Does the new statement represent a real step forward? Several questions arise. 1. The relation to earlier WCC statements is not clear. Is there any significance in the fact that *conciliar fellowship* is avoided? 2. The statement neglects the urgency of today’s situation. The call to the churches to cross barriers and unite in witness for justice, peace and the integrity of creation was prompted by the insight that the human race places its own survival at risk. 3. The statement follows the Roman Catholic idea that the way from the present division to future communion is a process of gradual growth. But can unity not only be achieved, if at all, under the condition that all churches undergo a process of renewal, repentance and conversion? 4. The need for *koinonia* is particularly urgent in today’s situation where solidarity is getting lost. The idea of *conciliar fellowship* attempts to develop the vision of a *universal fellowship* of the church. This view has vanished in Canberra. 5. The text sets out to free diversity from any stigma of illegitimacy. The question, however, is how the *limits to diversity* are to be determined. And: Do diversities not often act as a salutary spur in the life of the church? 6. The treatment of scriptural witness is vague. According to the New Testament the first generation of Christians maintained their fellowship by fulfilling their mission in ever-changing ways, with arguments and disputes and common decisions. The task for Christianity today is to continue this process. 7. The statement is addressed to “all churches”, i.e. the official bodies which are competent to represent and decide for the churches. Yet the ecumenical movement has its source in a wide variety of initiatives and ventures. What can individuals, parishes and movements do today?

In more than one respect the Canberra statement seems to represent a step backwards in comparison to earlier statements on unity. The forthcoming world conference on Faith and Order might be an opportunity to prepare a new statement in the light of the ensuing debate.

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CONVERSION

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Is This Really “the Unity We Seek”?

Comments on the Statement on “The Unity of
the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling”
Adopted by the WCC Assembly in Canberra

Lukas Vischer

Many attempts have been made to agree on a common description of the unity we are seeking to accomplish in the ecumenical movement. This is a task we cannot avoid. If the churches are to draw closer together, clarity as to the common goal is essential. What is unity? Agreement on this question is anything but self-evident. Each one of the churches has its own conception of unity, depending on its understanding of the church. If we are to develop a common conception of unity, we should have a broad measure of agreement on the nature and calling of the church. Even the founding of the World Council of Churches did little to alter this, indeed, on the contrary it actually aggravated the problem. On the one hand, the task of achieving a common mind had become yet more urgent, but on the other, the more concrete the question of unity became, the more evident were the differences between the churches. The hope that the obstacles could be overcome in the momentum of mutual discovery quickly evaporated. Two years after the founding of the World Council of Churches, the Central Committee expressly stated that no agreement existed on this question. “The Council stands for church unity... but none of these (various) conceptions can be called the ecumenical theory.”¹

Certainly, the Central Committee added: “The whole point of the ecumenical conversation is precisely that all these conceptions enter into dynamic relations with each other.” So the recognition of the differences is not the end of the story. The fact that the divided churches have come together in the World Council of Churches entitles us to hope that the different conceptions will gradually permeate one another. For however deeply divided the churches may be, they are nonetheless one in the

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conviction that “on the basis of the New Testament the church of Christ is one”. The Central Committee emphatically affirmed this common view:

The ecumenical movement owes its existence to the fact that this article of faith has again come home to men and women in many churches with an inescapable force. As they face the discrepancy between the truth that there is and can be only one church of Christ, and the fact that there exist so many churches which claim to be churches of Christ but are not living in unity with one another, they feel a holy dissatisfaction with the present situation.²

The question now is how far the conversation among the churches over the years has led to new perspectives.

A first attempt to answer that question was made at the assembly in New Delhi (1961), followed fifteen years later by a second attempt at the Nairobi assembly (1975), when the New Delhi text was developed and expanded. The two texts set the frame of reference for the ecumenical movement. They speak of unity as a gift of God and try to show how it can be made visible in the course of history. In particular they enumerate the conditions which need to be fulfilled if mutual recognition between the churches is to be achieved. While the New Delhi statement stresses above all “unity in each place”, the Nairobi statement develops the vision of a universal conciliar fellowship.

It is important from time to time to re-examine these descriptions to check whether they are still appropriate to today’s situation.

Have the encounter, the dialogue and the experiences the churches now have in common perhaps given rise to new aspects and perspectives which should be reflected in a new statement? Or has there in fact been such a radical alteration in the churches’ relations with one another that an entirely new and different formulation is needed? The Central Committee was certainly right, in 1987, to instruct the Commission on Faith and Order to prepare a new statement. At the time, the Committee expressly indicated that the new developments since Nairobi should be considered — including the insights gained in connection with the studies on the apostolic faith, baptism, eucharist and ministry (BEM), and the unity of the church and the renewal of the human community, as well as the conciliar process on justice, peace and the integrity of creation. The text adopted at the Canberra assembly is the outcome of studies and consultations covering a period of almost four years.

The content of the statement

The new statement is arranged in three parts, with a short epilogue. First of all the statement describes the origin and calling of the church.

The church is the foretaste of this communion (koinonia) with God and with one another... The purpose of the church is...to point to the fullness of communion with God, humanity and the whole creation in the glory of the kingdom.

In the second part it goes on to show the conditions that have to be fulfilled if this communion is to be expressed. Then follow some thoughts concerning the steps which can and must be taken by the churches here and now. This is a list of suggested moves — some general, some quite specific — which could bring the churches closer to their goal. The epilogue picks up the theme of the assembly and invokes the Holy Spirit as the source of communion.

As to the particular features of the statement, the most obvious one appears in the title itself, namely, the emphasis on the concept of *koinonia* or *communio*. In this statement the term unity is consistently replaced by the concept of *communio*. "The unity of the church to which we are called is a *koinonia*..." The use of the term *koinonia* is of course not new. The same comparison was already used in the past. The New Delhi assembly, for instance, said in the commentary on its statement:

The word "fellowship" (*koinonia*) has been chosen because it describes what the church truly is. "Fellowship" clearly implies that the church is not an institution or organization. It is a fellowship of those who are called together by the Holy Spirit and in baptism confess Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Up till now, however, the term has not been so consistently taken as the basis as it was at the Canberra assembly, and this undoubtedly marks a step forward. The concept of *communio* is more appropriate as a description of the goal than is the concept of unity. It calls to mind the dual relationship, to God and his gifts on the one hand, and to humanity and the whole creation on the other. Unity suggests a narrower concept — the word is too exclusively associated with the idea of an end to diversity. The use of the term *koinonia* automatically places the emphasis on the relationship through which human beings are bound together in Jesus Christ. *Koinonia* is a richer and therefore more appropriate term.³

A second important feature of the statement is its repeated references to the creation. This widening of the horizon is evident from the very beginning: "The purpose of God according to holy scripture is to gather the whole of creation under the Lordship of Jesus Christ..." Statements of this nature in relation to the theme of unity have been rare until now. The WCC assembly in New Delhi did certainly call for the goal of unity to be treated from the standpoint of God's creation and salvation, and the Commission on Faith and Order did some work along those lines at its meeting in Aarhus (1964). However, the theme was never really taken up again in subsequent discussions. The references to the creation in the Canberra statement are therefore in the nature of a signal. The awareness that the churches have not really fulfilled their mission in regard to the creation is reflected in sentences like: "... a common mission witnessing to the gospel of God's grace to all people and serving the whole creation" (2.1) or: "... work together for justice and peace, and care together for God's creation" (3.1).

A third feature of the statement is its relatively broad treatment of the theme "unity and diversity". The fellowship of the churches does not put an end to diversity but sets it in a new context. This is not new, either. Both New Delhi (1961) and Nairobi (1975) already said something similar. In the New Delhi report we read:

Neither does this "fellowship" imply a rigid uniformity of structure, organization or government. A lively variety marks corporate life in the one body of the one Spirit.⁴

There is, however, an obvious difference. Whereas in the past the call to unity was developed first of all, and then followed by a reassurance that fellowship would not lead to the suppression of diversity, this statement says more concisely:

Diversities which are rooted in theological traditions, various cultural, ethnic or historical contacts are integral to the nature of communion... In communion diversities are brought together in harmony as gifts of the Holy Spirit, contributing to the richness and fullness of the church of God.

Significantly enough, the question as to the limits of diversity is raised only in second place, and in fairly negative terms:

...yet there are limits to diversity. Diversity is illegitimate when, for instance, it makes impossible the common confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8); and salvation and the final destiny of humanity as proclaimed in holy scripture and preached by the apostolic community.

Lastly, a fourth feature which deserves to be mentioned is the fact that the statements about the nature of the communion we seek are directly linked in the third section with a series of statements about the tasks the churches in the ecumenical movement have to fulfill in regard to unity. Earlier assemblies had also tried to do this, but the Canberra assembly perhaps makes it still clearer that the goal of unity can only be reached by means of intermediate stages. The text lists a series of intermediate goals which seem to be within reach, e.g. mutual recognition of baptism.

How is this statement to be assessed?

Does it represent a real step forward? Does it lead beyond what was already said by previous assemblies? On closer examination a whole series of questions about the text arise, of which I mention only a few here.

1. The relation to earlier statements by the World Council of Churches is not clear

It is difficult to assess the significance and value of the statement because it is not clear how exactly it relates to the earlier statements of New Delhi and Nairobi. It is impossible to tell whether the text builds on the earlier statements and develops them, or whether it is to be read for itself. The statement says nothing about how far the earlier texts are implicitly assumed, nor where they are corrected or even replaced. The Nairobi statement was quite explicit in this respect: it presents itself as continuing and expanding the New Delhi text. The statements of New Delhi are explicitly confirmed. What was new about Nairobi was that it set the earlier statements in a wider framework. The theme of the universality of the church, which had been mentioned only in passing in New Delhi, was now developed fully. Is this again the case here? It would seem not. The Canberra statement is probably to be understood rather as an independent text which sets out to offer a new approach to the question of unity. This is indicated amongst other things by the fact that it addresses not only the member churches of the World Council of Churches, but "all churches". On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear nonetheless that it cannot be understood in its own right. The echoes and allusions to the earlier documents are numerous. Certain concepts are taken up again, others are modified or dropped. But nowhere is there any explanation of how the relationship is to be understood. How does the expression "fully committed fellowship", for example, relate to "koinonia"? Or is there any significance in the fact that "conciliar fellowship" is avoided? Such unclarity adds considerably to the difficulty of interpreting the text.

2. The statement does not give enough consideration to the urgency of today's situation

Every attempt to describe the goal of unity in outline must start with the witness of scripture and the testimony of the apostolic community. It must, however, also try to answer the question of how the church is called to witness in unity today. Unity does

not take exactly the same form in every age. Of course, the foundation which is given holds good for always — but unity must take a different form depending on the different assumptions and conditions. How does the statement deal with this second question? To what extent does it pick up the perspectives and insights of the conciliar process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation?

The answer has to be that the authors of this text have hardly been influenced by this at all.

The statement does certainly speak of the church's calling to reconciliation and healing. As we have seen, the mission "to care for God's creation" is expressly mentioned and, among the consequences in the third part, it also speaks of the commitment to work for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. But this still does not take up the real substance of the conciliar process. The call to the churches to cross the barriers that divide them and unite in common witness for justice, peace and the integrity of creation is prompted by the insight that the human race is plunged in deep crisis. In the course of the past centuries, but above all in recent decades, it has created a situation which places its own survival at risk. The North-South conflict has become so acute that, as far as we can tell, large sections of humanity are condemned to destruction. Even if the serious tensions which have marked the past decades seem to have lessened, violence can still break out in a new form and we know that any conflict is bound to have devastating consequences. Injustice and violence are being further aggravated by the ecological crisis. In face of the progressive destruction of nature it is becoming increasingly clear that only the privileged, those who have succeeded in appropriating the world's resources for themselves, have a chance of surviving.

What does communion mean in this day and age? The crisis confronts the churches in particular with an enormous challenge. In a world which seems to be careering out of control, solidarity can less and less be taken for granted. The more imminent the threat becomes, the more self-interest comes to be taken as a matter of course. Fend for yourself is the order of the day — so much so that the ability to look after oneself is actually valued as an indication of natural, perhaps even moral superiority. We are already witnessing the first signs of this general decline today.

The task for the churches is to stand out against this tendency; they must be places which offer a sense of fellowship and where solidarity is not written off. Let there be no mistake about it: the churches themselves are affected by this general tendency. Solidarity cannot by any means be taken for granted in their ranks, either.

The conciliar movement for justice, peace and the integrity of creation has been trying in recent years to give new expression to this struggle for communion among divided Christians. The deep underlying purpose of the conciliar movement was and is that the church should continue in the path of love and solidarity. How does it bear witness that God's love really is for all? How do we hold on to the vision of the whole in an age when the survival of the weak is acutely threatened? The conciliar movement has brought two ideas to the forefront of attention — the conciliar fellowship of the churches, that is, a church so closely bound together that it is able to take common decisions and action worldwide, and God's covenant, to which we have to bear witness worldwide. The conciliar process can be understood as the effort to make God's covenant, with its gifts, promises and challenges, tangible in the present situation, for instance by means of covenants, partnerships or the celebration of jubilee years.

The Canberra statement bears little trace of these considerations and efforts. Nothing in the text indicates that the seriousness of the situation has been realized at all. The reference to justice, peace and the integrity of creation in the third part is hardly more than a passing nod of acknowledgment to an ecumenical "programme" — necessary to avoid being accused of not having taken account of this "dimension". But the text shows no trace of alarm at the fact that despite "a certain degree of communion already existing among them", the fellowship among the churches is being threatened from within. Its only concern appears to be that the sacramental fellowship of the church could be impaired by the conciliar process.

Might the Canberra assembly not have been the opportunity to let something of the church's missionary duty to set up a counter-sign shine out more clearly? To break down walls rather than allowing new walls to be built?

3. *Conversion or gradual growth?*

A second comment ties in closely with this first remark. At no point does the text contain a reference to the need for repentance and conversion. Instead, it follows the idea that the way from the present division to future communion is a process of gradual growth. A "certain degree of communion" already exists; it can be gradually increased through conversations, common experience, and common decisions and measures until at last "all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness". The churches are required "to draw the consequences for their life from the degree of communion they have already experienced".

But does this quantitative view of fellowship correspond to reality? Will unity really be brought about by adding to it degree by degree until the vessel is full? Is it not much more likely that unity will be achieved, if at all, only if *all* the churches undergo a process of renewal? And, that being so, are not breaks inevitably to be expected along the way?

The question is all the more urgent in that, given the present situation, all the churches have to ask themselves how credible their witness has been in recent decades and up to the present time. They are all to blame for the developments which have led to the present situation. They have all fallen short of the radicality of the gospel message and contributed to the death-laden culture which characterizes our modern world. The statement gives the impression that the churches' "witness to the world in worship and in service" has remained basically intact and has been no more than "impaired" by scandalous divisions. That their sin lies simply in the fact that "they have remained satisfied to coexist in division". As they face up to the present situation, however, the churches are in fact discovering more and more that important elements of their witness have been curtailed. Freedom for life has in fact been replaced by self-advancement which is hostile to life. Through the style of their life and witness the churches bear a share of responsibility for the consequences which today constitute a threat to the survival of the human race. The credibility of the Christian, and above all the churches' witness has been deeply eroded, even without the divisions.

The path to communion leads through conversion. It cannot be achieved for less. This the conciliar process has made clear beyond a shadow of doubt. Both the European Ecumenical Assembly in Basel and the convocation on justice, peace and the integrity of creation in Seoul issued a call to this effect.

The precondition for any credible witness is conversion — conversion to the Creator who in his love cares for every single one of his creatures, conversion to Jesus Christ, the Son of God who in his life set us the example of true humanity, conversion to the Holy Spirit, the source of new life.⁵

However the Canberra statement does not address this aspect. The statements of Basel and Seoul apparently belong to another sphere of the ecumenical movement. The same representatives who at those meetings spoke of conversion use a different language whenever it comes to the theme of unity.

The idea of "degrees" of unity originates in the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. The Decree on Ecumenism spoke of a "some unity" (*quaedam unitas*) existing between the Roman Catholic Church and the other churches or ecclesial communities. It makes sense to speak in this way in this context: those who accept the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of itself as the one church of Jesus Christ can defend the thesis that, depending on their respective doctrine and structure, the other churches represent a "certain degree" of church. The Roman Catholic Church is the yardstick: the closer the other churches are to it, the greater the degree to which they participate in its unity. This way of speaking becomes problematic, however, when it is used in the ecumenical movement. It leads almost inevitably to the view that the way to unity is a process of gradual growth. The statement assumes that one day the moment will come when all the churches can recognize in all the others "the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in all its fullness". The presumption behind this view is the conviction that one's own church already represents that fullness or at any rate will do so one day. But what if the Holy Spirit causes our hearts to doubt on this very point? What if we are painfully aware how little our own church and the other churches represent this fullness in the world? The idea that a time could come when all the churches can also recognize in the others the fullness they find in themselves is somewhat appalling; a fellowship of churches which lack nothing. Surely the basis of the fellowship should be the certainty that, for all their imperfections, God will not abandon the churches — the passionate, common struggle so that, in our yet imperfect churches, God will cause something of the fullness of the one church to shine forth.

4. *Conciliar fellowship and "conciliar forms of life and action"*

As we have said, the need for koinonia is particularly urgent in today's situation. As the fellowship disintegrates, a counter-sign is needed. The churches can afford less than ever to allow themselves to drift apart. This applies to all levels of Christian life, but in particular to the universal fellowship of the church. As the view that sections of humanity are to be left by the wayside gains more and more ground, it has to be made clear across all boundaries that God's saving action is intended for the whole of humanity and that we want to witness to his love in all circumstances and against all obstacles, inward and outward. Boundaries are being misused today to build walls; and koinonia is needed so that walls can be broken down.

The idea of "conciliar fellowship" introduced by the Nairobi assembly is an attempt to develop this vision of the universal fellowship of the church. The statement starts from fellowship in each local place. All in each place are bound up with one another and share in the same missionary task. The reconciling strength of the gospel shows itself by bringing people together in all their diversity and placing them together in the service of the gospel. This local fellowship of "all in each place" does not exist

in isolation, however, but is in fellowship with all who are committed to the same service — “with all in all places”. They form a conciliar fellowship, that is to say, they are so closely linked with one another that, when need be, they can come together in council and consult and take decisions together. A fellowship of this kind needs not only to be built but also nurtured. This is why the Nairobi statement stresses that every church has a duty to establish relations with other churches so that they can strengthen one another mutually in what it calls sustained and sustaining relations.

The Nairobi assembly thus had a clear idea of how the local and the universal church belong together. Unity takes a different form according to the different levels: the local church is a fully committed fellowship or, as Nairobi put it, “truly united”; the church as a worldwide fellowship is a network of relations between local churches which recognize one another by reason of the same basis and when need be can come together in council.

This view has vanished in Canberra. Here we read simply that this “full communion will be expressed on the local and the universal levels through conciliar forms of life and action”. What does the phrase “conciliar forms” mean? The following sentence goes some way towards answering that question: “In such communion churches are bound in all aspects of their life together at all levels in confessing the one faith and engaging in worship and witness, deliberation and action.” The sentence is remarkably vague and leaves open many questions which seemed to have been answered in New Delhi and Nairobi.

Above all, there is no longer any distinction made between different levels. While unity at local level was described as “fully committed fellowship”, here it is now only a matter of “conciliar forms” for the local level also. All it now takes to establish unity in each place is apparently just the common confession of the faith and as much cooperation as possible in worship and witness, deliberation and action. The idea of mutual commitment in mission has disappeared. The same applies at the universal level. The Nairobi assembly said that “conciliar fellowship” should find expression in “conciliar gatherings whenever required for the fulfilment of their common calling”. With this, the assembly was expressing the hope that by going further and further in practising fellowship the churches would finally come together for a council in the full sense. This vision has been abandoned. The concrete term “conciliar gathering” has been replaced by the vague term “conciliar forms”. The proposal for an ecumenical council has entirely disappeared from the agenda.

The idea of a universal ecumenical council has repeatedly been called in question in recent years, particularly from the Roman Catholic side. Especially when the World Council of Churches began to talk of a “conciliar process of mutual commitment for justice, peace and the integrity of creation”, it was repeatedly stressed that the term “conciliar” gave rise to misunderstanding. The objections were based on the fact that, in the Roman Catholic understanding, the concept of the ecumenical council is already ecclesiologically established and is not really open to discussion. Surely the World Council of Churches cannot have taken this Roman criticism so much to heart that it has voluntarily abandoned the concept?⁶

5. Communion and diversity

Similar questions arose in relation to the theme of diversity which occupies a prominent position in the Canberra statement. The text clearly sets out to free diversity

in the church from any stigma of illegitimacy. Diversity must be recognized. Different theological traditions and cultural, ethnic and historical diversities are not simply to be unwillingly accepted but are in fact integral to the nature of communion.

This emphasis is surprising in that it is not clear who is meant by this statement. Have there ever been ecumenical circles which saw no place for diversity in the church? The question is not whether diversity is to be admitted, but what is the relationship between communion and diversity. Like all the other statements the Canberra statement too makes clear that "there are limits to diversity". How are these limits to be determined? The answer given in the statement is rather vague and unsatisfactory. It gives an "instance": diversity is illegitimate when, for instance, it makes impossible the confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour the same yesterday, today and forever... It is not clear what this "for instance" means. Are there other criteria besides this for fixing the limits of diversity? Or does this example already say the most essential? Or has what is said about limits been kept deliberately vague? It could in fact be that the limits have to be drawn differently according to the situation. But why not say so?

Whatever the intention of the paragraph, three questions at least remained unanswered.

1. What importance attaches at local level to the diversities "which are rooted in theological traditions, various cultural, ethnic or historical contexts"? Is it permissible for separate communities to be formed on the basis of these diversities? In particular, what is the position in regard to confessional differences? Does *communio* mean building one church in each place? Or could we conceive of a situation in which diverse churches agree on confessing the one faith and act together in worship, deliberation and action, but nonetheless remain separated on grounds of their particularity. The tenor of the text seems to suggest that the diverse confessional traditions do not have to be united; so long as they mutually recognize one another as the church of Jesus Christ, they can continue to exist alongside each other as differing traditions.

2. What does reconciliation really mean? What does the fact that we are brought together by Christ and placed together in the service of the gospel have to say about our diversities? In how far does this procedure, too, represent a "limit"? Particularities are challenged by the common calling. Lively communication among the churches is an essential condition if they are to fulfill their common calling. What price are we willing to pay for it? The task in the ecumenical movement lies in two directions: on the one hand, we have to defend the legitimacy of our particularities and, on the other, we have to recognize the danger that in the name of certain particularities we may withdraw from the mission of love and solidarity. Emphasis on diversity can easily turn into a defence of parochialism or fall short in other ways.

3. The theme of diversity leads the statement to paint an almost romantic picture: "In communion diversities are brought together in harmony as gifts of the Holy Spirit, contributing to the richness and fullness of the church of God." Can we really set out from this assumption? Do the diversities combine into a harmonious whole as soon as they are touched by the Holy Spirit? Do they not often act as a salutary spur in the life of the church? Diversities do not exist simply to be resolved in harmony. They are not just building blocks that will sooner or later form a mosaic. They are also a source of disagreements and conflict. They remind us of fundamental questions thrown up by the gospel. They are valuable insofar as they compel the fellowship always to keep

asking afresh about the deepest meaning of God's presence. The image of the harmonious whole is both unrealistic and misleading. The church will never be a harmonious whole. Indeed the idea of harmony only applies up to a point to communion. At any rate it must not be forgotten that genuine fellowship does not exclude arguments and conflicts but on the contrary allows them to take place.

A final word: it is noteworthy that one important difference not treated in the statement is that between men and women. Yet the Commission on Faith and Order has done intensive work on precisely that difference over the past two decades. Why is there no reference to it now? This difference more than any other could perhaps have illustrated how communion and diversity relate to one another.

6. Diversity in the biblical witness

There is no getting away from the fact that the different parts of the New Testament speak about the church in a variety of ways. The biblical witness does not lay out a uniform ecclesiology but gives us an insight into the diversity of witness in apostolic and post-apostolic times. It lets us see how early Christianity responded to the presence and the message of Christ, and shows us that it did so in a variety of ways at different times and in different situations. This insight is particularly important because it dispenses us from searching for the biblical understanding of unity. The New Testament lets us see, rather, how the first generation of Christians maintained their fellowship by fulfilling their mission in ever-changing ways, with arguments and disputes and common decisions. The task for Christianity today is not to deduce a particular understanding from the different indications in the New Testament but rather to continue the process we find there and ask ourselves about the forms of fellowship appropriate for our day and age.

The section on diversity would have been a chance to delve more deeply into this aspect, but the subject is not taken up either here or elsewhere. Indeed the treatment of scriptural witness as such is vague. The New Testament is certainly quoted at several points, but almost all the quotations serve simply to reinforce the sequence of ideas — strictly speaking, they could also be omitted. Only one quotation appears to be of substantive importance: the first sentence of the statement is supported by a reference to Ephesians 1. Why is the Letter to the Ephesians, and it alone, brought in at such a prominent point? The choice is all the more surprising in that the concept of *koinonia*, which is of central importance in the statement, does not even occur in that chapter. Are we to take this as an indication that, from among the manifold witness of the New Testament, the authors have opted for the ecclesiology of the Letter to the Ephesians? Or is this quotation, like the others, basically just a biblical allusion? As the text says nothing about the meaning of the biblical quotations, this question too remains unanswered.

7. Who is responsible for the movement towards greater communion?

The statement is addressed to "all churches". What is meant by church here? From the context it is clear that the authors are thinking of the bodies which are competent to represent and decide for the churches. The challenges in the third part of the statement are clearly directed at the official bodies in the churches which are in a position to advance the cause of unity through binding decisions, whether at national, regional or world level.

The emphasis on the role of these official bodies is important. The ecumenical movement must become more binding on the churches. General appeals are not enough. Only reliable and irreversible decisions can really bring the churches closer to one another and it is therefore essential to aim specifically for decisions of this kind.

The one-sided emphasis on the official level of the church is, however, also unhelpfully restrictive in that it gives the impression that the movement towards greater communion takes place solely at that level. Yet the ecumenical movement has its source in a wide variety of initiatives and ventures. It springs from the hearts of pioneers and is carried forward by a large number of individuals, groups and movements. It comes to life in exchange and encounter. Only once it has become an intellectual and spiritual reality can it make itself heard in the official echelons of the churches. Unofficial initiatives are therefore just as important as official decisions. The text of the statement is significant: the churches are called "to help parishes and communities express in appropriate ways locally the degree of communion that already exists". The churches help, the parishes are helped. But is the reverse not also the case in many respects? Can the initiative not come from parishes and communities? Can the reservations of the official churches not be gradually overcome by a movement "from below"? The important thing in the ecumenical movement is the interplay of many different forces.

Because of the one-sided focus on the official decision-making bodies, the list of challenges becomes somewhat unrealistic. Does anyone really expect great breakthroughs to come from the official churches today? Should not ecumenical imagination be turning to other sources of support for the ecumenical movement? What can individuals, parishes and movements do today? What can the World Council of Churches do to make a new start possible?

Why, then, does the statement not also address these groups which are the mainstay of the ecumenical movement?

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It will be clear from these critical comments that, despite the new approaches, I cannot regard the Canberra statement as marking any real progress. Indeed, I would even say that in more than one respect it represents a step backwards in comparison to earlier statements on unity. Even the preliminary draft which was submitted to the assembly as a working document is in many points superior to the final version. The text approved at Canberra should therefore, in my view, be taken not as the final word but as a working paper. Reactions should be gathered from as many sources as possible.⁷ The world conference on Faith and Order planned for 1993 could perhaps be an opportunity to prepare a new statement in the light of the ensuing debate.

NOTES

¹ Toronto statement by the WCC Central Committee on "The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches", Geneva, WCC, 1950, III, 5.

² *Ibid.*, IV, 3.

³ Its potential is very helpfully developed in the fine study by the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg. Cf. *Una Sancta*, no. 2, 1991, pp.157ff.

⁴ *The New Delhi Report*, New York, Association Press, 1961, p.119.

⁵ "Peace with Justice", the European Ecumenical Assembly in Basle, Geneva, Conference of European Churches, 1989, p.40.

⁶ The analysis made by Jean-Marie Tillard, one of the authors of the Canberra statement, is all the more surprising. He moves away from the idea of "conciliar fellowship" because, in his view, it is content with too little. "Despite the precisions given in Nairobi... one has the impression at the major meetings of Faith and Order that as regards the theory and practice of unity there is a gradual shift towards a conference of churches rather than a council in the full sense... There are more and more calls for realism, ecclesial modesty and eschatological unity. Let's aim for what is possible!" (J.-M.R. Tillard, "Konziliare Gemeinschaft, Versöhnte Verschiedenheit. Communio-Ekklesiologie und Schwesterkirchen", in *Gemeinsamer Glaube und Strukturen der Gemeinschaft*, ed. H. Meyer, Frankfurt, Otto Lembeck, 1991, p.142). This is a line of argument which turns the facts strangely upside-down. The Nairobi statement leaves no doubt about how the idea of "conciliar fellowship" is to be understood: it is a fellowship which is able to hold a council in the full sense of the word. It also makes it clear that this goal can only be achieved by way of interim steps. The fellowship required for a council can only grow out of a conciliar process. This view is however challenged on the Roman Catholic side: participation in a process of "practising" for conciliar fellowship cannot be reconciled with the prerogatives of Roman Catholic ecclesiology. Tillard, however, puts it the other way round: the idea of conciliar fellowship is not ecclesologically ambitious enough. It encourages the "temptation of the decade" to be content with a "council of churches united in fellowship and committed in solidarity" instead of full unity. In his view, this misunderstanding is averted by the idea of the "koinonia of sister churches".

Is this really so? Cannot this idea, too, be drained of meaning? The concept of koinonia in itself is no clearer than earlier definitions. It all depends on how it is filled out in detail. While the earlier statements did not use the term, they did assume it. They had the advantage, however, of making clear-cut statements about the shape of unity. The new text may use the actual term, but it has the disadvantage of not defining it in any detail. So what has been gained?

⁷ The articles published on the statement so far have been written by people who were among its authors or who were otherwise involved in preparing it. Besides the article by J.-M.R. Tillard mentioned above, the following may be indicated: "Die Einheit der Kirche als Koinonia: Gabe und Berufung — Erklärung der Vollversammlung von Canberra 1991", *Ökumenische Rundschau*, vol. 40, no. 2, April 1991, pp.179-184; Hans-Georg Link, "Mit Gemeinschaft beschenkt — zur Gemeinschaft berufen", *Una Sancta*, vol. 40, no. 2, 1991, pp.115-124; John Deschner, "Canberra's Church Unity Statement in a 'Restless' Ecumenical Movement", *Midstream*, vol. XXX, no. 3, July 1991, pp.191-198.