

September 2001

A Protestant Understanding of Church Fellowship

A statement on the ordered relations between churches of different confessions from the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany

Preface

Considerable progress has been made in ecumenical dialogues over the past few decades, especially with the Roman Catholic Church. The statement adopted by the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany on 9 November 2000, entitled "One in Christ – Churches on the way to fuller communion", therefore also begins with the sentence, "Thanks be to God. After centuries of hostility and parallel existence, of suffering and guilt, in the 20th century the churches have taken steps towards one another and established mutual relations." Protestant churches recognize that God is also at work in other churches. They acknowledge a communion in faith which transcends all confessional differences and divisions. Baptism in the name of the Trinity makes us all members of the one Church.

In the encounter between the churches and in their joint theological work, there is naturally also still evidence of divisions, disagreements and contradictions. For this reason, after looking back in gratitude for what has been achieved, the synod's statement continues, "But we are still far from having achieved the communion which God wills for all Christians on earth. We are convinced that the time has come for more ecumenical fellowship."

The question is in which way and by which means greater ecumenical fellowship can be established. In the past, the focus has been on efforts to deal successively with individual items of controversy and on using the method of a "consensus with nuances" to broaden the agreement on fundamental and essential issues. This procedure is still important. But increasingly the question has rightly been raised whether the source of all the differences and conflicts over individual questions may not lie in a different conception of the ecumenical goal. What kind of unity of the Church of Jesus Christ are we seeking? What do we mean by the "visible unity" of the Church? To answer these questions in the context of the Reformation churches, the theological conception of ecclesial communion as practiced in the Leuenberg Church Fellowship is of central importance.

Therefore the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany commissioned its Advisory Commission for Theology (Kammer für Theologie) to start from the Protestant understanding of the Church and examine the theological conception of ecclesial communion as practiced in the Leuenberg Fellowship as a contribution to the current debates. At its meeting on 7-8 September 2001, the Council adopted the document submitted by the Advisory Commission and is now making it available to the public. At the same time, I wish to thank the members of the Commission who prepared the document under its chairpersons, Prof. Eberhard Jüngel and Prof. Dorothea Wendebourg.

The document is intended, as the subtitle states, to be a "Statement on the ordered relations between churches of different confessions". That is relevant not only to ecumenical dialogues and the deepening of communion within the Church of Jesus Christ world wide; it will also assist in understanding and in appropriately developing further the communion already existing between the member churches of the Evangelical Church in Germany, if it is their common will.

Hanover, 29 September 2001

President Manfred Kock

Chairman of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany

A Protestant Understanding of Ecclesial Communion

A statement on the ordered relations between churches of different confessions

A number of developments in the contemporary ecumenical debate make it necessary to clarify the Protestant understanding of ecclesial communion[1]. On the one hand, there are processes which mainly affect the relationship between the Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church. The controversial debate about the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" between the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity showed that there are certainly different views of such ecclesial communion on the Protestant side as well. And the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of itself set out in the statement "Dominus Iesus" issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith also calls for mutual communication on the kind of ecclesial communion the Protestant churches see as their aim in ecumenical conversations and agreements. On the other hand, the dialogue between the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the Church of England

in the context of the agreements reached in the Meissen Declaration calls for similar clarification. And the rest of the conversations between the Evangelical Church and other confessions cannot do without such clarification either.

Greater understanding is all the more urgent because the recent discussion on the relation between the EKD and its member churches, and also on that between the Lutheran World Federation and its member churches, has made clear how necessary theological reflection on the Protestant understanding of the Church is for all the questions concerning Communion between Christian churches.

I. The Protestant Understanding of the Church

1. The foundation of the Church

"There can be no other foundation beyond that which is already laid, namely Jesus Christ" (1 Cor.3,11). The Church built on this foundation has a firm basis. It is the "gathering of believers in which the gospel is purely preached and the sacraments are administered according to the gospel" (CA VII)[2]. This event, which creates faith according to CA V, also creates the community of faith, the congregation "in which Jesus Christ acts presently as the Lord in Word and sacrament through the Holy Spirit" (Barmen III)[3]. Both of these, faith and the community of faith, are the product of the word of God which manifests itself in preaching and in the sacraments. As the Gospel, the word is God's power (cf. Rom.1,16) which wishes to reach all people and bring them to the faith and which therefore makes the believers whom it has already reached into messengers of the Gospel (cf. Matt.28,18-20). In the Gospel there is a present realization of the grace and truth of the triune God manifested in Christ, who creates faith through the Holy Spirit in order to justify and sanctify sinful human beings. By this free action of the triune God human beings are given the assurance in faith of the Gospel's grace and truth. They experience the transforming power of the Gospel in their lives which can then be lived in new relationships. Having been brought into communion with the triune God, they become members of the body of Christ and as such constitute his congregation. In this sense, believing in the triune God implies believing in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

Those who believe will, at the same time, be aware that by the same divine action they are commissioned and committed to give this community of faith which is derived from the Gospel a form in accordance with its origin and specificity.

2. The form and order of the Church

According to the Reformation understanding, the Church as *congregatio sanctorum* [4] is hidden from worldly sight. Martin Luther wrote *abscondita est Ecclesia, latent sancti* (the Church is hidden, the saints are hidden. *De servo arbitrio*, 1525, WA 18,652). This hiddenness does not simply imply invisibility. After all, the proclamation of the gospel in word and sacrament in the gathering of the congregation is perceptible for everyone. But the reality of the body of Christ as the communion of believers is God's work brought about by God himself through the word and sacraments and, as such, accessible to faith only. Faith recognizes the presence of the body of Christ wherever, in the authentic preaching of the gospel and in the corresponding administration of the sacraments (cf. CA VII), it discovers the "external word". They are both covered by God's promise, that his word will not return to him empty without accomplishing the purpose for which it was sent (Is.55,11).

The community of faith which remains hidden in the world still needs an outward order visible to everyone and for which human beings are responsible. The heart of this responsibility is the church's concern for the right teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. The conduct of services of worship and of the proclamation to the world should be so ordered that no human license will obscure the Gospel or divide the congregation. Human beings have the responsibility of presenting the good news to the world as unequivocally as possible. In this sense, the outward form of the Church does not exist in separation from the hiddenness of the community of faith or alongside it. On the contrary, the distinction between the hidden and the visible church should be understood to mean that the present embodiment of the triune God in the community of faith requires an adequate outward form with its own unmistakable visible characteristics in the midst of other social structures in this world.

According to Barmen III, the Christian Church as the "community of brothers" and sisters must witness not only "with its message" but also "with its ordinances in the midst of the world of sin as the Church of forgiven sinners that it is his [God's] alone, and lives and wishes to live only by his comfort and his counsel in expectation of his return". It may not leave "the form of its message and ordinances to a whim or to some dominant ideological and political conviction".

2.1. The marks of the true Church

The right proclamation of the Gospel and the celebration of the sacraments corresponding to the Gospel

are understood by the Reformation as the "marks of the true Church" (signa ecclesiae verae). It is through them that the body of Christ is constituted. They alone, among all the historical changes, are the unchanging, visible features of a Christian Church (cf. CA VII). Without them, no church order can be appropriate. With them comes the commission which the Church has to carry out, namely "to extend ... the message of the free grace of God to all people" (Barmen VI).

In order for this task to be carried out, God instituted the Ministry of the Word (cf. CA V) which is entrusted to human beings as the public ministry of preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments and which, as such, needs to be ordered (cf. CA XIV). However, the form which this ministry may take is variable. The same applies to all aspects of an order of the Church of Jesus Christ which it uses so as to carry out its task in different historical situations and to give the community of believers in a particular place and at a particular time its distinct form. This comprises, e.g. the difference and relation between the various ministries of the church, the forms these take and the outward organization of the church.

2.2. Individual churches and the Church

The one, holy, apostolic and catholic Church exists historically in space and time. As the universal communion of all the believers, it will always be the church of particular people in particular countries and areas. It necessarily takes the form of individual congregations which are the primary expression of the universal Church. As such, they are spiritually linked with all Christian congregations. But in most cases the individual congregations are linked to one another in a larger ordered entity – an ecclesial structure which in the following will be referred to as "individual church". Each individual church can be assured that all the other individual churches which display the marks of the true Church belong to the communion of the body of Christ and are thus spiritually linked with one another.

The individual churches must ensure that their relations with other individual churches are so ordered that the spiritual bond between all churches in Christ is expressed in an appropriate way. According to the Protestant understanding, this concern is at the heart of all ecumenical endeavors. It is essential to bear witness to the unity of the body of Christ which is hidden to the world through the outward form of the churches. Each church has many possibilities for doing this. By promoting an ecumenical spirit in its congregations, a church can institutionalize encounter and exchange with Christians of other churches. It can conduct regular doctrinal conversations with other churches. It can declare its willingness to jointly listen to the word of God and to celebrate the Eucharist together. It can consult other churches on important issues relating to its own life and activities and can co-operate with them in matters of the Churches' global responsibility. All this and more will serve to express and demonstrate what links one church with others in the faith.

Ecumenical discussions frequently refer to striving for "full visible unity". When Protestant theology uses this expression, it is understood to mean witnessing to the unity of the body of Christ already given by God. It is not a matter of "an attempt to add something to the visible unity that Christ has already given in Word and Sacraments" but of "the endeavor ... to witness to this unity more comprehensively and to respond more faithfully to what it promises" (Third Theological Conference held under the Meissen Agreement, March 1999). The shaping of church order must also contribute to this endeavor. The humanly attainable aim which can be pursued in this respect is the declaration and practice of full ecclesial communion. It is in this way, that witnessing to the unity of the body of Christ receives a visible form.

II. The Protestant understanding of witnessing to the unity of the body of Christ as an expression of ecclesial communion

1. What does ecclesial communion mean?

The expression "ecclesial communion" has many meanings. The Protestant understanding of ecclesial communion implies that autonomous congregations and individual churches grant one another fellowship in word and sacrament and – in line with the "marks" of the Church – recognize one another as "true Church". This means that they publicly declare the communion in which they stand by virtue of their belonging to the body of Christ. They order this communion together and practice it comprehensively. They can also declare, order and practice such communion with other communions of churches. They understand such human action as the achievement of the duty to which they are called by God's Church founding Word and which is to serve the unity of the body of Christ.

An ecclesial communion can comprise churches with the same confessional basis (as is the case of the VELKD[5] and churches with different confessional bases (as in the case of the EKD[6] or the EKD). If the marks of the true church are taken as the standard, an ecclesial communion is just as much a Church

as the autonomous congregations and individual Churches which belong to it. Yet in legal terms, as long as the individual churches forming an ecclesial communion maintain their autonomy, there will remain a difference with respect to their competence to act and their capacity for autonomous reception.

An ecclesial communion is in conformity with its origin in the event of the Word of God when the Churches within it acknowledge their common understanding of the gospel of justification and of the sacraments and thus recognize Jesus Christ who imparts himself in word and sacrament as the only basis for their communion and hence recognize one another mutually and put into practice their fellowship in word and sacrament.

Ecclesial communion, in this sense, can only be expressed responsibly if the Churches also present and develop their common understanding of the Gospel in their doctrinal teaching. Thus they render account about the basis of their communion in the Gospel and contribute through their doctrinal conversations to the necessary development of doctrine in the participating churches.

Another consequence of ecclesial communion is that the communion practiced must be so ordered that, it enables to take initiatives in relation to the individual churches belonging to it, while preserving their independence. The transfer of functions to an ecclesial communion, and hence the limitations on the independence of the churches belonging to it, can vary in extent; this can be seen e.g. when comparing the Constitutions of the VELKD, the EKU and the EKD. The process by which independent churches join together in an ecclesial communion and order this communion is similar to the fundamental relationship that exists between individual congregations and the communion of their own Church. Their authority to order the church which they are is not relinquished, but rather brought into the whole Church. The order of the Church in which they participate does not make them subservient parts of that Church but rather responsible contributors to the ordering of the whole Church to which they belong and of the local congregation.

2. The Leuenberg Agreement as a model –

Declaration and implementation of ecclesial communion

In the Leuenberg Agreement of 1973, individual churches of different confessions have declared that they stand in ecclesial communion with each other. This declaration became possible because the churches consenting to the Agreement recognized that they had a common understanding of the Gospel. This "common understanding of the Gospel" is the message of Justification in the sense of the Reformation. The Gospel creates faith and renews sinful human beings by imparting itself to them through the preaching of the word and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

On the basis of their common understanding of the Gospel, the churches which have signed the Leuenberg Agreement grant one another communion in word and sacrament. This includes "the mutual recognition of ordination and the freedom to provide for intercelebration". Thus, pulpit and altar fellowship constitute ecclesial communion in the sense of the Leuenberg Agreement. The Agreement itself is binding on the signatory churches.

The ecclesial communion pronounced by the Leuenberg Agreement becomes a reality in the churches and congregations through their common witness and service. This occurs among the individual churches in the various countries and regions but also – transcending political borders – at the European level. So at this level also there is a commitment to common witness and service to the world and to deepening the existing communion by means of theological conversations. The organs of the "Leuenberg Church Fellowship" (LCF) are the General Assembly, the Doctrinal Conversation Groups and the Executive Committee with the Secretariat. Statements by the Executive Committee represent the LCF-Communion to those outside and serve as recommendations to those inside.

III. From a fellowship of Christian churches to an ecclesial communion

1. Forms of fellowship already existing between Christian churches

The way Christian churches relate to one another at present is expressed in different kinds of fellowship. Churches of the same confession have joined to form world confessional families (Lutheran World Federation, World Alliance of Reformed Churches). Churches of different confessions have joined in many places, regions and countries, and also on the European and world level, to form national or ecumenical councils of churches; this is exemplified by the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC). These are not expressions of ecclesial communion in the sense set out above. But an ecumenical working group or national council can serve as an instrument on the way to such a Communion of churches.

Even within the national ecumenical body in Germany "Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen" (ACK), the relationships between the churches cooperating are of varied intensity. Between some, e.g.

the Methodist Church and the regional member Churches of the EKD (Landeskirchen), there is pulpit and altar fellowship. Others, such as the Old Catholics and the member Churches of the EKD, have agreed on mutual eucharistic hospitality although no altar and pulpit fellowship exists between them in the sense of the ecclesial communion described above. Still others, e.g. Baptists and certain member Churches of the EKD, practice eucharistic hospitality without there being any agreement on this. In the relationships between still other churches, e.g. between member Churches of the EKD and the Roman Catholic Church, there is no mutual eucharistic hospitality. It was declared unilaterally by the Protestant side.

From a Protestant point of view, although ecclesial communion has not yet been pronounced, the conditions have been met in the case of a number of churches within this ecumenical body (ACK). The member Churches of the EKD therefore have the desire to move on to declaring ecclesial communion with these ecumenical partners within the ACK and, as long as this has not been achieved, to practice mutual eucharistic hospitality with them.

Various forms of fellowship also exist between German and other churches beyond the borders of Germany. Thus, for example, the Church of England and the member churches of the EKD evidenced in the "Meissen Declaration" of 1988/1991 that they recognize "one another's churches as churches belonging to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ and truly participating in the apostolic mission of the whole people of God". They have established a "eucharistic fellowship" "which advances beyond mutual eucharistic hospitality but which falls short of the full interchangeability of ministers".

Otherwise, the majority of the Protestant churches in Europe are in full communion (altar and pulpit fellowship) as a consequence of the Leuenberg Agreement. This includes the inter-changeability of ministries.

2. Ecumenical dialogue

The ecclesial communion with other churches which the Protestant churches strive for cannot be achieved without a more intensive development of mutual relations. The dialogues required to this end between the individual churches will necessarily focus on different issues corresponding to the particular profile of the partners involved, as the on-going dialogues clearly demonstrate.

2.1. The relationship with the Anglican churches

The continuing dialogue with the Anglican churches includes conversations on "visible unity", the episcopal ministry and the historic apostolic succession in the ministry. The decisive question here is not whether but rather to what end and in which form the ministry of episcopate should exist. So it is a matter of the function of episcopacy and its ecclesiological foundation. Progress in this field, e.g. the gradual interchangeability of ministries, according to the Protestant understanding can, only improve the structure of ecclesial communion but not be the basis for it. In this perspective, a greater uniformity in the doctrine of the ministry cannot be the prerequisite for such communion.

2.2. The relationship with the Baptists

Links with the Baptists need to be developed further to find forms of cooperation and perhaps also intermediate steps on the way to ecclesial communion. In this context, the central issue will be the understanding and practice of baptism. The practice of adult baptism in the Baptist congregations is based on an understanding of the relation between faith and baptism which is only partly shared by the churches of the Reformation. It is essential to clarify how the Baptists understand baptism because their practice of re-baptism contradicts the understanding of baptism in the Protestant churches.

2.3. The relationship with the Roman Catholic Church

Obviously, the Roman Catholic concept of the full, visible unity of the churches is not compatible with the understanding of ecclesial communion as it is presented here. Nevertheless, it can be stated that both sides see the unity of the body of Christ and the communion between the churches as rooted in an understanding of the foundation of faith, the force of which goes beyond past and future doctrine. The first thing to be clarified must be how the Protestant and Roman Catholic views of the foundation of faith and of the self-revelation of the triune God are related to one another through the witness of the Church. Only then will it be possible finally to ascertain whether the views of the unity of the body of Christ and of the communion of churches within this body are compatible with one another. An agreement is to be sought that no one particular form of the Church's ministry which has evolved in the course of history can be set up as a condition for the communion between churches but that different forms of the ministry are possible. In this connection it must also be stated that the necessity and structure of the "Petrine Office" and thus of the Primacy of the Pope, the understanding of apostolic

succession, the non-admission of women to the ordained ministry and, not least, the significance of canon law in the Roman Catholic Church are positions which from a Protestant perspective must be contradicted.

2.4. The relationship with the Orthodox churches

The Protestant churches work together with the Orthodox churches in ecumenical councils of churches. And like most of the Orthodox churches in Europe they are also members of the Conference of European Churches (CEC). So far, in these relationships the issue of ecclesial communion in the sense described here was seldom raised. A quite considerable obstacle in this connection is that the Orthodox churches do not recognize baptism in the Western churches, according to the basic principles of their teaching. In addition, conceptions of national churchhood and church unity on the Orthodox side are clearly in tension with the Leuenberg Agreement. Therefore, to date, the relationship between the Protestant and Orthodox churches has only been concerned with improving their mutual perception and with overcoming prejudices or misunderstandings and making church coexistence and co-operation possible. On the other hand, as Orthodoxy is certainly familiar with ecclesial communion between autocephalous churches, one can ask whether this might not provide a basis for developing ecclesial communion with the Protestant churches. The recognition of the Nicene creed by the Orthodox and Reformation churches also offers a considerable potential for agreement. This is reason enough to encourage further the bilateral dialogues, even if at present they are not yet being conducted with the aim of reaching an agreement on church communion.

IV. The Evangelical Church in Germany as a church fellowship

In the "Basic Principles" of its Constitution, the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) is defined as follows. It "is the communion (Gemeinschaft) of its Lutheran, Reformed and United member churches. It understands itself to be part of the one Church of Jesus Christ". Thus, the EKD is an ecclesial communion in the sense described above. Its understanding of itself set out in this way in the Constitution expresses that the EKD is the declared and appropriately ordered communion of Protestant churches of different confessions in the Federal Republic of Germany. The EKD does not have certain sovereign rights which belong to its member churches, e.g. in matters of education and doctrine. Therefore the EKD is not a church in the terms of church law in the same sense as its member churches are (cf. I.2.2.).

Between these member churches in the communion of the EKD there is altar and pulpit fellowship as well as the mutual recognition of ministries. In addition, the polity of the EKD comprises common provisions and procedures of co-ordination for a number of other realms of work of the member churches. This form of communion was worked out and declared jointly by the churches involved; it is also practiced by them. As a consequence, the EKD is also entitled to take initiatives of its own in relation to its member churches without this affecting their autonomy.

No additional measures are needed in order for the EKD to become a church; as it already is a church in theological terms, since an ecclesial communion is a church (II.1.). Nevertheless, one could conceive of measures which would change the relation between the EKD and its member churches and the relation between the member churches and the EKD, and this would also affect the polity of the churches involved. Such changes would have an influence on the relation between the EKD and its member churches internally, but would also have external significance for the relationship with churches which do not yet belong to it and with the ecumenical movement world wide.

V. The ecumenical goal

The declaration and implementation of ecclesial communion is the goal of ecumenical activity from the Protestant point of view. In this respect, the various expressions of communion between churches, and the different social conditions to which they relate, show that there are various stages in the process of reaching this ecumenical goal. These should be encouraged because they contribute to the development of ecclesial communion which, in the sense of witnessing to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, is the realization of full mutual recognition by the churches.

[Translated by Oberkirchenrat Paul Oppenheim, Hannover (EKD). For a related document see the [Kundgebung](#).]

[1] In earlier English translations of German ecumenical texts the word Kirchengemeinschaft was inadequately translated with "church fellowship" (as in Leuenberg Church Fellowship), although, as the many ecumenical dialogues and conferences since 1973 have shown, the word should have been rendered by "ecclesial communion" (as in French: Communion Ecclésiale de Leuenberg). In this EKD

document "ecclesial communion" always refers to the German term "Kirchengemeinschaft".

[2] CA = The Augsburg Confession (1530)

[3] Barmen = The Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934) English translation in: The Ministry of the Whole Church of Jesus Christ and the Problem of Sovereignty, Barmen IV, Statement of the Theological Committee of the Evangelical Church of the Union, edited by Wilhelm Hüffmeier, Berlin 2001, ISBN 3-579-03498-7, page 116.

[4] "Versammlung der Gläubigen" in the German version of CA VII and "gathering of believers" in the English translation of the Augsburg Confession.

[5] Translator's note: VELKD = United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany which is the Communion of Lutheran Churches within the EKD.

[6] Translator's note: EKU = Evangelical Church of the Union which is the Communion of the United Churches of the former Prussian State within the EKD.