

A UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST RESPONSE TO BAPTISM, EUCHARIST AND MINISTRY

1985

PREFACE

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, adopted unanimously by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches in Lima, Peru, in 1982, represents more than fifty years of theological study among the participating Churches. It places before us "the major areas of theological convergence" (Preface ix) that are the fruit of this ecumenical endeavor. Although it is not a statement of consensus, it represents a growth in understanding concerning issues that profoundly affect the Churches as they seek to manifest more faithfully their unity in Jesus Christ.

The Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches has submitted Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry to the Churches for their study, response and "reception." The Council for Ecumenism of the United Church of Christ, in answer to this request, welcomed general response to the document throughout the church. It also specifically asked two of our closely related seminaries, six of our conferences and four of our national Instrumentalities or Commissions to respond. A Study Guide was provided for this purpose. Local churches and associations were included in the invitation through the work of the six conferences. The report that follows is based on the information received from this sampling of the Church. In the report, direct quotations from Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry are documented by references enclosed in parentheses. Quotations from respondents are simply set within quotation marks.

The process of "reception," like the study of the document, is a continuing opportunity and responsibility. By "reception," the Faith and Order Commission intends the recognition of "the common Christian tradition" discerned in ecumenical dialogue and the appropriation of that "Common Christian Tradition within our life as a Church. By this continuing "process of growing together," the Churches seek to move step by step, until they are finally able to declare together that they are living in communion with one another in continuity with the apostles and the teachings of the universal Church" (Preface ix).

INTRODUCTION

The General Synod of the United Church of Christ is pleased to accept the invitation of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches to "prepare an official response" to Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. It is our understanding that this initial response represents an early stage in a longer process of study and "reception." Our comments and suggestions, based on the work of a representative sampling of our constituency, are neither exhaustive in scope nor conclusive in intent. They are offered, as your invitation suggests, for the use of the Faith and Order Commission as preparations are made for a World Conference on Faith and Order to be held toward the end of this decade.

This response is set within the context of the founding and constitutional documents of the United Church of Christ. In the Preamble to our Basis of Union, our uniting parent denominations declared:

Affirming our devotion to one God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our membership in the holy catholic Church, which is greater than any single Church and than all the Churches together;

Believing that denominations exist not for themselves but as parts of that Church, within which each denomination is to live and labor and, if need be, die;

and confronting the divisions and hostilities of our world, and hearing with a deepened sense of responsibility the prayer of our Lord "that they all may be one;"

(We) do now declare ourselves to be one body...

Our Constitution affirms that "Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church unite in the United Church of Christ without break in their respective historic continuities and traditions" (IV, II). This affirmation honors the creeds, confessions, covenants, catechisms, and other expressions of faith brought into our union in 1957.

The Preamble to our Constitution identifies the United Church of Christ in this manner:

The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession. It looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world. It claims as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers. It affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God. In accordance with the teaching of our lord and the practice prevailing among evangelical Christians, it recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion.

In the spirit of this statement, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ adopted a contemporary Statement of Faith in 1961, has from time to time provided for revision of books of worship, and now celebrates the opportunity to share in an ecumenical project that seeks to express in our time what the churches are able to say together concerning baptism, eucharist and ministry.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, when all its virtues and faults are catalogued, endures as a "provocative, useful, helpful, and hopeful" document that leaves us "amazed at the extent to which some kind of common ground has been staked out" within its pages. We find our experience as a "united and a uniting church" affirmed by the kindred struggle for wholeness and inclusiveness that we recognize in the document. The convergence represented here, welcome and impressive as it is, loses some of its force because the language in which it is expressed is sometimes ambiguous. Nevertheless, we rejoice at the intention of the text to be as comprehensive as possible of diverse Christian points of view. We are mindful, as our own study of the text has demonstrated, that identical terms "are not always

understood in the same way by all of us within the United Church of Christ." The burden of clarity placed upon language in an ecumenical text is understandably demanding. The problem of ambiguity could be eased if such terms were briefly defined where they first occur. For example, In the Chapter on Baptism (par. 10), we appreciate the reference to Jesus Christ as our "liberator," but regret that both here and elsewhere the passing allusions to the language of liberation theology lack substance.

Although the published text is more inclusive with respect to gender than were the earlier drafts, it falls short of what many regard as possible and necessary. This observation is offered not for aesthetic reasons, but because inclusive language with respect to gender is inseparably linked with our ethical commitment to justice for women.

The technical terminology in the text is perceived by some in the United Church of Christ to exclude those who are not theological specialists from full participation in an endeavor that affects the whole people of God. Some feel excluded by the "high church tilt" of the document and by the "ahistorical" vocabulary that is "dogmatic" but ignores our experience in the contemporary world. We recognize in the document a vocabulary more reflective of the patristic and pre-Reformation church than of the church of all the centuries. Without diminishing this heritage, we long for a vocabulary that celebrates the full catholic heritage that we cherish, including the diversity of the New Testament church and the work of the Holy Spirit found in the obedience of reformers to the Word of God in every age.

The relationship between church unity and the unity of humankind, between unity and mission, is an area that concerns us. The document could state that relationship more convincingly. The weight of attention given to issues important to the unity of the church creates the impression that the ministry of the church to broken humanity is not of equal urgency. It is our hope "that historic divisions may indeed no longer impair the church's mission, in the faith that the world's brokenness will be healed through Christ's presence, and that humanity will, through God's grace, be one."

Finally, we rejoice that although the document speaks to us diversely, it speaks powerfully. Some of us would rush to revise every page. Others are able to say immediately, "we identify our faith position so closely with Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry that we have not found any major area of disagreement." Within the United Church of Christ, as well as in our ecumenical relationships, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry holds great promise as a signpost on our pilgrim way toward a deeper understanding and a more faithful embodiment of the one Church of Jesus Christ that is sent to the one humanity that is made in the image and likeness of God.

BAPTISM

Our affirmation of this chapter of the document may be summarized by the observation that "most groups reported that they could live with the whole thing." Questions raised for the sake of clarification center on the following five themes.

We welcome the emphasis on "a new ethical orientation (par.4)" that is rightly associated with baptism. However, the impact of this emphasis is weakened, especially in the section on "Celebration" (V) where, to us, "a commissioning for ministry seems muted if not lacking." We also question the terms

"believers" and "infant" as they are used throughout the text to qualify baptism. The effect of this usage is to suggest that infants and children cannot "believe" in any sense, and that they must await maturity for their experience of a new ethical orientation. The use of the term "installment" (par 19), creates a similar quantitative and chronological misunderstanding. Although baptism is offered at diverse ages in our church, "we do not rule out the response of faith in infants which may not be articulated but nevertheless is very real."

The document raises two issues for us in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity. The language in the text is clear that baptism celebrates our incorporation into Christ and into his body, the Church. However, we are baptized in the name of the triune God. Could not the text make it more clear that baptism brings us into relationship with "the whole triune community of God?" Further, many in our church who give full assent to the doctrine of the Trinity look to the day when the language used to express what that doctrine intends will be gender sensitive and inclusive.

A question of pastoral care is raised by the treatment of "re-baptism" (par. 13) in the text. Some in the United Church of Christ are concerned that we minister responsibly to those who are convinced that their earlier experience of baptism was flawed in some way. The pastoral care issue would be helped by a clearer statement of objections to re-baptism, and by the offering of appropriate pastoral alternatives that would correspond to expressed personal need.

What is meant by indiscriminate baptism" (p. 16), and does the use of this phrase adequately take into account that the difficulties to which it points may pertain to baptism at any age? The choice of words is unfortunate. A representative response notes that "God is rather 'indiscriminate' in sending blessings on the evil as well as the good." Our question does not deny that baptism sometimes may be celebrated in a less than fully responsible way in the United Church of Christ. On the contrary, we recognize the constant need for strengthening our ministry of nurture, and suggest that the document express more cogently "the need for life-long education."

While affirming that the sign of baptism is the sacrament of incorporation into Christ and the church (par. 6), some in the United Church of Christ question the making of the "sign" of this incorporation the exclusive criterion for acknowledging membership in Christ's body. Although they can offer no easy solution to the paradox, they affirm that baptism is the biblical sacrament of entrance into the church, while they also affirm that some who publicly confess Christ, but who do not celebrate either of the dominical sacraments, are not only our kindred in the human family, but are our sisters and brothers in Christ.

EUCCHARIST

The General Synod is encouraged by the evidence of convergence in the text on matters that in former times were the occasion for polemical argumentation and division among the churches. We welcome especially the comprehensive inclusion of diverse biblical images that inform our common understanding and practice of Holy Communion. Although we affirm the term "eucharist," we are concerned that the predominant use of this term may emphasize the human response of faith above the initiative of God. We recognize in the document's breadth of interpretation concerning "the real, living and active

presence" (par. 13) of Christ in the sacrament the diversity that we already experience within the United Church of Christ. We are concerned that this presence neither be identified exclusively with the elements of bread and wine nor associated rigidly with any one particular moment in the celebration, but that Christ's presence be understood in relation to the entire eucharistic action.

The treatment of "sacrifice" shows great sensitivity to our belief that Christ's suffering and death on the cross "are not repeated nor prolonged" (par. 8) in the eucharistic celebration. This claim could be strengthened by giving further attention to the biblical image of the eucharist as a meal of the Reign of God. Although this is discussed (sec. E), the weight of the overall treatment of the sacrament emphasizes the propitiatory nature of Christ's death as it is memorialized in the meal. The document would embrace a more biblically balanced understanding of salvation and of the sacrament if the passing reference to Holy Communion as a "foretaste" (par. 6) of Christ's return and of the final Reign of God were made more explicit. The effect of the current text, as one of our theologians comments, makes the eucharist "merely a 'sign of the Kingdom'" rather than an actual entrance into the trinitarian history of God's righteousness in the world.

We raise the issue of the sacrament as a meal of the Reign of God out of our concern that the relationship between the eucharist and ethics be made more compellingly clear. We applaud the several references to this relationship (sections D and E), and are challenged by the vision of the eucharist as a call "to be in solidarity with the outcast" (par. 24). Our pursuit of this understanding, as one voice in our midst has noted, holds great promise "for bringing our operational emphases on ethical considerations into the heart of our liturgical practice where they belong."

The questions of whether baptized children may share fully in Holy Communion is currently being explored in our Church (par. 19). Here again, our practice is diverse. There is an increasing willingness to welcome baptized children to the meal if they show interest and are prepared to participate with understanding appropriate to their age. Whether other children, for whom baptism will come at a later age, may also share in the meal, is often raised. The question reflects pastoral considerations which arise when diversity of baptismal practice is common within one and the same congregation. We invite ecumenical dialogue on how this matter is understood and resolved in other Churches.

We note with appreciation the list of various acts that are appropriately included in a full eucharist celebration (par. 27). This list has already influenced liturgical reform currently in process in our Church. We observe that the offering of the gifts of the people is not mentioned, and express our concern that this important participatory act be included in the list.

There is great diversity in the United Church of Christ with respect to the frequency of celebrating Holy Communion. We read with care the admonition that it "is appropriate that it take place at least every Sunday" (par. 31). Our own guidelines for worship concur in making this recommendation. Our published liturgies for Sunday are Services of Word and Sacrament, and are offered with the hope "that our Church will grow into this practice."

However, a weekly celebration of Holy Communion is not our predominant custom. Our study of

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry discloses that the frequency is increasing. Resistance to a weekly celebration of the sacrament is based upon a lack of felt need, a fear that familiarity will diminish the meaning of the sacrament, and a concern that the preaching of the Word may be subordinated to the sacramental action. Regretfully, we note that the document is weak in the case that it makes for the importance of the preaching of the Word in the conjoining of Word and Sacrament.

We are challenged by the document to rethink the question of the frequency of the eucharistic celebration. One of our biblical scholars cautions us that "When the decision is made not to celebrate weekly, it must be made with the awareness of the losses involved in such a decision are."

We receive with appreciation the suggestion that the consecrated bread and wine that remain at the conclusion of Holy Communion be treated with respect. Our study of the document indicates an expressed willingness among us to "consider the consciences of other brothers and sisters" by making provision for all the elements to be consumed. The very act of doing this can be yet another reminder that the eucharistic meal binds us in sacramental solidarity with all who celebrate Holy Communion, even though we do not understand every aspect of it in the same way.

MINISTRY

The General Synod commends all who labored to endow the Chapter on Ministry with forthrightness, clarity and sensitivity to the distinctions and enduring convictions held in trust by the diverse Churches. It is especially significant to us that the discussion of ordained ministry is placed within the larger ecclesial context of "The Calling of the Whole People of God" (section I), that all ministry is perceived as service through which we "proclaim and prefigure" (par. 4) the Reign of God in a broken world, and that no one particular pattern of ordained ministry is vested with exclusive biblical authorization (par. 19).

Our study, preliminary in nature as it is, indicates that the Chapter on Ministry raises as many critical issues for us as it appears to resolve. Although the text begins with "The Calling of the Whole People of God" (section I), the transition to the comparatively lengthy discussion of ordained ministries is abrupt, grounded more on the tradition of the Church of the second and third centuries than on the New Testament, and appropriates the New Testament witness in a manner that does not communicate a coherent hermeneutical treatment of scripture.

It is particularly disappointing that while other current ecumenical conversations emphasize clearly that all ministry is founded on Christ's one ministry, the document speaks of "a difference between the apostles and the ordained ministers whose ministries are founded on theirs" (par. 10, emphasis added). This reference and the reference to the "unique and unrepeatability" role of the Twelve Apostles, "as witnesses to the resurrection of Christ" (par. 10), demonstrate a double difficulty for us. While we affirm that the role of being a witness to Christ's resurrection is unique and unrepeatability, we also note that founding ordained ministry on the ministry of the Twelve obscures the grounding of all ministry on the ministry of Christ. It also "predisposes the document to exclude the ministry of women," on the basis of gender, "while ignoring the fact that the first resurrection witnesses were women," at least in the report of Matthew 28: 1-10 and John 20: 11-18.

This form of reasoning from the Twelve Apostles to the first bishops requires us to leap from chronology to ontology of office and person, and suggests distinctions in dignity and inequality of gender in ministry which we find untenable. Moreover, from a majority of our respondents, including academic theologians, laity and pastors, we have heard emphatically that "the largest obstacle to accepting and affirming the ministry section is its discussion of the ordination of women."

In a strongly worded statement, the representative voice of one of our biblical scholars protests:

Paragraph 50 of the ministry section is a slap in the face to women who are being denied ordination. This paragraph calls for a re-evaluation of ordination practices which discriminate on the basis of handicap or race, but in paragraph 18, which raises the issue of the ordination of women, there is no similar statement calling for a re-evaluation on the grounds of sexual discrimination.

To this, one of our conference study committees adds the question, "Is it not just as reprehensible to bar a woman from full ministry as it is to bar men because they are black?"

Statements intended to promote understanding concerning the ordination of women are read in quite another light. We read in paragraph 18, "The Church must discover the ministry which can be provided by women as well as that which can be provided by men." One of our theologians discerns "insult" in this statement because it does not acknowledge that "women have exercised Christian ministry since New Testament times."

We perceive in this issue a subject that needs considerable additional attention. Closer relationships with Churches which do not ordain women will undoubtedly be compromised until this matter is resolved. Our study indicates a willingness to pursue such relationships "with the hope that our policy on this issue will be a witness to other traditions that the ordination of women is a valid expression of the faith."

In relation to the three-fold pattern of bishops, presbyters and deacons, we affirm this venerable configuration of ordained ministry as one of the historic patterns that has flourished, with some diversity, across the centuries. We acknowledge that it endures as the predominant pattern in our day. We also affirm other patterns of ministry, including the ones evident in our own tradition and practice.

There is an openness in our Church to explore the particular value of the three-fold pattern of bishop, presbyter and deacon in the quest for unity among the Churches. Some among us affirm this pattern while raising the caution that throughout the document the "priestly" function of the ordained ministry "so dominates that the prophetic and servant leader functions are lost from view." Some would resist the three-fold pattern out of concern for its hierarchical possibilities, especially in relation to the title and office of bishop. We cannot concur with any understanding of the three-fold pattern that makes the office of the bishop the only "full" ordained ministry of the Church or that places the bishop between Christ and the faithful as an intermediary to whom obedience is due. At the same time, we rejoice that our Calvin Synod has retained the title and office of bishop, in accordance with its own norms, and we welcome a discussion of how the three-fold pattern can be expressed in a manner that fully respects the

participation of the whole people of God in the governance and ministry of the Church. Most would agree that "we are a long way" from moving to this pattern in the United Church of Christ. At the same time, we allow that this pattern, fully reformed in accordance with our understanding of the gospel, may in fact express the functions already identified by other terms in our polity. One theologian challenges us: "The United Church of Christ will surely need to come to grips with the fact that in the ecumenical church there will be bishops. It should be engaging its energy not to prevent this, but rather radically to criticize and transform the character of the bishop's office."

We are not unaware, however, that the real issue behind the three-fold pattern of ministry is not "labels," but "the relationship of the bishop to both the other ordained ministers and the laity of the Church." As we witness the three-fold pattern across the centuries, it confronts us less with a matter of "titles" than with "an approach to polity in which authority flows in a different direction than it is deemed to flow in the United Church of Christ." Therefore, only a transformed version of it, consistent with the best insights of our participatory polity, would be workable and welcome among us.

Where the bishop is seen as a servant of Christ and of the Church, as one responsible for "theological spiritual leadership," rather than primarily as an institutional administrator, there is openness to that office. One of our Conferences reports, through its Theological Commission, "We welcome the recovery of the office of bishop," and are convinced that although the three-fold pattern of ministry "would require some adjustments to our Constitution, it demands nothing impossible."

Openness to this pattern, and especially to the office of bishop, would likely be enhanced if greater care were given in the document to the use of certain images and terms. We read in the Chapter on Baptism that Christ is our "Liberator" (par. 10), and in the Chapter on Eucharist, God's servant (par. 21) "presides at" (par. 29) the Holy Meal. However, in the Chapter on Ministry, where ordained ministry is closely identified with Christ's ministry, we read that "the Church needs persons (i.e., ordained ministers) who are publically and continually responsible for pointing to its dependence on Christ" (par 8, emphasis added), and who "call the community to submit to the authority of Jesus Christ (par. 11, emphasis added)." The bishop is described as one called to "preside over the celebration of the eucharist" (par. 20, emphasis added). The move from Christ the servant who is our Liberator to notions of dependency and submission mediated by the clergy, who do not preside at, but over, the sacraments, is hardly a matter of neutral semantics. It is a move, likely not intended, that raises anew the suspicion that hierarchy is nearby when the three-fold pattern of ministry is present. This is unnecessary and unfortunate. A reformed three-fold pattern of ministry could with integrity be as constitutionally accountable as any other form of ministry practiced in the United Church of Christ or elsewhere.

We raise a concern about the office of deacon and the ministry of the laity. It appears to us that the functions of deacons and the laity are so similar as to render the distinction meaningless. The identity of deacons is not clear, and the treatment of the ministry of the laity is alarmingly weak. We urge further development of both subjects, and register our dismay that the disproportionate attention given to ordained ministry suggests that the calling of the whole people of God to service is not truly a calling to "ministry."

Finally, although we affirm the value of the three-fold pattern of ministry, we cannot regard it as belonging to the *esse* of the Church. Saying this does not diminish our regard for it. Rather, it makes us mindful, as the document itself states, that there is a place in the Church for the prophetic voice (par. 33), and that hearing that voice often requires that we be open to "unusual ways" and "the special ministries" (par. 33) that God, from time to time, may call forth from the pilgrim Church as it journeys in faith toward the city not made by human hands, eternal in the heavens, whose builder and maker is God.

CONCLUSION

In answer to the four specific questions placed before us by the Faith and Order Commission, the United Church of Christ, in the context of the Report above, offers this summary response.

- I. *The extent to which the United Church of Christ can recognize in this text the faith of the Church through the ages.*

We affirm, with respect to the issues to which it speaks, that we recognize in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry an expression of the faith of the Church through the ages. We applaud the diversity blessed by the text and, with the qualifications cited in our Report, find the United Church of Christ affirmed as one manifestation of Christ's universal Church.

- II. *The consequences your church can draw from this text for its relations and dialogues with other churches, particularly with those churches which also recognize the text as an expression of the apostolic faith.*

We affirm that Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry provides our Church with an invaluable instrument for pursuing our commitment to be "a united and a uniting Church." The convergence represented in the text, though by no means complete, affords us a clarity of focus that challenges us to share more generously the ecclesial gifts that we have come to cherish, and to cherish more graciously the ecclesial gifts offered to us by other Churches.

- III. *The guidance your church can take from the text for its worship, educational, ethical, and spiritual witness.*

We affirm that Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry addresses issues with which we are dealing constantly in our Church as we seek to witness to the gospel in the face of the demands of a changing world. The convergence represented in the text, as our Report shows, offers us guidance as we study and reform our celebration of the sacraments and all other worship. It places before us the challenge to look again at our commitment to Christian education and nurture for persons of all ages, and to reflect upon the effectiveness of our education for ecumenism in all parts of our Church, including our seminaries. It calls us to hold in closer relationship our ministry of nurture and our ministry of prophetic servanthood in the cause of peace with justice throughout the world. It raises with new poignancy the essential place of spiritual formation of an order that will sufficiently equip us for faithfulness in the struggle with all

unfaith that assaults the Reign of God in human history.

IV. *The suggestions your church can make for the ongoing work of Faith and Order as it relates the material of this text on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry to its long-range research project "Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today."*

We affirm that the convergence represented in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry requires further development if it is to make an enduring contribution to this research project. We cite in our Report a number of issues that concern us. We repeat here, briefly and for identification only, several issues that carry special urgency for us.

In general, we urge:

- greater care, throughout the document, for the use of language that is truly inclusive of all the people of God
- a more explicit recognition of the pain and promise that accompany the tensions inherent in the struggle of united and uniting churches to incorporate diversity within their common life
- a stronger affirmation of the particular heritage of each church and of the capacity of each church, without compromising the integrity of its own historical witness, to be enriched by opening its life to the heritage of other churches

In the Chapter on Baptism, we urge:

- a clearer understanding of and a stronger commissioning for the ministry of all Christians

In the Chapter on Eucharist, we urge:

- a clearer statement of Holy Communion as a meal of the Reign of God, by which we are nourished for ethical obedience as servants of Jesus Christ, who is the source of peace with justice
- a more substantive treatment of the parity of the preaching of the Word with Holy Communion in the conjoining of the two in one full service
- an openness to diverse terms for the meal in order to show that the full meaning of the sacrament is not exhausted by the term "eucharist"

In the Chapter on Ministry, we urge:

- a much stronger explication of the founding of all ministry on the ministry of Christ, including the diverse ministries of the laity, and a more positive statement of the complementarity of distinctive ministries within the one Body of Christ
- a more sensitive treatment of the serious theological and justice issues involved in the discussion of the ordination of women
- a clearer affirmation, in the Chapter on Ministry, of the diversity of patterns of ministry blessed by the Holy Spirit, and a greater care in the use of language that might imply that hierarchy and the three-fold pattern of bishop, presbyter and deacon are inextricably related
- a more balanced presentation of the functions of all ministry, especially the functions of the

ordained ministry, with respect to the prophetic and servant leader roles in relation to the priestly role, as all three roles are exemplified in the prophetic, priestly and servant leader ministry of Jesus Christ