

# THE CHURCH TOWARDS A COMMON VISION

## World Council of Churches

### An Anglican Study Guide

produced by the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission for Unity, Faith and Order

#### Introduction

In 2012, at ACC-15, Anglicans welcomed the publication of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. They commended it to the churches of the Anglican Communion for study, and response. Churches that are members of the World Council of Churches (WCC) are asked to respond directly to the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC, copying their responses to the Anglican Communion Office.

*The Church* is a convergence document produced after many years of consultation with the member churches of the World Council of Churches. It seeks to set out areas in which many churches agree in their understanding of what the Church is. *The Church* draws on the WCC's earlier convergence text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM) which presented agreement relating to these three themes. BEM proved very significant in helping churches to identify areas of agreement, and has been an important resource in helping discussions between churches. It is hoped that *The Church* will do the same.

*The Church* is intended to stimulate discussion and reflection on what it means to live as Christian communities. It is not simply a text seeking to identify theological agreement on the Church, but is trying to help all churches to develop a common vision. In this way, it is intended to contribute to the renewal of the Church.

All the member churches of the Anglican Communion are invited to send official responses to the WCC by the end of December 2015. Those churches which are members should do this as part of their commitment to the WCC.

This paper offers resources for studying the *The Church* and some suggestions as to how Anglican churches might respond to it.

## **Receiving *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* in the Anglican Communion**

We believe that it will be appropriate for whichever body responded to the Anglican Communion Covenant also to respond to *The Church*. Some Anglican churches have well-established theological, doctrinal, Faith and Order, or ecumenical commissions that can assist the churches in preparing a response. Some provinces may ask the assistance of its teachers of theology. Some may wish to involve clergy and parishes in compiling their response. The Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) has asked that responses also be sent to the Unity, Faith and Order department of the ACC. They will feed into discussions about Anglican ecclesiology – that is, discussions about how we think about and define the Church. Parishes and congregations may be encouraged to study the text as part of adult education, or as an Advent or Lenten study programme. Anglican parishes are also encouraged to study the text with local parishes and congregations of other churches.

*The Church* also offers a useful resource for theological education, for the study not only of ecclesiology and systematic theology, but also of pastoral theology and missiology.

## **Reading *The Church* in order to respond to it – provincially or locally**

*The Church* lists five questions to which it invites churches to offer a formal response (Introduction, page 3):

- *To what extent does this text reflect the ecclesiological understanding of your church?*  
What in this text really resonates with the situation of your church? What does it mean to be the church? How does your church describe what it means to be a church? What does your church say about itself in its Creeds, catechism, and liturgy? Does this match your own experience? Does this fit with the church as presented in the text?
- *To what extent does this text offer a basis for growth in unity among the churches?*  
What other churches do you interact with principally? What kind of relationships do you have? Where are you hurt by disunity with other churches? Can the insights of this text help to strengthen your relationships with other churches? Are there Christian communities that you are not sure whether they are churches: does this text help you to decide?
- *What adaptations or renewal in the life of your church does this statement challenge your church to work for?*  
What would you like to be doing as a church or with other churches that you are not? What would you need to make this happen? Is there anything you need to let go of in the life of your church?
- *How far is your church able to form closer relationships in life and mission with those churches which can acknowledge in a positive way the account of the Church described in this statement?*  
Does this text help you to move closer to other churches? What kind of shared projects could you develop together? What might prevent you from working more closely together?
- *What aspects of the life of the Church could call for further discussion and what advice could your church offer for the ongoing work by Faith and Order in the area of ecclesiology?*

Is there anything unique or distinctive about your situation which you would like to share with others? And anything else you want to include!

**Read *The Church* in six sessions:**

In the light of the questions above, read and discuss the text.

**Session 1** – paragraphs 1-10 (pp. vii-ix and 1-8):

Preface; Introduction

Chapter I – God’s Mission and the Unity of the Church

- A. The Church in the Design of God
- B. The Mission of the Church in History
- C. The Importance of Unity

**Session 2** – paragraphs 11-24 (pp. 9-15):

Chapter II – The Church of the Triune God

- A. Discerning God’s Will for the Church
- B. The Church of the Triune God as *Koinonia*
  - The Initiative of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
  - The Prophetic, Priestly and Royal People of God
  - Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit
  - The One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church

**Session 3** – paragraphs 25-32 (pp. 15-19):

Chapter II – The Church of the Triune God (*continued*)

- C. The Church as Sign and Servant of God’s Design for the World
- D. Communion in Unity and Diversity
- E. Communion of Local Churches

**Session 4** – paragraphs 33-44 (pp. 21-26):

Chapter III – The Church: Growing in Communion

- A. Already but Not Yet
- B. Growing in the Essential Elements of Communion: Faith, Sacraments, Ministry
  - Faith
  - Sacraments

**Session 5** – paragraphs 45-57 (pp. 26-32):

Chapter III – The Church: Growing in Communion (*continued*)

- Ministry within the Church
  - Ordained Ministry
  - The Gift of Authority in the Ministry of the Church
  - The Ministry of Oversight (Episkopé)

**Session 6** – paragraphs 58-69 (pp. 33-40):

Chapter IV – The Church: In and for the World

- A. God’s Plan for Creation: The Kingdom
- B. The Moral Challenge of the Gospel
- C. The Church in Society

Conclusion

**If you would like to explore these ideas further, you might...**

**... find out more about the agreements that already exist and see if they might be useful for your church:**

Many agreements have already arisen from work between Anglicans and Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Old Catholics, Oriental Orthodox, Orthodox, Reformed, and Roman Catholics. These contain rich resources for discussions of the theology and mission of our churches. You can find them on the Anglican Communion website:

[www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/index.cfm](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/index.cfm).

A key text is the WCC paper, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. You can find it on the WCC website: [www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text).

**...consider the relationship between *The Church* and the Anglican Communion:**

Anglicans have many resources to help us think about the Church:

- the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral agreed by the Lambeth Conference of 1888 ([www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/acis/docs/chicago\\_lambeth\\_quadrilateral.cfm](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/acis/docs/chicago_lambeth_quadrilateral.cfm));
- the Appeal to All Christian People sent out by the Lambeth Conference in 1920 ([www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1920/1920-9.cfm](http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1920/1920-9.cfm));
- the Anglican Communion Covenant which is currently being considered by the member churches of the Anglican Communion ([www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/covenant/docs/The\\_Anglican\\_Covenant.pdf](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/covenant/docs/The_Anglican_Covenant.pdf));
- the canons and constitution of your own church;
- the ecumenical agreements into which Anglicans have entered (see above).

**...think about processes of reception:**

ACC-15 considered a report about “ecumenical reception”, thinking about how ecumenical documents are integrated into the lives of our churches. Ecumenical reception is a multilayered process.

The various stages of reception can be described as:

- *discovery, dialogue, and reflection* on the insights gathered during the long course of a multilateral dialogue;
- *discernment* of the truth and wisdom of its conclusions and recommendations;
- and then – perhaps – *living into a new relationship* with other churches and faith communities.

In the process of reception of ecumenical texts, there is an important interplay between the local, regional and global levels of the Anglican Communion. Within the churches of the Anglican Communion there is no uniform process for the reception of ecumenical texts. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify broadly similar patterns of reception operating across the Anglican Communion at a regional and global level. The agreement or acceptance of an ecumenical text is but a single moment within a much broader process of reception which begins long before that text or statement is formally received, and continues long afterwards.

By reading and discussing *The Church*, or any of the texts mentioned here, you are participating in this process of reception. How might you share these insights with others?