

*Doctrine divides, service unites:
Towards a vital and coherent theology*

by

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Doctrine divides, service unites: Towards a vital and coherent theology

“Doctrine divides, service unites.” This refrain is occasionally heard loudly in certain church circles. It expresses the intuition that contemporary divisions in the Christian church arise from doctrinal disputes from throughout church history, even from as early as the early ecumenical councils. Alternatively, mission and service provide the opportunity for Christian people of numerous confessionally-isolated communities to gather together and share in the common goals of service to the poor and the marginalised, of witness to peace and justice, and of building the city of God. According to this view, the unity that is found in mission and service is a sufficient expression of the unity that Christ willed. Therefore, sharing in a common confession of faith is unnecessary for sharing in the sacraments and ministry.

In contrast, the “Faith and Order” movement has affirmed the necessity of theological dialogue. Such dialogue provides the opportunity to set aside stereotypes and misunderstandings of the other, as well as the opportunity to engage in a mutual search for the meaning of the gospel in the present world. In contrast to the refrain “doctrine divides, service unites”, proponents of theological dialogue contend that cultural, linguistic, racial and geographic factors are at the root of division. Thus, they insist that dialogue remains an essential element of the process of rapprochement, of coming to know one another as Christian brothers and sisters.

The distinction represented here is itself a stereotype. It is the classical dichotomy between the “Faith and Order” and “Life and Work” movements. The foundation of this conflict is the perceived conflict between the essence of the church and its mission in the world. This dichotomy treats the marks of the church — one, holy, catholic and apostolic — as descriptors with no relation to the purpose for which God willed the church. However, most theologians would reject this dichotomy as false. There is only one ecumenical movement, they insist. Insofar as the goal of mutual reconciliation and visible unity remains in view, all ecumenical activity derives from the same gospel imperative: “that they all may be one ... that the world may believe” (Jn. 17:21). Nevertheless, despite efforts to overcome the problem, the ecumenical movement finds itself continually returning to the issue. The

Vancouver Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1983, requested that the WCC programme units take steps towards formulating a “vital and coherent theology” which would overcome this perennial problem.

A vital theology will incorporate the rich diversity of theological approaches emerging out of the varied experiences of churches throughout the world. A coherent theological approach will incorporate tradition and methods of reflection which represent the concrete needs and call of each and all members of the ecumenical movement towards unity of life and faith.¹

The Vancouver request indicates that the Assembly understood the problem as one of hermeneutics. The methods and tasks of the different programme units of the WCC are clearly different. Some programmes are concerned with social and political activism, with social aid and development, and with educational efforts to increase awareness of economic and social disparities. Other programmes are concerned with mission and evangelism, though this increasingly overlaps with the concerns of the former programmes. In contrast, the Commission on Faith and Order is concerned with theological dialogue and the building of theological consensus. It is not difficult to see how the various programme units derive from the three founding movements of the WCC: Faith and Order; Life and Work; and the International Missionary Council. It is also not difficult to see how they each might develop diverging theoretical reflections upon their task. From the perspective of a Faith and Order ecumenist, the political and social activism of the other programme units may obscure the primary ecumenical goal of visible unity. Similarly, from the perspective of those involved in HIV prevention programmes in Africa, for example, the Faith and Order concern for theological consensus may represent an ivory tower mentality, divorced from basic human compassion and concern for one’s neighbour. The hermeneutic assumptions of each perspective appear to be at the root of their conflict. The Vancouver Assembly called for a hermeneutic of unity that encompasses the whole of the ecumenical movement.

In this paper, I intend to explore some of the various attempts to respond to the Vancouver mandate. There are two major programme initiatives of the WCC that attempted to address this issue:

¹ World Council of Churches, *Gathered for life: Official report, Sixth Assembly, World Council of Churches*, ed. David Gill. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1983), 251.

the 1990 World Consultation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation; and the *Ecclesiology and Ethics* study conducted from 1993 to 1996. During this time, a number of other ecumenical projects have contributed to the reflection on this important topic. Arising from these reflections are two Biblical notions that motivate the ecumenical activities of the churches. The first is covenant. Reflection upon the mission of the church has situated the social and ethical activities of the church within the notion of a covenant between God and creation. The second notion that has arisen is *koinonia*. *Koinonia* is a Greek term used in the New Testament that is variously translated as communion or fellowship. The relationship of God and humanity, and among God's people, is described as one of communion. The two notions are interwoven in a new and creative way in recent ecumenical reflection. This paper will explore these two WCC programmes seeking insights for this "vital and coherent" theology.

I. Criticism of the WCC

Criticism of the WCC's social activism has come from a number of churches, both within the Council's membership and beyond. The strongest critiques have come from Evangelical and Orthodox churches. At the Canberra Assembly in 1991, the emphasis on the Holy Spirit was of great interest to the Orthodox churches. However, the theological freedom that the Spirit blew into the Council was seriously problematic, particularly concerning issues of inculturation. The Orthodox participants issued a statement expressing concerns about certain trends in the WCC. Highlighted amongst the Orthodox concerns was that:

The tendency to marginalize the Basis [of the WCC] in WCC work has created some dangerous trends in the WCC. We miss from many WCC documents the affirmation that Jesus Christ is the world's Saviour. We perceive a growing *departure from biblically-based Christian understandings* of: (a) the Trinitarian God; (b) salvation; (c) the "good news" of the gospel itself; (d) human beings as created in the image and likeness of God; and (e) the church; among others.²

The Orthodox feel that "the results of Faith and Order work [should] find a more prominent place in the various expressions of the WCC, and that tendencies in the opposite direction [should] not be

² "Reflections of Orthodox participants," in *Signs of the Spirit: Official report, Seventh Assembly, World Council of Churches*, ed. Michael Kinnamon. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), 280.

encouraged.” The Orthodox participants end their reflection on the work of the Canberra Assembly with the following ominous question: “Has the time come for the Orthodox Churches and other member churches to review their relations with the World Council of Churches?”³ As we know from the succeeding years of tension between the WCC and the Orthodox Churches, a small number of these churches have suspended membership in the WCC but considerable energy has been expended on either side attempting to address the Orthodox concerns.

Evangelical concerns were also raised at the Canberra Assembly. Participants of an evangelical perspective circulated a statement expressing similar concerns to those of the Orthodox churches. Noting the continuing inability of the WCC to develop a “vital and coherent theology,” they assert that:

The ecumenical movement needs a theology rooted in the Christian revelation and [which] is relevant to contemporary problems. At present, there is insufficient clarity regarding the relationship between the confession of the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to scripture, the person and work of the Holy Spirit, and legitimate concerns which are part of the WCC agenda. We share many of these concerns, such as those related to justice, peace and the integrity of creation, to the contextualization (and inculturation) of the gospel, and to religious pluralism. This theological deficit not only conspires against the work of the WCC as a Christian witness but also increases the tensions among its member churches.⁴

It is interesting to note the differing approach to the problem chosen by Orthodox and Evangelical participants. Orthodox churches highlighted the Faith and Order agenda, and questioned the relevance of the life and work concerns to the ecumenical task. Evangelical participants, on the other hand, acknowledged the relevance of the life and work agenda, and claimed it as their own. However, for the Evangelicals and the Orthodox, the WCC Basis which “confesses the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour” is the basis for subsequent ecumenical co-operation and reflection. For each of these communities and for many other churches, the reflection upon “a vital and coherent theology” is essential for continued participation in the WCC.

³ Ibid., 282

⁴ “Evangelical perspectives from Canberra,” in *Signs of the Spirit*, 283

II. Justice, peace and the integrity of creation

Since the establishment of the WCC in 1948, the WCC has spoken of social justice under three basic frameworks. At the Amsterdam Assembly in 1948, the concept of “responsible society” was proposed. In the 1970’s, we started to speak of a “just, participatory and sustainable society,” a notion that had its echoes in the political realm as governments proclaimed their commitment to the “just society.” By the time of the Vancouver Assembly in 1983, the Council was expressing a vision of “justice, peace and the integrity of creation,” also known as JPIC. The Assembly affirmed that:

The foundation of this emphasis should be confessing Christ as the life of the world and Christian resistance to the powers of death in racism, sexism, caste oppression, economic exploitation, militarism, violations of human rights, and the misuse of science and technology.⁵

Following the Vancouver Assembly, a new project was undertaken by the Council. Under the JPIC rubric, the Council attempted to focus reflection on the theological bases for the social mission of the church. The Council has been engaged in this mission since at least the 1950’s post-war refugee programmes, and continues to be committed to these tasks. Indeed, the WCC focus on social ethical reflection “was fuelled by events like the church struggle in Germany in the 1930’s and later by analyses of neo-colonialism, dependence and structures of poverty and injustice.”⁶ The JPIC process provided an opportunity for reflection that gave theological consistency to the work of the Council and its member churches. It further considered whether there are aspects of the mission of the church that are neglected or ignored. Indeed, the title of the project represents the scope of the reflections. Though the Council has frequently addressed core issues of justice and peace, the JPIC process invited the member churches to think of the whole of creation as the forum for the mission of the church. Concerns for environmental responsibility were raised, though the traditional notion of “dominion over the earth” was deliberately downplayed. Dominion models were seen as contributing to the environmental degradation of the planet. “Stewardship” — sometimes used as a synonym for

⁵ Ans van der Bent, ed., *Commitment to God’s world: A concise critical survey of ecumenical social thought*, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), 67.

⁶ World Council of Churches, “Costly unity,” *Ecclesiology and ethics: Ecumenical ethical engagement, moral formation and the nature of the church*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997). Also available from www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/faith/eeintro.html.

dominion — was replaced by “covenant,” and the understanding of the mission of the church as the *missio Dei* was highlighted. The whole of creation is the concern of God. The church — and each of its members — is the servant of God, and thus servant of the mission of God.

In 1990, the WCC held the *World Convocation on Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation* in Seoul, South Korea. At the convocation, the delegates formulated and approved ten basic affirmations of faith relating to the themes discussed. As the central committee moderator was later to remark: “They link the confession of faith with the commitment to corresponding action and attitudes in everyday life.” These basic affirmations lead to personal “*acts of covenanting*... that are aimed at something more — they are aimed at mutual commitment by the churches.”⁷ Interestingly, the delegates enthusiastically approved the basic affirmations but balked at approving a preparatory document that was theological in tone and content. It was approved only as a “working document” for the consideration of the churches. As Emilio Castro, general secretary of the WCC reported to the Seventh Assembly in Canberra:

In Seoul we found it easier to spell out our common missionary obedience than to articulate together the theological foundations of that mission and that obedience.⁸

In other words, the JPIC process failed to engender the theological reflection needed to develop the “vital and coherent theology” called for by Vancouver.

Despite its problems in Seoul, the JPIC process has had some impact upon the structures of some churches and ecumenical agencies. An immediate impact was in the renaming of justice and peace offices and rewriting of their mission statements to include environmental concerns. Although this might seem to be a cosmetic change, it has helped to keep ecological concerns on the agenda of the churches. Of more significance, was the displacement of “dominion” theologies with the notion of *missio Dei*. Obviously, this change was not only a result of the JPIC process. Christian ethicists had raised the profile of *missio Dei* and contributed this to the preparatory stages of the JPIC consultation.

⁷ Hans Joachim Held, “Report of the moderator”, in *Signs of the Spirit*, 134.

⁸ Emilio Castro, “Introduction,” in *Vancouver to Canberra, 1983-1990: Report of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches to the Seventh Assembly*, ed. Thomas F. Best. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), xvii.

The focus on the *missio Dei* proved extremely rich for the JPIC reflection on social and environmental ethics. The JPIC process held out the prospect of connecting the work of the churches for justice, peace, and the environment with the wider mission of the church. The point of interest to us in this paper, however, is the openness of the concept of *missio Dei* to the traditional Faith and Order concern for visible unity and rapprochement. It offered the opportunity for a sustained and coherent theological reflection. If the unity of the church is more than just a human goal, but is a divine mandate, then the unity of the church fits into the *missio Dei* schema in some fashion. The being and the mission of the church cannot be in conflict. The JPIC process affirmed the oneness of the ecumenical movement, and that the work for Christian unity and the social and environmental concerns of the church are each integral to the *missio ecclesiae* as to the *missio Dei*. However, the JPIC preference for social and ecological issues has led to a minimal impact on the Faith and Order agenda.

The focus on *missio Dei* at the JPIC consultation gave shape to the internal reflections of many churches on this issue. One such church was the United Church of Canada. The United Church of Canada reflection process “Towards a renewed understanding of ecumenism” attempted to integrate a broad spectrum of concerns under the heading “ecumenism.” Sometimes called “whole world ecumenism,” the concerns raised include traditional Faith and Order, Life and Work, mission and environmental concerns. Similar in scope to the JPIC process, the United Church characteristically begins with a pragmatic question borrowed from Rabbi Abraham Heschel: “where does the world need mending today?” Thus the title of the concluding document of their reflection: *Mending the world*.⁹ The document provides a focus on the *missio Dei*, with the familiar flavour of United Church activism.

Although the result of a broad internal consultation initiated in 1988, the United Church has received a number of responses from its ecumenical partners who are concerned that the “whole world” scope of their ecumenical vision threatens to diminish or ignore core ecumenical concerns. Some have even questioned whether the United Church remains committed to the search for visible

⁹ United Church of Canada, *Mending the world: An ecumenical vision for healing and reconciliation*, adopted by the 36th General Council of the United Church of Canada, 1997.

expressions of Christian unity. In addition, many have felt that the use of the term “ecumenism” in such a broad fashion leads to more confusion than clarity.

III. The Canberra statement on unity

At the Canberra Assembly in 1991, a statement entitled “The unity of the church as koinonia: Gift and calling”¹⁰ briefly explored the ecclesiological implications of koinonia, or communion. *Koinonia* is the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity, and is the model for the relationship amongst the human community. Moreover, koinonia is one facet of the reconciled relationship between God and humanity that is commonly called “the economy of salvation.” The Canberra document begins from the notion that:

the purpose of God is to gather the whole of creation under the Lordship of Christ Jesus in whom, by the power of the Holy Spirit, all are brought into communion with God and one another. ... [The] purpose of the church is to unite people with Christ in the power of the Spirit, to manifest communion in prayer and action and thus to point to the fullness of communion with God, humanity and the whole creation in the glory of the kingdom.¹¹

The nature of koinonia as both a gift granted by God through the Spirit, and a calling by God through the Spirit is found throughout the document. We are called “to proclaim reconciliation and provide healing, to overcome divisions... and to bring all people into communion with God.”¹² Koinonia is expressed in “the common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognized and reconciled; and a common mission witnessing to the gospel of God’s grace to all people and serving the whole of creation.”¹³ Moreover, “full communion is realized when all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness.”¹⁴

The Canberra document addresses the challenging issue of unity in diversity. The image of koinonia rejects any call for uniformity or models of unity that would require surrender of

¹⁰ Commonly called the “Canberra statement,” it can be found online at www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/faith/canb.html; in *Signs of the Spirit*, 172-174; or in numerous other subsequent WCC publications.

¹¹ “The unity of the church as koinonia,” § 1.1

¹² *Ibid.*, § 1.2

¹³ *Ibid.*, § 2.1

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

theological traditions rooted in culture, ethnicity, and history. “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.”¹⁵ Oddly, the document only proposes limits to diversity where it inhibits the common confession of faith. One presumes that diversity which inhibits the common sacramental life, reconciled ministry and membership, and common mission would also be illegitimate.

Koinonia is a rich theological image that is found in some bilateral dialogues and earlier WCC documents¹⁶ and it will remain an important theme for future reflection, as we shall see below. One aspect of the Canberra treatment of koinonia is particularly relevant for this paper. Koinonia has the potential to provide a connection between theological bases for the unity of the church — such as the bond of baptism — and the practical commitments to justice, peace and the environment that the JPIC process affirmed in its acts of covenanting. Thus, the Canberra focus on koinonia enriches the JPIC insights while providing an ecclesiological foundation for future Faith and Order reflection. The JPIC process had introduced the biblical image of covenant to describe the mutual commitment of the church for justice, peace, and the environment. The *Ecclesiology and ethics* process further enriches our reflections by the interplay of koinonia and covenant.

IV. Ecclesiology & ethics

An attempt to harvest the fruit of the JPIC process was undertaken through a joint programme of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order and Programme Unit III (Justice, Peace and Creation). Through a series of three consultations held in 1993, 1994 and 1996 the programme “explored the relationship between what the church *is* and what the church *does* in the world, how the church’s ethical reflection and witness is related to its faith, worship, and life as a whole.”¹⁷ The three consultations were held in Rønne, Denmark, at the Tantur Institute outside Jerusalem, and in

¹⁵ Ibid., § 2.2

¹⁶ Cf. WCC Commission on Faith and Order, *Church and world: The unity of the church and the renewal of human community*, Faith and Order paper no. 151. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990).

¹⁷ WCC Commission on Faith and Order, “Ecclesiology and ethics, Introduction to...,” www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/faith/eeintro.html.

Johannesburg, South Africa.¹⁸ In addition, the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order was held in Santiago de Compostela, Spain in 1993 and the Plenary Commission of Faith and Order met at Moshi, Tanzania in 1996. These additional gatherings offered the opportunity to assess the progress of the study programme.

a) Costly unity

The Rønne meeting produced a statement entitled “Costly unity” in which the image of *koinonia* is explored in greater depth than the Canberra Assembly was able to do. At Rønne, *koinonia* had clear ethical implications. Quoting *Baptism, eucharist and ministry*, Rønne stated:

The eucharistic celebration demands reconciliation and sharing among all those regarded as brothers and sisters in the one family of God and is a constant challenge in the search for appropriate relationship in social, economic and political life. All kinds of injustice, racism, separation and lack of freedom are radically challenged when we share in the body and blood of Christ.¹⁹

While speaking of the church as a moral community, Rønne was very careful to clarify that the church is not limited to this description. It is neither constituted by nor dependent upon the moral character or activities of its members.²⁰ Indeed, given the ambiguity and complexity of many ethical issues, ethical consensus is not to be expected. “Christian freedom encompasses sincere and serious differences of moral judgment.”²¹

The title of the Rønne report derives from a comparison of cheap unity and costly unity. “Cheap unity avoids morally contested issues because they would disturb the unity of the church. Costly unity is discovering the churches’ unity as a gift of pursuing justice and peace. It is often acquired at a price.”²² As examples, the document mentions the independence struggle in Namibia and the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. Costly unity:

breaks down dividing walls so that we might be reconciled to God and one another... Its enemy is cheap unity — forgiveness without repentance, baptism without discipleship, life without daily dying

¹⁸ The three reports are entitled “Costly unity,” “Costly commitment” and “Costly obedience.” Together, they make up the *Ecclesiology and ethics* text cited in note 6.

¹⁹ WCC Commission on Faith and Order, *Baptism, eucharist and ministry*, Faith and Order paper no. 111. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982), Eucharist § 20 quoted in “Costly unity,” § 3. Cf. Matt. 5:23f.; 1 Cor. 10:16f.; 1 Cor. 11:20-22; Gal. 3:28

²⁰ “Costly unity,” § 7.2

²¹ *Ibid.*, § 7.3

²² *Ibid.*, § 7.6

and rising in a household of faith (the *oikos*) that is to be the visible sign of God's desire for the whole inhabited earth (the *oikoumene*).²³

Of course, if the church is not constituted or dependent upon the moral activities of its members, neither can it be said that church unity is only forged in the context of ethical struggle. However, the Christian community has long taught that the church is forged in the crucible of martyrdom. This is one expression of this ancient affirmation. Baptism is a sign of this martyrdom "insofar as the baptized become the effective witness — martyr — to gospel values in the world."²⁴

A central affirmation of the Rønne document is that "the community of disciples rather than the individual Christian is the bearer of the tradition and the form and matrix of the moral life."²⁵ The church is the community in which the "gospel tradition is probed... for moral inspiration and insight."²⁶ One can see various dimensions of this in the life of the church, particularly in liturgy, education and mission. Koinonia provides the safe context to explore, to challenge and to be challenged. It also provides the context in which the word can be broken open and the sacraments celebrated; equipping and strengthening disciples in the mission of the church and of God. "Koinonia's primary reference appears to be to the interaction or sharing of believers within the local Christian community."²⁷ The use of koinonia to refer to relationships beyond the immediate local community was seen by Rønne as an extension of this usage. Following Pauline usage, where koinonia refers "beyond ethnicity and family to a community which exists on the basis of the gospel," ecumenical reference to koinonia can include "communion in which we share, in Jesus Christ, a common vision for a newly just, peaceful and responsible world."²⁸ Koinonia thus confronts us with the dual imperatives of unity and catholicity.

As we briefly mentioned above, the JPIC process reflected upon the image of covenant. At Seoul, some disagreements were related to the understanding of covenant. For Rønne, covenant became a central theme. Consequently, Rønne attempted to clarify its meaning in the context of koinonia.

²³ Ibid., § 8

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., § 18

²⁶ Ibid., § 19

²⁷ Ibid., § 22

²⁸ Ibid., § 23

Covenant has a far richer meaning than a “compact or common undertaking among human beings.”²⁹

Covenant is used:

in its full biblical meaning as a relationship initiated by God: a promise to which God is faithful despite all his peoples’ failures and transgressions. Thus a covenant between human beings carries the biblical sense only if it made before God with the intention of obedience to God’s covenantal requirements.³⁰

Covenants — such as the JPIC “acts of covenanting” and “covenantal communion” between churches — are related to the broader covenantal history between God and humanity.

To enter into this covenant means we accept the conditions under which God sets us in the midst of creation.³¹

The Rønne consultation was careful not to allow their reflections on *koinonia* to serve as the sole model of unity. They were concerned that *koinonia* could, if not carefully nuanced, be interpreted as an acceptance of existing divisions. “That would make *koinonia* only a synonym for ‘reconciled diversity.’”³² To counter this impression, Rønne called for a further reflection on “conciliarity” in the context of *koinonia*. They are concerned with ecclesiastical structures of accountability. *Koinonia* must lead to mutual accountability if it is real; in fact, it may be impossible without it.³³

b) Costly commitment

At the World Conference on Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostela, the ecclesiological significance of mission and service was highlighted.

The Church is the community of people called by God who, through the Holy Spirit, are united with Jesus Christ and sent as his disciples to witness to and participate in God’s reconciliation, healing and transformation of creation.³⁴

Addressing the same concerns, the Tantur consultation reformulated the Lund principle: “that common reflection and action, common confession, mission, witness and service should be the *norm*,

²⁹ Ibid., § 25

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., § 31

³³ Ibid., § 33

³⁴ WCC Commission on Faith and Order, *On the way to fuller koinonia: Official report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Günther Gassmann. Faith and Order paper no. 166. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 259.

rather than the exception, in the lives of the churches today.”³⁵ For Santiago, there can be no conflict between the essence of the church and its mission in the world.

The being and mission of the church, therefore, are at stake in witness through proclamation and concrete actions for justice, peace and integrity of creation. This is the defining mark of *koinonia* and central to our understanding of ecclesiology... our theological reflection on the proper unity of Christ’s church is inevitably related to ethics.³⁶

The Tantur document insists that the marks of the church — one, holy, catholic and apostolic — have ethical dimensions.

Oneness calls for deepening love and communion; catholicity involves a welcome to rich diversity within community; apostolicity suggests reaching out to the neighbour in sharing truth received from Jesus Christ; and straightforward, unselfconscious goodness is an essential dimension of holiness. These are central expressions of what it means to be the body of Christ.³⁷

The relationship between ecclesiology and ethics is not one-sided. Just as the being of the church leads to its mission, so too Santiago reminded us, the ethical engagement of the church generates *koinonia*. Both inside and outside of the church, the struggles of humanity provide a foundation for community. The ecclesial significance of this form of community was unclear both at Santiago and later at Tantur. And yet, as Tantur affirmed, the Spirit is constantly renewing the church, and thus:

we should expect new things, new experiences of faith, new expressions of the church coming to life... Through Christians and non-Christians, the Spirit is ‘making all things new.’³⁸

While there is openness expressed here towards new forms and structures in the church, there is also wariness towards new ecclesial bodies. How does this “*koinonia*-generating involvement” in witness and action “relate to the renewal which has taken place among followers of Christ over the centuries? ... How do we distinguish renewal from fragmentation and disintegration?”³⁹

The Tantur document offers an interesting reflection on the ethical dimensions of eucharistic *koinonia*. The document asserts that the *koinonia* experienced in the eucharist and that generated in ethical engagement are “two dimensions of the covenant... each in their own way an anamnesis.” In

³⁵ “Costly commitment,” § 19

³⁶ *On the way to fuller koinonia*, 259

³⁷ “Costly commitment,” § 23

³⁸ *Ibid.*, § 40

³⁹ *Ibid.*, § 41c

other words, they are “an active remembering, a ‘re-presenting’ of the covenant between God, humankind and creation, a testimony to God’s mighty acts (1 Pet. 2:12).”⁴⁰ Since the two experiences of *koinonia* are mutually interdependent, Tantur cautioned that the eucharist that treats members of the community unjustly degenerates into spiritualism. Conversely, ethical engagement that is not grounded in the life of worship degenerates into activism and moralism.⁴¹ It is not difficult to recognise in the cautious words of the consultation echoes of the evangelical critique of contemporary ecumenism, although it is matched by an equally sincere critique of the social disengagement that many activists fear.

The concept of covenant accentuates the ethical dimensions of *koinonia*. One of the strengths of the Tantur document is its focus upon the church as a moral community. By this term, the consultation intended to say more than simply that the church is a community of ethical reflection. As well, this was not simply a confession of the holiness of the church, though this remains a credal affirmation. The point that Tantur wished to highlight is the function of the community in moral formation. Moral formation occurs for the wider society as a result, in part, of the public discourse engendered by ethical reflection and action undertaken by the church and its members. At the same time, moral formation occurs within the life of the Christian community — and the lives of its members — as moral issues are confronted. The consultation was careful to caution against any form of reductionism that would see the church merely as a moral agent, or which would lead to moral triumphalism. Looking back to the Rønne consultation, Tantur affirmed that “the identity of the church as ‘moral community’ is a gift of God, a part, though not the whole, of the fullness of the church.”⁴² Recalling its earlier discussion of the traditional marks of the church, the consultation asks:

What kind of environment nurtures such moral practices? What patterns of behaviour help create and foster them? What virtues, values, obligations and moral vision do each of these marks imply for Christian catechesis and the life of the church as a whole? How should church life be ordered to promote these practises? How are these practises a source for spiritual and moral discernment on specific issues which Christians face?⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid., § 49a

⁴¹ Ibid., § 50

⁴² Ibid., § 55

⁴³ Ibid., § 63

These same questions could be asked of any number of images of the church. At Tantur, the consultation considered in detail “the *ekklesia* understood as a saving, eucharistic and covenantal ‘household of faith.’”⁴⁴ The household image is derived from the Greek word *oikos*, which means “house.” It is the root of the word *oikoumene*, which refers to the whole inhabited world, and which in turn became the English word “ecumenical.” There are two aspects of this image that we should explore. Firstly, consider the dimensions of the household image. As Tantur pointed out, the household can be conceived as the local congregation, monastic community or base community. At a larger scale, it refers to the ecumenical movement, the universal church and the *oikoumene*. Secondly, the ecclesiological image of a household points towards ethical considerations. Since the root of the English word “economy” is also found in the Greek *oikos*, the *oikoumene* “is located ecclesologically within the trinitarian economy of salvation and points beyond the present to the eschatological fulfilment of the *oikoumene*.”⁴⁵ Economic theory is based upon the concept of the household. Basic economic theory deals with household finances, goods and services. Similarly, the Greek root “*oikos*” is also found in the modern word “ecology.” Thus, *oikos* points to the ethical witness of the church in response to economic and ecological exploitation. “It points equally to the ethical accountability of the universal church, in relation both to the local church and to the global concerns for justice, peace and the integrity of creation.” Hence, “*oikos* mediates between the micro and macro levels of human activity and meaning.”⁴⁶

At the most micro level, the “household of faith” is used to describe the Christian family, or in the language of Vatican II, the “domestic church.” As the Tantur document reminds us, the family is fundamental to the moral formation of its members.⁴⁷ Ethical relationships within each family are both essential for moral formation, and challenged by the ongoing ethical reflection of the family and the larger household of faith. Relationships with the broader household of faith are also challenged and measured by the ongoing moral formation of the *oikoumene*.

⁴⁴ Ibid., § 65

⁴⁵ Ibid., § 65b

⁴⁶ Ibid., § 65c

⁴⁷ Ibid., § 65d

While affirming the transcendent reality of the church we recognize that the church is not yet, in its empirical historical manifestation, fully what it is in God. In this sense we can say that the church as historic institution is itself undergoing a process of “moral formation” guided by God, a process which will continue until the full reign of God dawns.⁴⁸

In this quote, the Tantur consultation is clearly influenced by a desire in some churches, particularly the Roman Catholic, to distinguish between the sinful character of the historical leaders and the holiness of the institution as such. Nevertheless, the document continues, “in the church’s own struggles for justice, peace and the integrity of creation, the *esse* of the church is at stake.”⁴⁹ This assertion is consistent with the general thrust of the document and of the *Ecclesiology and ethics* study of which it is a part. Ethical engagement is not supplemental to the life of the church, but speaks to the very essence of our being as *koinonia* and our bonds of covenant with God and our neighbour.

c) Costly obedience

The Johannesburg meeting in June 1996 completed the projected series of consultations for the WCC’s *Ecclesiology and ethics* study. The third report, published under the title “Costly obedience,” reviews the results of the first two consultations and adds some minor comments. A major portion of the report focuses on the experience of the churches involved in the struggle against apartheid. The discussion of moral formation at Tantur is expanded and several insights offered. The significant contribution of Johannesburg, from the perspective of our hermeneutic inquiry, is section IV: “Toward communion in moral witnessing.” In this section, the consultation attempts to sketch a new vision and accompanying vocabulary that transcends the two institutional languages of Faith and Order and Life and Work. “The point is to break away from the artificial division of perspective [the] two distinctive vocabularies have represented. This calls for a vision, with language to go with it, that substantially recasts two perspectives into one.”⁵⁰ As ambitious as this might sound, the consultation cautioned that the vocabulary would not spring “full-blown” from the report. “It will be the product of shared ecumenical experience. If we learn to live together in a morally engaged worshipping community, we will eventually find the words to talk about it.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid., § 71

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ “Costly obedience,” § 68

⁵¹ Ibid., § 71

This vision of ecumenical moral reflection and formation is consistent with the discussion of moral formation at Rønne and Tantur. The earlier discussion of moral formation provides a description of the shared ecumenical experience envisioned by the Johannesburg report. The experience of life in a community of reflection, worship, and service “shapes the community of faith itself to take an intrinsically moral role in relation to events around it.” These experiences are not isolated; they are to be seen as an integrated whole:

[a] single, integral, way of life, seeing, hearing, thinking, doing. Not first a theological moment and then a practical moment but one stream of life shaped by the baptismal call to discipleship and eucharistic memory and thanksgiving which open us to participation in the historical movement of the Trinity through the power of the Holy Spirit.⁵²

To be shaped by the baptismal call is what is meant by moral formation. The integrated life of the community “gives us the preparation, the conditioning, the equipment, and the companionship to face the unknowable future which confronts us every day.” We are formed by our community experiences, and “we think in terms of values built into the sort of community we are... [We] confront challenges in terms of communal relationships, customs, kinship patterns, deep-seated convictions about what is fitting.”⁵³

In the Rønne and Tantur reports, we found a clear sense that ethical action is community building. Ethical action leads to moral formation understood in its broadest sense. As we should expect, the conscience of the individual is formed in ethical life and action. In addition, the ethical awareness and convictions of the Christian community and broader society are formed by the ethical witness and example of individuals and groups within the community. In the Tantur report, this assertion leads to a consideration of the significance of community that is formed beyond the borders of the church by common ethical action with peoples of other living faiths and ideologies. The Johannesburg consultation adds a significant nuance to the discussion. Ethical action is more than merely the development of conscience in the individual or community, though this is important. The way of life formed by reflection, worship, and action in turn forms the very identity of the

⁵² Ibid., § 76

⁵³ Ibid., § 78

community, not merely its conscience. It is this identity-building which is *koinonia*-generating. By sharing in a common identity, community is formed.

It is important to remember that just as a common identity can be a positive force in building community; it can also be a negative force by isolating those who are different. Isolation of the religiously and ethnically diverse can lead ultimately to violence and other abuses. Conflict based upon religious identity has been seen throughout history, and has been seen tragically in very recent years. The more that we focus upon our identity as Christians, the more we must attend to the challenge of honouring the religious identities of those who are religiously and ethnically different from us.

The Johannesburg report acknowledges that the description that it provides gives the impression that the moral struggle is primarily local, “and that the diversity of particular situations makes it impossible to generalize... Does this localism mean that no general guidance can be given about what to look for? Is there no constant pattern in the way liturgically formed Christians should behave?”⁵⁴ Observing the contemporary tendencies to deconstruct language and any large systems of thought, the Johannesburg consultation noted that “the very notion of an ecumenical vision as itself a kind of global synthesis” seems to be undermined. The “very word *oikoumene* seems to violate this post-modern preference for particularity, evoking as it does the notion of the unity of the human race in the household of God. Can we still convincingly speak ‘ecumenical’ language?”⁵⁵ The answer to this question is, of course, positive. It is at this point that Johannesburg offers its most interesting contribution.

d) Resonance and recognition

Despite great cultural and linguistic barriers, it is still possible to recognise the meaning of certain words spoken in many different contexts. The example given by the Johannesburg report is “human rights.” Using ideas adapted from Michael Welker,⁵⁶ the report asserts that through the Holy Spirit’s

⁵⁴ Ibid., § 83

⁵⁵ Ibid., § 85

⁵⁶ Cf. “Costly obedience,” note 16. Welker’s article “The Holy Spirit” appeared in *Theology Today* 46 (April 1969): 4-20.

action we are able to recognise the “resonance” of Christ’s presence in the world. This resonance connects “the many biblical and post-biblical forms of witness to Jesus Christ.” The presence of God’s incarnation in history is reflected in the life and witness of those who follow Christ. While each context shapes us, the common experience of Christ “generates a community having a certain recognizable character. The Holy Spirit instigates an energy-field of resonance”⁵⁷ which allows us to recognise one another as disciples. Apart from the language of “energy-fields,” the discussion of resonance and recognition in the report seems quite familiar. The ability to recognise each other as disciples, to recognise the face of Christ in the other, is surely the work of the Holy Spirit. The metaphors of resonance and recognition are echoed in the biblical metaphor of John 10: the sheep know the voice of the shepherd.

Discipleship means hearing, being drawn, being formed, by the voice: not just its sound but also its content, the authentic note of a way of speaking by which we are shaped, attesting to an identifiable way of being having many different forms. It is this voice-pattern recognition that is celebrated, acted, co-risked.⁵⁸

According to the Johannesburg consultation, *oikoumene* is found where this recognition occurs. We are able to recognise that others “have the same spirit.” In light of the work of the Holy Spirit in revealing each other as disciples:

the notion of *oikoumene* is not to be understood as a globalizing, even imperial, concept... It is rather to be seen as a conscious *mutual* recognition of the resonating patterns and configurations of activity that follow from the Spirit’s working.⁵⁹

Concepts such as peace and justice have a particular poignancy for those who have experienced their absence. The achievement of peace and justice gives to these people and communities the experiential meaning that allows them to recognise peace and justice in other contexts. Similarly, *oikoumene* is recognised by certain markings. The traditional marks of the church, for example, function “as pointers which create a certain presumption that we, and all others who claim them, are grounded in the same resonating and recognizable community-forming work of the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁰ This seems to

⁵⁷ Ibid., § 88

⁵⁸ Ibid., § 90

⁵⁹ Ibid., § 89

⁶⁰ Ibid., § 94

imply that the consultation thinks that all churches that claim to be the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” church are indeed marked by these gifts of the Spirit. However, they affirm that the communion that we have is “real but imperfect.” The document cites Vatican II’s *Decree on Ecumenism* for this concept,⁶¹ although the experiential context is quite different from the Council’s ontological notion of ecclesiality. For Johannesburg, the reality of communion is the gift of the Spirit acting in the diverse forms of Christian community. The imperfection of communion is a result of human failure to express these marks in the life of our churches.

To be in communion means to be in a network of relationships such that the Spirit’s resonance is shared and recognizable messages are given and received. Communion means a recognition that we are living the same stories in forms, both liturgical and moral, which manifest the mystery, the transcending ground, of what is historically manifest.⁶²

Unlike the traditional approach that asks whether a specific community has the marks of the church, and thus should be regarded a fully ecclesial, the Johannesburg report asks whether the community belongs to the network of relationships wherein their experience is recognised and communion is found. Does their experience resonate with the Spirit?

Having presented a dynamic and thought-provoking proposal describing the meaning of communion, Johannesburg falls back into the traditional trap of asking where communion resides. In section IV.F of their report, they address the ongoing WCC study process attempting to identify a “Common understanding and vision” for the council. Their transition from the discussion about “resonance and recognition” to rethinking the nature of the council is entitled “The World Council of Churches as marker and space-maker for an Ecumenical moral communion.” They begin with a very contentious denial that any “ecclesiastical jurisdiction exists ... where the universal church ... comes to expression.” While it should not be expected that the WCC would affirm the claims of universality expressed by the Roman Catholic Church, the proposal that the WCC itself “may well come closer than any other entity to being that mark and offering that space”⁶³ seems an unlikely starting point for

⁶¹ *Unitatis Redintegratio* § 3

⁶² “Costly obedience,” § 95

⁶³ *Ibid.*, § 99

a common understanding and vision. Such a statement appears to claim ecclesial status for the WCC. This contradicts the WCC's own self-understanding expressed in the Toronto Statement of 1950.

Since it is not the purpose of this paper to explore the discussion of the common understanding and vision process that consumes the remainder of the Johannesburg report, I will leave these further considerations for another occasion. The contribution of the consultation that concerns us in this paper is the reflection upon *oikoumene*, moral formation, and the recognition of communion.

Coining a term not found in any of the documents we have examined, I could summarise the *Ecclesiology and ethics* study with the simple statement that ethical witness is ecclesiogenetic. By this, I mean that ethical witness is both *koinonia*-generating as Tantur reminded us, and part of the life-blood of the church as Rønne reminded us. In the description of ecclesiogenesis offered by the three consultations, we hear echoes of various theologians and philosophers. The philosophically sensitive might detect the vague shadow of Bernard Lonergan's epistemology in the process of experience leading to ethical reflection and action.⁶⁴ Those acute for whispers of liberation theology might hear the pedagogy of Paulo Freire in the notion that ethical formation leads to community identity and solidarity.⁶⁵ The Johannesburg document identifies Michael Welker as its source for the language of resonance and recognition. As a metaphor, it has the advantage of overcoming the either/or presented by ontological notions of ecclesiality as traditionally applied to the marks of the church. Rather than conceiving of the marks as static attributes possessed by particular communities and thereby denied to other communities, the Johannesburg approach recognises the dynamic and relational character of the marks, as well as the manner in which they are contextually conditioned.

All language related to communion points to the life, obedience, and liturgical-moral integrity of the community of faith in such a way that its world-relationships, solidarities and ways of being prophetic are part of that wholeness.⁶⁶

A dynamic re-interpretation of Vatican II's "real but imperfect communion" is provided by this metaphor. Communion is not expressed identically in all times or circumstances.

⁶⁴ Cf. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A study of human understanding* (London: Longmans, Green, 1957).

⁶⁵ Cf. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

⁶⁶ "Costly obedience," § 97

V. Conclusion

One might expect that a WCC reflection process on “ecumenical hermeneutics” conducted during the same years as the *Ecclesiology and Ethics* study might have reflected on some common concerns and issues. However, *A treasure in earthen vessels*⁶⁷, the Faith and Order “instrument for an ecumenical reflection on hermeneutics” does not address any of the insights expressed at Seoul, Rønde, Tantur, or Johannesburg. The product of three consultations held between 1994 and 1997, *A treasure in earthen vessels* explores the Montréal consensus on *Scripture, Tradition and traditions*⁶⁸ and updates it with recent reflection on contextuality, inculturation, ecclesiology, and reception. A hermeneutics for unity is describes as one that:

- aims at greater coherence in the interpretation of the faith and in the community of all believers as their voices unite in common praise of God.
- should make possible a mutually recognizable (re)appropriation of the sources of the Christian faith
- and should prepare ways of common confession and prayer in spirit and truth.⁶⁹

A hermeneutic of unity certainly prepares ways of common confession and prayer, but the affirmation that common confession calls us to common mission and service is missing. Within its own Faith and Order environment, *A treasure in earthen vessels* is a significant contribution to theological reflection on these issues. It will likely be an important reference text for future hermeneutical reflection.

It should be recalled, as Konrad Raiser reminds us,⁷⁰ that one of the factors leading to a renewed interest in hermeneutics was the conflict over inculturation. This was shown vividly at the Canberra Assembly by the reaction of many delegates and observers to the presentation by Chung Hyun Kyung. Charges of syncretism were widely debated throughout the Assembly and resulted in the Orthodox and Evangelical criticisms that I referred to above. *A treasure in earthen vessels* is more

⁶⁷ WCC Commission on Faith and Order, *A treasure in earthen vessels: An instrument for an ecumenical reflection on hermeneutics*, Faith and Order paper no. 182. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998). Available from www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/faith/treasure.html.

⁶⁸ WCC Commission on Faith and Order, “Scripture, Tradition and traditions,” in *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963*, ed. P. C. Rodger and L. Vischer, Faith and Order paper no. 42. (London: SCM Press, 1964).

⁶⁹ *A treasure in earthen vessels*, § 6

⁷⁰ Konrad Raiser, “Beyond tradition and context: In search of an ecumenical framework of hermeneutics,” *International review of mission* 80 (1991): 347-354.

closely related to the WCC's contemporaneous *Gospel and culture* study than to the *Ecclesiology and ethics* study. Beyond the heat of the controversy at Canberra, however, it is clear that differing perspectives on inculturation derive from the same diverging hermeneutics that I have addressed in this paper. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the insights of the *Gospel and culture* study or its relationship to the *Ecclesiology and Ethics* study. This will have to wait for a more extensive treatment in a later paper. However, it seems unlikely that the themes of covenant and koinonia that provided a rich source for common reflection on ecclesiology and ethics could provide similar inspiration to the *Gospel and culture* study. As such, it is clear that the search for "a vital and coherent theology" is not completed.

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