Summary of Introduction and Chapter I  
John George Huber, Jan. 9, 2015

Introduction

The “Common Vision” text “addresses what many consider to be the most difficult issues facing the churches in overcoming any remaining obstacles to their living out the Lord’s gift of communion: our understanding of the nature of the Church itself.” In other words, it is not only matters of faith and doctrine that challenge our ecumenical quest, but also different convictions regarding order, structure and ministry. The aim of this document is “to offer a convergence text . . . not expressing full consensus on all the issues considered.” This emphasis on convergence instead of consensus is a similar approach that was used in producing the BEM (Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry) document in 1982. The Towards a Common Vision text expresses “how far Christian communities have come in their common understanding of the Church, showing the progress that has been made and indicating work that still needs to be done.” The ambitious goal is to “enable some decisive steps toward the full realization of unity.” This sounds similar to the concept of “full communion” that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has achieved with six other churches.

Chapter I, “God’s Mission and the Unity of the Church”

We are reminded that the quest for the unity of the Church has as its major purpose the mission of the Church. This mission includes “the proclamation of the kingdom of God inaugurated in Jesus the Lord, crucified and risen.” The connection between the Church’s unity and its mission is made in Jesus’ high priestly prayer: “that they may all be one. . .so that the world may believe” (John 17:21). The New Testament describes this unity as “communion” (koinonia in Greek) “whose source is the very life of the Holy Trinity.”

A concrete example of how the early church carried out its mission is the story of “St. Paul’s preaching of Christ in the Areopagus [Mars Hill in the King James Version] at Athens (Acts 17:22-34).” This “illustrates how the very first generation of Christians attempted to share the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection, drawing upon and, when necessary, transforming, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the cultural heritage of their listeners and serving as a leaven to foster the well-being of the society in which they lived.”

This chapter concludes by identifying a basic requirement for “visible unity”: “that churches be able to recognize in one another the authentic presence of what the Creed of Nicea-Constantinople (381) calls ‘the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church.’” In addition to this idealistic perspective, the document also offers a realistic admission of the failure of the separated churches to realize visible unity. Some churches “identify the Church of Christ exclusively with their own community, while others would acknowledge in communities other than their own a real but incomplete presence of the elements which make up the Church.” Others have “joined into various covenanted relationships,” while “others maintain that Christ’s Church is invisible and cannot be adequately identified during this earthly pilgrimage.”

Finally, “Fundamental issues on the way to unity” are summarized by citing the historic Toronto Declaration of 1950. This is a statement issued by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches shortly after the Council was formed at its first Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948. A key challenge was given to the churches: to “recognize that the membership of the church of Christ is more inclusive than the membership of their own
church body.” Three significant ecclesiological questions were raised: “How can we identify the Church which the creed calls one, holy, catholic and apostolic? What is God’s will for the unity of this Church? What do we need to do to put God’s will into practice?” This challenge and these questions are still relevant today.

**Summary of Chapter II,**
The Church of the Triune God
John George Huber, February 6, 2015

**A. Discerning God’s Will for the Church**


**B. The Church of the Triune God as Koinonia**

Helpful definitions of Tradition and traditions are provided in Footnote 11, based on the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order held in Montreal in 1963. The “biblical notion of koinonia” is regarded as “central in the ecumenical quest for a common understanding of the life and unity of the Church” (¶13). The document points to “the gospel, the proclamation of the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, Son of the Father” as the reality in which “the Church is centered and grounded” (¶14), but limiting the gospel to the Incarnation misses St. Paul’s more complete definition: “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures….” (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

However, reference to Jesus’ death and resurrection does appear in ¶17.

Mary is cited as “the Mother of God (Theotokos)” and is seen as “a symbol of and model for the Church and the individual Christian” (¶15). Another resource in this regard is the “Agreed Statement” of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue on *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* (ARCIC 2005). The purpose of God’s establishment of the new covenant is identified as “uniting all human
beings with himself and with one other,” and yet it is maintained that God “will always remain faithful” to the first covenant (cf. Romans 11:11-36) ¶17. This seems to suggest a positive relationship that we Christians continue to have with members of the Jewish community. Members of the Church are described as “a royal priesthood” and “a prophetic people” (¶18, 19). This reference to “royal priesthood” reminds us of Martin Luther’s concept of the “universal priesthood of all believers,” implying that we all have a ministry to carry out. The “royal priesthood of the whole people of God (cf. 1 Peter 2:9) and a special ordained ministry are both important aspects of the church, and are not to be seen as mutually exclusive alternatives” (¶20). But churches differ regarding the decision-making roles of each.

Definitions of the creedal description of the Church as “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” are helpful in ¶22. The basis of the churches’ oneness is that “in spite of all divisions, all the churches understand themselves as founded in the one gospel (cf. Gal. 1:5-9).” “The Church is holy because God is holy” and has a ministry of “continually calling people to repentance, renewal and reform.” But missing here is the concept of the Church’s holiness as being set apart. The catholicity of the Church is seen in its inclusivity as a mission that “transcends all barriers and proclaims the Gospel to all peoples.” The apostolic nature of the Church is based on the sending of the apostles and prophets to oversee the Church’s mission. A primary definition of the Church is offered: “fundamentally a communion with the Triune God and, at the same time, a communion whose members partake together of the life and mission of God” (¶23). Disagreement regarding matters of church order and structure are acknowledged in ¶24. But the possibility of being open to “development” and “a new approach” is suggested.

C. The Church as Sign and Servant of God’s Design for the World

God’s design is defined as “to gather humanity and all creation into communion under the Lordship of Christ (cf. Eph. 1:10),” and “the mission of the Church remains that of inviting, through witness and testimony, all men and women to come to know and love Christ Jesus” (¶25). This sounds like an impossible dream and would probably be regarded as Christian arrogance by some outside the community of believers. The New Testament uses the term “mystery” to describe “the intimate relation between Christ and the Church (cf. Eph. 5:32, Col. 1:24-28)” ¶26. Not all can accept the “Church as Sacrament,” but those who do “understand the Church as an effective sign and means (sometimes described by the word instrument) of the communion of human beings with one another through their communion in the Triune God” (¶27). Footnote 22 cites the Vatican II document Lumen gentium 1 as an example of this use of “Church as Sacrament.” Also see a more elaborate commentary on this sacramental imagery in Models of the Church by Avery Dulles (Doubleday, 1978, Chapter IV). The Common Vision document raises this ecumenically significant question: “Might this, therefore, be seen as a question where legitimate differences of formulation are compatible and mutually acceptable?” This is a similar concept as “legitimate diversity” that is mentioned in ¶12 and ¶28.

D. Communion in Unity and Diversity

A further insight about communion is offered, namely, that “each local church is in communion with the local churches of all places and all times” ¶29, echoing a similar understanding articulated in the WCC New Delhi statement on “The Church’s Unity,” i.e., “…all in each place…are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all
The Church: Towards a Common Vision

ages...” A New Testament example of unity and diversity is “that Gentiles were to be welcomed into communion” as a result of decisions made by the Apostolic Council, recorded in Acts 15 (¶30). Limits to legitimate diversity require overcoming heresies and schisms, e.g., “the condemnation of apartheid by many Christian communities.” An overarching principle is spelled out: “Christians are called not only to work untiringly to overcome divisions and heresies, but also to preserve and treasure...legitimate differences in liturgy, custom and law and to foster legitimate diversities of spirituality, theological method and formulation in such a way that they contribute to the unity and catholicity of the Church as a whole” (¶30).

E. Communion of Local Churches

Here is how “the local church” is defined: “a community of baptized believers in which the word of God is preached, the apostolic faith is confessed, the sacraments are celebrated, the redemptive work of Christ for the world is witnessed to, and a ministry of episkopé exercised by bishops or other ministers in serving the community” (¶31). “Each local church,” this paragraph maintains, “contains within it the fullness of what it is to be the Church. It is wholly Church, but not the whole Church.” The universal Church is described as “the communion of all local churches united in faith and worship around the world.” The Towards a Common Vision document admits that the churches hold conflicting convictions about the role of bishops and the definition of “local church.” Thus, this chapter concludes with an invitation: “In our common quest for closer unity, we invite the churches to seek more precise mutual understanding and agreement in this area: what is the appropriate relation between the various levels of life in a fully united Church and what specific ministries of leadership are needed to serve and foster those relations?”

Summary of Chapter III,
The Church: Growing in Communion
John George Huber, June 11, 2015

A. Already but Not Yet

“The Church is an eschatological reality, already anticipating the kingdom, but not yet its full realization.” The Holy Spirit is identified as “the principal agent in establishing the kingdom and in guiding the Church.” It is the Spirit who enables us “to grasp something of the mystery of the church.” This concept of the Church as mystery reminds us that our study of ecclesiology is more than a cerebral, intellectual exercise. We are exploring a mystery, and this must be received in faith. Thus, the reference to the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church” in the Nicene Creed is preceded by “We believe.”

We Christians are “the communion of believers held in personal relationship with God.” Here are some “visible and tangible signs which express that this new life of communion has been effectively realized”: receiving and sharing the faith of the apostles, baptising, breaking and sharing the eucharistic bread, praying with and for one another and for the needs of the world, serving one another in love, participating in each other’s joys and sorrows, giving material aid, proclaiming and witnessing to the good news in mission and working together for justice and peace.” As human beings, we experience positive and negative change while also affirming: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever” (Heb. 13:8).

We are people on a pilgrimage who contend with “the reality of sin.” The tradition of some of us “affirms that the Church is sinless,” while others “refer to the Church as sinning,” either seeing sin primarily as “moral imperfection or primarily as a break in relationship.” Even though “Christ’s victory
over sin is complete and irreversible,” there is also the realization that “believers are vulnerable to the power of sin.” We “recognize the continual need for Christian self-examination, penitence, conversion (metanoia), reconciliation and renewal.” A reference to forgiveness would be appropriate here.

B. **Essential Elements of Communion: Faith, Sacraments, Ministry**

(a) **Faith**

The goal of the ecumenical movement is defined as “full communion within a visibly united church.” Footnote 30 reveals the many bilateral and multilateral ecumenical documents that have identified “The ecclesial elements required for full communion,” including “communion in the fullness of apostolic faith; in sacramental life; in a truly one and mutually recognized ministry, in structures of conciliar relations and decision-making; and in common witness and service in the world.” This list of essential elements for full communion is similar to the list given in *Ecumenism: The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.* But the Augsburg Confession points to “the Gospel” and “the sacraments” as “sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church.”

As the Church proclaims the apostolic faith, this proclamation must “remain in continuity with the original witness and with its faithful explication throughout the ages.” The 1991 Faith and Order study, *Confessing the One Faith,* demonstrated “substantial agreement among Christians concerning the meaning of the creed professed in the liturgies of most churches.” In 1998, *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels* “explored the ongoing interpretation of Scripture and Tradition in handing on the Faith. . . .” These two Faith and Order studies may not be as widely known as the Lima text of 1982, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM), but continue to have value in defining “the fullness of apostolic faith.”

(b) **Sacraments**

The churches “registered a significant degree of approval with the way in which [BEM] described the meaning and celebration of baptism and eucharist.” The “presence of Christ in the eucharist” is identified as one of “the most significant unresolved issues,” but the author of this commentary written for the SCEC Faith and Order Commission would invite all to examine Paragraph 13 of BEM where a strong affirmation of “Christ’s real, living and active presence in the eucharist” is stated. However, it is agreed that BEM “did not address the other rites celebrated in many communions and considered by some as sacraments.” But the *Towards a Common Vision* text does speak of “The growing convergence among churches in their understanding of baptism,” and adds: “The general agreement about baptism has led some who are involved in the ecumenical movement to call for the mutual recognition of baptism.” Footnote 35 alerts us to the WCC Faith and Order Paper No. 210, *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition.*

A summary of the “progress in agreement about the eucharist registered in ecumenical dialogue” is presented, including the following: “Christians receive the body and blood of Christ. It is a proclamation of the gospel. . . . a memorial of the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. . . . accomplished once and for all on the cross (anamnesis),” and adds this quote from BEM which indicates that the eucharist has more than doctrinal significance: “Christians are called in the eucharist to be in solidarity with the outcast and to become signs of the love of Christ who lived and sacrificed himself for all and now gives himself in the eucharist. . . .” Regarding the churches’ contrasting use of either “sacrament” or “ordinance,” the document suggests: “Might
this difference then be more one of emphasis than of doctrinal disagreement?” Could this insight be applied to other seeming disagreements among the churches? A key invitation is offered as part of the conclusion of this section: “We also invite churches to consider whether they can now achieve closer convergence about who may receive baptism and who may preside at the Church’s liturgical celebrations.”

(c) Ministry within the Church

(i) Ordained ministry

This section on ministry demonstrates that it is not only matters of faith that can divide us, but also order. It seems that the authors of BEM were more capable of proposing convergence on “Baptism” and “Eucharist” than on “Ministry.” Thus, we can appreciate the efforts of the writers of The Church: Towards a Common Vision to dare to take the study of “Ministry” beyond what was accomplished in BEM.

There is disagreement among the churches about whether ministry includes a sacrament of ordination, whether ordained ministers are priests, and whether ordained ministers should be restricted to men only. It is admitted that these issues constitute “challenging obstacles on the path to unity.” Although the New Testament does not specify a single pattern of ministry, “Early writers, such as Ignatius of Antioch, insisted upon the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon.” This eventually “became the generally accepted pattern and is still considered normative by many churches today.” But “some churches, since the time of the Reformation, had adopted different patterns of ministry.”

A related divisive issue is the concept of the “historic episcopate,” that is, “bishops ordained in apostolic succession back to the earliest generations of the Church.” The BEM text affirms that it “may serve today as an expression of the unity we seek and also as a means for achieving it.” When the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America established full communion with the Episcopal Church, the ELCA described the historic episcopate is “pastorally desirable,” for unity, but “not necessary for the relationship of full communion” (Called to Common Mission: A Lutheran Proposal for a Revision of the Concordat of Agreement, November 1998, Paragraph 13). Note that the “Decree on Ecumenism” of Vatican II states: “. . .quite large Communities became separated from full communion with the Catholic Church” (Paragraph 3).

(ii) The Gift of Authority in the Service of the Church

Authority in the Church is traced to “Jesus’ entire ministry,” a ministry “characterized by authority” which was “shared. . .with the apostles.” This authority “must be understood as humble service” that is “exemplified in Jesus’ action of washing the feet of the disciples.” This authority is “a gift of the Holy Spirit destined for the service (diakonia) of the Church in love.” Examples of church leaders who have exercised this kind of authority include Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and Brother Roger of the Taize community. A resource for studying the issue of authority is the document “The Gift of Authority” that resulted from the Anglican/Roman Catholic bilateral dialogue dated 1998.

(iii) The Ministry of Oversight (episcopé)

This ministry is “in the service of maintaining continuity in apostolic faith and unity of life.” A “principal purpose of this
ministry is faithfully to safeguard and hand on revealed truth, to hold the local congregations in communion, to give mutual support and to lead in witnessing to the gospel.”

Footnote 53 recalls how the first world conference on Faith and Order at Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1927 pointed to the value of each of the three systems of ministry, namely episcopal, presbyteral and congregational. This evaluation appears in BEM’s Commentary 26. The Towards a Common Vision text repeats the affirmation of BEM, that “ordained ministry should be exercised in a personal, collegial and communal way,” and then applies this more specifically to “the ministry of oversight.”

Mention of “the authority of ecumenical councils” is made as an example of one historic approach to a ministry of oversight (episcopate). But it is admitted that some churches regard conciliar doctrinal decisions to be “open to revision,” while other churches see them as “normative and therefore irreformable.” Footnote 56 identifies the council of Nicea in 325 A.D. as the “universally recognized” first council, but adds: “Churches differ on how many such councils have been held.” The Documents of Vatican II, edited by Walter M. Abbott, S.J., lists Vatican II as the 21st and final council as of 1966. The Eastern Orthodox recognize the first seven ecumenical councils, and are contemplating an eighth.

The word “primacy” has been used to refer to “the bishops of Alexandria, Rome and Antioch, and later Jerusalem and Constantinople” who “exercised a personal ministry of oversight over an area much wider than that of their individual ecclesiastical provinces. . . . A primacy of decision-making (jurisdiction) and teaching authority, extending to the whole people of God, was gradually claimed by the Bishop of Rome on the basis of the relation of that local church to the apostles Peter and Paul.” More recently, “the Fifth World Council on Faith and Order raised the question ‘of a universal ministry of Christian unity.’ In his encyclical Ut Unum Sint, Pope John Paul II quoted this text when he invited Church leaders and their theologians to ‘enter into patient and fraternal dialogue’ with him concerning this ministry.”

Although “Christians do not agree that a universal ministry of primacy is necessary or even desirable,” it is also true that “several bilateral dialogues have acknowledged the value of a ministry in service to the whole Christian community. . . .” One example of the latter is the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue of 1998, “The Gift of Authority—Authority in the Church III,” which states: “The Anglicans are open to and desire a recovery and re-reception under certain clear conditions of the exercise of universal primacy by the Bishop of Rome.”

At the conclusion of Chapter III of The Church: Towards a Common Vision, this question about “A universal ministry of unity” is raised: “If according to the will of Christ, current divisions are overcome, how might a ministry serving to foster and promote the unity of the Church at the universal level be understood and exercised?”
Summary of Chapter IV,
The Church: In and for the World
John George Huber, June 11, 2015

A. God’s Plan for Creation: The Kingdom

“The reason for the mission of Jesus is succinctly expressed in the words, ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son’ (John 3:16). . . . The Church’s mission in the world is to proclaim to all people, in word and deed, the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ (cf. Mark 16:15). Evangelization is thus one of the foremost tasks of the Church. . . .” This task includes bearing witness to “the Father’s reconciliation, healing and transformation of creation” and “the promotion of justice and peace.” We Christians are “not only to share the riches of Christian faith but also to appreciate whatever elements of truth and goodness are present in other religions.” Our sharing is “an expression of respectful love.”

On the one hand, we Christians ponder “the possibility of salvation for those who do not explicitly believe in Christ,” and on the other hand, we continue to proclaim “that Jesus is Lord.” This seeming contradiction calls for an “Ecumenical response to religious pluralism.” “There remain serious disagreements within and between some churches concerning these issues. The New Testament teaches that God wills the salvation of all people (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4) and at the same time, that Jesus is the one and only saviour of the world (cf. 1 Timothy 2:5 and Acts 4:12)” We need to face this question: “How may the churches arrive at greater convergence about these issues and cooperate more effectively in witnessing to the gospel in word and deed?”

Two resources for dealing with this controversy that are not mentioned in this Towards a Common Vision text include a document of Vatican II and a statement by the World Council of Churches (WCC). The “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” (Nostra Aetate) states: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions,” but this affirmation is also made: “Indeed, she proclaims and must ever proclaim Christ, ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6), in whom men find the fullness of religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18-19.” During the San Antonio conference of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (WCC, 1989), this statement was made: “We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot set limits to the saving power of God.” This was reaffirmed at Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, in 1966.

B. The Moral Challenge of the Gospel

Although “discipleship demands moral commitment,” we are reminded that St. Paul teaches that “human beings are justified not through works of the law but by grace through faith (cf. Rom. 3:21-26; Gal. 2:19-21).” The Lutheran-Roman Catholic bilateral agreement, Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999), is a helpful resource in this regard (Footnote 64). “Together with the adherents of other religions as well as with all persons of good will, Christians must promote . . . the social values of justice, peace and the protection of the environment. . . . Thus koinonia includes not only the confession of the one faith and celebration of common worship, but also shared moral values, based upon the inspiration and insights of the gospel.” In their quest for Christian unity, “individual Christians and churches sometimes find themselves divided into opposing opinions about what principles of personal or collective morality are in harmony with the gospel of Jesus Christ.” There is also disagreement as to whether or not these moral questions are “Church-divisive.” An example is the conflict regarding sexuality issues. This
The Church: Towards a Common Vision

A question is proposed: “How might the churches, guided by the Spirit, discern together what it means today to understand and live in fidelity to the teaching and attitude of Jesus?”

C. The Church in Society

The world’s “problems and tragedies. . .cry out for the compassionate engagement of Christians. The source of their passion for the transformation of the world lies in their communion with God in Jesus Christ.” Our task includes becoming “a voice for those who are voiceless,” “to work for a more just social order,” and “as followers of the Prince of Peace,” to “advocate peace, especially by seeking to overcome the causes of war” which include “economic injustice, racism, ethnic and religious hatred, exaggerated nationalism, oppression and the use of violence to overcome differences. . . . Christians will seek to promote the values of the kingdom of God by working together with adherents of other religions and even with those of no religious belief.”

Included in our calling to be the Church in society are the following: “critically analyzing and exposing unjust structures, and working for their transformation, but also supporting initiatives of the civil authorities that promote justice, the protection of the environment and the care of the poor and the oppressed.” This is how we Christians “stand in the tradition of the prophets who proclaimed God’s judgment on all injustice.” This action will risk “persecution and suffering” and “the way of the cross, even to the point of martyrdom (cf. Matt. 10:16-33). . . . Together with all people of goodwill, the Church seeks to care for creation. . . by opposing the abuse and destruction of the earth and participating in God’s healing of broken relationships between creation and humanity.”

Conclusion

This document notes an important connection between “the unity of the body of Christ” and “the gift of koinonia or communion that God graciously bestows upon us human beings.” Koinonia is defined as “communion with the Holy Trinity.” This communion “is manifested in three interrelated ways: unity in faith, unity in sacramental life, and unity in service. . . including ministry and mission.” The significance of the liturgy is that it is in this act of worship “the people of God experience communion with God and fellowship with Christians of all times and places.” In addition, they “proclaim the Good News, confess their faith, pray, teach and learn, offer praise and thanksgiving, receive the Body and Blood of the Lord, and are sent out in mission.”

A reason is given for the urgency of “the restoration of unity between Christians,” namely, “Our brokenness and division contradict Christ’s will for the unity of his disciples and hinder the mission of the Church.” Paragraphs 68 and 69 contain some eloquent language that is difficult to summarize, including this eschatological note: “The final destiny of the Church is to be caught up in the koinonia/communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, to be part of the new creation, praising and rejoicing in God forever (cf. Rev. 21:1-4; 22:1-5).” The final paragraph reminds us that Christ’s mission and ours is “bringing light and healing to human beings until he comes again in glory.”

HISTORICAL NOTE

The Process leading to “The Church: Towards a Common Vision”

Following a quotation of the brief theological Basis of the World Council of Churches, this six-page section identifies the historical events and ecumenical documents that contributed to producing the final text of the “Towards a Common Vision” statement. All these many references, from 1927 through 2012, indicate the scholarly research and dedication
that has been invested in this work of the Faith and Order Commission, resulting in “progress achieved toward convergence.”

A concluding comment explains the status of the completed text: “The [Faith and Order] commission believes that its reflection has reached such a level of maturity that it can be identified as a convergence text, that is, a text of the same status and character as the 1982 *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.* As such, it is being sent to the churches as a common point of reference in order to test or discern their own ecclesiological convergences with one another, and so to serve their further pilgrimage toward the manifestation of that unity for which Christ prayed.”