



THE CHURCH:

TOWARDS A COMMON VISION

A STUDY GUIDE FOR USE BY COURTS AND COMMITTEES WITHIN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA

The Committee on Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations and the Life and Mission Agency commend this study guide to congregations and committees of the church. While it is part of the “study and report” recommendation from the 2014 General Assembly, with responses to be sent back to the committee by the end of January, the committee is very much aware that the primary value in this document is to foster lively theological discussion within The Presbyterian Church in Canada on the nature of the church today. That discussion can take place at any time and your feedback will be appreciated by the committee both for communicating back to the World Council of Churches and also to share within our own church.

The committee is grateful to The Rev. Dr. Ron Wallace for his work in preparing this guide.

INTRODUCTION

The Church: Towards a Common Vision is the second convergence text presented to the churches by the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches (WCC). It builds on the work that went into the first convergence text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM) (1982), and on the churches’ official responses to it. Reflection on the comments made in these responses led to the conclusion that the remaining unresolved issues in the BEM document were almost all related to different understandings of ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church). The decision was made, therefore, to begin work on a second ecumenical study focusing on the doctrine of the church. The study process lasted twenty years from 1993–2013, when the resulting convergence document received official approval from the Central Committee of the WCC and was sent to member churches for study and report.

The Church: Towards a Common Vision describes itself as a convergence document. What is a convergence document? It is a document that acknowledges that the churches involved have not yet been able to reach full agreement on all of the issues related to the doctrine of the church that have historically divided them. At the same time, however, it celebrates the fact that considerable progress has been made over these 20 years of intense ecumenical discussions on the doctrine of the church among representatives of the Protestant, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, and seeks to harvest the fruits of these discussions. A convergence document, therefore, is a text that indicates where mutual agreement has been achieved on the doctrine in question, and also, where it has not, where further work is required. Paragraphs identifying and dealing with specific issues where divisions remain can be found scattered at appropriate places throughout the text and are printed in italics to distinguish them from the discussions of matters on which there is mutual agreement.

The Introduction to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* expresses the hope that this document will serve the churches in three main ways. Firstly, by presenting an account of the results of the ecumenical dialogue relating to the doctrine of the church over the last 20 years, secondly, by asking the churches to consider the results of this dialogue by confirming its positive achievements, by pointing out its deficiencies and by indicating areas that require further work, and thirdly, by providing an opportunity for the churches to reflect on their own understanding of the doctrine of the church with the hope that they will be able to make progress towards greater unity.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

The WCC has requested the churches to submit an official response to the Faith and Order Commission and provide responses to the following questions:

- To what extent does this text reflect the ecclesiological understanding of your church?
- To what extent does this text offer a basis for growth in unity among the churches?
- What adaptations or renewal in the life of your church does this statement challenge your church to work for?
- How far is your church able to form closer relationships in life and mission with those churches that can acknowledge, in a positive way, the account of the church described in this statement?
- 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?

These questions could be reformulated into a Lenten study in your congregation. The 140th General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada endorsed this request by passing a motion recommended by the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee to the effect that *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* be sent to the courts and committees of the church for study and report by January 31, 2015. Copies of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* can be downloaded, without charge, from the WCC website (<http://oikoumene.org>). They can also be purchased in book form from World Council of Churches publications or from Amazon.com at a price of \$10 per copy.

Before undertaking the task of study and report on *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, members of the courts and committees of The Presbyterian Church in Canada may find it helpful to refresh their knowledge and understanding of our church's official theological views on the ecclesiological issues involved. These can be found in our subordinate standards, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*: chapter XXV, Of the Church; chapter XXVI, Of the Communion of the Saints; chapter XXVII, Of the Sacraments; chapter XXVIII, Of Baptism; chapter XXIX, Of the Lord's Supper; and chapter XXXI, Of Synods and Councils; and in *Living Faith*, chapter 7, God's Church. These documents are available on The Presbyterian Church in Canada website (<http://presbyterian.ca>).