

## THE CHURCH: TOWARDS A COMMON VISION

### STUDY RESOURCE FROM THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND'S COUNCIL FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

#### Preface

According to the creeds we believe in one Church, but we know there are many churches. Indeed, the number of different churches in England has increased significantly in recent decades and we can probably expect that trend to continue. Christians know they gain so much from supporting and standing alongside one another in witness, worship and service. But do we really have a common vision on the basis of which we can come together as churches, even as the one Church of Jesus Christ?

In 2013, the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches (WCC) published *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. It represents a landmark for international theology across the churches, being the culmination of two decades of preparatory work. It builds on a number of previous documents, including the widely discussed *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, published in 1982. The full text can be accessed at:

[The Church: Towards a Common Vision](#)

*The Church* (as we will be calling it) is being discussed in many different contexts, including a debate at the Church of England's General Synod in July 2015. It is especially important that local groups are able to discuss it as well, because it is in the experience of the local church that many of the insights and issues that *The Church* touches on come to life.

The Church of England's Council for Christian Unity wants to make *The Church* accessible to as many people as possible. We have produced this 'Study Resource' to help people engage with the many important questions raised by the document who may not have the time to read through it all for themselves. It is designed specifically for groups from local churches, ideally though not necessarily bringing together people from different denominations. It could also be useful for getting theology students to begin to familiarise themselves with the text.

Whatever your context, we hope a session based on this 'Study Resource' will enable you to

- draw on a major international ecumenical document to inform your own thinking at local level about what it means to be the church of God
- reflect on how you relate to other churches and make decisions about when to do this and who should be your partners
- remind you about the wonderful, God-given reality of the church, the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit, sent into all the world.

It's been written as a resource for a 'stand-alone' session that introduces people to key themes from *The Church*. Some thought will be needed about how best to use it in your particular context. You might want to focus on some sections rather than others, for instance, though it's important to start with the first one. Some groups may want to read through the key passages together, but that's not intended to be necessary. The 'Key themes' summary should be enough to enable you to have a good discussion about the questions.

One person will need to take responsibility for:

- reading through this material and thinking in advance about where it might need adapting for your particular context (including deciding on what to include from the material here – all of it, or leave out some sections, passages or questions – and whether you want to add in any ideas of your own)
- making the session notes that will be needed available to participants (printing them out in most cases, but some may send round electronically and / or use data projection)
- facilitating discussion on the day and helping the group stay on track so far as time is concerned.

It would be helpful if other participants had the opportunity to look at the 'key passages' in advance, but it shouldn't be essential – busy people can just turn up and join in, without needing to do preparation.

Some other excellent materials have been produced to help people read *The Church* and respond to it, including a brief study guide on the Anglican Communion Office website, produced by the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order, and a more extensive resource from CTBI. You can find them at:



[Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order](#)



[CTBI study resource](#)

## 1. Introduction

### Imagine....

You get chatting to a new neighbour and find out that they belong to a church. They tell you the name of it but it's not a denomination or network that you recognize. Your neighbour is really pleased to hear that you belong to a church too and explains that her church is relatively new and keen to build up links with longer-established churches, perhaps through working together on something like a night shelter for the homeless or a neighbourhood pastors scheme. She also mentions that they may soon outgrow their current venue and would be interested in sharing a church building on a temporary or even permanent basis. Finally, she invites you to come to a service at her church later in the month – it's the same time as the one you normally go to so you would have to miss that.

What would you like to know about her church before deciding to take up her offer of attending a Sunday service there?

What might people in your church want to know about this church in order to commit to working with people from it on a project like a night shelter?

What questions should your church leadership be asking about this church if they start exploring whether they could offer the use of your church building for regular worship?

*If you are meeting in a small group, give people time to think individually and perhaps jot down some answers of their own, so that you can begin discussion by comparing different people's responses. If you are in a larger group, perhaps start instead by discussing in separate small groups and then comparing their responses.*



### Bible focus

Read John 20.19-23 and after giving space for silent reflection on it, discuss what strikes you from the passage. Are there other passages it's helpful to bear in mind when reading it? What might be important here for how we understand the church today?

## 2. Together on a mission

### Key themes

The first chapter of *The Church* is headed 'God's Mission and the Unity of the Church'. It draws on a number of passages from Scripture to describe how the church is sent into the world by Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit to do God's work, and argues that this 'sending' (the meaning of the Latin word 'missio' from which we get our 'mission') is at the heart of what the church is about. The church doesn't exist for its own sake, but as part of God's mission to the world. This mission has its source in the sending by the Father of the Son and the Spirit, and being the church means being caught up in that.

### Key passages

'Each of the four gospels closes with a missionary mandate; Matthew recounts: "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age'" (Matt. 28:18-20; see also Mark 16:15; Luke 24:45-49; John 20:19-21). This command by Jesus already hints at what he wanted his Church to be in order to carry out this mission. It was to be a community of witness, proclaiming the kingdom which Jesus had first proclaimed, inviting human beings from all nations to saving faith. It was to be a community of worship, initiating new members by baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity. It was to be a community of discipleship, in which the apostles, by proclaiming the Word, baptizing and celebrating the Lord's Supper, were to guide new believers to observe all that Jesus himself had commanded.' (Paragraph 2)

'At the heart of the Church's vocation in the world is the proclamation of the kingdom of God inaugurated in Jesus the Lord, crucified and risen. Through its internal life of eucharistic worship, thanksgiving, intercessory prayer, through planning for mission and evangelism, through a daily life-style of solidarity with the poor, through advocacy even to confrontation with the powers that oppress human beings, the churches are trying to fulfil this evangelistic vocation.' (Paragraph 4)



### Questions:

- In responding to the exercise at the start of the session, did you raise questions that were to do with being a community of witness, of worship and of discipleship? Could a community that did not practise all those things really be a church?
- What has your church community been sent to do by the risen Christ in the power of the Spirit? Where can working with other churches help it to fulfil that? Where might it actually be essential?
- What does it mean to be sent by Jesus 'as' he was sent by the Father (John 20.21)?

### 3. Our life and God's life

#### Key themes

The second chapter of *The Church* has the title 'The Church of the Triune God', and it emphasizes the relationship between what Christians want to say about their life together as the church and their understanding of God as Trinity from all eternity. There are many different images Scripture for the church, such as people of God, body of Christ and temple of the Holy Spirit, but we might say they can be held together by the notion of 'communion', or 'sharing' (*koinonia* in Greek, also sometimes translated as 'fellowship'). The church is about communion with God and communion with one another, and all because we share in the one Lord Jesus Christ. Our life in the church, therefore, is bound up with the life of God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is also bound up, in a different but connected way, with the life of all who believe in Jesus Christ: we are 'in communion' with them, and we belong to them as they belong to us. No individual church stands on its own.

#### Key passages

'The biblical notion of *koinonia* has become central in the ecumenical quest for a common understanding of the life and unity of the Church. This quest presupposes that communion is not simply the union of existing churches in their current form. The noun *koinonia* (communion, participation, fellowship, sharing), which derives from a verb meaning "to have something in common," "to share," "to participate," "to have part in" or "to act together," appears in passages recounting the sharing in the Lord's Supper (cf. 1 Cor. 10:16-17), the reconciliation of Paul with Peter, James and John (cf. Gal. 2:7-10), the collection for the poor (cf. Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 8:3-4) and the experience and witness of the Church (cf. Acts 2:42-45). As a divinely established communion, the Church belongs to God and does not exist for itself. It is by its very nature missionary, called and sent to witness in its own life to that communion which God intends for all humanity and for all creation in the kingdom.' (Paragraph 13)

'In the light of the previous paragraphs (13-22), it is clear that the Church is not merely the sum of individual believers among themselves. The Church is fundamentally a communion in the Triune God and, at the same time, a communion whose members partake together in the life and mission of God (cf. 2 Pet. 1:4), who, as Trinity, is the source and focus of all communion. Thus the Church is both a divine and a human reality.' (Paragraph 23)



#### Questions:

- The WCC document says that communion between different churches is 'not an optional extra' for them (31). How do we actually express that communion, and with which other churches? To go back to the exercise at the start of the session, what responsibilities would follow for your church from recognising that it has such a relationship of communion with your neighbour's church??
- How easy is it to see the church as a divine as well as a human reality? What helps to remind us of that truth? What gets in the way?
- What might John 20.19-23 tell us about God as Trinity and the life the church?

## 4. Becoming what we are

### Key themes

The third chapter of *The Church*, 'The Church: Growing in Communion', takes us into territory that will be familiar to many who are involved with ecumenism. It begins by reflecting on how it takes time to grow into the fullness of the communion that is the church, as we join together in God's mission. The reality of sin also means that we get things wrong and need to repent and seek God's forgiveness and restoration for the church. Becoming what we are in Christ means seeking to grow more fully into our 'divinely established communion', with essential elements of that including communion in faith (what we believe), in sacraments (in particular baptism and eucharist / holy communion) and in ministry (extending to ordained ministry and disputed questions about e.g. whether churches should have bishops or accept the authority of the Pope). While much progress has been made in how different churches can affirm common ground with one another here, many challenges still remain.

### Key passages

'The journey towards the full realization of God's gift of communion requires Christian communities to agree about the fundamental aspects of the life of the Church. "The ecclesial elements required for full communion within a visibly united church – the goal of the ecumenical movement – are 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." These attributes serve as a necessary framework for maintaining unity in legitimate diversity. Moreover, the growth of churches towards the unity of the one Church is intimately related to their calling to promote the unity of the whole of humanity and of creation, since Christ, who is head of the Church, is the one in whom all are to be reconciled.' (Paragraph 37)

'The authority which Jesus Christ, the one head of the Church, shares with those in ministries of leadership is neither only personal, nor only delegated by the community. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit destined for the service (*diakonia*) of the Church in love. Its exercise includes the participation of the whole community, whose sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) contributes to the overall understanding of God's Word and whose reception of the guidance and teaching of the ordained ministers testifies to the authenticity of that leadership.' (Paragraph 51)



### Questions:

- In responding to the exercise at the start of the session, did you discuss questions relating to faith, sacraments and ministry? Are they all equally important in enabling churches to recognize one another and to be 'in communion' with each other?
- How should authority and leadership operate in the life of the church? How should it be distinctive compared to other bodies and institutions?
- What does Jesus give the disciples in John 20.19-23? What does it have to do with Christian ministry?

## 5. To the end of the earth

### Key themes

The final chapter in *The Church*, 'The Church: In and for the World', is relatively brief but still crucial for the task of seeking a common understanding of the church. As was stressed in the first chapter, the church is sent to proclaim good news, in word and deed. Churches today are however conscious of a number of common challenges in living out this mission today. One challenge concerns how to share the good news of Jesus Christ with people of other religions. Another is how to decide on Christian responses to critical moral and political questions about seeking justice and peace in our societies and across the world. Remembering that the heart of the church is communion, and that our life is shared with one another as we share together in God's life through Jesus Christ, can help us find the right way forward in facing these challenges.

### Key passages

'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. Mk.16:15). Evangelization is thus one of the foremost tasks of the Church in obedience to the command of Jesus (cf. Matt. 28:18-20). The Church is called by Christ in the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the Father's reconciliation, healing and transformation of creation. Thus a constitutive aspect of evangelization is the promotion of justice and peace.' (Paragraph 59)

'The ethics of Christians as disciples are rooted in God, the creator and revealer, and take shape as the community seeks to understand God's will within the various circumstances of time and place. The Church does not stand in isolation from the moral struggles of humankind as a whole. Together with the adherents of other religions as well as with all persons of good will, Christians must promote not only those individual moral values which are essential to the authentic realization of the human person but also the social values of justice, peace and the protection of the environment, since the message of the Gospel extends to both the personal and the communal aspects of human existence. 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. Notwithstanding their current state of division, the churches have come so far in fellowship with one another that they are aware that what one does affects the life of others, and, in consequence, are increasingly conscious of the need to be accountable to each other with respect to their ethical reflections and decisions. As churches engage in mutual questioning and affirmation, they give expression to what they share in Christ.' (Paragraph 62)



### Questions:

- In responding to the exercise at the start of the session, did you talk about the good news and how you might expect a church to show commitment to sharing that, through evangelism and through a clear witness on moral and social questions? How far do these things matter for being the church?
- *The Church* follows paragraph 62, quoted above, with a passage noting that various developments are 'causing new conflicts over moral principles and ethical questions to affect the unity of the churches' (paragraph 63). Is that your experience at local level? In the face of the challenges here, how can churches identify and communicate their 'shared moral values', and what might it mean for them 'to be accountable to each other with respect to their ethical reflections and decisions'?
- In what ways can the church show and share the peace that the risen Christ declares to the disciples in John 20.19-23?

## 6. Concluding reflection and prayers

The Introduction to *The Church* asks churches to consider a number of questions, including

- i) To what extent does this text reflect the ecclesiological understanding [i.e. understanding of the church] of your church?
- ii) To what extent does this text offer a basis for growth in unity among the churches?
- iii) What adaptations or renewal in the life of your church does this statement challenge your church to work for?
- iv) How far is your church able to form closer relationships in life and mission with those churches which can acknowledge in a positive way the account of the Church described in this statement?

Have any responses to these questions emerged from your conversations? Are there any particular points that seem important to pass on e.g. to others in your local church and maybe those in leadership, to ecumenical networks in your area or to national ecumenical offices? How can you make sure that happens?

Finally, reflect on what you want to bring to God in prayer from your conversations. What could you give thanks for? What might you ask for the church? What should you perhaps repent of, with and on behalf of others in the church?

Some groups will prefer to allow a space for open prayer at this point without using fixed words or following a structure. Others might like to draw on material for occasions focusing on 'The Unity of the Church', published in *Common Worship: Festivals* (London: Church House Publishing, 2008) and available from the Church of England's website. Some of that material is reproduced below.

## **Kyrie Confession**

Lord Jesus, you came to reconcile us  
to one another and to the Father:  
Lord, have mercy.

**Lord, have mercy.**

Lord Jesus, you heal the wounds of sin and division:  
Christ, have mercy.

**Christ, have mercy.**

Lord Jesus, you intercede for us with your Father:  
Lord, have mercy.

**Lord, have mercy.**

## **Intercession**

In faith let us pray to God our Father,  
his Son Jesus Christ,  
and the Holy Spirit.

For the Church of God throughout the world,  
let us invoke the Spirit.

**Kyrie eleison.**

For the leaders of the nations,  
that they may establish and defend justice and peace,  
let us pray for the wisdom of God.

**Kyrie eleison.**

For those who suffer oppression or violence,  
let us invoke the power of the Deliverer.

**Kyrie eleison.**

That the churches may discover again their visible unity  
in the one baptism which incorporates them in Christ,  
let us pray for the love of Christ.

**Kyrie eleison.**

That the churches may attain communion  
in the eucharist around one table,  
let us pray for the strength of Christ.

**Kyrie eleison.**

That the churches may recognize each other's ministries  
in the service of their one Lord,  
let us pray for the peace of Christ.

**Kyrie eleison.**

## Collect

Heavenly Father,  
you have called us in the Body of your Son Jesus Christ  
to continue his work of reconciliation  
and reveal you to the world:  
forgive us the sins which tear us apart;  
give us the courage to overcome our fears  
and to seek that unity which is your gift and your will;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

**Amen.**

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