

The Nature and Purpose of Ecumenical Dialogue

A JWG Study

Introduction

DIALOGUE: A GIFT TO THE CHURCHES

1. Since the establishment of the contemporary ecumenical movement in the 20th century a “culture of dialogue” has emerged. Throughout the first half of the century, the philosophical, cultural and theological presuppositions for such a culture were elaborated. Such a culture has led to new relationships between communities and societies. However there has also emerged a counter-culture, fuelled by fundamentalism, new experiences of vulnerability, new political realities such as the ending of the cold war and the bringing into relationship peoples with very different visions and goals, and the impact of globalization which has led to increased awareness of ethnic and national identities. This has been manifested further in the destabilization of institutions and value systems and a questioning of authority. Dialogue has become a *sine qua non* for nations churches and cultures. For the Christian churches, dialogue is an imperative arising from the gospel, which thus presents a counter-challenge to those who would adopt exclusivist positions.

2. This document charts the impact of the culture of dialogue on the churches, offers a theological reflection on the nature of dialogue, and suggests a spirituality which can guide Christians and their communities in their approach to one another. It is an attempt on the basis of experience gained since 1967 to encourage the churches to continue their ecumenical dialogue with commitment and perseverance.

3. The Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches was formed in 1965. It began its work by reflecting on the nature of dialogue. In 1967, it published a report entitled “Ecumenical Dialogue”, which has served since then as a useful reference. The experience of the multilateral dialogues of Faith and Order since 1927 and of church union negotiations, such as those in South India, provided insights for the Joint Working Group as it undertook its task.

The year 1967 did not mark the beginning of ecumenical dialogues, but due to the active participation of the Roman Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council,

ecumenical dialogues received a new energy and scope. They soon developed into a key instrument for ecumenical progress.

4. Almost forty years have passed. The Joint Working Group again presents a study document on “The Nature and Purpose of Ecumenical Dialogue”. Organized dialogues have taken place at local, national and international levels involving all major churches and confessional communions. Substantial achievements have been reached and the participating bodies have clarified positions, and consensus has emerged on important matters of division and remaining obstacles to unity have been identified. In the meantime, the context of dialogue has changed, the reflection on dialogue has continued and the urgency of seeking visible unity through honest and persistent dialogue seeking truth with love has increased.

5. Since 1967 relations between different churches, Christian world communions and Christian families have grown and developed as a result of dialogue. Dialogue has encouraged churches to understand one other, and has helped to shatter stereotypes, break down historic barriers and encourage new and more positive relationships. Some examples include:

- the 1965 common declaration of Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I which removed from the memory and midst of the church the sentences of excommunication mutually pronounced in 1054;
- the Christological agreement between the Roman Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East (1994);
- the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church in 1999, which states that the condemnations of each other’s view of justification pronounced during the Reformation period in the Lutheran confessions and the Council of Trent do not apply today, insofar as they hold the understanding of that doctrine found in the Joint Declaration.

These are significant stages on the path towards mutual recognition, communion and the visible unity of the church.

6. The results of international dialogues have fostered a number of new church relationships. The Faith and Order statement, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM 1982), and bilateral dialogues combined to lay the foundations for the Meissen, Porvoo, and “Called to Common Mission” agreements between Anglicans and Lutherans in different parts of the world. The bilateral agreement between Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches has facilitated reconciliation between these church families. The theological dialogue of the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) has led to the establishment of a new commission to foster growth in communion between these churches, through the reception of the agreements and the development of strategies for strengthening the fellowship (Iarcum – International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission).

7. Dialogues have also helped to challenge and change attitudes in communities living in tense situations.

8. Insights from the dialogues have led different churches towards renewal and change in their life, teaching and patterns of worship. For example, BEM has encouraged more frequent celebrations of the sacrament of the Lord’s supper in some communities, and influenced revision of their liturgy itself.

9. Since 1967 it is clear that a culture of dialogue has emerged among some churches which influences every aspect of Christian living. It is evident in projects of collaboration as members of different communities seek to address the needs of those who are marginalized in our world. It is also seen in a variety of discussion groups involving members of different communities. It is an attitude of openness to other communities and their members.

10. His Holiness Pope John Paul II has called this culture “the dialogue of conversion” where, together, Christians and communities seek forgiveness for sins against unity and live into the space where Christ, the source of the church’s unity, can effectively act, with all the power of the Spirit (Ut Unum Sint, 34, 35). While the attitude of dialogue is to be evident in every aspect of Christian living, engagement in international and bilateral dialogues is a very specific form of dialogue.

TWO APPROACHES TO DIALOGUE

11. Since 1967 two distinct approaches to this specific form of ecumenical dialogue have been evident, each with its own character and each addressing different, but related, aspects of the quest for full communion.

12. The bilateral dialogues between officially appointed representatives of two Christian world communions or church families seek to overcome historical difficulties between these communities. Attention is paid to the history and classic texts which define those communities, and to the current issues, past and present, which have inhibited relations between them and which hinder movement towards communion. These dialogues normally identify that which is held in common, clarify differences, seek solutions and encourage collaboration where possible.

13. The multilateral dialogues operate in a wider framework, with officially appointed representatives of churches seeking to draw on the wisdom of all Christian traditions to investigate a theological issue. This has enabled distinctions to be made on issues over which Christians have been divided (e.g. between episkope and episcopacy), offering bilateral dialogues new approaches to historical difficulties. Christians have been reminded that multilateral and bilateral dialogue takes place within the context of the mission of the church and as such are in the service of the unity of the church “so that the world might believe...” (John 17:21). Multilateral dialogue has also emphasized that non-doctrinal factors are important for understanding doctrinal divisions; such divisions have occurred for a multiplicity of reasons – political, cultural, social, economic, and racial as well as doctrinal – and these factors also need to be addressed in processes of reconciling and healing memories.

14. Both multilateral and bilateral dialogues are essential for the dialogical process. At best there is a continuing interaction between them, with each drawing on insights gained in the other. All dialogue will be subject to the historical and cultural context which influences the relations between different communities.

NEW CONTEXT OF DIALOGUE

15. While churches have embraced a culture of dialogue and it is possible to chart a number of achievements arising from the engagement in formal ecumenical conversations, new factors have emerged in the thirty-six years since the publication of “Ecumenical Dialogue” which signify a new context in which such dialogue takes place.

16. While dialogue has led to increased sensitivity and ecumenical commitment among ecclesial traditions, a renewed allegiance to confessional identity has also developed, leading possibly to exclusivist confessionalism. There has often been a reluctance to change in the light of the results of dialogue. Sometimes this has been caused by the difficulty of achieving wider consensus within the different churches. Difficulties in reception have sometimes led to division within confessions, since it is increasingly clear that no church or confessional tradition is a homogeneous entity. In some cases, reception has been made more difficult as divisions within and between some churches have emerged on cultural and ethical issues – matters rarely the subject of the dialogues themselves. For some churches the issues being addressed in the international bilateral and multilateral dialogues are perceived as remote from their existential concerns. After over thirty years of theological dialogue and despite significant agreements during this period, not all issues required to lead to unity between churches have been resolved. The process of reconciliation has been slow. For some, and for different reasons, this has put in question the value of undertaking such theological dialogues.

17. Yet it is clear in every part of the world that the gospel of reconciliation cannot be proclaimed credibly by churches which are themselves not reconciled with each other. Divided churches are a counter-witness to the gospel.

18. What can be learned from the experience of dialogue about the nature of ecumenical dialogue itself? The new context suggests that a re-examination of ecumenical dialogue is needed, lifting up the insights of “Ecumenical Dialogue” from 1967, reflecting on over three decades of multilateral and bilateral dialogue activity, and considering challenges which have arisen.

The nature and purpose of ecumenical dialogue

TOWARDS A DESCRIPTION OF ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

19. Ecumenical dialogue is pursued in response to Our Lord’s prayer for his disciples “that they may all be one so that the world may believe” (John 17:21). It is essentially a conversation, a speaking and a listening between partners. Each speaks from his or her context and ecclesial perspective. Dialogic speech seeks to communicate that experience and perspective to the other, and to receive the same from the other in order to enter into their experience and see the world through the other’s eyes, as it were. The aim of dialogue is that each understands the partner in a deep way. It is a spiritual experience in understanding the other, a listening and speaking to one another in love.

20. Dialogue entails walking with the other; pilgrimage is an apt metaphor for dialogue. Dialogue represents a word – neither the first nor the last – on a common journey, marking a moment between the “already” of our past histories and the “not yet” of our future. It images the disciples’ conversation on the road to Emmaus, recounting the wonders the Lord has worked during a journey culminating in the recognition of the Lord in the breaking of bread at a common table.

21. Dialogue is more than an exchange of ideas. It is a “mutual gift exchange”. It is a process through which together we seek to transcend divisions by clarification of past misunderstandings through historical studies, or bypass obstacles by discovering new language or categories. And more: it involves being receptive to the ethos of the

other, and those aspects of Christian tradition preserved in the heritage of the other. Different church traditions have often given preference to certain biblical texts and traditions over others. In the process of dialogue, we are invited to reappropriate these and thus witness to the richness of the gospel in its integrity.

22. An important focus of dialogue involves mutual exploration of the meaning of the apostolic faith. At the same time dialogues are conducted within the context of the living faith of communities in particular times and places; thus they should always reflect contextual experience. They do not simply focus on systems or formulae of belief but on how these are lived out by the communities involved in the dialogue. This is particularly true with regard to national dialogues. While context is also an essential consideration in international dialogue, in this case, no particular local context can dominate, and the total, often complex, self-understanding of a Christian world communion is taken into consideration.

23. Furthermore, there is another difference in regard to context. It stems from the very different understandings found among the Christian world communions concerning the relationship between the local and universal expressions of the church. This in turn has an influence on the impact of contextual experience within the whole. Thus, for many, final authority (and therefore an aspect of independence to one degree or another) rests in each member church of a world communion (e.g., in churches stemming from the Reformation). In another case (e.g. the Catholic Church), bonds of communion of a theological, canonical and spiritual nature govern the relationships between the particular churches and the universal church. The very understanding of a particular or local church involves its being in communion with every other local church and with the church of Rome. Thus there is a continual mutual influence between the particular and universal expressions of the church. While particular and universal expressions of the church are interdependent, priority is given to the unity of the whole.

24. Dialogue addresses the divisions of the past, examining them through scholarship, seeking to state what the dialogue partners can say together about the faith today. Dialogue seeks to discern the evangelical character of the present faith, life, and worship of the partner. Thus dialogue has a descriptive character.

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF DIALOGUE

25. Ecumenical dialogue reflects analogically the inner life of the Triune God and the revelation of his love. The Father communicates himself through his Word, his Son who, in turn, responds to the Father in the power of the Spirit – a communion of life. In the fullness of time, God spoke to us through his Son (cf. Heb 1: 1-2); God's Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14).

26. The exchange between the Father and the Son in the power of the Spirit establishes the mutual interdependence of the three persons of the Triune God. In God's self-communication to God's people, God invites us to receive his word and respond in love. Thus we enter through a participation in God's gracious activity and the imperative of Christian obedience into communion with God who is communion – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In emulating this dialogical pattern of speaking and listening, of revealing ourselves and receiving the other, we leave our illusion of self-sufficiency and isolation and enter a relationship of communion.

27. The very nature of human existence also emphasizes that we do not live or exist without each other. “We not only have encounter, we are encounter. The other is not the limit of myself; the other is part of and an enrichment of my own existence. Dialogue thus belongs to the reality of human existence. Identity is dialogical” (H.E. Cardinal Kasper).

PRESUPPOSITIONS OF DIALOGUE

28. Ecumenical dialogue presupposes our common incorporation in Christ, through faith and baptism and the action of the Holy Spirit and we recognize in one another faith communities seeking oneness in Christ (see the JWG statement, “Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of a Common Baptism”, 2004). Within ecumenical dialogue we meet not as strangers but as co-dwellers within the household of God, as Christians who through our communion with the Triune God already experience “a real, though imperfect communion” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3).

29. Thus ecumenical dialogue presupposes engagement in prayer. It assumes a cruciform pattern, at the intersection of our “vertical” relationship with God and our “horizontal” communion with one another. In this we also imitate Christ’s self-giving and vulnerability. We turn from our self-absorption and self-interests to the experience of the other, assuming the vulnerability of allowing ourselves to be known by the other and of allowing ourselves to see another’s Christian pattern of life, witness, and worship through their eyes. Within this reciprocal exchange we allow ourselves to experience a fusion of horizons, enabling us to heal our divisions, strengthen our common witness, and engage in the shared mission of furthering God’s reign.

THE PURPOSE OF ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

30. The goal of ecumenical dialogue as expressed in the Canberra statement “The Unity of the Church as *Koinonia*: Gift and Calling” is that of the ecumenical movement itself:

“The unity of the church to which we are called is a *koinonia* given and 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. The goal of the search for 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. This full communion will be expressed on the local and the universal levels through conciliar forms of life and action. In such communion churches are bound in all aspects of their life together at all levels in confessing the one faith and engaging in worship and witness, deliberation and action” (2.1).

31. Dialogue aims not only at agreement on doctrine, but also at the healing of memories through repentance and mutual forgiveness. It may also be an avenue for exploring those activities we can pursue together, in order to undertake together everything that we are not obliged to do separately, as was expressed in the statement of the Faith and Order conference at Lund in 1952.

PRINCIPLES OF DIALOGUE

32. Christian unity is a gift of the Holy Spirit, not a human achievement. Dialogue prepares for that gift, prays for it, and celebrates it once received.

33. Ecumenical dialogue is ecclesial; the participants come as representatives of their ecclesial traditions, seeking to represent their tradition while exploring the divine mysteries with representatives of other traditions (cf. Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, 176).

34. Dialogue assumes an equality of the participants, as partners working together for Christian unity. It exhibits reciprocity, so that partners are not expected to adopt “our” structures for dialogue (cf. *Ut Unum Sint*, 27).

35. As dialogue proceeds, it is important to be conscious of the “hierarchy of truths” where not everything is presented at the same level of integration with the essential doctrines of the Christian faith (cf. Directory, *supra*, 176).

36. Doctrinal formulations of the faith are culturally and historically conditioned. One and the same faith can be expressed in different language at different times, reflecting new insights and organic developments. The awareness of this has proved to be a liberating experience in dialogues and has helped to create possibilities for the development of new understandings and relationships. The process of discerning a consensus in faith, must take into account different approaches, emphases, and language respecting the diversity and the limits to diversity within and among the dialogue partners.

The spirituality and practice of ecumenical dialogue

SPIRITUALITY

37. Since Christian life is itself dialogical (cf. §§23-24 *supra*) ecumenical dialogue is a way of being, of living the Christian life. Although it has specific features, it presupposes a broad spirituality of openness to the other in light of the imperative of Christian unity, directed by the Holy Spirit. Dialogue is a process of discernment, and as such requires patience, since ecumenical progress may be slow. Humility is required in order to be open to receiving truth from another. Commitment in love is also required, to search together to manifest that unity willed by our Lord. Thus we may include the following considerations about a spirituality for dialogue.

SPIRITUALITY FOR DIALOGUE PARTNERS AS COMMUNITIES

38. Communities engaging in dialogue commit themselves to a shared journey. While conducted by just a few persons on each side, a dialogue aims to assist those communions involved to move step by step towards unity by working to ensure that each partner understands, to the degree possible how the life and witness of the other can be beneficial for all. When this aspect of dialogue is neglected, dialogue results will seem remote from the experience of the church and may not be received into its life and transform relationships. Furthermore, when this aspect of dialogue is neglected, the ecumenical endeavour itself becomes an excuse for maintaining the status quo ante. Thus ecumenical dialogue implies new spiritual obligations not only for individual participants, but also for the communities as a whole.

39. A willingness to change through dialogue requires seeing the other differently, changing our patterns of thinking, speaking and acting towards the other. Since Christian unity is realized through God's power, not our own, dialogue is also a process of conversion, of discernment, of being attentive to God's impulse. It opens us up for judgment and renewal. Thus in seeking openness to transformed and reconciled relationships, we explore processes of healing and forgiveness.

40. Dialogue with Christians from whom we are divided requires examining how our identity has been constructed in opposition to the other, i.e. how we have identified ourselves by what we are not. To overcome polemical constructions of identity requires new efforts to articulate identity in more positive ways, distinguishing between confessional identity as a sign of fidelity to faith, and confessionalism as an ideology constructed in enmity to the other. This entails a spiritual as well as a theological preparation for ecumenical dialogue. Through understanding mutual hurts and expressing and receiving forgiveness we move from fear of one another to bearing one another's burdens, to being called to suffer together. Commitment to dialogue requires, at the least, a review of how our church educates its members about the dialogue partner(s).

41. Preparation for dialogue includes recovering theological resources for the development and refinement of doctrine within our own tradition. This requires a willingness to be challenged by, and to learn from, others. As encounter deepens, we find ourselves incorporating theological reflection from the partner's tradition(s) into our own life, embracing the other's thoughts and words as our own.

42. Our common commitment to Christian unity requires not only prayers for one another but a life of common prayer.

Practice

43. Each dialogue is unique and must take into account the factors drawing these partners into this dialogue at this time. Here the following points may be relevant.

CONFIGURATIONS OF DIALOGUE PARTNERS

44. The configuration of partners will necessarily affect the practice of each dialogue. To agree the goals and methods for the dialogue, whether bilateral or multilateral, it is critical to understanding who the partners are, the origin of their divisions, and/or the way these Christian communities have related to each other in the past.

45. Each partner has a particular understanding of the history of the divisions. One or both may have neuralgic memories of power and victimisation stemming from the actions of representatives of the other community in dialogue. There may be considerable asymmetries between partners (e.g. of size, ecclesial self-understanding, ability to speak on behalf of the larger ecclesial community, majority or minority status). Dialogue must consider such asymmetries, with each partner understanding the other's entry point. Many dialogue partners are also engaged in other dialogues, both bilateral and multilateral. Dialogues should be interrelated, and influence one another.

TOPICS AND AGENDA ITEMS FOR DIALOGUE

46. Dialogue aiming at Christian unity demands more than cooperation on non-divisive matters. We bring to ecumenical dialogue all that falls outside the Lund principle which asks: “whether they [churches] should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately”. Where conscience has, thus far, forbidden unity, we engage in dialogue precisely to clarify and overcome these past and present deep differences of conviction.

47. The subjects for dialogue are drawn from the partners’ past and present relationship. In discerning topics to pursue we might ask: “Where, in our relationship as dialogue partners, is the gospel at stake? What prevents us from fully recognizing one another?” Context will influence the choice of dialogue topics; yet these topics will be all the more relevant if understood within the wider spectrum of the basic, historic Christian divisions.

48. The choice of topics should be informed by history. Although each generation must reappropriate what has come before, we should not forget that we are contributing to a journey which began before us and will continue after us.

49. Topics may include not only formulations of doctrine, but also ways of doing theology and using sources of faith. Methodologies may themselves become the subject of dialogue. Choosing points of departure requires discernment of what is ripe for discussion. It may be important to begin by examining what unites the partners; the most divisive questions may need to be set aside until a shared experience of trust makes it possible to tackle them. But dialogue between divided churches cannot postpone indefinitely an examination of the issues at the crux of their division.

50. Dialogues that have matured through considerable agreement on areas of conflict may be drawn on to further constructive engagement on particular issues.

Methodologies

DIVERSE CONTEXTS AND APPROACHES

51. Since different dialogue topics call for different methodologies, we cannot speak of one way of approaching dialogue. Each partner will be more comfortable with some methods than others. We should not assume that certain ways of engaging one another should be favoured over others.

52. The experience of ecumenical dialogue in the 20th century has shown how important it is to examine the historical and socio-economic factors affecting doctrinal issues. Situating doctrinal formulations in their historical context can free us to express the same faith in new ways today. This methodology that resulted in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification modelled a hermeneutic which may be fruitful elsewhere.

53. The work on hermeneutics by the Faith and Order commission (A Treasure in Earthen Vessels, Faith and Order Paper 182, 1998) draws attention to how we “read” our own story as a community, and how we find points of convergence with the stories of others. A “hermeneutics of coherence” suggests sympathetic awareness of the faith and witness of others, as complementary to our own. A “hermeneutics of confidence” suggests that mutual reception and recognition is possible through the Holy Spirit’s gifts

to the Christian community. A “hermeneutics of suspicion” suggests the question, “Whose interests are being served by this particular reading?” Because dialogue serves the cause of the one gospel of Jesus Christ, each mode of “reading” can lead us together into greater understanding of the truth.

54. Dialogue is not negotiation towards a “lowest common denominator”, but a search for new entry-points in order to discover the way forward together. Sometimes dialogues confront issues which gave rise to mutual condemnations in the past. Here it can help to clarify what the actual position of each side was at that time and how each sought, through their position, to preserve the integrity of the gospel in a particular context. Perhaps the demands of the gospel today enable the partners to find common ground.

55. Not all doctrinal conflicts can be easily resolved. Therefore a careful consideration of the positions – how far they are complementary, and where and how they diverge – can be very useful in furthering the churches’ growth in ecumenical relationships.

PARTICIPANTS AND COMPETENCIES

56. A variety of competencies are required in ecumenical dialogue today. Those with historical and doctrinal expertise are necessary; but so are those bringing other forms of expertise, such as liturgists, ethicists, missiologists, and those with pastoral oversight responsibilities. The broader a church’s participation in a dialogue, the more applicable will be its findings for the life of the church as a whole. Different churches have different understandings of how an individual “represents” the church in a dialogue, but all participants should be aware that they stand within the discipline of their tradition and are accountable to it.

57. As “Ecumenical Dialogue” advises, it is often appropriate to include observers in the dialogue, to recognize and encourage the wider ecumenical implications of the work.

The reception of ecumenical dialogues

58. If the agreements reached through ecumenical dialogue are to have an impact on the life and witness of the churches and lead to a new stage of communion, then careful attention needs to be paid to processes for receiving the agreements so that the whole community might be involved in the process of discernment.

THE MEANING OF RECEPTION

59. “Reception” is the process by which the churches make their own the results of all their encounters with one other, and in a particular way the convergences and agreements reached on issues over which they have historically been divided. As the report of the sixth forum on bilateral dialogues notes:

“Reception is an integral part of the movement towards that full communion which is realized when “all the churches are able to recognise in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness” [Canberra statement].

Thus reception is far more than the official responses to the dialogue results, although official responses are essential. However, even though they are not concerned with the full range of interchurch relations, the results of international theological dialogues are a crucial aspect of reception, as specific attempts to overcome what divides churches and impedes the expression of unity willed by our Lord.

INSTRUMENTS OF RECEPTION

60. Churches have developed appropriate modes and instruments for receiving the results of bilateral and multilateral international dialogues. The structures and processes of decision-making that determine the “mind” of a church or community of churches reflect each church or communion’s self-understanding and polity and their particular approach.

DIFFICULTIES IN RECEPTION

61. Churches have encountered difficulties in the process of reception in part because of different modes and processes of reception.

62. Issues of consistency have emerged. When a church community is involved in several dialogues with partners from different ecclesial traditions, the presentation of its self-understanding must be consistent with what is said to all the partners, and the results achieved in one dialogue must be coherent with those achieved in the others. Some Christian world communions (the Anglican communion, the World Alliance of Reformed churches, the Lutheran World Federation) have developed structures to test this.

63. Issues of perceived relevance have emerged. Are the subjects of ecumenical dialogue largely those on the agenda of European and North American churches, even if the doctrinal divisions in question were transported throughout the world through missionary activity?

64. How do international dialogues relate to pastoral and theological priorities of the local churches? If the issues addressed are not existential questions faced by the churches, reception becomes difficult. New ways are needed to help churches see that disunity contradicts the gospel of reconciliation. How can the results of international dialogues engage the churches existentially in their different contexts? Many factors inhibiting the reception of dialogues are non-doctrinal. Where majority and minority tensions are evident, processes of forgiveness, healing and reconciliation must proceed before, and alongside, processes of reception.

65. By their very nature, dialogues are conducted by officially appointed representatives, competent in the issues under discussion. But reception, while a process of discernment by the leadership of the churches, also involves the discernment of the whole people of God. Insensitivity to the need for education and discernment by the whole community has made reception difficult. “Top-down” rather than “bottom-up” language has appeared at critical points in some processes. Thus while dialogues seek communion among churches, they may lead to the formation of dissenting groups and divisions within churches.

POSITIVE EXPERIENCES IN RECEPTION

66. How might reception processes be conducted so as to overcome these problems? In the past thirty years several international dialogues have been widely received, leading to new expressions of church fellowship and the renewal of the churches involved. Perhaps these can provide some clues about what is essential if reception is to take place.

A MULTILATERAL CASE STUDY

67. The multilateral dialogue leading to Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry offers one such example. The BEM process required time, constant dialogue with the churches, the provision of study materials, serious consideration of responses to the draft texts, translations into many languages, building upon what had been previously achieved in dialogue, and drawing on other dialogues and ecumenical initiatives.

68. This process took nearly twenty years, and indeed there had been discussion of the issues for a prior forty years. In the period 1963-82 the draft-in-process was sent three times to churches, theological colleges and ecumenical instruments for comment and reaction. The drafts were published widely, and comments taken seriously in each stage of redrafting. Many churches encouraged discussions of drafts in congregations, thus involving the whole community. Drafters also drew on international bilateral dialogues on related subjects, and on insights from the liturgical movement. The multilateral approach went behind the divisions between the churches, seeking biblical roots for understanding the specific issues (e.g. anamnesis). This provided points of reference, placing historical differences in a fresh perspective.

69. Whenever it became clear that agreement on a particular issue was going to be elusive, the specific issue was addressed by a gathering of theologians (e.g. the relation between baptism of those making a personal profession of faith and infant baptism; the issue of episcopacy). From these consultations new language was found enabling agreement to be expressed.

70. Once finalized and acclaimed by the Faith and Order commission in 1982, the text was sent to the churches for response. Carefully crafted questions accompanied the document, so that the churches in a process of discernment could receive it. An accompanying commentary facilitated understanding by those not party to the discussion. A volume of theological essays encouraged discussion in theological colleges, while a collection of liturgical materials assisted churches in reflecting on the relation between their theological understanding and liturgical practice. To give a liturgical expression to the eucharistic agreement, a liturgy was developed which illustrated what the convergence enabled in respect of celebrating the sacrament. This "Lima liturgy" undoubtedly helped to popularize the BEM agreement and process.

71. BEM was translated into more than thirty languages, facilitating its reception around the world. The process was enhanced by seminars led by Faith and Order commissioners and staff. Study guides were produced in various contexts, assisting congregational and interchurch discussions of the text. The process which from the beginning engaged the churches in the actual development of the text, facilitated official responses "at the highest level of authority" when the text was completed in 1982. Some 186 responses were received and published in six volumes. This resulted in the text having

an unprecedented ecumenical authority, which in turn encouraged churches to develop new relationships with each other.

72. On the basis of this convergence several churches were able to enter new relationships of communion (e.g. Lutheran and Anglican churches in Nordic and Baltic countries, Britain, Ireland, Canada, Germany, United States; Reformed and Lutherans in the United States; United/Uniting churches in South Africa...). Other churches were encouraged, through responding to the questions, to renew the frequency and liturgical content of their eucharistic celebrations. The distinctions made concerning ministry have facilitated bilateral dialogues, even in situations where these issues had become difficult to pursue.

SOME BILATERAL CASE STUDIES

73. Several international bilateral dialogues also developed mechanisms and work patterns which have fostered reception.

74. The official signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification was the result of a series of events of Lutheran-Catholic cooperation. The Joint Declaration drew from results of more than thirty years of international and national dialogue. In 1991, having decided to focus more on the reception of dialogue results, the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity developed a working paper entitled "Strategies for Reception: Perspectives on the Reception of Documents Emerging from the Lutheran-Catholic International Dialogue". In 1993, they established a small joint commission to draft a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. Each side then submitted the draft to its respective internal processes of evaluation. The results of the evaluation led to a revision of the draft. At every stage each side was supported by the highest levels of authority. The final version of the joint declaration was formally accepted by both sides in 1998 and signed in 1999. The successful reception of the declaration was helped by the close collaboration between the two partners in the reception process.

75. The agreement resulting from the dialogue between Reformed churches and Mennonite churches was sealed through a visit to the battle sites at which their forces had fought in the Reformation period. The churches repented, received forgiveness for allowing the memory of these events to determine present-day relationships, and sought to initiate a new relationship. A constant interplay of agreement, comment and elucidation by the bodies sponsoring the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission may have facilitated the reception of its dialogue reports. A concern in several dialogues involving the World Alliance of Reformed churches and the Roman Catholic Church was relating the theological agenda to actual Reformed-Roman Catholic relations around the world. This was an early attempt to hold together the agendas of a dialogue and of local churches.

SOME CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING RECEPTION

76. Since 1967 several factors essential to reception processes can be discerned. For dialogue results to be appropriated, the widest possible engagement with the community and their theologians is needed. This is best effected by interchange at appro-

priate points in the development of a text between persons engaged in dialogues and the churches concerned, with the text being developed in light of comments received.

77. The process is enhanced by sharing biblical, theological, and liturgical resources which help communities understand the journey undertaken by the drafters and situate the theme both within the confessions involved and within contemporary scholarship. The text should be translated into all appropriate languages, and accompanied by study guides (written by members of the drafting group, since only they know the road travelled to reach agreement). Reception can be enhanced by appropriate symbolic gestures by the sponsoring bodies, indicating that a new stage on the journey towards fuller manifestation of communion has been reached.

78. For reception and for subsequent implementation it is important to devise instruments for cooperative oversight. In the light of agreements reached, consideration needs to be given to processes of reception which involve both communities seeking to discern together. At present many reception processes are conducted within each community separately.

79. Visits between communities foster growth in relationship. It should become natural to invite partners to significant events in the life of the church, and to encourage Christian friendships at the local level. The ecumenical movement includes a spirituality of hospitality, of willingness to receive the other in our own place. Commitment to dialogue requires the willingness of church leaders to be examples of new openness, for example through shared symbolic acts, visits, and being present in times of joy and sorrow. All of these contacts foster mutual understanding and the reception of dialogue results.

Challenges for dialogue in the 21st century

80. The ecumenical movement has helped Christians move from the churches' virtual isolation from one another, experienced for centuries due to 5th-, 11th-, or 16th-century divisions. By the end of the 20th century, the churches could speak of a new relationship of sharing even now a "real, though imperfect", communion. Given these achievements, what are the challenges for ecumenical dialogue in the 21st century?

81. While these achievements have been considerable, during this same period there has also been a tendency to greater fragmentation and fracture between and within churches. There are those who assert strongly that dialogue is inimical to the Christian tradition, and who wish to assert claims of absoluteness and uniqueness. Under the influence of post-modern culture authority structures and authority in all aspects of life have been called into question. This raises challenges within the churches to doctrinal statements and to structures of governance as well. Some question whether it is at all possible for any one of any group to represent a community. The treatment of ethical questions in revolutionary ways by society has increasingly influenced the way these issues appear on the agenda of the churches, where it is clear that different views and approaches are discussed across denominational and confessional lines. It is crucial that these features of contemporary church life are taken into account as the culture of dialogue is developed in this decade.

82. However, we limit ourselves to some broader perspectives which must be considered, and to some challenges to the ecumenical movement and to dialogue in particular.

THE CHALLENGE OF A CHANGING WORLD

83. The broad context in which people live today, characterized by an increasingly interdependent and inter-connected world, will continue to have an impact on Christians. In its most positive sense, this globalization expresses the aspiration of human beings to become one family. However, globalization has further divided humanity because in the present world order the forces of globalization work to the benefit of some and to the detriment of many.

84. In this context the ecumenical movement can be a seed of hope in a world that is divided economically, culturally, socially and politically. The joys and sorrows, hopes and despairs of all peoples are those of Christians as well. While respecting all human efforts to draw people together, the ecumenical movement can make its specific contribution to the unity of the human family by healing divisions among Christians. One response to globalization calls for the development of healthy mutual relationships between global and national social structures. A parallel ecumenical challenge is achieving common perspectives on the proper relationship between universal and local expressions of the church, and between unity and diversity. By showing that dialogue can resolve persistent differences, progress made on these ecclesiological questions can have a positive impact on persons responding to globalization.

85. Thus the continuing commitment to ecumenical dialogue not only fosters reconciliation among Christians, but is also a sign of humanity's deepest aspirations to become one family.

THE CONTINUING CHALLENGE OF CHRISTIAN RECONCILIATION

86. Some challenges relate specifically to the ecumenical movement itself.

87. While we rejoice in the achievements of the 20th century ecumenical movement we recognize that Christian reconciliation is far from complete. Ecumenical dialogue must continue in order to resolve serious divergences concerning the apostolic faith. These hinder the achievement of visible unity among Christians, the unity necessary for mission in a broken world.

88. Second, the ecumenical movement is important for Christians everywhere. Early in the ecumenical movement most participants came from Europe and North America, though the minority from other continents made an important impact in early ecumenical meetings, asserting that the disunity of the church was a sin and a scandal. As noted above many major divisions among Christians started in Europe, with European and American missionaries taking these to other continents in the course of their activities.

89. Today, however, dialogue participants come also from Africa, Asia, Latin America, Oceania and the Caribbean – and their contributions are significant. For many the ecumenical agenda is deemed to be less appropriate and urgent than their work for the provision of the basic needs of their communities. Yet many Christians realize that perpetuating divisions undermines the credibility of the one gospel, and that many of the issues that they face are indeed issues of unity and division. This gospel speaks to people in their different cultures and languages; and healing the wounds of division requires the efforts of Christians in every part of the world. The diversity among Chris-

tians around the world should receive much more attention in ecumenical dialogues in the 21st century.

90. Third, we have become aware of a changing Christian landscape. We acknowledge that some of the fastest-growing Christian communities are Evangelical and Pentecostal. Many if not most of these are not involved with the ecumenical movement and have neither contact with the WCC nor dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed the very words “unity” and “ecumenical” are problematic for these communities. Their major focus is on mission and they do not necessarily see this in the context of collaborating with other churches in a given region, even where these churches have been established for centuries. A challenge today is finding ways to make ecumenical dialogue more inclusive of these important Christian groups.

91. Fourth, bilateral dialogues have focused on matters needing resolution so that reconciliation between two Communion can be achieved. This must continue. But it may be helpful if some dialogues give more systematic attention to the Christian heritage shared by both East and West, as a frame of reference for all. Perhaps all dialogues, even as they address their own particular issues, could benefit by attending to this common Christian heritage.

THE CHALLENGE OF INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

92. But although inter-religious dialogue cannot replace ecumenical dialogue, inter-religious dialogue is held among the world’s religions. It seeks not to create one religion, but to enable collaboration among religions in fostering spiritual values to contribute to harmony in society, and to help to build world peace. Cooperation among Christians to promote inter-religious dialogue is necessary, even imperative, today. Recently religions have been abused in order to justify and even promote violence, or have been marginalized from efforts to build human community. Through ecumenical cooperation in inter-religious dialogue, Christians can support the world’s religions in promoting harmony and peace.

93. Ecumenical dialogue and inter-religious dialogue must not be confused. While both are germane to the culture of dialogue, each has a specific aim and method. Ecumenical dialogue is held among Christians; it seeks visible Christian unity. It must continue because discord among Christians “openly contradicts the will of Christ” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1) and must be overcome.

Conclusion

94. Since the 1967 JWG statement on dialogue, churches have participated in dialogue especially over the last decades of the 20th century. Ecumenical dialogue has opened new vistas, showing that despite long centuries of separation, divided Christians share much in common. Dialogue has contributed to reconciliation. The reception of dialogue results has been instrumental in bringing Christians together in various ways.

95. Now in the 21st century ecumenical dialogue continues with the same goals, but in a new context. Dialogue is still an instrument which Christians must use in their search for visible unity, a goal which still remains to be fulfilled. Dialogue continues to be an instrument to assist in reconciliation of divided Christians. In this time before us,

the results of dialogue must be continually reviewed in the churches. Ecumenical dialogue has already helped to change relationships between churches. In the new context of a more globalized world, of a world of instant communication and abundant information, the church's task of proclaiming the word of God and salvation in Christ comes into unprecedented competition with proclamations of every sort of information aimed at capturing the human heart. All the more urgent in this time of history is the common witness to the gospel by Christians who can put aside their divisions and take up common witness to the Lord, who prayed for his disciples "... that they may all be one... so that the world may believe" (John 17:21).

A NOTE ON PROCESS

After papers on dialogue were presented by Bishop Walter Kasper and Dr Konrad Raiser, the first plenary developed a series of issues to be considered in a study document on dialogue. A small drafting group consisting of Eden Grace, Dr Susan Wood, Msgr Felix Machado, Msgr John Radano, and Rev. Dr Alan Falconer, met in Cartigny, Switzerland (February 2003), and produced an initial draft. After discussions in the plenary in Bari, the text was further developed through email correspondence and at a one-day drafting session in September 2003 (Falconer, Radano, Dr Thomas Best). After further discussion at the JWG executive meeting in November 2004, Bishop David Hamid was asked to review the text for editorial consistency. The study document was adopted by the JWG plenary at Chania, Crete, in May 2004.