

The Church – Towards a Common Vision

WCC Faith and Order paper No, 214

A response from The Salvation Army

Introduction

The preface of *The Church: towards a common vision* sets out the primary purpose of the World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order: ‘to serve the churches as they call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.’¹

This ‘necessarily entails a mutual recognition of each other as churches’,² despite difference, not only in practice but also in ecclesiology. *The Church* is a welcome step in this process, and represents significant convergence in important areas without claiming full consensus on all issues considered. The notion of convergence is significant. It indicates a willingness to seek common ground and shared understanding where possible whilst not assuming that all differences have been resolved or are irrelevant. It is movement *towards* unity which acknowledges diversity.

The Salvation Army welcomes the invitation to respond to the document and the following is respectfully submitted as a contribution to the conversation.

The ecclesiological self-understanding of The Salvation Army places it firmly within the universal Church.

‘Salvationists are members of the one body of Christ. We share common ground with the universal church whilst manifesting our own characteristics. As one particular expression of the Church, The Salvation Army participates with other Christian denominations and congregations in mission and ministry. We are part of the one, universal Church.’³

‘We believe that the Church, the Body of Christ on earth, often referred to in the New Testament as ‘the saints’ (*hoi hagioi* – Ephesians 1:23), comprises all who are born not of natural descent, nor of human decision, or a husband’s will, but born of God (John 1:13). The Church Universal includes all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, confessing him as Saviour and Lord, and witnessing to that sacred commitment through loving mutual submission (Matthew 18:15-20; John 13:34, 35; Ephesians 5:21) and sacrificial service (Mark 8:34; Matthew 20:25-28; John 13:1-17)⁴.

There is much in *The Church* with which The Salvation Army is in accord and which reflects our focus and purpose. We would want to acknowledge these points of concord whilst acknowledging that there are areas in which our belief and practice diverge from the assumptions of the text.

The response will be framed according to the questions set out in the introduction of the document as follows:

¹ 2012 bylaws quoted in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* vii

² *The Church* vii

³ The Salvation Army 2010 *Handbook of Doctrine* 247

⁴ The Salvation Army 2008 *The Salvation Army in the Body of Christ: An Ecclesiological Statement* 3

- *To what extent does the 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 which 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?*

1. To what extent does the text reflect the ecclesiological understanding of your church?

The text of *The Church* explores four key areas in order to seek common ground. In each chapter there is resonance with the ecclesiological understanding of The Salvation Army.

i. The description of the church as ‘missionary,’ finding its origin in the mission of God, lies at the heart of Salvationist self-awareness. It is reflected in the name; we are a *salvation* army, and the conviction that transformation is at the heart of the Gospel message is fundamental to our faith. The description of a ‘community of witness, proclaiming the kingdom which Jesus has first proclaimed...’, a community of worship, and a community of discipleship⁵ encompasses key aspects of Salvationist life and ministry. The imperative to offer hope and healing to a wounded and divided world is a fundamental motivation, from the daily activities of smallest local corps (church), to the strategic planning of International Headquarters.

The challenge of finding appropriate and respectful means by which to proclaim the Gospel, by word and deed, in a variety of contexts, languages and cultures,⁶ is ever present. Similarly, the need to allow for contextual and cultural understanding, response, and Christian practice, without compromising the essential content of the message, is vital.

ii. The second chapter notes the normativity of the Bible ensures that ecclesiological understanding remains rooted in the purposes of God as revealed in scripture. It is further shaped by the historical interpretation of key Biblical texts and the broad sweep of the Biblical message. The significance of both the Old and New Testaments in ecclesiological understanding are explored. This is consistent with Salvationist faith and belief which affirms that ‘we believe that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were given by inspiration of God, and that they only constitute the Divine rule of faith and practice’⁷.

The chapter describes the Church as called into being by God, centred and grounded on the Gospel, and through the Holy Spirit believers are incorporated into spiritual union with Christ, nourished and empowered for service. The significance of *koinonia* for Christian unity is summarised succinctly: ‘As

⁵ *The Church* 2 (references from this point refer to paragraph numbers)

⁶ *The Church* 6

⁷ The Salvation Army 2010 Handbook of Doctrine xv

a divinely established communion, the church belongs to God, and does not exist for itself.’⁸ *Koinonia* is therefore more than human acceptance or toleration.

Salvationist ecclesiological understanding affirms the importance of *koinonia*, recognising the call to the Church to be ‘a prophetic people, bearing witness to God’s word; a priestly people, offering the sacrifice of a life lived in discipleship; and a royal people, serving as instruments for the establishment of God’s reign.’⁹ It finds resonance in the claim that the mission of the Church is fulfilled through the lives and proclamation of its people,¹⁰ acknowledges the profession of the church as one, holy catholic and apostolic¹¹, and welcomes the statement that ‘legitimate diversity in the life of communion is a gift from the Lord.’¹²

Affirmation of the ‘Father’s design that salvation in Christ be incarnational and thus “take flesh” among the various peoples to whom the Gospel is proclaimed’¹³ is demonstrated in the accepted diversity of Salvation Army expression throughout the world.

However, there are also divergences, which mean that aspects of the above are understood differently from other parts of the church, and this understanding and its associated practice, for some, may place The Salvation Army beyond the scope of ‘legitimate diversity’. For example, the conviction that sacramental living and the possibility of a holy life do not require the institution of formal sacraments may be seen to be some to be divisive, or disqualifying (see iii below). The question of who decides upon the legitimacy of diversity is significant. What might be an acceptable point of convergence in this instance, and where is the point of divisive diversity located?

iii. Chapter three focuses upon the ‘growth of the Church as the pilgrim people moving towards the Kingdom of God.’¹⁴ As a pilgrim community, and the body of Christ, it claims the promise that the gates of hell cannot prevail against it (Matthew 16:18), yet acknowledges its vulnerability to both individual and corporate sin, although the text notes that there are significant differences in the ways in which Christians articulate these convictions, and define terms.

The growth of believers in discipleship is seen to be shaped by faith, sacraments and ministry.¹⁵ These three are articulated in the aspirational statement relating to the unity 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 the 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.’¹⁶

The widespread consensus that the Church is called to proclaim, in each generation, the faith ‘once for all entrusted to the saints’ (Jude 3) finds agreement in Salvation Army ecclesiology, and commitment to it is evidenced by a wide range of practice throughout the world. The need for contextual interpretation that is consistent with Biblical fidelity, and the historic witness of the church is significant for The Salvation Army, which has a presence in 127 countries.

⁸ *The Church* 13

⁹ *The Church* 19

¹⁰ *The Church* 25

¹¹ *The Church* 22

¹² *The Church* 28

¹³ *The Church* 12

¹⁴ *The Church* Introduction p.2

¹⁵ *The Church* 37 ff.

¹⁶ *The Church* 37. Quotation from *The Church Local and Universal* 1990 :25

Throughout *The Church* the place of the sacraments in the life of the church is both assumed and expected. The Salvation Army accepts that this is relevant for a large majority of the Christian Church. However, despite the recognition of the need for a wider view than that of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* and acknowledging 'those communities who affirm that their vocation does not include the rites of baptism and the eucharist, while affirming that they share in the sacramental life of the Church'¹⁷ there is a pervasive assumption throughout *The Church* that membership of the Church universal must include the celebration of the formal sacraments.

Salvation Army ecclesiology affirms the sacramental nature of the Salvationist community.

'We are a sacramental community because our life, our work, and our celebrations centre on Christ, the one true Sacrament. Our life together is sacramental because we live by faith in him and our everyday lives reveal and offer unexpected grace, his undeserved gift, again and again.

We also recognise that God uses human beings to bring grace to each other. In a similar way to the prophets and apostles, all believers are called to speak on behalf of God by their words and through their lifestyle. The call to holiness of life is a call to sacramental living – demonstrating the grace of God in the ordinary.

The Salvation Army is a permanent witness to the Church as to the possibility and practicability, of sanctification without formal sacraments.'¹⁸

'We believe that our calling into sanctity without sacraments is not a contradiction of the ways of other churches, but is something beautiful for Christ, to be held in creative tension with the equally beautiful, but very different, practices of other denominations. In the overall economy of God there are no inherent contradictions, but there are creative paradoxes'¹⁹.

Thus, whilst The Salvation Army appreciates the acknowledgment of alternative viewpoints in paragraph 40, it also notes its own divergence from assumptions of *The Church*. Whilst recognising the fundamental importance of the sacramental life, Salvationist ecclesiology does not see the sacraments of baptism and eucharist as essential to the life of the pilgrim community.

The third section, ministry, focuses upon leadership and authority in the Church. It notes a variety of understandings of ordination and ministry and looks to the Biblical text to give a broad pattern for church governance.

As in some other Christian denominations, ministry in the Salvation Army is essentially viewed as functional rather than as affording a particular status. Salvation Army officers are first of all soldiers – members of the church – and are marked by a calling from God to relinquish secular employment and be available to the organisation for deployment. Despite the use of the word 'ordination' in a Salvation Army officer commissioning ceremony, the ministry of *Salvation Army* officership does not support a theology of ministry that is essentially different from that of the committed non-officer Salvationist. The Salvation Army believes that all the people of God are called to ministry, exercised according to each individual's particular calling, gifts and graces.

¹⁷ *The Church* 40

¹⁸ The Salvation Army 2010 *Handbook of Doctrine* 269-270

¹⁹ The Salvation Army 2008 *The Salvation Army in the Body of Christ: An Ecclesiological Statement* 13-14

As an outworking of the conviction that all people are equally created in God's image, equally redeemed by Christ, equally gifted by God, and equally called to use those gifts as God directs, all forms of Christian leadership in The Salvation Army, at any level of seniority, are open equally to men and women.

The hierarchy of authority and governance in The Salvation Army is structural rather than ecclesial, practical rather than theological. This includes the ministry of oversight.²⁰ However, the call to understand authority as 'humble service, nourishing and building up the *koinonia* of the Church in faith, life and witness... a service of love without any domination or coercion'²¹ reflects closely the ecclesiological understanding and aspiration of The Salvation Army. The distinction between power and the pursuit of truth which leads to holiness and therefore 'a greater authenticity in relationship with God, with others and with all creation'²² finds an echo in the Salvation Army's requirement that 'by reason of the work to which they have committed themselves, and to which they declare themselves to be divinely called, it follows that officers must first of all live godly lives'.²³ Thus leadership is understood as spiritual leadership and any organisational authority is subservient to the spiritual authority which flows from a calling from God.

iv. The final chapter, which reflects upon the place of the church in and for the world finds strong agreement in Salvation Army theology and practice. The imperative to proclaim to all people the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ is central to the Salvationist psyche. The need for respectful communication is taken seriously, whilst affirming that Jesus is the Saviour for all times and all people.

The Salvation Army notes and affirms that

'The Church does not stand in isolation from the moral struggles of humankind as a whole. Together with 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.'²⁴

The responsibility of the Church to proclaim words of hope and comfort stands alongside an obligation to offer practical assistance, and to become a voice for the voiceless, to stand in solidarity with those who suffer, and to care for the marginalized. All of these find resonance in Salvation Army history, current practice, and in a Salvationist understanding of what it means to be the people of God in, and for, the world. *The Salvation Army in the Body of Christ* affirms a 'worldwide tradition of service (arising out of the compassionate love of Christ for all persons) without discrimination or preconditions, to the distressed, needy and marginalised, together with appropriate advocacy in the public domain on matters of social justice.'²⁵ The challenge to avoid collusion with secular authorities when we should speak out against injustice resonates clearly with our experience, and calls to mind the brokenness of the church in the present age.

²⁰ *The Church* 52

²¹ *The Church* 49

²² *The Church* 50

²³ The Salvation Army 1997 *Orders and Regulations for Officers* 2

²⁴ *The Church* 62

²⁵ The Salvation Army 2008 *The Salvation Army in the Body of Christ: An Ecclesiological Statement* 7

2. To what extent does this text offer a basis for growth in unity among the churches?

The preface identifies ecclesiology as ‘the most elemental objective in the quest for Christian unity’²⁶ and notes that while visible unity entails mutual recognition of each other as churches there are divergences between confessional ecclesiologies that may be irreconcilable. As a convergence text, *The Church* contributes to the process of identifying common ground and raising questions for further conversation. Thus there is opportunity to celebrate what is shared, recognize and affirm the progress that has taken place, whilst still acknowledging difference, and to seek a constructive way forward.

The text also provides a common starting point for internal conversations, allowing individual churches to ‘benchmark’ their own ecclesiology, and to find their place at the table.

The document describes a path to unity that looks to both confession of faith and life in the world. It may be that a unity that is expressed in terms of sacramental living, rather than in the Eucharistic fellowship, can be more easily countenanced by churches such as The Salvation Army, whose vocation does not include the rites of baptism and eucharist.

The text repeatedly affirms that service belongs to the very being of the Church,²⁷ and it is the mission of the Church to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed, through respectful evangelization, care for the marginalized and becoming a voice for the voiceless. When churches collaborate on these issues, focussing on the alleviation of human need, they begin to demonstrate the unity they are seeking.

3. What adaptations or renewal in the life of your church does this statement challenge your church to work for?

The document is a reminder that any Christian community is part of the whole; that God’s church is broader and more diverse than our personal experience of it. There is much to learn from other traditions, and to celebrate within our own. The acknowledgement of legitimate diversity, despite the absence at this time of shared common criteria for discernment, is a reminder that God works in many and varied ways in and through his people.

The challenge for the Church, and for The Salvation Army, is to learn to live, and work, together whilst respecting difference. Fidelity to the mission of God in, and for, the world, must be of paramount importance in our quest for unity.

The significance of worship in this process cannot be overestimated. Mission must be rooted in worship, and arise from it. The Salvation Army identifies itself as a community that is both gathered and scattered; gathered ‘in fellowship as one, sharing life together, growing up into Christ our head, discovering in him freedom from prejudice and sin’ and scattered for witness and mission.²⁸ *The Church* reinforces the truth that the gathering and scattering are deeply interconnected and that it is from our worship that mission and service flow. Furthermore, it is suggested that ‘in the liturgy, the people of God experience communion with God and fellowship with Christians of all times and places,’²⁹ so that the liturgy serves as a ‘dynamic paradigm’ for the present age of the anticipated

²⁶ *The Church* viii

²⁷ *The Church* 58ff

²⁸ The Salvation Army 2010 *Handbook of Doctrine* 250-252

²⁹ *The Church* 67

koinonia of the people of God. A challenge for The Salvation Army is to ensure that nothing is lost by its adherence to a form of worship that is not formally liturgical.

Chapter 3 identifies some aspects of Christian life and ministry that diverge from Salvation Army theology and practice, particularly in relation to the sacraments and understanding of ministry and authority in the church. There is always value in reflection upon one's own beliefs in the light of what we understand of those of other people. For example, by exploring issues relating to primacy, synodality and collegiality³⁰ we may gain further insight into our own structure of leadership and governance. Similarly, The Salvation Army would traditionally locate sin and holiness in the individual and would not normally use the language of corporate sin, or corporate holiness.³¹ It may benefit from considering carefully the implications of this collective responsibility, and may also contribute to the conversation by highlighting the personal responsibility and calling to holiness of each believer.

4. 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?

The Salvation Army affirms the outward focus of the document. The common purpose of the church, to witness and serve, offers opportunity to seek the unity that Christ calls for in deed as well as in word. It may be that, if on the basis of this document, Christian communities can find the common ground that allows them to work together, a visible unity may emerge.

In practical terms, it is sometimes the case that The Salvation Army is able to mediate between churches because it is seen to be 'different', facilitating the development of a *koinonia* that does not rest on the sacraments, but upon service and proclamation. In many countries, practical unity is demonstrated as The Salvation Army partners with a variety of churches to bring transformation and hope in a local community.

5. 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?

The document takes a considered view that 'mission' is at the heart of the church, but does not explore it in detail. Further work in this area could open up new conversations. How do individual churches perceive mission? What are the parameters surrounding acceptable practices in evangelisation? What are the specific challenges that arise in relation to other faiths and cultures? Each of these could lead to further understanding of similarity and difference and therefore offer insights which may foster unity.

Conclusion

'The final destiny of the Church is to be caught up in the *koinonia*/communion of the Father, 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)'.³² Until that time, it is called, in unity, to share in the mission of God to bring reconciliation and transformation to his world. The responsibility of the Church is clear and this document is a

³⁰ *The Church* 52

³¹ *The Church* 35,36

³² *The Church* 68

testament to those who are actively seeking for a path to unity, giving hope of further fruitful dialogue. However, there is also the salutary reminder that 'our brokenness and division contradict Christ's will for the unity of his disciples and hinder the mission of the Church.'³³ Unity will only become a reality when each of the churches learn to recognise our own brokenness and, through the Holy Spirit, open our hearts and minds to a new and creative way forward with the whole people of God.

³³ *The Church* 68