The Church – Towards a Common Vision

A response based on the Consultation on
Migration *and Ecclesiology – Being Church in Europe Today*

Introduction

One of the major challenges for European churches today is the multi-faceted reality of migration. Migration challenges the theological reflection of what it means to be Church at the local level and in the global context. Not only are people coming to Europe in order to seek refuge from violence, conflict and persecution and others seeking to escape poverty, starvation and pollution or other environmental degradation; there is a new quality of mobility within and beyond Europe that intensifies the experience of growing religious plurality.

Migration is not a new phenomenon. Scripture is rich of images of migration: In the Old Testament, Adam and Eve leave the Garden of Eden, Abraham and Sarah are called to leave their home and travel to a new land, Joseph is trafficked into Egypt and he is reacquainted with his father and brothers when famine forces them to move, Moses leads the people of Israel to the Promised Land, and later the Jews find themselves in exile in a far off land, yearning for their home. In the New Testament the Gospel itself becomes a migrating message on the day of Pentecost as it is spread in all corners of the world. And so it is not an exaggeration to say that Christianity would not be what it is without migration and migration has always changed the way we lived and shaped the theological understandings of what it means to be the Church.

However, in the current European context, migration forces the churches to ask ecclesiological questions differently. While churches in the past reflected on the question of the nature and purpose of the church as well as the interrelationship of church and culture, and acknowledged that Tradition is more than what is expressed in confessional documents, while they noted the dangers of nationalism, racism and religious hatred, migration urgently highlights the need to rethink these matters, while at the same time receiving and contextualising theological insights from outside Europe.

Today there is an increasing sense that people have multiple identities: cultural, national and religious. Once it might have been assumed that to belong to one nationality meant to have an equivalent or similar cultural and religious outlook. With increasing migration this is less often the case. The interconnectedness between these facets of individual and corporate identity and how they relate to the Christian faith is an area of theology that requires further exploration. To belong to a church essentially means to belong to a particular community in a particular place – a local congregation. The regular worship and fellowship experienced there, roots Christians in a uniquely specific time, place and culture. And yet to be Christian is to confess the belief in the triune God which transcends time, place and culture.

For the churches migration and global mobility mean more than just a diaconal duty to help refugees and those in need - whether Christian or not. This duty is integral part of the life and being of the Church and

there is no question about the importance of receiving Christ and witnessing Him through the love for the ones in need and our neighbours (Matthew 25). The Church as the Body of Christ cannot but pass on the love of the Trinity to all of humanity as a real way of being.

In the current situation, churches have to come to terms with the impact of migration on the life of the church in local contexts. Established churches, or churches that have historical longevity, and churches which are new or relatively recent, share the same geographical space and are challenged to relate to one another, especially in cases when they hold different views with regard to worship, theology and ethical issues. At the same time, churches that have existed for decades in Europe are sometimes labelled as "migrant" simply because the origins of many of their members are traced back to other countries or continents, while historic churches are called to include the recently arrived Christians, re-examining their flexibility and barriers to integration built into their respective contextual ecclesiologies. Many churches are affected by the emigration of church members and their continuous need for spiritual care. Many churches realise and attempt to respond to the growing diversity within them. There are new neighbours who worship in communities of similar ethnic or linguistic background, or worship style, establishing new church movements.

Churches are also challenged with regard to interreligious dialogue, as a considerable number of new migrants are faithful of other religions. They are challenged to review and redefine their self-understanding and theologies vis-à-vis their neighbours, and overcome sentiments of fear, racism and intolerance in society and the church.

The Consultation on Migration and Ecclesiology

In light of these challenges, the Conference of European Churches (CEC), the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Denmark organised a consultation held in Copenhagen, Denmark, from 8-10 December 2016.[1] The meeting aimed to provide a current European response to *The Church – Towards a Common Vision* (*TCTCV*)[2] in the context of an urgent reality of churches and societies in Europe related to the impact of migration on ecclesiology, as well as the spiritual and theological challenges it implies. The consultation brought together around 30 participants from a diversity of church backgrounds. What was striking was the number of participants who were either migrants themselves, or descendants of refugees and migrants. The migration origins of many participants, but also of their churches (e.g. the Waldensians in Italy) and how traditions also migrate (e.g. Lutheran churches in different continents) underlines how Christians are called to go beyond borders for the sake of the Gospel and for the Reign of God.

The Consultation found that the *TCTCV* recognises the role of migration, migrant churches and intercultural co-operation in several ways. In "The Mission of the Church in History" there are references towards the migrant churches in Europe (§6, 7),[3] that are serving with a mission in reverse approach, as well as the still existing need to develop new ways of being the Church (§7) which includes intercultural ministries and co-operation with migrants and migrant churches. In addition, the document emphasises the need for *koinonia*; communion with God as well as within the Body of Christ – communion within the different churches and among the churches.

In this regard it seems problematic not to specify racism as one of the sins which distorts the humans' relationship with God and with one another. This violation of God's design (§1)[4] poses one of the great

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[1] http://www.ceceurope.org/being-church-in-europe-today-migration-through-a-theological-lens/

[2] *The Church – Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Document No. 214, World Council of Churches Publications, 2013, hereafter cited as *TCTCV*.

[3] *TCTCV*, 7-8.

[4] *TCTCV*, 5.

challenges with regard to the reality and vision of the Church. Participants in the consultation felt the need to emphasise this aspect as they came to realise the manifold impacts racism has on the life of the Church. As the Church and its ministry are open to all people in all times and places as is salvation in Christ[5], the fact that ethnic and racial discrimination are existing in the churches, and coming to the forefront more with the current discourse on migration, poses a threat to the very being of the Church. Thus to only name racism just as a question for the churches' advocacy in society (§64)[6] is utterly insufficient.

Gospel and Culture

1. Churches in Europe are increasingly recognising that their own structure and practice is influenced by the culture of the society in which they are located; Migration of Christians brings different approaches that become obvious on a local level. Contemporary challenges of racism and the rising political tension around ethnic and national identity pose the question to the churches of how to speak of the unity of the world-wide Church.

2. The consultation heard how the rise of nationalism, Islamism and other forms of religious fundamentalism have tended to undermine democracy and therefore social pluralism, as they lean towards defensiveness of identity, and how this is becoming a growing phenomenon in Western societies. The problem of phyletism was highlighted, distinctions based purely on differences of language and ethnic origin, condemned by the Synod of Constantinople in 1872[7], which has resulted in a situation that prevails in many European cities of several national or ethnic jurisdictions that is viewed as entirely normal. Thus the so-called 'diaspora' has become an issue also between Orthodox autocephalous churches rather than "the providential place" where the Church can demonstrate its unity and catholicity.

3. For Lutheran churches, where liturgy and ecclesiology have been influenced strongly by European history and culture, an encounter between a newly established congregation for migrant Christians with those church denominations that have a historic longevity can be difficult. The consultation heard anecdotes that members of a historical Lutheran congregation considered a newly established parish of African migrants as a sect; the African Christians thought the Lutheran Church to be lifeless and lacking the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

4. A third example is the experience of Roma congregations; not migrants but often suffering from racism and social exclusion. How can a need be met to worship according to their own culture without being subsumed into other denominations? How can legitimate diversity find expression in the life of communion as a gift of God? (§ 28)[8] But also, how can all churches "recognise in one another the authentic presence of […] 'the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church,'" (§ 9, § 28)?[9]

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[5] See "Communiqué of Consultation about the question on ecclesiology," in Michael Beintker et al. (eds.), Consultations between the Conference of European Churches and the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, Leuenberg Documents Vol. 11, Wittenberg/Phanar: Verlag Otto Lembeck Frankfurt am Main, 2007, 16.

[6] *TCTCV*, 36.

[7] The Synod convened in Constantinople in 1872 by Patriarch Anthimos VI of Constantinople was attended by the Patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, and other Orthodox hierarchs to consider the situation of the Bulgarian Exarchate established with the help of the Ottoman authorities in 1870. The Exarchate was an independent ecclesiastical entity under Exarch Anthimos of Bulgaria. The local Synod excommunicated the Bulgarians and condemned them for the heresy of "phyletism," namely the false principle that ecclesiastical jurisdictions should correspond to ethnic divisions. Phyletism comes from the Greek words 'plyle' which means clan, tribe, race.

[8] *TCTCV*, 16, cf. *Charta Oecumenica*, A Text, a Process, and a Dream of the Churches in Europe, Viorel Ionita and Sarah Numico (eds.), Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2003, 8, hereafter cited as *Charta Oecumenica*.

[9] TCTCV, 8 and 16

5. Many European countries have a history of having a national or state Church. This history however developed rather out of a pastoral – and at times political - necessity than out of a theological need. While it is important to allow people to pray and worship in their language and a cultural pattern there is no theological imperative to associate a church to a state or people. It is rather the practice of the church as described in the gospel to form "intercultural" communities ad locum, i.e. the church of a specific city. The letters of Apostle Paul give a clear indication on the intercultural debates and conflicts in the communities of gentiles, who came from many different countries, and Jews. So in regard to the origins of the church and its present challenges it seems only appropriate to describe such churches as being *territorial* – in that they have a calling to serve the people and land *in* a particular geographical area, rather than being *of* a nation. Keeping the territorial nature of the local church in mind, the question of the so-called "diaspora" becomes a unique challenge. While there are pastoral needs for many migrants to be able to pray and worship in their traditional way, theologically speaking this should not lead to different ecclesial jurisdiction of foreign churches in a long run. Rather the migrants and local people are called to find ways in which they develop a local and inclusive church. While churches might be still divided along denominational or traditional lines, there should be no division along cultural or language lines, as Christ transcends those categories (without negating them). So where pastoral necessity calls for diversity this may not divide the people of God on the local level. This may also facilitate churches to change practices while appreciating cultural diversity, but also giving up some elements of culture in order to fulfil their mission. In the context of migration, migrants give up a great deal in order to survive and are changed by the process of migration itself. Historic European churches, many who cherish cultural traditions, are called to reflect on being part of a pilgrim Church and to be prepared to change in order to live out the Gospel in culturally relevant ways.

6. *TCTCV* §31 notes "Culture, language and shared history all enter into the very fabric of the local church."[10] Although this is true for the majority of places, the consultation participants heard numerous stories where local churches can be places of diverse cultures and languages, yet there is no previously shared history. As it is stressed earlier in §28 "Legitimate diversity is compromised whenever Christians consider their own cultural expressions of the Gospel as the only authentic ones, to be imposed upon Christians of other cultures."[11] There is a need to find a balance between the pastoral need of expressing ones faith in an accustomed way and the theological/ecclesiological need to live together as an inclusive and respectful community as the Body of Christ.

7. Racism is still prevalent and the Church should not rest until racist attitudes and behaviours have been eradicated. *TCTCV* mentions racism in §64 as one of the causes of war – but this does not cover this great evil with sufficient detail. Racism is a key factor in preventing the embracing of cultural diversity; and too often particularly in the current refugee context the issue of religious diversity is used as a proxy for racism and as a reason for not offering humanitarian protection to people in need.

Practice of being Church – Identities and the Church

8. While the incarnation of Christ calls for the inculturation of the Body of Christ, the Church, national and ethnic issues become obstacles to the catholicity and unity of the Church. While the Gospel needs to be expressed in the specific cultural form of the place where it is preached, and thereby the churches are shaped by this specific culture, at the same time the Church needs to transcend culture and place in order to express the unity and catholicity of the Body of Christ. Ecumenical bilateral and multilateral dialogues have shown that visible unity requires the overcoming of national and ethnic problems that divide the people of God as much as the healing of divisions on aspects of faith. The

[10] *TCTCV*, 17.

[11] *TCTCV*, 16.

role of socio-cultural identities needs to be studied with regard to understanding churches and denominations, especially how these identities influence the realisation of the notion of the catholicity and unity of the church. Projects such as the Faith and Order 1997 *Ethnic Identity, National Identity and the Unity of the Church* that resulted in the document *Participating in God's Mission of Reconciliation: a Resource for Churches in Situations of Conflict*[12] need to be promoted and influence the work on ecclesiology. As churches in Europe continue to struggle with divisions due to national and ethnic identities further reflection is needed on the matter and on the interplay between national and ethnic identities and ecclesiology.

9. One place to begin consideration is a matter of nomenclature. Churches labelled "migrant" can often be established for several decades, and include members who are citizens of the society they are located in, and are fully involved in the ecumenical movement including participation in formal structures. Churches called "mainline" may imply that there is something ordinary, proper and regular about them, and therefore that other churches are deficient or regarded even as some kind of sect. "National" in a European context has connections with State churches (*cuius regio eius religio*), and an uncritical closeness between the institutions of the church and the government of a nation state. The Church can be, when called to be, deeply counter-cultural; all churches have a history of migration, persecution and movement; there is a real danger when trying to describe different models and practices of churches in a way which immediately divides groups into 'them' and 'us'. Similarly, there are dangers to describe the relationship between different churches as 'host' and 'guest' – a host has control and the guest is dependent. We need to recognise that both together are the Church, which indicates a relationship of mutual accountability and interdependence.

10. Once we have overcome the internalised barriers of our own outlook we can turn to some of the real problems facing the practice of churches today. One common issue raised during the consultation was a situation when one congregation rents rooms from another (in the European context, often a new congregation of migrants using the building of a long-established congregation). When one Christian congregation acts as a landlord to another, urgent questions rise concerning how they together constitute the Church and the implications for their relationship.

11. A second area of church practice which is increasingly a live issue is the question of how membership in the church is established and of the recognition of baptism, as a practical and ecclesiological matter. When a migrant Christian is able to 'prove' his or her baptism, or the ceremony of baptism may have conformed to a sense of 'order' by another denomination, the recognition of a valid baptism in a refugee's claim for protection on the grounds of religious persecution, can have a bearing on the decision of immigration officials.[13]

12. Related to the recognition of baptism is the recognition of ministry inherent in the unresolved question between Protestants and Orthodox of the relationship between the apostolic succession of ministry and the apostolic continuity of the Church as a whole. In addition, some of the Protestant churches which have historic longevity in Europe have rigorous processes for the selection of candidates for ordained ministry, involving a series of assessments to identify if the church is satisfied with the nature of the individual's calling, in addition to their suitability for the role. However, in Evangelical or Pentecostal churches now larger in Europe, a person who feels God's spirit moving them can play a role in preaching, pastoral care and other ministry. The feeling in the consultation was that the attitudes of both the long-established and the recently-established churches have to be prepared to be flexible. At a practical level, if recognition of ministry depends on formal agreements

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[12] Participating in God's Mission of Reconciliation. A Resource for Churches in Situations of Conflict, A Faith and Order Study Document, Faith and Order Paper No. 201, World Council of Churches Publications, 2005.

[13] CCME resources and support on this topic: http://www.ccme.be/areas-of-work/refugee-protection/.

between larger church bodies, this is of little use for a particular congregation in a local context, seeking to be "Church" with churches that do not belong to larger bodies.

Unity in Reconciled Diversity

13. Some migrant Christians in Europe join churches that have historical longevity. Some join existing churches but also join fellowship meetings for people of their own nationality, culture or language group. Some set up or join separate churches which meet the needs of other migrant Christians. Some of these newly formed churches belong to ecumenical bodies and networks, others do not. How are these increasingly diverse expressions of being the Church to be united in reconciled diversity? How is ecumenical prayer possible amidst cultural diversity?

14. There are those who regard greater diversity as a blessing[14] and those who see it as toxic. There are risks in trying to force congregations of different cultures together into a structural model which meets the need of neither group. Treating every person equally does not necessarily lead to equity; there are challenges to develop prophetic practices which work towards equity where the environment is unequal. The only way to work through such matters is to create a shared religious *habitus*, strengthen intercultural education, talk through issues not only where there is agreement or disagreement but also the relevance of different issues (which might be non-issues to others).

15. There is a challenge to always remember that 'unity' as reconciled diversity is an essential component of ecumenical – and therefore Christian – spirituality. There is not always - or even often - a practical reason and so it is regarded as less of a priority by some. *TCTCV* is helpful in this regard, particularly §28,[15] §33-36[16] and §62-63.[17] The consultation also heard that there can be serious lack of unity within the same tradition, from Orthodox concerns about ethno-phyletism to Reformed expressions of worship often being radically different. So as a first step we need to develop an ecclesiological thinking which is able to appreciate pluralism and a variety of expressions within the individual churches as to be able to deal with pluralism in the given societies. As the different churches in Europe today are as well denominational as post- or pre-creedal churches, theological dialogue becomes more demanding than previously assumed. New ways of engaging are required that do not require high-level committees but which involve the participation of many more Christians living in many different contexts. Furthermore, a new emphasis should be given to the *lex orandi, lex credendi* way of expressing the churches' teaching, so that a dialogue based on the actual expressions of faith in worship, prayer, preaching and everyday life of the churches can be developed. This would allow churches of different traditions in one place to recognise their similarities as well as allow non-creedal churches to enter in a theological dialogue on a grassroots level as well as on a European one.

16. *TCTCV* §37 outlines the imperative to seek agreement on matters of faith, sacraments and ministry to achieve visible unity. While this goal remains a central one, in order to live and work together as churches in one place and to serve the needs of the different groups in our societies, we need a way to express the recognition of being siblings in Christ. In addition to theological dialogue, we need to explore practical expressions of unity which go beyond physical "unity" of sitting in the same worship service in order to recognise unity where there is no common language. The work of bilateral dialogues may be helpful here such as the Joint Commission on Doctrine of the Church of

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[14]"We consider the diversity of our regional, national, cultural and religious traditions to be enriching for Europe. In view of numerous conflicts, the churches are called upon to serve together the cause of reconciliation among peoples and cultures." *Charta Oecumenica*, 13.

[15] *TCTCV*, 16.

[16] *TCTCV*, 21-22.

[17] *TCTCV*, 35.

Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland which produced a shared/common liturgy for renewal of baptismal vows.[18]

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[18] http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/3116/baptism_liturgy.pdf.

The present paper is the response based on the consultation organized by CEC and CCME to the *TCTCV* document of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. In summary, the consultation made the following observations:

- There are vastly different experiences of migration in different parts of Europe and the experience of migration in Europe has changed substantially from the period leading up to the publication of *TCTCV*.

- The terms "migrant", "mainline" and "national" church are distinctly unhelpful when used too generally.

- Migration tests historical church structures and models, which provides new challenges for churches seeking to promote unity in reconciled diversity.

- When new neighbours worship in communities that share a common language, worship style, nationality or ethnic background, they encounter new opportunities and avenues for relating to other churches and Christians.

It also identified the following points that require immediate action:

- Traditional ecumenical organisations and those churches with historical engagement with ecumenism need to be better equipped to respond to an increasingly diverse range of church expressions and visions.

- Attitudes and behaviours within and between churches need to be shaped to be receptive and respectful of difference.

- Churches in Europe must respond to the refugee emergency which presents the continent with crises which are spiritual, moral and humanitarian.

- In places where integration in the church community is slow or difficult, churches can support it through their ministry, through diversity expressed in their worship and life, and making good use of the gifts of all members irrespectively of cultural background. It is important to underline the meaning of integration as:

  a dynamic two-way process of mutual accommodation where all parties give and receive. In this sense integration means respect for different cultural identities. This involves a shift in the majority communities' ways of thinking. It is necessary to understand and accept that cultures and identities – including our own – are not static but changing. Integration is also a process of reducing socio-economic barriers between people or groups of people, creating equal opportunities and enabling people to participate actively in the public, economic, social, and political as well as church or religious spheres. It is a common effort towards a peaceful and equitable society.[19]

Suggestions for further work

Some of the ideas and suggestions for further reflection and work from the consultation included:

- In refugee-receiving communities, support should be given to Imams to reach out to new refugees to prevent interference from religious extremists.

- Establish an ecumenical committee in each country which can take up issues of migration with the state.

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[19] From the CSC/CCME response to the Council of Europe White Paper consultation on Intercultural Dialogue, p.3 available on http://www.ccme.be/fileadmin/filer/ccme/70_DOWNLOADS/95_ARCHIVE/2007/2007-06-14_CSC-CCME_Response_to_the_CoE_White_Paper_consultation_on_Intercultural_Dialogue.pdf

- Hold a consultation on national identity and being Church to address ethno-phyletism and publish a clear statement on it.

- Faith and Order work to prioritise questions of churches that struggle with division due to national and ethnic identities.

- The international ecumenical movement should have better defined and realistic goals, such as seeking to end the concept of 'migrant' and 'mainstream' churches.

- Among churches maintaining communion, explore dual or multiple church membership as a practice to be commended to those for whom it is appropriate, as a sign of unity and understanding that migrants especially may wish to worship both with their new neighbours as well as in their own language or cultural style.

- Churches with different histories and cultures should invite Christians from different traditions to participate in social action work as well as into governing bodies.

- Establish more flexible approaches around the recognition of individuals' ministry, for example by allowing the responsibility to determine status to a local office holder or appropriate body.

In 2004 the CEC-CPCE Consultation on the question of ecclesiology affirmed that "Ecclesiology can only be dealt with properly within the context of the doctrine of the trinity, the context of Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, and theological anthropology." [20] Today, as migration changes the ecclesial landscape in Europe, ecclesiological questions need to be revisited in the conviction that

> The universal Church is not compiled of incomplete part-churches, but exists as a community of equally valid local churches, without any overriding importance or subordination of any of these churches. The local church is supplied with all the marks of the nature of the Church, which enable the salvation of human beings. The idea of love, which binds together the persons of the Trinity and in which they interpenetrate each other (perichoresis) has come to be an important impulse for the understanding of the unity of the Church. [21]

> The biblical vision of the reconciled people of God does not mean "the end of cultural diversity but the end of division between people of different cultures as the church became incarnate in each culture. One of the great issues in European culture is the tension that exists between different cultural groups and yet also the positive situations in which once oppressed cultures have found new freedoms. We believe the Church has a calling in this situation to be the Body of Christ in which the different parts are all honoured for what they are and the gifts they bring". [22]

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[20] *Consultation about the question on ecclesiology*, 18.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Towards a Common Mission in Europe, http://cid.ceceurope.org/working-priorities/mission-research/