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ONE BAPTISM : TOWARDS MUTUAL RECOGNITION
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ONE BAPTISM: TOWARDS MUTUAL RECOGNITION

A STUDY TEXT

FAITH AND ORDER PAPER NO. 210
WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, GENEVA

ISBN: 978-2-8254-1556-6
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PREFACE

The study text *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition* belongs to the biblical vision of Christian unity, “making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the one bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:3-5). The study text finds its place within the long lineage of Faith and Order Papers; more specifically, *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition* continues in the direction of the 1982 *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. *BEM* affirms: “Through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and space.”¹ The commentary reflects more cautiously:

The inability of the churches mutually to recognize their various practices of baptism as sharing in the one baptism and their actual dividedness in spite of mutual baptismal recognition, have given dramatic visibility to the broken witness of the Church.... The need to recover baptismal unity is at the heart of the ecumenical task as it is central for the realization of genuine partnership within Christian communities.²

¹ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1982, “Baptism”, §6.

² *BEM*, “Baptism”, §6, Commentary.

The need for *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition* arises from three different but interrelated contexts. The first is the responses to BEM from the churches. Most churches agree with BEM that baptism is the primary and fundamental sacrament of unity.³ From this widespread response other questions arise. To what extent, for instance, does an emerging consensus within the churches on BEM's teaching on baptism imply a degree of mutual baptismal and ecclesial recognition? The responses on this question reflect a diversity of attitudes towards the recognition of baptism. For some churches, such recognition is relatively straightforward; for others, it is more difficult. What are the implications when Christians can, or cannot, recognise as authentic baptisms celebrated in divided churches? "For indeed, the 'implications' of this recognition are at the very heart of the churches' self-understanding in their search for visible unity."⁴

The second context is the ecumenical baptismal praxis that has emerged since 1982. In different regions and countries around the world today, there are many examples of churches agreeing to recognise one another's baptisms, including the use of a common baptismal certificate. This development may rightly be identified as an instance of the practical or lived reception of *BEM*.

The third context is the ongoing challenges to mutual recognition as well as new issues that equally impede recognition which can, in fact, reverse previous agreements on the mutual recognition of baptism. Faith and Order's 2005 text on ecclesiology, *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, carefully notes such historic and more recent areas of disagreement on baptismal practice and theology, including the question of baptismal formulae.⁵

As the text itself makes clear, *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition* is a study document rather than a

common statement of the Commission on Faith and Order. It explores the close relation between baptism and the believer's life-long growth into Christ as a basis for greater mutual recognition of baptism. It also addresses issues in baptismal understanding and liturgical practice which cause difficulty within churches, and hinder the mutual recognition of baptism between them today. The study text is offered to the churches in the hope that fresh perspectives will help the churches to clarify the interrelated challenges of the mutual recognition of baptism and ecclesial recognition; to put the consequences of mutual recognition fully into practice; and to identify issues which still prevent such recognition. As such, *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition* belongs to Faith and Order's ongoing work to call the churches to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship.

As this text was a decade in the making, we express our thanks and appreciation to the previous Moderators and Directors of the Commission on Faith and Order, with particular appreciation for work of commission members and consultants who worked so hard on this text.

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³ See *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry 1982-1990: Report on the Process and Responses*, Faith and Order Paper No. 149, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1990, p. 51.

⁴ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990*, p. 52.

⁵ *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 198, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 2005, grey box on Baptism following §77.

ONE BAPTISM: TOWARDS MUTUAL RECOGNITION

A STUDY TEXT

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The goal and perspective of this text

1. This is a study document rather than a convergence text. It explores the close relation between baptism and the believer's life-long growth into Christ, as a basis for a greater mutual recognition of baptism. It also addresses issues in baptismal understanding and practice which cause difficulty within churches and hinder the mutual recognition of baptism among churches today. It is offered in the hope that fresh perspectives will help the churches (a) to clarify the meaning of the mutual recognition of baptism, (b) to put the consequences of mutual recognition fully into practice, and (c) to clarify issues which still prevent such recognition.⁶

2. The text is organized in the following way:

- a) Section I (Introduction) begins by discussing the notion of recognition, principally but not only with respect to baptism.
- b) Section II (Baptism: symbol and pattern of the new life in Christ) explores the biblical language and the liturgical history of baptism, stressing the common dimensions of most churches' baptismal liturgies, including a discussion of the terminology of "sacrament" and "ordinance", and the relation of the event of baptism itself to the continuing, life-long process of growth into Christ.

⁶ The present document stands within Faith and Order's recent process of reflection on the role of worship generally, and now baptism in particular, in the search for Christian unity. This text was endorsed by the World Council of Churches' Standing Commission on Faith and Order, at its meeting at the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, Republic of Armenia, 21-25 June 2010.

- c) Section III (Baptism and the church) notes the function of baptism as entry into the church, explores the relation between baptism and the eucharist, and raises issues about the relation of baptism to church membership.
- d) Section IV (Baptism and faith) addresses the relationship between God's initiative and the faith both of the individual and of the community. This section also addresses the context and content of Christian formation.
- e) Section V (Further steps for the journey towards mutual recognition: questions for the churches) focuses these themes and suggests steps which may be necessary on the way to a fuller mutual recognition of baptism. Questions in each area invite the churches to reflect on the developments in their own traditions, and in their relation with other churches, since the publication of *BEM*.
- f) Section VI (Conclusion) reminds readers and the churches of the wider goal of the ecumenical quest: full visible unity as realised in eucharistic fellowship.

3. The churches use terms related to baptism in a variety of ways. In this study document:

- a) *Christian initiation* refers to a process that begins with hearing the Gospel and confessing the faith, continues with formation in faith (catechesis), leads to baptism, resulting in the incorporation of the baptized into the Christian community, marked by the sharing of the eucharistic meal.
- b) *Baptism* is the central event of this process, in which a believer is incorporated into the body of Christ. This act includes profession of faith and is "administered with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit".⁷

It is acknowledged that some churches may not be familiar with the broader term "Christian initiation" and that for others, "baptism" includes the liturgical acts of anointing and/or the laying on of hands (cf. hereunder §§32-33). Despite this diversity in understanding and practice, churches are increasingly able to recognize, in the baptism

⁷ *BEM*, "Baptism", §17.

of other churches, the action of the triune God. At the same time, those reading the present text will naturally do so through the lens of their own tradition and experience.

B. The mutual recognition of baptism: a gift and challenge to the churches

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:4-6).⁸

4. According to this biblical witness, in baptism we are called into communion with the triune God. In baptism, Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, calls his followers and makes them his own, members of the one body and participants in the communion of his disciples. Echoing this, *BEM* says: "Therefore, our one baptism into Christ constitutes a call to the churches to overcome their divisions and visibly manifest their fellowship."⁹

5. *BEM* revealed considerable convergence on the understanding of baptism among churches, and identified areas where differences remain. The process of responding to *BEM*¹⁰ spurred many churches to reflect on their own baptismal understanding and practice, and helped them to understand better the views and practices of others. On this basis significant steps have been taken towards a greater mutual recognition of baptism – towards, as *BEM*

⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, the scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America, and are used by permission. All rights reserved.

⁹ *BEM*, "Baptism", §6, p. 3. Also: "Mutual recognition of baptism is acknowledged as an important sign of expressing the baptismal unity given in Christ. Wherever possible, mutual recognition should be expressed explicitly by the churches", "Baptism", §15; and "Baptism, therefore, constitutes a sacramental bond of unity linking all who have been reborn by means of it": *Unitatis Redintegratio*, §22, in Walter M. Abbott, S.J., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*, Guild Press, America Press, Association Press, New York, 1966, p. 364.

¹⁰ See Max Thurian, ed., *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" Text*, Vols. I-VI, Faith and Order Papers Nos. 129, 132, 135, 137, 143, 144 respectively, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1986-1988.

put it, “churches... recognizing one another’s baptism as the one baptism into Christ”.¹¹

6. Formal agreements in local and national contexts¹² have established mutual recognition on an official basis, enabling and encouraging practical expressions of mutual recognition at the level of the local congregation. Bilateral discussions among Christian confessions at world level have reflected the fact that “the continued existence of common baptism is a decisive factor of unity beyond the divisions” of the churches.¹³ Significant multilateral, ecumenical texts at world level have confirmed and extended these results, urging the churches to put mutual recognition into practice wherever possible.¹⁴

7. Another sign of progress has been a growing consensus concerning the fundamental unity in what some Christian traditions have called the “sacraments of Christian initiation” (baptism, chrismation/confirmation, eucharist).

¹¹ *BEM*, “Baptism”, §15.

¹² For example at the state level the text “Baptism: Baptismal Practice in an Ecumenical Context” issued by the Massachusetts [U.S.A.] Commission on Christian Unity, revised edition, 2000; and at the national level the documents “The Sacrament of Baptism as a Sign of Unity” approved by the Theological Commission of the Roman Catholic Polish Episcopate Churches and the Polish Ecumenical Council in 2000; and the Mutual Recognition Agreement on Baptism signed by 11 churches (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican and Protestant) in Germany on 29 April 2007.

¹³ See the surveys of the treatment of baptism in the bilateral dialogues by Andre Birmelé, “Baptism in Ecumenical Dialogues,” in Wilhelm Hüffmeier and Tony Peck, eds., *Dialogue between the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) and the European Baptist Federation (EBF) on the Doctrine and Practice of Baptism*, Leuenberg Documents 9, Verlag Otto Lembeck, Frankfurt am Main, 2005, pp. 79-103, citation, p. 79; and the previous version, “Baptism and the Unity of the Church in Ecumenical Dialogues”, in Michael Root and Risto Saarinen, eds., *Baptism & the Unity of the Church*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and WCC Publications, Geneva, 1998, pp. 104-129.

¹⁴ See *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 198, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 2005, §§74-77; “Called to be the One Church”, the Porto Alegre [WCC Assembly] ecclesiology text, World Council of Churches, 2006, §§8-9 and §14(c); and “Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of a Common Baptism: A JWG Study”, in *Eighth Report: Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, Geneva-Rome, 2005*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2005, pp. 45-72.

These have, in some traditions, been separated and performed at different points in the life of the believer, with each action acquiring a distinct and self-contained meaning. When the unity of these actions is acknowledged, differences in understanding and practice may no longer appear divisive (for example, the moment at which the Holy Spirit is invoked).

8. Another sign of progress is that churches have begun to take positive, practical steps to nurture and express mutual recognition. Examples are the common recovery of the catechumenate (instruction in the faith prior to baptism), including an ecumenical dimension in the preparation of catechists; the widespread generous use of water in baptism, including a more frequent use of immersion fonts; and the use of a common baptismal certificate recognized by different churches; and adult education done together by several churches.

9. Despite the signs of progress, the call to the churches “to overcome their divisions and visibly manifest their fellowship” has become even more insistent since *BEM* was published in 1982. This question needs to be put sharply today: what does the “mutual recognition of baptism” actually mean, theologically, ecclesiologically and pastorally? What are the full *implications* of that recognition, and how can each church live out those implications, both in its own life and together with other churches?

C. Mutual recognition and discernment

10. This study text places the event of baptism within the broader context of Christian initiation, and places both within the context of the believer’s life-long growth into Christ. This life-long process is marked by ongoing nurture within the Christian community, and comes to fulfillment only with the end of the believer’s earthly life. It is hoped that consideration of baptism within this broader context will help the churches to discern common understandings and intentions within diverse practices, thus fostering mutual recognition.

11. In many cases churches do mutually recognize (as put by the fifth world conference on Faith and Order) “one

another's baptism as the one baptism into Christ",¹⁵ and this has important consequences for the self-understanding and practice of *all* the churches. But it is also true that "not all churches are able to recognize other churches' baptisms, and not all agree entirely on the insights of *BEM* concerning baptism".¹⁶ The situation is indeed complex, as the following instances make clear:

- mutual recognition of baptism may reflect a condition of full sharing in faith and life among the churches, marked by eucharistic communion, and including common discernment and decision-making, service and mission; or
- mutual recognition may exist together with significant limitations in sharing, particularly at the eucharistic table – raising questions for some about the meaning of recognition, if not of baptism itself, or
- mutual recognition may exist, but without further shared life and mission; or
- mutual recognition may be lacking, so that some churches (or congregations within them) require the baptism of all persons seeking membership, even if they have already been baptized in another church.

In any case mutual recognition of baptism varies from place to place depending on local circumstances, including the degree of local awareness, and acceptance, of the ecumenical dimension of the church's life.

12. Mutual recognition is one of the central aims of the ecumenical endeavour. There are at least three dimensions to mutual recognition. It may involve:

¹⁵ See the *Worship Book, Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela, 1993*, Commission on Faith and Order, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1993; English, p. 12; Spanish, p. 32; German, p. 53; French, p. 74.

¹⁶ "Faith and Order Work on Worship (with special reference to Baptism) in Relation to the Unity of the Church, Planning Meeting, Communauté de Grandchamp, July, 1998", Appendix III, in *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Board, 15-24 June 1999, Toronto, Canada*, Faith and Order Paper No. 185, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1999, p. 101 (Report, pp. 100-110).

- churches recognizing one another as churches, that is, as authentic expressions of the One Church of Jesus Christ; or
- churches recognizing the baptism of a person from one church who seeks entrance into another church; or
- persons recognizing one another individually as Christians.

13. In all these contexts, recognition indicates that one party *acknowledges* an already-existing quality, identity or status which it has discerned in another. Recognition in this sense of "acknowledging" corresponds to the churches' realization that they already share an existing degree of *koinonia*. This grows with their experience in the ecumenical movement, as they are challenged to receive God's gift together more intensely and to make their communion ever more visible.¹⁷ Recognition as acknowledgement intensifies the commitment of the churches to one another, on the basis of their shared convictions and values, as equal partners within the search for visible unity. This by no means excludes their calling one another to a fuller expression of "the faith of the Church through the ages", as the preface to *BEM* puts it.¹⁸ Such respectful mutual encouragement and correction is natural, as each church seeks to discern in the other – as in itself – an authentic expression of the One Church of Jesus Christ.

14. Mutual recognition of baptism arises from an acknowledgement of apostolicity in the other. Apostolicity indicates coherence and continuity with the faith, life, witness and ministry of the apostolic community, chosen and sent by Christ.¹⁹ This acknowledgement may occur in different contexts: with regard to the rite, with regard to the larger pattern of initiation, and with regard to the ongoing life and witness of the church. Thus recognition of baptism involves:

¹⁷ Cf. *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, §§57-59.

¹⁸ *BEM*, "Preface", p. x.

¹⁹ See *Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)*, Faith and Order Paper No. 153, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1991, §241, pp. 89-90.

- a) discerning the apostolicity of the rite itself. The elements of the rite – proclamation, profession of faith, thanksgiving, the use of water, the triune name – function as signs of the *common faith* which Christians through the ages share. In particular, the use of water and the triune name of God as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” is regarded by many if not most communions as the heart of the baptismal rite. The water rite initiates the believer into the wealth of meanings of the biblical teaching on baptism (cf. hereunder §§17-25, 49) and the trinitarian formula affirms the classic faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;
- b) discerning apostolicity in the larger pattern of Christian initiation. In many Christian churches there is a rich pattern of initiation which includes formation in faith, baptism in water (and in some cases chrismation and/or the laying on of hands), leading to eucharistic communion.
- c) discerning apostolicity in the ongoing life and witness of the church which baptizes and forms the new Christian.

15. This text reflects the conviction that convergence in the understanding and practice of baptism “makes more urgent the achievement, by separated Christians, of a common understanding of the apostolic faith which the church proclaims and in light of which a person is baptized”. As significant as the mutual recognition of baptism is, it is important to note that it is not the only condition for full communion among the churches: churches need to discern apostolicity also in other dimensions of the life of other churches, for example in their faith, life, and witness.²⁰

II. BAPTISM: SYMBOL AND PATTERN OF THE NEW LIFE IN CHRIST

16. The churches, drawing upon scripture, historic texts and traditions, have formed various interpretations of baptism and its significance. This section examines biblical

²⁰ Quoted from “Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of a Common Baptism: A JWG Study”, §56. Some churches, moreover, hold that the fundamental question is not finding similar patterns in baptismal practice (other than the normative use of water and the trinitarian formula), but the *prior recognition* of others as churches and as Christians.

material related to baptism, the use of symbol and sign as related to baptism, the nature of baptism as sacrament and ordinance, and the question of whether a common pattern may be discerned across the traditions.

A. Baptism and scripture

17. For most churches, baptism actualizes the whole history of salvation. *BEM* presents the churches with a rich tableau of biblical language which expresses the reality of new life through Jesus Christ.

Baptism is participation in Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5; Col. 2:12); a washing away of sin (1 Cor. 6:11); a new birth (John 3:5); an enlightenment by Christ (Eph. 5:14); a re-clothing in Christ (Gal. 3:27); a renewal by the Spirit (Titus 3:5); the experience of salvation from the flood (1 Pet. 3:20-21); an exodus from bondage (1 Cor. 10:1-2); and a liberation into a new humanity in which barriers of division whether of sex or race or social status are transcended (Gal. 3:27-28; 1 Cor. 12:13).²¹

18. In the celebration of baptism these images often point to stories in the Old Testament, understood as “types” (or prefigurings) of the salvation to be brought in Christ. Thus baptism joins the candidate not only to Christ but to the entire history of salvation, to the entire biblical account of God’s acting to give light and life, forgiveness, meaning and hope. Christians have understood that the waters of creation in Genesis (Gen. 1) prefigure the waters of the new creation in baptism; the destruction of sin through the flood (Gen.7) anticipates the washing from sin in baptism; the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex. 14) foreshadows the exodus from bondage and the liberation into a new creation; the water from the rock in the wilderness (Ex. 17) prefigures Christ who gives the water of life. Similarly the act of covenant in circumcision (Gen. 17) has its parallel in the new act of covenant – baptism; and as God was able to bring new life to dry bones (Ezek. 37), so God, through the waters of baptism, brings new life to those who seek it.

²¹ *BEM*, “Baptism”, §2.

19. Biblical descriptions of baptism and the baptismal relationship provide a foundation for baptismal theology and ecclesiology. Some biblical texts stress the pneumatological and trinitarian aspects of baptism: for example, the gift of the Spirit and the presence of the Father, Son, and Spirit at the waters of the Jordan.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:9-11, cf. synoptic parallels Matt. 3:13-17 and Luke 3:21-22)

In Christian baptism, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the baptized are incorporated into Christ (Gal. 3:27), adopted as heirs of the Father (Rom. 8:14-17), and become temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16-17). By adoption and grace (Eph. 2:5-8), the baptized thus enter into the trinitarian life of God. The invocation of the name of God in the water rite, in the baptismal anointing, in the ecumenical creeds and in professions of faith, gives expression to a shared trinitarian faith.

20. Biblical passages also identify baptism as participation in the death and resurrection of Christ and stress the new life of the baptized.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3-4).

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Phil. 3:10-11).

21. The baptismal waters are both death-dealing to sin and life-giving (cf. Rom. 6:5-11); the act of baptismal submersion or

immersion²² is a vibrant sign of the Christian dying and rising to new life in Christ. Baptismal dying and rising in unity with Christ is especially connected with the three-day observance of Christ's passage from death to life (the Triduum) that culminates in the feast of Easter. For this reason, Easter was from very early times the privileged occasion for the celebration of baptism. The presence of an Easter candle in the assembly serves as a constant reminder of this paschal reality.

22. Certain scriptural texts teach that baptism leads to the reconciliation of Christians with God and with one another, and that the church's task is to proclaim divine reconciliation to the world.

But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of God. (1 Cor. 6:11b)

As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:27-28)

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (2 Cor. 5:18-19)

The sign of peace with which some congregations greet the newly baptized is one expression of the responsibility for reconciliation.

23. Through baptism each Christian is entrusted with the mission of the church to bring the good news to the world. Christians intercede for the life of the world, exercise ministries of discipleship and mission, and work for justice and peace. As *BEM* stressed, "baptism...has ethical implications which not only call for personal sanctification, but also motivate Christians to strive for the realization of

²² In baptism by *submersion* the entire body is placed under the surface of the water; in baptism by *immersion* a substantial part of the body (typically up to the waist) is placed under the water, and water poured (hopefully generously) over the head.

the will of God in all realms of life (Rom. 6:9ff, Gal. 3:27-28; 1 Pet. 2:21-4:6).²³

24. Other biblical texts express the eschatological dimension of baptism.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Rom. 6:5)

If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. (2 Tim. 2:11b-12a)

Christians are reminded that their true citizenship is in the kingdom that is being established by God (cf. Phil. 3:20). At the eucharist, the church celebrates and anticipates God's reign, and receives a foretaste of the banquet to come.

25. Churches throughout the ages have drawn on such images with differing emphases, ignoring some and using others heavily. Some of these differences arise from the particular cultural contexts within which Christians and churches live; these have helped to form their theological outlook but have also resulted in certain limitations of understanding. *BEM* has helped many churches to discover anew the variety of scriptural language which has been used to interpret the meaning of baptism. When seen separately, each image risks presenting an unbalanced or monochromatic view of baptism; together, they portray a colourful mosaic of the reality of new life in Christ. Here the churches are challenged to listen to one another, and to benefit from the experiences of others, as they seek to understand the wealth of meaning in baptism.

B. Sacrament and ordinance

26. Many churches describe baptism as a *sacrament*, while others prefer the term *ordinance*.²⁴ These have sometimes been regarded as opposing terms, but historical reflection

²³ *BEM*, "Baptism", §10.

²⁴ See especially the Baptist-Roman Catholic dialogue (1984-1988) in Jeffrey Gros, FSC, Harding Meyer, William G. Rusch, eds., *Growth in Agreement II. Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations at World Level 1982-1998*, WCC Publications, Geneva, and William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000, pp. 373-385.

may help clarify them, showing that they are not necessarily incompatible.

27. The early church used the Greek word "mystery" (*mysterion*) to refer to the unfolding of God's purpose of salvation in Christ (e.g., Mark 4:11; Rom. 16:25; 1 Cor. 4:1; Eph. 1:9f; 3:1ff; Col 1:25-28, 2:2-3). The Latin term *sacramentum* was used to translate *mysterion*, and when applied to the acts of baptism and eucharist this was intended to mean that in these events God's work in Jesus Christ is effected by the power of the Holy Spirit. Gradually the terms *mysterion* and *sacramentum* came to refer to several rites of the church, including baptism and eucharist.

28. "Sacrament" (especially as developed in the scholastic tradition) has come to mean "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace", so that, through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, God's saving work is communicated in a symbolic action. Though this term has been carefully developed theologically, it has sometimes been misunderstood to suggest that grace was conferred automatically through the sacraments. Churches which hold to this understanding of sacrament still differ about the way that God's gracious presence is related to the material elements, and about the way that salvation in the present is related to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

29. "Ordinance", on the other hand, indicates that certain acts are performed in obedience to the command and example of Christ (for example, the baptismal command in Matt. 28:18-20). Those who understand baptism as ordinance emphasize its scriptural warrant and divine initiative. This view has sometimes been misinterpreted in two ways: first, that God is not really present and active in the event of baptism and that grace is not really received; and second, that God's presence is "automatic", and independent of faith and grace.

30. Most traditions, whether they use the term "sacrament" or "ordinance", affirm that these events are both *instrumental* (in that God uses them to bring about a new reality), and *expressive* (of an already-existing reality). Some traditions emphasize the instrumental dimension, recognizing baptism as an action in which God transforms the life of the candidate as he or she is

brought into the Christian community. Others emphasize the expressive dimension. They see in baptism a God-given and eloquent demonstration, within the Christian community, of the gospel and its saving power for the person who, being already a believer through his or her encounter and continuing relationship with Christ, is then baptized.

31. Those who prefer the language of sacrament often regard baptism also as an ordinance, recognizing that it is performed following Christ's command and example. Some – though not all – who prefer the term ordinance may, in fact, give the act a sacramental meaning. These two approaches represent different starting points in understanding baptism. They are not mutually exclusive, and may both be regarded as essential for understanding the full meaning of baptism.

C. The liturgy of baptism

32. Baptismal practice has taken different forms in the history of the church. In its earliest practice, the rite of baptism typically included water, anointing with oil, and admission to the eucharist. Over time, and particularly in recent usage, the term “baptism” has been used for the water rite alone and the larger process has come to be referred to as “Christian initiation” (cf. above §3).

33. Following *BEM* the churches today largely affirm that “within any comprehensive order of baptism at least the following elements should find a place: the proclamation of the scriptures referring to baptism; an invocation of the Holy Spirit; a renunciation of evil; a profession of faith in Christ and the Holy Trinity; the use of water; a declaration that the persons baptized have acquired a new identity as sons and daughters of God, and as members of the church, [are] called to be witnesses of the Gospel.”²⁵ Recognizing the original unity of the rite, *BEM* noted also that “some churches consider that Christian initiation is not complete without the sealing of the baptized with the gift of the Holy Spirit and participation in holy communion.”²⁶

²⁵ *BEM*, “Baptism”, §20.

²⁶ *BEM*, “Baptism”, §20.

34. As noted in §§17-25 above, the churches have incorporated into the celebration of baptism a wide range of symbols and symbolic actions based directly or indirectly upon scriptural images. Many of these images are based on materials from the natural world. Christians affirm that in Christ the whole creation is made new, is restored to God's original purposes and intends to convey the Creator's love for humankind. Therefore materials from the natural world may be used to convey the theological realities associated with baptism.

35. Integral to the practice of baptism is the use of water. Especially when used abundantly, water bears positive but also negative qualities: it can be seen as the means of participation in Christ's death, as if through drowning, but also as the means of new birth, as if from the waters of a womb. The use of water as a natural agent for washing is seen in some traditions as affirming God's cleansing of the candidate from his or her sin.

36. Some churches have understood water as a “sign”, meaning that it points beyond itself to the realities of cleansing and new life in Christ. Other churches have understood water as an “effective sign” or “symbol”, meaning that it bears within itself, by faith and through the power of the Holy Spirit, the reality of new life in Christ. With whatever nuances, the churches largely agree that the use of water indicates the believer's entry into a new life made possible by the gospel of divine grace, and pointing towards the fullness of the kingdom to come.

37. Other symbols and symbolic actions have been used to express and interpret the meaning of the baptismal act. These actions have varied with time, place and cultural context, and have done so from Christian beginnings. In many traditions, the thanksgiving over the waters of the font echoes and reflects the thanksgiving over the bread and wine of the eucharist, first in giving thanks to God for his mighty acts of salvation, and then in calling upon the Spirit also to make use of water in the transformation of the lives of those to be baptized.

38. Many churches have maintained, or recovered, the use of oil to symbolize the candidate's anointing with the Holy Spirit and incorporation into the royal priesthood

(1 Pet. 2:9). In some churches a baptismal garment symbolizes the “putting on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal. 3:27), and the light of a baptismal candle symbolizes our sharing in Christ as “the light of the world” (John 8:12; Matt. 5:14-16). In some cases churches have recovered the catechumenate (a structured period of instruction in the faith before baptism), and use a wealth of signs and symbols to mark the journey to the font. Within all this variety, there appears a renewed appreciation of the importance of created elements in expressing the saving power of God (cf. 1 Tim. 4:4).

39. Where candidates offer a personal testimony at the time of their baptism this is seen as a powerful sign of the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives, thus revealing God’s power to convert and to save. At the same time, the assembly which gathers to celebrate the act of baptism signifies the whole church into which the baptized are incorporated. The individual and communal confession of faith at baptism expresses the faith of the church, inspired by the Spirit, into which this candidate is now baptized.

40. As churches engage more closely with the cultures in which they live, there is today a new process of exploration as to how additional elements, held to be of symbolic importance in local cultures, can also be used to express the richness of the various dimensions of baptism. This opens the way to further creative developments in this area, but this process must be done critically and with caution, according to principles of faithful inculturation.²⁷

²⁷ For an extensive exploration of this see Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller, eds., *Becoming a Christian: The Ecumenical Implications of our Common Baptism*, Faith and Order paper No. 184, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1999, especially “III. The inculturation of baptism”, pp.83-88. The following are identified as criteria for inculturation: “The inculturation of baptism needs fidelity to and preservation of the fundamental *ordo* [pattern] of baptism as it was developed in the tradition... No form of incultured baptism can dispense with the basic elements of the baptismal *ordo* [pattern]: formation in faith, washing in water and participation in the life of the community. The inculturation of baptism will look for gestures, signs and symbols in a specific culture which relate to the essential aspects of baptism, such as its meaning as incorporation into the body of Christ and as conferring a life-long new status”, p. 86.

D. Baptism and life-long growth into Christ

41. “Baptism is related not only to momentary experience, but to life-long growth into Christ.”²⁸ Most churches regard the baptismal event as an unrepeatable liturgical rite in which God acts and the Christian faith is professed. However, the unique event of baptism reflects and recapitulates the catechumenate, and the processes of nurture and growth guided by the Holy Spirit, that lead to and follow it. In the early church complex patterns of Christian nurture emerged, including instruction in faith before and after baptism, as well as an extended series of liturgical celebrations marking the journey in a growing faith. Later Christian history saw the development of even more diverse patterns of Christian nurture.

42. Within this diversity the churches have discerned three elements which encompass the believer’s full incorporation into Christ: (1) formation in faith, (2) baptism and Christian initiation as explained in §3 above, and (3) participation in the life of the Christian community, fostering life-long growth into Christ.²⁹ These elements may be understood as follows.

1) Formation in faith

43. Formation includes preaching and teaching about the faith of the church, and the appropriation of the ethical and spiritual dimensions of the Christian life before and after the act of baptism. In some traditions this takes formal shape in the catechumenate. The experiences of hearing, learning, and doing are intended to lead to conversion, appropriation of the faith in heart and mind, trust in the triune God, and baptism. In the case of a baptized infant, the faith claimed by parents, sponsors, and the whole church is professed by that person following formation and nurture. In some traditions this profession involves a formal rite, while in others it consists simply of conscious and active participation in the life of the local worshipping community. Formation in faith is a life-long process, ending with that final profession which is the testimony of a Christian death.

²⁸ *BEM*, “Baptism”, §9.

²⁹ “Report of the Consultation: ‘The common baptismal *ordo*’”, in *Becoming a Christian, The Ecumenical Implications of Our Common Baptism*, §§17-24, pp. 78-81.

2) Baptism

44. “Baptism is a gift of God and is administered in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”³⁰ It is the central symbolic act within the whole process of Christian initiation, the act in which the local church, the body of Christ, gathers to incorporate new members.

45. Because water as symbol bears multiple meanings, its generous use allows for the fullest expression of the biblical images of baptism (cf. above §§17-25). Threefold immersion or submersion in water is the most widely attested practice in ancient Christian traditions, but there is also early evidence for pouring water over the head of the candidate. In more recent times, sprinkling has emerged as a practice in some churches.

46. The liturgical expression of the giving of the Holy Spirit has varied in the practice of the church. From early times this was seen in some churches to be associated with the baptismal water (Acts 19:5-6), in some with the laying on of hands (Acts 19:5-6), and in some with the anointing with oil. Within this diversity was a shared understanding that the Spirit was poured out in the context of the baptismal act, and belonged integrally to it.

47. Closely associated with the baptismal rites are other events, in various sequences: thanksgiving over the water, confession of faith, an array of interpretive signs and symbols (for example, the wearing of new clothing, the giving of a candle (cf. above §38)). The newly baptized are then welcomed for the first time to the Lord’s supper. With their admission to the eucharistic table the newly baptized are fully integrated into Christ and the church, and set to continue on their process of life-long growth into Christ.

3) Participation in the life of the Christian community

48. With their admission to the eucharistic community, the newly baptized take their place in the “royal, priestly and prophetic” community that is the church, and so will exercise the spiritual gifts with which they have been endowed for service in the church and the world.

³⁰ BEM, “Baptism”, §1.

49. The act of baptism is a new beginning; it marks a particular point on the journey with Christ and into Christ. The community of the disciples is assured by the love of God that its origin and eschatological completion rest in the community of the Holy Trinity (2 Cor. 1:21-22). The baptized look to this completion before having reached their goal. They must seek above all to grow in faith, and to become what they are: the children of God (John 1:12; 1 John 3:1-3). The reality of baptism needs to be lived out as a daily experience; again and again, the baptized will need to repent and turn to Christ (Rom. 6:1-11, Eph. 4: 21-5:2).

50. Throughout the whole of their lives Christians are empowered by the Holy Spirit to seek faith, hope and love. God grants deeper insight, greater love and maturing faith as believers engage in the study of the scriptures, in prayer and worship, and in love of neighbour. In sufferings and other trials, faith is tested. Christians need constantly to renew their participation in the *koinonia*, the fellowship of the church, in which Christ is present in word and sacrament. Christians are to trust God’s promises to feed his followers “on the way” with the bread of thanksgiving (John 6:51; 1 Cor. 11:23-25).

51. The local church needs to make specific provision for the nurture in faith of all the newly baptized. The ministry of bishops or other regional leaders has sometimes involved a recovery of mystagogy (post-baptismal catechesis) with regard to the newly baptized. Workers in Sunday schools or Christian education programmes need to be aware of their great responsibility for building up the congregation in faith, hope and love. In some places, the ministry of mentors (persons who accompany others on their journey in faith) is being discovered.

52. Some churches understand Christian nurture as a matter of providing instruction in Sunday schools or Christian education programmes. As important as this is, there is a broader perspective in which nurture has been a function of the whole worshipping assembly. Here Christians have received liturgical catechesis, and the mysteries of the Christian life have been spelled out in the reading and preaching of the word and the

celebration of the Lord's supper. Thus it is especially important that children be fully involved in the worship life of the congregation. The experience, in worship, of a living relationship with the triune God is the way in which all discover most deeply what it is to be a disciple of Christ.

53. Many churches are finding that both personal and corporate faith is strengthened by a more frequent practice of reaffirming baptism. The public celebration of baptism invites all the baptized to recall their own baptism. The regular celebration of the eucharist reminds the faithful of their own baptism, as do Sundays with strong baptismal associations (for example Easter, Pentecost, and Epiphany/Theophany (the Baptism of the Lord)).

54. Some churches mark particular stages in the continued growth into Christ with rites in which individuals profess or confess their baptismal faith. In many western churches this is known as "confirmation". This is a matter of discussion among and within churches which have different sources for, and understandings of, confirmation.

55. In some churches (e.g., Roman Catholic and Old Catholic) confirmation has its origins in the second post-baptismal, episcopal anointing in the Roman rite – an action which became separated in time from the other components of baptism. In other churches, particularly those whose roots lie in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, confirmation has its source in the more mature profession of faith expected of adolescents. For the former, confirmation is the sacramental completion of the baptismal action, at whatever age it is performed. For the latter, confirmation has assumed an independent life and is understood not as "completing" a person's earlier baptism but as a public profession in which a mature person witnesses to the Christian faith. Churches may find it easier to accept diverse practices if they remember that confirmation, at whatever point it is practised, is set within the process of life-long growth into Christ.

III. BAPTISM AND THE CHURCH

A. Baptism as entry into the church

56. In Acts 2:16-42, in response to Peter's proclamation that God had made Jesus who had been crucified both Lord and Messiah, the people asked, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter replied, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Those who welcomed his message were baptized and "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." In drawing nearer to Christ, they drew nearer to each other. As John 17 witnesses, through the Holy Spirit Christ continues to be present in the life of the church after his ascension. The Spirit brings Christians into Christ and into a bond of unity with one another. All this is reflected in the events marking a person's entrance into the church, including: the proclamation of the Gospel, profession of faith, baptism and the gift of the Spirit, participation in the eucharist, and life within the community.

57. In baptism we are baptized into the one body and we become members of one another. The church is both the body of Christ and the people of God (1 Pet. 2:9-10). Baptism in Christ, and in the Spirit, is inseparable from Christian life in community (1 Cor. 12:12-27).

58. Baptism, however, always occurs in a particular local church which shares in a specific confessional identity. Thus it is the church in which a person is baptized that determines his or her confessional identity. But the local churches are, in too many cases, not in full communion with one another. This results in a paradox: while baptism brings Christians into the unity of Christ's body, which is one, the location of baptism within a specific confessional body means that the baptized experience disunity with many other Christians.

B. Baptism and the eucharist

59. Both baptism and the eucharist lead Christians into communion with the triune God and into communion with one another. In baptism and in the Lord's supper, we meet

the risen Lord to whom the scriptures bear witness. The central invitation which both sacraments extend, together with the word proclaimed and by the power of the Holy Spirit, is to know Christ and to live as his disciples: “Communion established in baptism is focused and brought to expression in the eucharist. There is a dynamic connection between baptism and eucharist. Baptismal faith is re-affirmed and grace given for the faithful living out of the Christian calling.”³¹

60. The one unrepeatable baptism leads a Christian to the regular, repeated participation in the Lord’s supper. The eucharistic meal marks the culmination of Christian initiation, leading into a new phase of continual growth into Christ and into the body of Christ. During this time of growth, the believer is repeatedly nourished through participation in the meal.

61. How far is this intimate and intrinsic link between baptism and Holy Communion maintained *across* churches so that a person baptized in one church is able to partake of the eucharist in another church? Churches respond to this question in several ways, depending on the situation.

- a) In some cases churches recognize one other as full expressions of the one church of Jesus Christ, sharing the same apostolic faith. In such cases of full communion, there is both mutual recognition of baptism and eucharistic fellowship.
- b) In other cases churches do not recognize one other as full expressions of the church of Jesus Christ. This arises from a perceived lack of apostolicity in some dimension(s) of the other church’s life. Mutual recognition of baptism may be possible if a church discerns apostolicity in another’s understanding and practice of baptism; but a common eucharist would still not be possible if apostolicity is not discerned in the understanding and exercise of ordained ministry.
- c) In some cases where mutual recognition of baptism does not exist, a common eucharist is still possible. For example, churches which do not recognize infant

baptism may offer communion to persons baptized as infants in another church. They do so in recognition of Christ’s welcome to “all baptized Christians” to partake at his table.

C. Initiation, church membership, and baptism

62. What constitutes full initiation into the Christian church? In Christian beginnings, “baptism upon personal profession of faith is the most clearly attested pattern”.³² It constituted in itself full incorporation into the church. Later, Christian initiation including baptism and anointing leading to participation in eucharist marked full entry into the church. In some cases, this ancient pattern of initiation remains today. However, as noted in §§32-33 above, in many churches the separation of the rites of Christian initiation has resulted in their being performed at different points over an extended period of time.

63. As a result of these historical developments, the relationship between baptism and church membership has become complex.³³ In current practice, “membership” is attained in a variety of ways. Some churches have developed rites for welcoming and blessing children as an initial step towards membership. In some communions, catechumens (persons being formed for baptism) are considered church members, as reflected in their right to a Christian burial. Some traditions consider faith to be sufficient for church membership, even prior to baptism. For yet others, full membership comes only with confirmation, even if this is separated from baptism by several years.

64. Theologically and liturgically, membership appears to be “incomplete” prior to admission to the eucharist; yet some baptized are barred from the eucharist because they have not reached a certain age or because they are not yet confirmed. The wide diversity of liturgical practice among – and sometimes within – churches

³¹ *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, §78.

³² *BEM*, “Baptism”, §11.

³³ On the relation of baptism and church membership, see especially the Anglican-Reformed dialogue (*God’s Reign and Our Unity*, 1984) in *Growth in Agreement II*, pp. 130ff.; and the Lutheran-Methodist dialogue (*The Church: Communion of Grace*, 1984), in *Growth in Agreement II*, p. 210.

indicates different understandings of the relationship between theology and practice.

65. Whenever it is said to be attained, “membership” needs to be understood in light of baptism as entrance into the body of Christ. Through baptism a person is drawn into the mystery of life in Christ. This challenges contemporary understandings of “membership” which sometimes suggest that the church is merely a human institution, rather than the *ekklesia* (assembly) of believers in communion with the triune God, and thus with one another. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” (1 Cor. 12:12-13)

IV. BAPTISM AND FAITH

66. In the search for unity, the churches together confess that “there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:5). All churches affirm that faith accompanies baptism. But what is the relationship between faith and baptism, and how is the faith of the community related to the faith of the baptized person?

A. The faith of the believer and the faith of the church

67. The source of faith is the triune God who calls each one “by name” (Is. 43:1; cf. Acts 9:4), and the freedom to respond in faith is God’s gracious gift. Faith begins when God sows the seed of simple trust in the heart. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the believer grows up into Christ, in whom the fullness of God dwells (Col. 1:19). It is not on the basis of understanding or ability that human beings can receive God’s gift, but only through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:24; 1 Cor. 1:26ff).

68. Faith is the response of the believer to the gospel proclaimed in the community of the faithful. The believer’s faith grows and deepens in the relationship with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, and that faith discovers its harmony with the faith professed by the whole church throughout the ages. Thus, the faith which the believer comes to confess as his or her own is truly one with the faith of the apostles, so

that the “we believe” of the Christian community and the “I believe” of personal commitment become one.

69. In the early centuries of the church’s life this convergence of the “we believe” and the “I believe” found expression in various ways, and especially in baptismal confession and in worship. Christian communities shared their baptismal creeds as a sign of their unity. Likewise, this unity was expressed in the eucharistic prayer, itself an ancient confession of faith made by the believing community in each Sunday worship. When the leaders of the various local churches met in councils, they expressed the same faith in the shape of more extensive formulations, notably the Nicene-Constantinopolitan and the Apostles’ creeds. Significantly, neither of these creeds is specific to a particular communion. And the same profession of trinitarian faith often occurs in churches which do not formally use the words of a creed³⁴ but express their faith in a number of forms including hymns, vows and prayers.

70. The faith professed and recognized across the churches, and handed down by our mothers and fathers in the faith, is that which is celebrated in baptism. As a person is baptized into this trinitarian faith in a local assembly, that person is at the same time united with the one church of Christ that transcends geographical, social, ethnic and temporal boundaries. That person is brought into relationship with the whole body of Christ in all places and in all times.

B. The divine invitation and the human response in faith

71. The churches affirm the priority of the divine initiative in the process of Christian initiation, as in all aspects of the Christian life. God invites and enables a response in faith. These two aspects come to fruition in the act of baptism, which is the visible sign of belonging to Jesus Christ, and of the commitment to walk with the community which follows him.³⁵ The scriptures insist on the necessity of

³⁴ Cf. *Confessing the One Faith*, §15.

³⁵ On the question whether baptism is a Divine or a human “action” see the Baptist-Reformed Conversation (1977) in Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer, eds., *Growth in Agreement [I]*, Faith and Order Paper No. 108, Paulist Press, New York/Ramsey and World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1984, §§14, 21, pp. 131-151.

baptism (Matt. 28:19; Eph. 4:4), and reflect and allow for a diversity of practice.

72. Until the sixteenth century a single unitary rite was used for the baptism of both infants and adults.³⁶ The divine initiative, and the human response in faith, were both encompassed within this theological understanding and liturgical practice. More recently the churches have distinguished between those who may profess faith for themselves, and those who cannot. In both cases, however, the churches agree that faith needs to be discerned and the divine initiative affirmed.

73. The person who asks for baptism asks to walk with the church on a life-long journey, trusting Christ in all things.³⁷ At this stage, faith may take only rudimentary forms, but the church needs to discern in these the call of the triune God. Central to this is repentance before God, the willingness to renounce evil and all the “principalities and powers” (Rom. 8:38, Eph. 6:12) which hold persons captive, the readiness to turn to Christ and to pledge faithfulness to the Holy Trinity. In all this, the church rejoices to see God’s work, namely the divine invitation and the human response in faith.

74. “The consequence of sharing, through baptism, the death and resurrection of Jesus is that, as Paul emphasized, we might walk in newness of life (Rom 6:4).”³⁸ Because of this grace, we are called ambassadors of God’s reconciliation to the world (2 Cor 5:18ff). This means that the baptized are called to minister to the world, to proclaim the good news of God’s saving love. Baptism thus signals a critical starting point of the believers’ engagement in God’s mission through the church: “Those who through conversion and baptism accept the gospel of Jesus partake in the life of the body of Christ and participate in an historical tradition”.³⁹

³⁶ *BEM*, “Baptism”, §12 and Commentary.

³⁷ The Armenian tradition provides an example. Someone who seeks baptism is asked “What do you seek of God’s Church?” The reply is “Faith, hope, love and baptism!”

³⁸ *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology*, Faith and Order Paper No. 199, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 2005, §103, pp. 43-44.

³⁹ *Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation*, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1982, §20.

75. Baptism also signals a critical starting point in the believers’ engagement with the ethics of the kingdom of God. “In the present, the solidarity of Christians in the joy and sorrows of their neighbours, and their engagement in the struggle for the dignity of all who suffer, for the excluded and the poor, belongs to their baptismal vocation. It is the way they are brought face to face with Christ in his identification with the victimized and outcast”.⁴⁰ The baptized receive the calling to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (cf. Micah 6:8).

76. Among those whom God calls are some who are too young to articulate faith. The church welcomes them, through baptism, into the community of faith which lives in the love of God. It promises to nurture them towards maturity and then throughout life. Rejoicing that they belong to the kingdom of God, the congregation accompanies them on their journey of faith. In this way children are enabled, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, to express their Christian commitment in and through the fellowship of the community.

77. God calls others who, owing to certain disabilities, may never be able to articulate faith. Their physical or mental condition points to the plurality of human possibilities and experience, and reminds all persons of their participation in a “perfection of vulnerability and of openness to pain.”⁴¹ The testimony of the Ecumenical Disabilities Action Network (EDAN) is that God loves all disabled people and extends to all the opportunity to respond to that love, and that every disabled person has the opportunity to find peace with God.⁴²

78. As a place and a process of communion, open to and inviting all people without discrimination on the basis of physical or mental ability, the church through baptism

⁴⁰ *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, §77.

⁴¹ Cf. *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology*, §§39-52, pp. 22-26.

⁴² See “A Church of All and for All: An Interim Statement”, a text prepared jointly by the Ecumenical Disabilities Action Network (EDAN) and the WCC and adopted for study and discussion by the WCC Central Committee in 2003, in Arne Fritzson and Samuel Kabue, *Interpreting Disability: a Church of All and for All*, Risk Book Series No. 105, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2004, §8, p. 67.

embraces also disabled persons in its life. In a sense, without the full incorporation of persons who can contribute from the experience of disability, the church falls short of the glory of God and cannot claim to be fully in the image of God.⁴³ In exercising special responsibilities for disabled persons, the congregation lives out its baptismal faith as a community of worship and service, so that everyone may grow in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the knowledge and love of God. The congregation has a duty to ensure that parents, godparents and sponsors each fulfill their responsibilities within this process.

V. FURTHER STEPS FOR THE JOURNEY TOWARDS MUTUAL RECOGNITION: QUESTIONS FOR THE CHURCHES

79. The mutual recognition of baptism is fundamental to the churches' search for visible unity. Insofar as it has been achieved, it has become a basis for the churches' increasing common witness, worship and service. As noted at the beginning of this text, issues of the mutual recognition of baptism have become more and more insistent in recent years. Churches have begun to take positive and practical steps to nurture and express mutual recognition. Such substantial progress encourages – and indeed challenges – the churches to take further steps in their mutual recognition of baptism.

80. Despite these developments, as the churches work on issues related to the mutual recognition of baptism they are hindered by difficulties of various kinds. Some involve fundamental questions of ecclesial recognition as well as the relation of theology to actual liturgical, pastoral and congregational practice. Other difficulties relate to continuing differences in the practice of baptism. Insofar as these matters pose problems for the mutual recognition of baptism they need to be addressed by the churches, both individually and in an ecumenical context.

81. *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition* is a study document rather than a convergence text. As such it seeks to encourage dialogue among the churches on differences

⁴³ Cf. "A Church of All and for All: An Interim Statement", §§85 and 30.

in baptismal understanding and practice which impede the mutual recognition of baptism. On the basis of the discussion to this point, §§83-108 address a range of such differences, in the following areas:

- a) baptismal practice in relation to mutual recognition;
- b) the relation between baptism, the churches and the church;
- c) the practical consequences of mutual recognition;
- d) the renewal of baptismal faith;
- e) admission to the eucharist before baptism;
- f) rebaptism;
- g) baptism and faith;
- h) insurmountable obstacles?

Each of these areas is addressed below. Not all areas are relevant for all churches and church dialogues; churches are invited to focus on those areas most relevant for their own lives and for their dialogues with other churches. In each area questions are posed which may help the churches to deepen – and express practically – their mutual recognition of baptism.

82. The following questions are posed for study purposes, rather than as questions addressed to the churches seeking formal responses.

A. Common baptismal practice and mutual recognition

83. This text has set baptism within the larger contexts of Christian initiation and the believer's life-long growth into Christ. This approach develops the suggestions in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* that churches might arrive at a greater mutual recognition of baptism through recognizing and affirming the similarity of wider patterns of initiation and formation in Christ.⁴⁴ There is consensus that this would be a better way towards unity than simply comparing practices of

⁴⁴ See also *BEM*, "Baptism" §15, §12 and Commentary. See *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry 1982-1990: Report on the Process and Responses*, Faith and Order Paper No. 149, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1990, pp. 109-110.

the water rite in isolation from the wider contexts. With this in mind, the following question is asked:

With baptism placed in the larger contexts of Christian initiation and the believer's life-long growth in Christ, can churches ask afresh the question, "Can we now recognize the baptism of other churches?"

84. A careful examination of the rites by which churches baptize makes it clear that much common material is used, and in many cases relatively little is peculiar to a specific Christian tradition. This raises the possibility of recognizing one another as churches on the basis of the degree of unity implied in the performance of similar baptismal rites, set within similar patterns of Christian initiation and on-going formation within the Christian community.⁴⁵ With this in mind, the following questions are asked:

How does the liturgical practice of your church reflect its theological understandings of baptism, Christian initiation, and the process of continuing growth into Christ?

How far does finding similar patterns in the life of other churches enable your church to discern common theological understandings which would lead to a mutual recognition of baptism?

B. Baptism, the churches and the church

85. Baptism occurs in a particular church (with its own history of ecclesial relations and divisions), but brings persons into the unity of Christ's body, which is one. With this paradox in mind, the following questions are asked:

How does the celebration of baptism in your church make clear that baptism is into the whole body of Christ, and not simply into a local congregation and a particular denomination?

How does your church's understanding of membership reflect this understanding of baptism as entry into the one body of Christ?

86. On certain conditions some churches recognize a person as a baptized Christian without, however, recognizing

⁴⁵ Cf. §15 of the present text.

either the baptism as it is exercised in that church, or the ecclesial character of that church itself. Some have asked whether this is possible ecclesialogically. With this in mind, the following question is asked:

How far does recognition of a person as a baptized Christian imply some recognition of the baptism which they received, and of the church in which it was performed?

C. Mutual recognition: practical consequences

87. It is important that churches celebrate the fact that in a great many cases they *do* recognize one another's baptisms. In some places, churches already express their mutual recognition of baptism by issuing Common Baptismal Certificates. These dare to emphasize that baptism is first into the one body of Christ, and second into a particular church or confession. Another – and bold and visible – sign of mutual recognition would be the commitment to a common catechumenate, to the common preparation of candidates for baptism. With this in mind, the following questions are asked:

How do congregations actually express the fact that they recognize the baptism of other churches?

How can a common baptismal certificate witness to the mutual recognition of baptism which already exists among the churches today?

Could a common catechumenate – the common preparation of candidates who will be baptized in their respective churches – be helpful, and how might it be implemented?

88. Many believers ask: why does the mutual recognition of baptism not lead, in some cases, to eucharistic communion? This raises the question of what additional requirements must be met for eucharistic sharing to take place. With this in mind, the following questions are asked:

Do churches which recognize the baptism of other churches, admit members from those others to eucharistic communion? If so, what further expression could this recognition find? If not, what additional requirements must be met for such admission to take place?

Can we speak of “degrees of communion”, or “degrees of recognition”, in which the recognition of baptism is the first step towards “full communion” marked by the sharing of the Lord’s supper?

D. The renewal of baptismal faith

89. The renewal of baptismal faith is a part of ongoing Christian life. This is becoming a more explicit feature in the life of many churches. It is baptism that leads to regular participation in the eucharist at which Christians celebrate the Easter mystery of Christ’s dying and rising into which they were incorporated at their own baptism. The regular public celebration of baptism helps all those present to recall their own baptism. Acts of community renewal of baptismal faith on days with strong baptismal associations (e.g. Easter, Pentecost, Epiphany/Baptism of the Lord) can be important if baptisms are not actually being celebrated. With this in mind, the following question is asked:

What patterns have developed in your church or local congregation that help it celebrate its baptismal foundations, and renew its commitment to its baptismal faith and mission?

90. Confirmation is one way some churches (particularly those whose roots lie in the Reformation of the 16th century) have asked those baptized in infancy to commit themselves to their baptismal faith. Recent years have seen considerable confusion develop as some churches, seeking to clarify their understanding and practice of confirmation, have drawn on the practice of others. In some cases this risks imposing incompatible theologies upon existing liturgical practice. It is unlikely, for example, that the various theologies of the Orthodox practice of chrismation will be able to help Western churches resolve their theological confusion over their practice of confirmation.⁴⁶ Similarly, some churches have created new interpretations

⁴⁶ See the Lutheran-Orthodox joint commission 2004 statement “The Mystery of the Church: Baptism and Chrismation”, in Jeffrey Gros, FSC, Thomas F. Best, Lorelei F. Fuchs, SA, eds., *Growth in Agreement III: International Dialogue Texts and Agreed Statements, 1998-2005*, Faith and Order Paper No. 204, WCC Publications, Geneva, and William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2007, pp. 29-32.

of confirmation which diminish the theological importance of baptism (for example, confirmation as “the ordination of the laity”). With this in mind, the following questions are asked:

If your church practises confirmation, how clearly does it understand its specific origins and development within the tradition of your church?

Have you developed your theology of confirmation in a way that reinforces, rather than undermines, the fundamental importance of baptism?

Can the mutual recognition of baptism be furthered by the awareness that confirmation, whenever it is practised, is set within the broader context of the believer’s life-long growth into Christ?

E. Eucharistic communion before baptism

91. In a number of churches the question of communion before baptism has become an important issue, for a variety of reasons. In some churches that practise believers’ baptism, children and young people not yet baptized are incorporated into the life of the community. They are regularly admitted to the Lord’s supper on the grounds that they are members of the community. In some churches which baptize infants there is a movement to communicate all persons, citing the radical openness of Jesus’ fellowship meals as justification. Both practices raise serious difficulties for some other churches.

92. Whatever the theological or pastoral reasons adduced for these practices, they result in a serious rupture between baptism and the eucharist, which threatens the integrity of both rites. As a general principle, the historic order of reception of baptism before reception of the eucharist should be observed for the sake of the unity of the church. With this in mind, the following question is asked:

How is it possible for a person to share in the constitutive meal of the church, the body of Christ, without having been incorporated into that body through baptism?

F. Rebaptism

93. Most churches regard baptism as an unrepeatable event; nonetheless many churches find themselves confronted with the issue of rebaptism. In one case, churches require the rebaptism of persons baptized as infants in another church. This rests on the understanding that the baptism of an infant is not a true baptism, and that admission to the church requires baptism upon personal profession of faith. Understanding infant baptism in the context of the threefold pattern of formation in faith, baptism and Christian initiation, and the believer's life-long growth into Christ, the following question is asked:

Is it appropriate to require the baptism of those who, in their previous church, were numbered among the baptized?

94. In another case, churches require the rebaptism of persons who have been baptized as adults in another church. This rests on the understanding that membership in the new church requires, for its integrity, baptism within that church. Understanding infant baptism in the context of the threefold pattern of formation in faith, baptism and Christian initiation, and the believer's life-long growth into Christ, the following questions are asked:

How does membership in your church relate to membership in the body of Christ as a whole?

Does the requirement for rebaptism take sufficient account of God's action in a person's life, from the time of their prior baptism until now?

What pre- and post-baptismal catechesis is appropriate in cases of rebaptism?

95. In still another case persons baptized as infants, and wishing to remain in their present church, seek rebaptism in order to "experience" the baptism they do not remember from their infancy. Rebaptism may be sought from a pastor within the person's tradition or even, if this is refused, from a pastor in another tradition. While the need for a baptismal experience can be appreciated, both situations bring the person into serious difficulties within their own tradition. Recognizing the unique and unrepeatable character of

baptism, and for the sake of the unity of the church, pastors should not assent to requests for rebaptism. With this in mind, the following question is asked:

How can your church help such persons to find ways in which they may experience a renewal of their baptismal faith?

G. Baptism and faith

96. A dynamic relationship exists between the faith of the believer and the faith of the church: the faith which the believer comes to own is that of the whole church of Christ. This process of growth into Christ, to which all believers are called, is the work of the triune God who, both in the church and in the believer, is the beginning and end of faith. The faith confessed in baptism, the faith of the church throughout the ages, is the faith that binds believers and their churches together.⁴⁷ This faith is necessary for the reception of the salvation embodied and set forth in baptism.⁴⁸

97. Churches baptize those who make a personal profession of faith. Some, agreeing that faith is a condition for being baptized, also baptize infants "brought by parents or guardians who are ready, in and with the church, to bring up the children in the Christian faith".⁴⁹ Where godparents are appointed, they need to be mature Christians, able to teach and care for their spiritual children. With this in mind, churches familiar with the tradition of godparents are invited to consider the following question:

In cultures where the choice of godparents has become a "favour" to family members and friends, or a matter of social custom, are there ways in which churches may explore the appointment of additional sponsors who are active within the life of the Christian community?

98. On the journey of faith, the Christian family is a small unit of the larger church, which is a foretaste of the kingdom. Parents have a special responsibility to give an

⁴⁷ See ~~*Eighth Report*, §45~~ and "Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of a Common Baptism: A JWG Study".

⁴⁸ *BEM*, "Baptism", §8.

⁴⁹ ~~"Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of a Common Baptism: A JWG Study", §48~~ and *BEM*, "Baptism", §11.

example of living faith to their children. The responsibility which devolves upon parents who come from different churches can be challenging. This is particularly so as they face decisions about the baptism and growth in faith of their children, especially when their respective churches have disparate understandings and practices of baptism of young children and their admission to the eucharist. With this in mind, the following question is asked:

Has your church developed sufficient ways to help families which embody different Christian traditions to deal with the baptism and Christian nurture of their children, in ways which respect the ecclesial traditions of both parents?

99. Many churches have become more aware in recent years of the special gifts which persons with disabilities bring to the life of the Christian community, and more attentive to their special needs as members of Christ's body, the church. Insofar as a personal profession of faith (whether at the moment of baptism or, in the case of infant baptism, at a later point in life) is integral to baptism, the question arises about the baptism of persons who, due to learning disabilities, are unable to make such a profession.

100. The churches need to reflect together on these issues, which have deep pastoral implications for the persons and congregations concerned but also raise profound theological and anthropological issues. These include: the relation of faith to intellectual capacity and the ability for self-expression; the variety of ways in which faith may be experienced and expressed; and how persons with special gifts and needs may be fully integrated into the life of the church.⁵⁰ With this in mind, the following questions are asked:

How can the church discern the faith of persons who are unable to articulate and communicate their faith verbally?

In what ways does your church provide for the incorporation of persons with disabilities into the life of the Christian community?

⁵⁰ See "A Church of All and for All: An Interim Statement", especially §§56-65, 74, 78, and 87. Cf. also *BEM*, "Baptism", §§11-12.

H. Insurmountable obstacles?

101. At the time of *BEM*, some understandings and practices with regard to baptism seemed to reflect irreconcilable divergences among the churches. In the process leading to this study document we have discovered that some of these no longer seem to be insurmountable – while others remain as serious sources of division.

1) Sacrament and ordinance

102. The terms "sacrament" and "ordinance" have often been used to characterize what were thought to be mutually exclusive understandings of baptism, particularly between those churches which baptize infants and those which baptize only professing believers. From what has been said above (cf. §§26-31) these terms can no longer be used as the basis for division among the churches. With this in mind, the following questions are asked:

Has the use of the term "sacrament," or of "ordinance," by another church prevented your church from recognizing its baptism? If so, can the reflections in this study document help towards mutual recognition?

2) Diversity and uniformity

103. The importance of common elements in the baptismal service (particularly the use of water and the trinitarian formula) for the mutual recognition of baptism has been stressed in §14 above, where it was noted that these elements function as signs of the common faith shared by Christians through the ages. Some churches, however, hold that the meanings expressed by these elements may also be conveyed in other ways. On the basis of their understanding of biblical texts, their traditional practice, or their effort to inculturate baptismal practice, such churches perform baptism in other ways. This raises serious questions of discernment within and among the churches. With this in mind, the following questions are asked:

Which variations in baptismal practice reflect a *healthy diversity* within the one body of Christ?

Which variations reflect a *significant divergence* from acceptable practice, a divergence which threatens the unity of Christ's body?

104. There are churches, members of the World Council of Churches and manifestly Christian in their witness and service, which perform baptism “in the name of Jesus”, without reference to the traditional trinitarian formula. There are churches, members of the World Council of Churches and manifestly Christian in their witness and service, which perform baptism without water.⁵¹

105. There are churches, members of the World Council of Churches and manifestly Christian in their witness and service, in which entry into the Christian community is effected without baptismal rites.⁵² As was made clear in the response process to *BEM*, most churches within the ecumenical movement regard the use of water and the trinitarian formula, administered in a liturgical rite, as a minimum requirement for baptism and membership in the church. Yet successive ecumenical texts, while acknowledging this understanding of baptism as normative, have sought also to honour the witness of churches which speak not of a specific rite but rather of Christian life as a whole being infused with the Spirit.⁵³

106. There are churches, members of the World Council of Churches and manifestly Christian in their witness and service, which find evidence of valid baptism not so much in the use of traditional baptismal forms, but rather in the presence of the “fruits” of baptism in the life of the believer. Beginning early in the twentieth century, some churches began to use what they understood to be the earlier biblical form of baptism “in the name of Jesus” rather than the formula found in Matt. 28:19 of baptism “in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

⁵¹ Cf. *BEM*, “Baptism”, §21, Commentary (c).

⁵² Cf. *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry 1982-1990*, pp. 53-54 and 147; “The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling” [The Canberra Unity Statement], in Thomas F. Best and Günther Gassmann, eds., *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela, 1993*, Faith and Order Paper No. 166, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1994, §3.2, p. 270; and “Called to be the One Church”, §8.

⁵³ See “The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling”: “...we gladly acknowledge that some who do not observe these rites share in the spiritual experience of life in Christ”, §3.2, p. 270; and “Called to be the One Church”: “There are some who do not observe the rite of baptism in water but share in the spiritual experience of life in Christ”, §8.

107. Questions of theological and liturgical language are particularly sensitive in some places today. There are churches, members of the World Council of Churches and manifestly Christian in their witness and service, which have offered as an alternate to the traditional trinitarian formula “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”, such words as “Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier”. This has been prompted by a concern about exclusively masculine language for God. These changes, however, raise serious questions for the mutual recognition of baptism. In some places, the latter practice has resulted in the rescinding of already existing mutual recognition.

108. With the issues raised above in §§101-107 in mind, the following questions are asked:

How can churches discern and respect the authentic Christian witness of those who follow alternate baptismal practices?

How far are some churches prepared to modify their practice for the sake of the unity of the church?

VI. CONCLUSION

109. The member churches of the World Council of Churches, gathered at their 9th assembly in 2006, affirmed together that baptism is the basis of their commitment to one another within the ecumenical movement. And more than that, they committed themselves to draw the full consequences from the existing mutual recognition of baptism. Thus they affirmed that “Baptism bestows upon the churches both the freedom and the responsibility to journey toward common proclamation of the Word, confession of the one faith, celebration of one eucharist, and full sharing in one ministry.”⁵⁴

110. We hope that the reflections in this study document will help your church put its existing mutual recognition of baptism more fully into practice. Where mutual recognition seems difficult due to differences in understanding and practice, we hope these reflections will suggest starting points for a fresh discussion of the issues involved. In

⁵⁴ “Called to be the One Church,” §16 and note 15.

cases where mutual recognition seems impossible due to fundamental differences in the understanding of the faith, we hope these reflections will have clarified some of the issues which need to be addressed.

111. Baptism looks beyond itself. As the basis of our common identity in the one body of Christ, it yearns to be completed through the full eucharistic fellowship of all the members of Christ's body. We should be one at the one table of our one Lord. "All Christians who have received their baptism as the one baptism into the one church, have also received a radical calling from God to communion with all the baptized."⁵⁵ The churches are thus called to renewed efforts towards full ecclesial communion, in order that the unity which is theirs in Christ through the waters of baptism may find its fulfillment at his one table.

⁵⁵ "Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of a Common Baptism: A JWG Study", §104.





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