Council for Christian Unity

Faith and Order Advisory Group

Church as Communion

Briefing for the General Synod

1. What is *Church as Communion* and why is the Synod debating it now?

The Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) was set up by Archbishop Michael Ramsey and Pope Paul VI after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). The first phase of ARCIC concluded with the *Final Report* (1982), which was debated in the General Synod in 1986. Synod declared that the ARCIC statements on ministry and ordination and on the Eucharist contained in the *Final Report* were consonant in substance with the faith of the Church of England and the 1988 Lambeth Conference subsequently declared that they were consonant in substance with the faith of Anglicans as a whole.

Church as Communion is the second agreed statement by the second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC II).[1] It was first published in 1991. Other reports of ARCIC II, *Salvation and the Church* and *The Gift of Authority*, have previously been debated by the Synod. The remaining reports of ARCIC II, *Life in Christ* and *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* are expected to come before the Synod during this quinquennium, in accordance with the Synod motion of February 2008 requesting debates on the reports of ARCIC II.

Church as Communion differs from the reports of ARCIC I in that, although the doctrinal issues that have divided Anglicans and Roman Catholics since the Reformation are in the background, it does not focus directly on them. In addition, it is not intended to be a full scale treatment of the doctrine of the Church. Its purpose is instead 'to give substance to the affirmation that Anglicans and Roman Catholics are already in a real though as yet imperfect communion' and to enable them to recognise 'the degree of communion that exists both within and between us.' (Para. 2)

In doing this it builds on the statement made by Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Robert Runcie in their Common Declaration on 2 October 1989 that Anglicans and Roman Catholics should not:

> ...neglect or undervalue that certain yet imperfect communion we already share. This communion already shared is grounded in faith in God our Father, in our Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit, our common baptism into Christ, our sharing of the Holy Scriptures, of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds; the Chalcedonian definition and the teaching of the Fathers; our common Christian inheritance for many centuries. This communion should be cherished and guarded as we seek to grow into the fuller communion Christ wills.

[1] The first agreed statement of ARCIC II was the 1987 statement *Salvation and the Church*.

2. What does *Church as Communion* say?

Church as Communion consists of an Introduction and five sections.

Section I 'Communion Unfolded in Scripture' summarises the biblical story of how the intimate relationship (or 'communion') between God and his creation is broken as a result of the Fall, but then, as promised by God in the Old Testament, re-established by Christ through his life, death and resurrection. It then summarises what the Bible has to say about how this restored relationship is manifested, albeit imperfectly, in the life of the Church, and how it will reach its fulfilment at the end of history when all things are 'brought to ultimate unity and communion in Christ' (Para.15).

Section II, 'Communion, Sacramentality and the Church.' looks at how, in spite of its divisions and the frailty and sinfulness of its members, the Church is nevertheless a sign, instrument and foretaste of God's purpose 'to bring all people into communion with himself within a transformed creation' (Para.16). This is especially manifested at the celebration of the Eucharist in which:

> …the Church points to the origin of its communion in Christ, himself in communion with the Father; it experiences that communion in a visible fellowship; it anticipates the fullness of the communion in the Kingdom; it is sent out to realize, manifest and extend that communion in the world. (Para.24)

Section III, 'Communion: Apostolicity, Catholicity and Holiness,' looks at three of the four traditional credal 'marks' of the Church.

The apostolicity of the Church consists in its being built up by the Holy Spirit on the basis of the apostolic witness to Christ and in its sharing in the missionary mandate given to the Apostles. As the Church carries out this mandate it preserves and transmits the memory of Christ on the basis of the joint witness of the living Word of God in Scripture and the testimony of the Holy Spirit and constantly needs to give fresh expression to the gospel in new cultural settings.

The succession of bishops in the Church is intended to assure each Christian community that its faith is indeed the apostolic faith and the communion between the bishops makes the wider Church aware of the 'perceptions and concerns' of local churches and enables local churches to 'maintain their place and peculiar character' within the wider Church (Para.33).

The Church is catholic in three senses. It is catholic because it exists throughout the world and down the ages, because it teaches 'all that has been revealed by God for the salvation and fulfilment of humankind' and because it is called to manifest the reconciling work of Christ by uniting in 'one eucharistic fellowship men and women of every race, culture and social condition in every generation' (Para. 34).

The Church is holy because it is God's special possession endowed with his Spirit and consists of those who are seeking to be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect

(Matt. 5:48) through a life ‘in communion with Christ, a life of compassion, love and righteousness’ (Para.38).

These three aspects of the Church are inseparable from each other:

> The holiness of the Church reflects the mission of the Spirit of God in Christ, the Holy One of God, made known to all the world through the apostolic teaching. Catholicity is the realization of the Church's proclamation of the fullness of the Gospel to every nation throughout the ages. Apostolicity unites the Church of all generations and in every place with the once-for-all sacrifice and resurrection of Christ, where God's holy love was supremely demonstrated. (Para. 27)

Section IV ‘Unity and Ecclesial Communities’ looks at the Church’s unity, the fourth credal mark of the Church. Drawing on Ephesians 4 it states:

> Because there is only, one Lord, with whom we are called to have communion in the one Spirit, God has given his Church one gospel, one faith, one baptism, one eucharist, and one apostolic ministry through which Christ continues to feed and guide his flock. (Para. 42)

Because these things have been given to the Church by God the Church is already spiritually united. However, ‘it is inadequate to speak only of an invisible spiritual unity as the fulfilment of Christ’s will for the Church; the profound communion fashioned by the Spirit requires visible expression’ (Para. 43).

The report then goes on to consider what this visible expression of the Church’s unity needs to look like, what it calls the ‘constitutive elements’ of the ‘visible communion’ of the Church. This visible or ‘ecclesial’ communion:

> …is rooted in the confession of the one apostolic faith, revealed in the Scriptures, and set forth in the Creeds. It is founded upon one baptism. The one celebration of the eucharist is its pre-eminent expression and focus. It necessarily finds expression in shared commitment to the mission entrusted by Christ to his Church. It is a life of shared concern for one another in mutual forbearance, submission, gentleness and love; in the placing of the interests of others above the interests of self; in making room for each other in the body of Christ; in solidarity with the poor and the powerless; and in the sharing of gifts both material and spiritual (cf. Acts 2:44). Also constitutive of life in communion is acceptance of the same basic moral values, the sharing of the same vision of humanity created in the image of God and recreated in Christ and the common confession of the one hope in the final consummation of the Kingdom of God. (Para. 45)

In order to nurture this ecclesial communion and enable it to grow, Christ has provided ‘a ministry of oversight, the fullness of which is entrusted to the episcopate, which has the responsibility of maintaining and expressing the unity of the churches’.

> By shepherding, teaching and the celebration of the sacraments, especially the eucharist, this ministry holds believers together in the communion of the local

> church and in the wider communion of all the churches. This ministry of oversight has both collegial and primatial dimensions. It is grounded in the life of the community and is open to the community's participation in the discovery of God's will. It is exercised so that unity and communion are expressed, preserved and fostered at every level locally, regionally and universally. In the context of the communion of all the churches the episcopal ministry of a universal primate finds its role as the visible focus of unity. (Para. 45)

Separated churches should not be complacent about their disunity. As they move together they should recognise the 'profound measure of communion' that they already possess through their spiritual communion with God and those elements of visible communion that they can already recognise in each other.

Even the achievement of complete ecclesial communion is not the end of the story. Christians will still be obliged to seek ever deeper communion with God and each other and in addition the Church on earth is only part of a wider communion which includes 'the martyrs and confessors and all who have fallen asleep in Christ throughout the ages'. Perfect communion is something that will be only be achieved in the Kingdom of God (Para. 48).

The last section 'Communion between Anglicans and Roman Catholics' looks at the relationship between the two traditions in the light of what has been said. Referring to the 1989 Common Declaration, it states that Anglicans and Roman Catholics 'already share in the communion founded upon the saving life and work of Christ and his continuing presence through the Holy Spirit′ (Para. 50). This communion finds expression in a number of different ways:

> Alongside common participation in public worship and in private prayer, members of both churches draw from a common treasury of spiritual writing and direction. There has been a notable convergence in our patterns of liturgy, especially in that of the eucharist. The same lectionary is used by both churches in many countries. We now agree on the use of the vernacular language in public worship. We agree also that communion in both kinds is the appropriate mode of administration of the eucharist. In some circumstances, buildings are shared.
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> In some areas there is collaboration in Christian education and in service to local communities. For a number of years, Roman Catholic and Anglican scholars have worked together in universities and other academic institutions. There is closer co-operation in ministerial formation and between parochial clergy and religious communities. The responsibility for the pastoral care of inter-church families is now increasingly entrusted to both churches. Meetings of Roman Catholic and Anglican bishops are becoming customary, engendering mutual understanding and confidence. This often results in joint witness, practical action and common statements on social and moral issues. (Paras 51-52)

The effects of the centuries of separation between the two traditions cannot be ignored. However, on closer examination the developments that have taken place in

both traditions can be seen as complementary and as contributing to a fuller understanding of communion. There is room for 'growth towards fuller communion' on the basis of the understanding of the Church as Communion set out in the report, an understanding that ARCIC believes the two traditions share.

It is this shared understanding of communion that needs to form the basis of the unresolved matters between them, such as the reconciliation of ministries, the ordination of women, the handling of moral issues, and the exercise of authority in the Church, including the authority exercised by the Bishop of Rome.[2]

3. What is particularly important about *Church as Communion*?

a. It shows why there is an inseparable link between the fundamental nature of the Church and the search for visible unity between Anglicans and Roman Catholics.

b. It bases its account of the nature of the Church on Scripture and the four credal marks of the Church, thus establishing a starting point behind the divisions of the Reformation and post-Reformation periods by returning to theological sources that both traditions share in common.

c. While acknowledging the need for a proper diversity in the life of the Church, it also notes that this diversity has to be limited by fidelity to the apostolic tradition and the avoidance of behaviour that will disrupt communion.

d. It recognises that the visible unity of the Church has to include not only agreement about matters of faith and order, but also 'acceptance of the same basic moral values'.

e. As paragraph 55 indicates, what it says is compatible with the teaching of the historic formularies of the Church of England.

f. What it says reflects the development of wider ecumenical thinking about the nature of the Church[3] and is in line with with the ecumenical agreements which the Church of England has entered into in recent years.

g. It highlights the fact that, as Christians sharing a common faith, common Scriptures and a common baptism, Anglicans and Roman Catholics are already in communion with each other in Christ, in spite of the divisions between them.

h.. It draws attention to the many ways in which Anglicans and Roman Catholics are already giving expression to the communion they have in Christ, whilst also acknowledging the remaining obstacles to visible unity between them that need to be addressed.

4. What are some of the apparent difficulties that have been identified by some in *Church as Communion*?

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[2] The last two issues mentioned were tackled in the subsequent ARCIC II reports *Life in Christ* (1994) and *The Gift of Authority* (1999).

[3] It has been suggested, for example, that it draws on the thought of the distinguished Reformed theologian Lesslie Newbigin.

a. 'Given that it was published in 1991, *Church as Communion* is now out of date.'

Some studies, which are directly related to unfolding events, undoubtedly do look dated seventeen years later. This report, however, is not of that kind. Furthermore, the mutual suspicions about the way each side views the Church have not gone away. They still need to be addressed constructively and *Church as Communion* provides a good basis for doing this.

One area in which the text does now look dated is its failure to explore the link between the communion established by Christ and care for the environment. The text notes in paragraph 9 that:

> …because Christ is the one in whom all things are crested and reconciled, the proper relationship between humanity and the rest of creation is restored and renewed in him (Col 1.15-20; Gal. 27-29).

However, it does not go on consider what this means in terms of Christian responsibility for the planet and for the other creatures with whom we share it, an issue of which Christians have become increasingly aware since *Church as Communion* was published.

b. '*Church as Communion* mistakenly assumes that we can base what we say about the Church on the doctrine of the Trinity.'

In recent years there has been a tendency amongst theologians to try to base our thinking about the Church on the eternal relationship between the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. This tendency has been rightly criticised for failing to give due recognition to the limitations of our knowledge about the mystery of God and for failing to respect the difference between God and the Church.

However, it not clear that this is a criticism can be rightly applied to *Church as Communion*. *Church as Communion* does indeed link the doctrine of the the Trinity and the doctrine of the church. However, while it says that the Church participates in the life of the Trinity, it does not use the relationships within the Trinity as a model for understanding the Church.

c. 'The report's use of *koinonia* is problematic because there is a continuing debate amongst biblical scholars about the meaning (or meanings) of this term in the New Testament.'

The existence of this debate needs to be acknowledged and if *Church as Communion* was based on a particular understanding of the meaning of the term *koinonia* then the differences amongst New Testament scholars about the meaning of the term would indeed be a problem.

However, the actual term *koinonia* is not fundamental to the report, being used in only one paragraph (para.12).and what is said in this paragraph acknowledges the complexity of the use of this term in the New Testament and is defensible even in the light of recent New Testament scholarship.

The report could not have ignored the term, given that it had been both important and controversial in Roman Catholic theology. What it does, therefore, is state what it thinks can usefully be said about the term without allowing it to dominate the report as a whole.

d. 'The report uses 'communion' to refer to a range of different realities (the life of the Trinity, the unity of Christians with God and each other, the visible unity of bodies of Christians and the destiny of the cosmos), without making clear how these different uses relate to one another.'

It is true that the report does use 'communion' to refer to a range of different realities and if it did not make clear how these different uses of the term related to one another this would indeed be a problem. However, the report in fact links together these different uses of the term in a clear and consistent fashion. In accordance with the New Testament teaching summarised in paragraphs 1-15, it teaches that God wills to share his life with humanity and the whole of the created order, that Christians are those in whom this sharing of God's life has begun to happen as a foretaste of what will be universally true at the end of history, and that Christians are called to express and promote this sharing in God's life through the existence of a visibly united Christian community.

e. 'The report wrongly suggests that 'communion' is the key to New Testament teaching on the Church and that all the other images used for the Church have to be understood in the light of it.'

It is important that all the various images that are used for the Church in the New Testament are each noted and given their proper place in our understanding of the mystery of the Church. However, as paragraph 13 says, these images – people of God, flock, vine, temple, bride, body of Christ and so forth – all 'express a relationship with God and also imply a relationship among the members of the community.'

The question then becomes 'what does this relationship with God involve?' and, as the paragraph goes on to say, the teaching of the New Testament as a whole can be expressed in summary form by saying that it involves 'participation in the life of God through Christ in the Holy Spirit, making Christians one with each other'. When the report uses the term 'communion' this is what it has in mind. The term is thus a convenient short hand way of referring to the relationship with God the Father through Christ in the Spirit and therefore with all other Christians that is the fundamental reality of the life of the Church.

However, the report might usefully have said more about the way in which participation in the life of God involves sharing in the sufferings of Christ (Philippians 3.10). An important aspect of being in communion with Christ is a willingness to suffer with Christ for the sake of his people and for the world he died to save and, although this aspect of communion is referred to briefly in paragraphs15 and 21, it would have been helpful if it has been discussed more fully.

In addition, while the report highlights the way in which communion is entered into, nourished and expressed through the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, it fails

to highlight the equally import role of the preaching of the word in creating and sustaining communion.

f. 'There is a lack of coherence between what is said about the fundamental nature of the Church in sections I-III and what is said in sections IV and V about the requirements for church unity ('ecclesial communion') and communion between Anglicans and Roman Catholics.'

There is certainly a different focus in sections I –III and IV-V of the report. Nevertheless there is also clear continuity between section IV and the earlier parts of the report.

The description of the constitutive elements of ecclesial communion in paragraph 45 draws on what has already been said about the manifestation of communion in the life of the Church in paragraph 15 and what is said in sections I-III in general. This is because the overall argument of *Church as Communion* is that the constitutive elements of visible unity identified in section IV are not arbitrary. They are no more and no less than those things that make the Church the Church, what it calls the 'essential constitutive elements of ecclesial life' (Para.43).

What is said in section V also draws on what has been said earlier in the report. Anglicans and Roman Catholics are seen as sharing in the communion outlined in sections I-III and it is the recognition of this communion between them that forms the basis for their continuing attempts to give it ever more visible expression.

5. Conclusion

Church as Communion is an important resource for ecclesiology. As the references to it in the recent IARCCUM report *Growing Together in Unity and Mission* show, it has proved fruitful in the development of Anglican-Roman Catholic relations. It has also been found helpful in other ecumenical conversations such as the recent conversations about faith and order between representatives of the Church of England and of the Church of Scotland.

The report outlines the fundamental nature of the Church as a community of people who are in relationship with God and with each other through Christ and who are called to be God's instruments in bringing others into that relationship and in witnessing to the cosmic unity that God will one day bring to fruition. It explains why this community needs to give visible expression to its unity in Christ and what the key elements of that visible unity need to be and why. It reminds Anglicans and Roman Catholics of the unity they already possess and the ways in which it is already expressed and challenges them to continue to work to make this unity ever more visible in spite of the various issues which threaten to keep them apart. In the words of the final paragraph:

> Together with all Christians, Anglicans and Roman Catholics are called by God to continue to pursue the goal of complete communion of faith and sacramental life. This call we must obey until all come into the fullness of that Divine Presence, to whom, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be ascribed all honour, thanksgiving and praise to the ages of ages. Amen.