

**GENERAL SYNOD**

**Communion and Disagreement**

***A Report from the Faith and Order Commission***

This report on *Communion and Disagreement* was written by the Faith and Order Commission to support the process of shared conversations in the Church of England, including the participation of Synod members in July 2016, and the discussion and discernment that will continue beyond it. It has been approved for publication and commended for study by the House of Bishops.

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Secretary to the House of Bishops  
June 2016

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## Preface

The origins of this report lie in various discussions in 2015 around the reception of the *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality* (GS 1929), widely known as the Pilling report. One of the key decisions taken early on by the House of Bishops was to act on the report's recommendation for a structured series of 'facilitated' (later 'shared') conversations. Consultation between the Faith and Order Commission and those responsible for shaping the shared conversations process indicated that there was a theological – specifically an ecclesiological – task that could usefully be undertaken alongside it. Hence the first of the two *Grace and Disagreement* booklets produced to resource that process stated that: 'For the Church of England, the Faith and Order Commission will in due course support the process of shared conversations by producing some reflections on theologically responsible ways of holding difference, diversity and serious disagreement within the common life of the church' (p. 17). Those reflections are contained in the report that follows.

The task was never, then, about addressing again the particular issues considered in the Pilling Report regarding the church's response to same-sex relationships. Indeed, a major theme in this document is the variety and complexity of disagreements in which Christians have been caught up over two millennia, beginning with the New Testament itself. Of course, every disagreement has its own particular features, its unique place in church history, but there are also common patterns that can be observed and wisdom to be gained from considered reflection upon them. So, while we are not seeking to offer guidance in this document on how to find the right answers to controverted questions about sexual ethics, we are aiming to help Christians understand what may be happening when disagreement becomes thoroughly entrenched in the life of the church. We are also aiming to indicate how they might seek to frame conversations between those who find themselves in serious disagreement that are profoundly shaped by those truths on which they continue to agree, within the communion of the church. Such conversations may, by God's grace and in God's good time, lead to deeper unanimity in the fullness of God's truth.

The report does not attempt to offer a road-map, overt or coded, by which the Church of England might navigate once the formal shared conversations process is completed. Nevertheless, we hope that what we have written can inform the work of thoughtful and prayerful discernment that is going to be so very necessary and that, to a greater or lesser extent at any particular point, will always be part of the life of the church here on earth. We believe that it has things to say to all who share responsibility for that work of discernment – including the College of Bishops, the House of Bishops and the other Houses of the General Synod, and extending beyond them to the whole body of the Church of England. Indeed, we hope that as we have drawn on the experience and wisdom of the wider Church, so this text may be of some value also to other churches, within and beyond the Anglican Communion.

This report from the Faith and Order Commission, commended for study by the House of Bishops, rests on the work of the drafting subgroup over the course of a year and a half of regular meetings, for which members prepared a significant range

of papers. We decided to draw these together into five co-written 'dialogue papers', which both provide extended treatment of issues dealt with more briefly in the text of the report itself and model a range of ways of agreeing and disagreeing well together. The five papers, which will be made available on the Faith and Order Commission page of the Church of England's website (<https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/work-other-churches/faith-and-order-commission.aspx>), are:

1. Loveday Alexander and Joshua Hordern, 'Communion, Disagreement and Conscience'
2. Loveday Alexander and Morwenna Ludlow, 'Irenaeus and the Date of Easter'
3. Christopher Cocksworth and Julie Gittoes, 'Richard Hooker on Scripture, Tradition and Reason: Responding to Disagreement'
4. Mark Chapman and Tim Dakin, 'Dialogue and Difference: Symbolic, Symptomatic and Systemic'
5. Jonathan Goodall and Jeremy Worthen, 'The Limits of Diversity'.

I am very grateful to all the authors for their contributions to our deliberations, and the report and essays that have followed from them.

In summary, this document originated in a specific context within the Church of England, and it is written with the intention of being useful for all those concerned with seeking to find a way forward for the Church of England at the present time. Its method, however, is not to reflect on this situation directly but to open up scriptural, historical and doctrinal perspectives that may bring into better focus the choices that lie more immediately before us. Our hope is that what is offered here, while by no means the last word to be said on the subject, can be a resource of enduring value for churches facing serious disagreement yet also wanting to be 'standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel' (Phil. 1.27).

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## Summary

This report from the Faith and Order Commission explores what it means for the church to be both the communion in Christ of human persons with the Triune God and a human, historical community where disagreement is a regular feature of our life together. It sets out some key parameters for disagreeing well within the communion that is the church. It offers an analysis of different types of theological disagreement and suggests that lack of consensus as to which type we are engaged in can make disagreement particularly hard to address constructively. It underlines the importance of careful discernment, responsible leadership and commitment to the demanding virtues of discipleship when Christians are seeking a way forward in such situations. In each of its four chapters, it comments on some of the distinctive issues for the Church of England with regard to all this.

The first chapter, on ‘Disagreement and the Life of the Church’, shows disagreement to be part and parcel of how the church in mission responds to the diversity of human cultures and the new challenges that continually arise for a ‘community of missionary disciples’ (Pope Francis’ description of the church). It sets out both the inseparability of beliefs and practices, and the crucial effect of different ‘weightings’ of theoretical and practical components within disagreements. It argues that disagreeing well requires us to ‘aim at moving creatively through disagreement towards the fullness of agreement in God’s truth, so that this can be proclaimed in all its abundance before God in worship and before humanity in mission.’

The second chapter sketches out the relationship between ‘Communion, Conflict, Consultation, Conciliarity and Conscience’. When conflict occurs that has a potential bearing on our communion in Christ, there is a proper place for consultation that includes all. At the same time, the Church of England like other churches appoints people to ‘councils’ where some deliberate on behalf of others and have a responsibility to address difficult issues for the good of all. Attention to conscience is an important theme in the treatment of disagreement within the New Testament, and although what we normally think of as ‘conscience’ may not be quite the same in all respects as what the biblical writers mean in these passages, their insights must continue to inform our approach.

The third chapter, ‘Elements of Communion and Types of Disagreement’, distinguishes three types of disagreement on the basis of their perceived bearing on our being in communion with one another through Christ. The first, most severe type is one where there is concern that what is being proposed – or resistance to it – may jeopardise our very ability to recognize one another as being united with one another in communion through Christ (which the report refers to as ‘apostolic communion’). The second type is where that is not an immediate concern, but participants are nonetheless unsure whether they can remain part of a single church or family of churches (which the report refers to as ‘ecclesial communion’) with people who take different stances on a given issue. The third type is where those debating a substantial theological question believe that those adopting a different point of view from their own are wrong, perhaps even dangerously wrong, but do not find this puts a question mark against their ability to recognise them as brothers and sisters in

Christ (apostolic communion) or to walk the road of discipleship alongside them within the same church or family of churches (ecclesial communion).

In the fourth and final chapter, on 'Sustaining Conversation in Serious Disagreement', attention turns to the challenges of disagreeing well when the goal of 'moving creatively through disagreement towards the fullness of agreement in God's truth' seems distant at best, unreachable at worst. Different types of disagreement require different kinds of conversation, but while some people may already be at odds over the type of disagreement involved as well as the correct response to it, others may be still making up their minds as to what they think about the issue itself, let alone its bearing on apostolic and ecclesial communion. There is a need in such situations for leadership in oversight that can discern the kind of conversation that is most needful at a specific point in time, as well as for a common commitment across the church as a whole to the virtues of Christian discipleship and to expressing them consistently in behaviour around communication in particular.

## 1. Disagreement and the Life of the Church

### *Pluriformity, unanimity and mission*

1. 'If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind' (Philippians 2.1–2). Paul's passionate exhortation to the Christians in Philippi reminds us that disagreement is part of life in the church as it journeys through history toward the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, and that it always has been. At the same time, his words assume that there is a wonderful and joyful unanimity that 'sharing [*koinonia*] in the Spirit' makes possible for us, and that in all our disagreements we should strive for the 'being in full accord and of one mind' that properly accompanies 'having the same love', rather than being content either to find some way to work around our disagreements or to stifle, quickly or slowly, all voices apart from one.
2. It is not necessarily the case that if only Christians were faithful to Christ, there would never be disagreement. The church exists in the dynamic of evangelization, of receiving and proclaiming the good news. Called from every nation to share the gospel with every nation, Christians have to work out what it means to hear and to speak the gospel in their particular time, culture and circumstances. They cannot do this unaided and in isolation, but neither can they always rely wholly on imitating or repeating the words and actions of Christians from other times and other places. The witness of the church is irreducibly pluriform<sup>1</sup> rather than uniform, as the inclusion of four different canonical Gospels underscores. It is in such pluriformity, not in spite of it, that the church fulfils the command to 'be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.'
3. Questions are however bound to arise as to where the boundary lies between necessary, right pluriformity and confusing, wrong pluriformity – or, to use a different terminology, between legitimate and illegitimate diversity.<sup>2</sup> Different answers will sometimes be given to these questions, leading on some occasions to significant disagreement, one outcome of which may be the judgment that a particular way of speaking and acting is not compatible with abiding in the

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<sup>1</sup> This term is used by a wide variety of authors to indicate that the church cannot and should not be reduced to a single 'form' of existence in history. See e.g. Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, *Communion, Conflict and Hope: The Kuala Lumpur Report of the Third Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission*, 2008, available at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/107653/Communion-Conflict-and-Hope-the-Kuala-Lumpur-Report.pdf>, §§42 and 93–94. Cf. Pope John Paul II on the significance of the church in Jerusalem as described in the opening chapters of Acts: 'In turning to it with nostalgia and gratitude, we find the strength and enthusiasm to intensify the quest for harmony in that genuine plurality of forms which remains the Church's ideal,' *Oriente Lumen*, 1995, §2, available at [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1995/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19950502\\_orientale-lumen.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19950502_orientale-lumen.html).

<sup>2</sup> World Council of Churches Commission for Faith and Order (WCC), *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, Commission on Faith and Order, 2013) §30, p. 17; also available at <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision>.



teaching of Christ (2 John 9). Such exclusion, however, should not be confused with an ideal of uniformity; it concerns rather the proper parameters of Christian diversity. Difference and disagreement remain part of the church's journey through the dynamic of evangelization towards ever fuller and deeper unanimity in the praise of God and the declaration of God's truth to the world.<sup>3</sup>

4. The New Testament provides plenty of evidence for this. As the early Christian movement spread out from Judea and Galilee and took root in communities of Gentiles as well as Jews, for instance, judgments needed to be made about the extent to which characteristic practices of first-century Judaism – circumcision, Sabbath observance and dietary laws – should be taken on by Gentiles professing faith in Jesus as Lord. Christians quickly found themselves disagreeing with one another about that. Their debates, as we find them in Acts, Galatians and Romans, recall the controversies in the Gospels between Jesus and other teachers and groups he encountered.

#### *Beliefs and practices are inseparable*

5. The parallels here underscore the way that questions in the New Testament about what to *do* in the light of God's revelation in Christ are not neatly separable from questions about who Christ *is* in relation to the God of Israel. The more obviously 'doctrinal' issues that surface in the Gospel and letters of John about Jesus' identity as the Son of God are likely to have been important for early Christians in part because of their direct implications for practices of evangelization and corporate worship. Similarly, detailed discussions about eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols were bound up with fundamental theological questions about the doctrine of God, as well as the radical imperative to reject all idolatry.
6. Disagreement, then, could arise from the church's own activity – such as the mission to the Gentiles – or from situations it faced because of outside circumstances, such as the persecution that forms the background to the letters to the churches in Revelation 2–3. It might focus around behaviour or beliefs, deeds or words, but perhaps – both then and subsequently – the most potent disagreements somehow related to both. Indeed, much thinking in philosophy and theology over the past forty years has stressed the relationship here. One way of putting it would be that judgments about what to do always depend on descriptions of the situation we are facing, and such descriptions are always informed by theological and philosophical commitments, however unarticulated and unacknowledged they may be. Similarly, theological views serve to interpret the world in such a way that some choices are perceived as significant and others as unimportant, some decisions as difficult and some as uncontroversial. So it is only to be expected that in church disagreements, questions about

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<sup>3</sup> See the Second Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC II), *Church as Communion*, 1991, especially §§ 35–41; text available at [http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/105242/ARCIC\\_II\\_The\\_Church\\_as\\_Communion.pdf](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/105242/ARCIC_II_The_Church_as_Communion.pdf). There is a fuller discussion of this and other relevant ecumenical texts in the supporting paper for this report on 'The Limits of Diversity' by Jonathan Goodall and Jeremy Worthen, available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/work-other-churches/faith-and-order-commission.aspx>.

doctrine, church order, worship, ethics and mission, for instance, can be broadly distinguished but cannot be rigorously separated. Indeed, the most significant disagreements tend to be those that touch on a number of these areas, if not all of them.

7. We know that a few centuries after the writing of the New Testament documents, debates about the Trinity and the Incarnation that drew on highly technical philosophical language were also bound up with practical questions about worship: what form of words was to be used in baptism, or how to refer to Mary, Jesus' mother. Moreover, at a time of continuing initiatives in evangelization, they also had direct implications for how faith was to be proclaimed and explained to those who had not previously heard the good news. They touched deeply on the identity of believers as well as the God in whom they believed – on what we might call spirituality – as also, to take a much later example, did debates about predestination in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

#### *Theoretical and practical elements*

8. While theoretical and practical elements are normally bound together in significant disagreements, in the church as in human life more generally, the way that the accent falls on one or the other is nonetheless significant. There are disagreements in which the weight of the problem rests on the incompatibility of how the two parties *understand* something. They may criticise each other as 'misinformed', or in theological terms as 'heterodox'. There are other disagreements in which the weight rests primarily on what one party *does*, eliciting a hostile reaction. The parties criticise each other as 'destructive', 'dangerous', 'judgmental', etc. Now, most concrete disagreements are compounded of both elements, as has just been emphasised, nor are these watertight categories. Nevertheless, since disagreements vary very considerably in the weight which one element or the other has in them, we can think of disagreements as lying on a spectrum between two poles, and sometimes moving, in the course of history, from one end towards the other.
9. The disagreement between the Eastern and the Western churches over the doctrine of the double procession of the Holy Spirit is probably as near resolved as these things ever can be. Mutual acts of excommunication have been withdrawn by Constantinople and Rome. Eastern theologians admit that the *filioque* can be a legitimate theological speculation (though not part of the ecumenical faith), Western theologians allow that the *filioque* clause adds nothing essential to the ecumenical doctrine, so that the use of the creed without it is not in any way defective. The process has been helped by study on each side of the arguments in their intellectual contexts. The long lapse of time from the moment when practical offence was first given and angry reactions evoked has helped each to look at the other as a cultural whole, allowing the theoretical issues to emerge more fully, and finally a way through them to appear. When Eastern delegates first observed the recitation of the creed in Rome with the *filioque* clause attached, on the other hand, it was an outrage that demanded a practical response.

10. By contrast, the disagreement between the world churches and the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa over their support, during the *apartheid* period, for the principle of separate development of races never reached the point at which the world churches thought it necessary to engage with the offending church over the theological perspectives that conditioned their view. Their attitude remained (until the question disappeared) one of taking offence and repudiating the offending church. While the wrongful policies the arguments seemed to support were still in operation, the matter could not be responded to in any other way. One might compare the stance of the author of 2 John, who, far from being open to dialogue with those who deny Jesus has come in the flesh, asks his readers not to 'receive' or 'welcome' them (2 John 10). Offence and reaction is the essential character of disagreement where the immediate focus is on practical elements, evoking a practical judgment about what must be done.
11. Such disagreements can be sharp and divisive. Our response to seeing wrong done is often peremptory. We pass judgment immediately and react with highly charged conviction, even anger. The important thing seems to be to take a clear practical stand against the wrong and to gather a consensus of disapproval. That reaction is not necessarily an irrational mistake on the part of over-excited people. It belongs to our moral rationality that we are outraged at wrongdoing, and must name it.
12. On the other hand, the practical contexts which make these peremptory reactions necessary pass away. When the offensive behaviour persists, and a strong consensus of disapproval is not formed, the immediacy of the hostile reaction inevitably dissipates. The dispute may then enter into a further phase as a settled antagonism, in which grounds of disapproval, no longer immediately evident, have to be constantly rehearsed, and if possible expanded, in order to sustain the opposition. This is the period of 'demonization', in which the mere fact of the original wrong is not enough but has to be elaborated into a total disapproval of everything the other side stands for – a natural development emotionally, but not practically reasonable and certainly not charitable.
13. Once the question of reasons for the antagonism has come to the fore, there is another possibility, which is to reflect on whether there are any further perspectives from which the matter can be seen, not necessarily *better* perspectives, but at least *fuller* perspectives. At that point, if absolute breach of relation is not to be the last word, there is no alternative but to concentrate on the *reasons* for acting and the *reasons* for disapproving of the action and to attempt arbitrations and assessments of them. Theoretical perspectives have to become the centre of discussion. But there is still a practical rationality for exploring these. Three clear steps are involved.
  - (i) Each side has to be prepared to offer the other a self-reflective account of what is important to it in its actions and reactions. It must, in other words, get beyond reiterating its sense of indignation over the other's head.
  - (ii) Each side must open itself to the other's *interrogation* of the account it will give of itself, as it seeks clarifications and voices its puzzles.

- (iii) Each side must be committed to seek the fullest possible extent of agreement and to define the remaining disagreement within that context. It must be prepared to relinquish any lingering sense that the other side is wrong about everything. These disciplines do not commit either side to doubting that it is in the right on the matter that divides them, but they do commit both sides to want to get to the root of what has come to divide them, and not to be content with the polemical mutual characterisations that belong to the antagonistic phase.

### *Biblical interpretation and unity in Christ*

14. Any sustained disagreement in church life that has an acknowledged theological dimension is likely to have disagreement about the interpretation of Scripture as one of its dimensions. Detailed commentary on relevant biblical passages was a major component of the exchanges in the controversies referred to earlier (paragraphs 7 & 9 above). How the Old Testament – as both law and prophecy – was to be received in the light of Christ is clearly at the heart of the New Testament writings as a whole, including those that deal with the divisive debates about circumcision, Sabbath observance and dietary laws. With some important qualifications, Christians have been formed by common reading of the same texts, yielding a high degree of convergence upon shared meaning but without allowing a precise determination of it.<sup>4</sup> The hermeneutical character of Christian theology ensures that it does not reach a fixed and final state. Interpretive disagreement is a creative and necessary part of how human communities read texts with the expectation of growth in understanding of truth and goodness: different interpretations need to be tested against one another in order for the best interpretation to emerge.
15. Paul begins his exhortation to the Philippians to ‘be of the same mind’ by recalling their ‘sharing in the Spirit’. Such passages are not injunctions to ban all disagreement in the church, but rather reminders that the response to disagreement should always affirm the theological reality of the *koinonia* that believers have in Christ.<sup>5</sup> Paul is writing to ‘the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi’ (Phil. 1.1): being together ‘in Christ Jesus’ is what enables Paul to address them as one, and it is on this basis that they need to respond to the reality of their disagreements. Hence Paul’s instruction to the Philippians in the following verse, leading into the Christological hymn of verses 6–11, ‘Let your bearing towards one another arise out of your life in Christ’ (NEB). It is life together in Christ that opens up sharing of the Spirit and discloses the vision of unanimity in pluriformity before God. Everything that happens between us in the life of the church – including our disagreements – should respect and express the truth of *koinonia* in Christ and also lead to its deepening, which will include ever fuller agreement in celebrating and proclaiming the truth of the gospel.

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<sup>4</sup> The relationship between Canon, creeds and interpretation of Scripture is considered in the supporting paper for this report by Loveday Alexander and Morwenna Ludlow on ‘Irenaeus and the Date of Easter’, available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/work-other-churches/faith-and-order-commission.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> See Andrew T. Lincoln, ‘Communion: Some Pauline Foundations’, *Ecclesiology* 5:2 (2009): 135–60.

16. Disagreement that happens within the church, then, takes place by definition between those who are 'in Christ Jesus' and therefore belong to one another in him and recognize one another as belonging to him. This reality of belonging to Christ, shared by all to whom Christ is bound, despite our individual and corporate failure to follow him faithfully, does not however preclude the need at times for both repentance and discipline (see further paragraph 74 below). Life in Christ calls us to greater conformity to his will and way. Moreover, the possibility always remains for missing his will and way so seriously that our belonging to him and therefore our communion with one another is put at risk: 'So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall' (1 Cor. 10.12). There are points in the New Testament where there is a clear demand for it to be acknowledged that this has happened, and distance to be established from those who then reject the opportunity for repentance (e.g. 1 Cor. 5.1–5; cf. paragraph 10 above). There will be occasions when, erring from Christ's truth and straying from his way, Christ's people need to be called back to forms of discipleship and church life that will enable them to resume the journey towards 'the measure of the full stature of Christ' (Eph 4.13).

*Good disagreement relies on and strengthens agreement in faith*

17. A number of points arise from these initial observations as to what 'disagreeing well' might mean in the life of the church. It will be framed by the reality that those who belong to Christ stand together in communion with Christ and therefore should allow that truth to shape all their words and actions. That should help Christians to resist the slide from the kinds of disagreement that are part and parcel of church life (as indeed of all human life) into the paralysing and destructive solidification of fixed blocks of people organised against one another and in opposition to one another – the phase of 'settled antagonism' described at paragraph 12 above. It will mean behaving as one body, where every member is valued and none is despised or ignored, with direct implications for the moral and spiritual quality of our conduct (hence e.g. 'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit'). It will also always aim at moving creatively through disagreement towards the fullness of agreement in God's truth, so that this can be proclaimed in all its abundance before God in worship and before humanity in mission. That is what makes 'joy complete' for those who love the church as Paul did.

18. Disagreements in the church are only meaningful because there are crucial things on which we agree: some shared understandings of God, shared descriptions of created reality, shared commitments to holy ways of life. It is a cliché to observe that the most intense disagreements happen between those who are closest to one another in outlook. Disagreements matter where they concern those things we care about, and we are therefore most likely to have them with other people who care about related – if not precisely the same – things. So it should not be surprising that disagreements between those who care passionately about faithfulness to Christ should be passionate, even fierce, especially when the disagreement has a strong 'practical' component (paragraphs 8–11 above). Such fierceness may be connected at least in part to their common passion, their shared commitments and their deep agreement about God's good news for all the world in Jesus Christ.

19. It may be worth acknowledging that our contemporary cultural context is one in which disagreements relating to religious faith are a source of some suspicion and anxiety. Ofsted's Inspection Handbook, at the time of writing, lists four 'fundamental British values': 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs.'<sup>6</sup> Why are respect and tolerance with regard to differences of faith specifically singled out here? After all, there are many other ways to be intolerant, some of them deadly. Nonetheless, while the context in the quoted passage concerns relations between 'different faiths and beliefs', learning to disagree well within faith communities should form us in virtues that can take us beyond mere tolerance to dialogue, friendship and collaboration with the many other types of community in our society. The subject of distinctively Christian virtues that frame good disagreement in the life of the church is one to which we return in the final section of the report (paragraphs 83–88 below).
20. Just as disagreement in the life of the church holds together what we might broadly term doctrine and practice (paragraphs 5–7 above), so does the agreement in faith that frames it. Such agreement is founded on and expressed in what we do together, as well as in what we say together, and in shared practices that communicate and celebrate common beliefs. Liturgical worship has a vital role in this regard, as word and action brought together in the confession of the truth that has been received. The particular significance of that role for the Church of England is indicated by the fact that of its three historic formularies, two are liturgical texts: the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal. Indeed, it would be possible to argue that the high level of commonality in texts and practices of worship in the Church of England, and therefore of agreement in what is said before God in praise and prayer, has enabled it to hold within itself a striking plurality of theological perspectives, and therefore that such unity in worship has been critical to how Anglicans work at good disagreement. The strains on that distinctive tradition with dramatic expansions in liturgical diversity since the nineteenth century, and limitations on sacramental sharing since the end of the twentieth century, need to be acknowledged. Nonetheless, agreement in what we say to God and to one another in common worship remains a powerful element in the way that agreement and disagreement, unanimity and pluriformity, are woven together in the Church of England. It is why changes in liturgical practice have been so sensitive in Anglican life: they express, even effect, change in doctrine.

### *Making space for disagreement*

21. Such an understanding of disagreement as both resting upon agreement in faith and opening up space for its fuller expression is important for ensuring that we do not succumb to a pessimism that just shrugs its shoulders in the face of debilitating and at times destructive disagreements in the life of the church. Yet we may find ourselves entering waters that are not necessarily well sign-posted

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<sup>6</sup> Ofsted, *School Inspection Handbook: Handbook for Inspecting Schools in England under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005* 2015, §135, available at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/458866/School\\_inspection\\_handbook\\_section\\_5\\_from\\_September\\_2015.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/458866/School_inspection_handbook_section_5_from_September_2015.pdf).

here. Many Christians in earlier centuries considered all disagreement in the church as somehow the outcome of faithlessness, rather than sometimes part of the journey of faithfulness through time, and they therefore sought to establish a church where disagreement could be banished. They would have found the idea of 'good disagreement' as articulated in this report perplexing: good disagreement could only mean disagreement with a prompt and decisive outcome, in the demarcation of true from false teaching. One reason for seeing things somewhat differently today is simply the experience of Christian mission over two millennia. David Hesselgrave, for instance, identifies ten mission questions over which there have been repeated debates for those involved in missionary activity.<sup>7</sup> A church committed to mission is a church exposed to regular disagreement, and a church that needs to be able to resolve it and learn from and through it.

22. Moreover, the move towards more open and participatory decision-making processes in many churches, including the Church of England, has made it very evident that disagreements of one sort or another are an enduring feature of church life. With the establishment of the Church Assembly in 1919 followed by its successor bodies, including the General Synod of today, the Church of England embraced a system of church government in which people who disagree with one another, sometimes very seriously indeed, come together and make decisions, and have thereby exercised a crucial role in sustaining the unity of the Church of England.<sup>8</sup> At one level, what has happened is that the political dynamics of the church are exposed in a new and harsher light, but it would be misleading to imagine that they have been fundamentally changed. The reality of church life has always been that political methods for handling conflict are needed, because disagreements have always arisen that cannot be resolved in consensus. These political methods have always involved difficult compromises, decisions that are not perfect in anybody's eyes and sometimes the voluntary or involuntary exit of those whose views did not prevail. The synods of the early centuries were no different in this respect.
23. It is important to recognise the continuities between this and previous generations of the church in facing serious disagreements, while also exploring what may be different or distinctive in our own situation here and now. For instance, for churches as for institutions more widely in modern societies, 'exit' as a response to disagreement has become far less costly than it might have been in earlier periods. However conscious we may be of disagreement within our church, the reality is that we may too easily accept the relative ease with which people can leave as a solution to our disagreements. That some may have already left further weakens the commitment on all sides to seek 'fuller and deeper unanimity' (paragraph 3 above). The acceptance of departure as a solution encourages on the one hand those who consider themselves a minority to look towards exit as the safer option, and on the other those who consider themselves a majority to

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<sup>7</sup> David Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel 2005). See the supporting paper for this report by Mark Chapman and Tim Dakin, 'Dialogue and Difference: Symbolic, Symptomatic and Systemic', available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/work-other-churches/faith-and-order-commission.aspx>, for a fuller account of issues relating to Hesselgrave's analysis.

<sup>8</sup> More extended reflection on the political character of disagreement in the life of the church can be found in Chapman and Dakin, 'Dialogue and Difference'.



see that exit as an acceptable price for achieving workable organizational consensus.<sup>9</sup> We are seeking something deeper: a fellowship in the Body of Christ in which we can all share with good conscience and without prejudicial distinction. Yet this cannot be forced; it is given in Christ as we seek to discern the difference between questions of truth and prejudice (cf. 1 Cor. 11.18–22).<sup>10</sup>

24. For Anglicans, there is here a necessary but fraught connection with the challenge of shared confidence in authority in the life of the church, extending both to authoritative criteria for adjudicating on disputed matters and to authoritative persons or bodies who may be trusted to reach and implement decisions arising from them.<sup>11</sup> Serious disagreements within communities and institutions are more or less bound to raise questions about authority, yet the contemporary church can quickly appear to find itself at an impasse at this point, and therefore be tempted to accept separation as the only realistic outcome. There is a need to accept that addressing deep disagreements may properly lead to seeking correspondingly deeper agreement on matters of authority, and that finding it will require patience, commitment and perseverance from all involved. In its 2004 report, the Lambeth Commission on Communion surveyed five factors relevant to ‘the problems... which have resulted’ in it being established, concluding that ‘All of this can be summed up in a word which, though often misunderstood, denotes an elusive sixth element which might hold the key: authority.’ While ‘The Anglican Communion has always declared that its supreme authority is scripture,’ the report recognizes that ‘what this claim might actually mean’ is something that requires significant discussion.<sup>12</sup>

25. Disagreement, it has been argued within this chapter, will always arise as the church seeks faithfulness to Christ while it takes part in God’s mission through Christ to ‘all the nations . . . to the end of the age’ (Matthew 28.19–20). Its occurrence does not negate the command, today or in the past, to ‘be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind’, but provides an opportunity to fulfil it more completely. It sends the church back to reflection on its agreement in the gospel and the communion in Christ that flows from it, so that through attending to the different perspectives contained within the disagreement carefully and prayerfully, the church may grow together in knowledge of the truth of the gospel. Such attention will need to encompass both genuine dialogue in which those involved seek to persuade one another of the view they believe to be true, and commitment by all involved to be obedient to the rule of Christ. That would be one way of describing good disagreement – of

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Ephraim Radner’s contribution to the Continuing Indaba website, ‘Talking about Things You Will never Agree on’, at <https://continuingindaba.org/2013/09/18/talking-about-things-you-will-never-agree-on/>. See also Chapman and Dakin, ‘Dialogue and Difference’.

<sup>10</sup> See Anthony Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp.179–191.

<sup>11</sup> Authority has been a repeated focus for attention in Anglican – Roman Catholic dialogue; see ARCIC I, ‘Authority in the Church’ and ‘Authority in the Church II’, both available in ARCIC, *The Final Report*, available at [http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/105260/final\\_report\\_arcic\\_1.pdf](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/105260/final_report_arcic_1.pdf); ARCIC II, *The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church III*, 1998, available at [http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/105245/ARCIC\\_II\\_The\\_Gift\\_of\\_Authority.pdf](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/105245/ARCIC_II_The_Gift_of_Authority.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> The Lambeth Commission on Communion, ‘The Windsor Report’ (Anglican Communion Office, 2004), §§30 & 42, available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/18\\_10\\_04\\_windsor\\_report.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/18_10_04_windsor_report.pdf).



disagreeing well – in the life of the church. For the Church of England, liturgy has a particular role in enabling such common confession before God in worship as the ground and the goal of the church's life, a life that includes space for good disagreement while we walk together here on earth.

## 2. Communion, Conflict, Consultation, Conciliarity and Conscience

### *The church as communion*

26. A vital strand in the development of thinking about the church and its unity over the past half century has been the way that the idea of communion – present in Phil. 2.1 as in other New Testament texts – has become pivotal.<sup>13</sup> The church itself *is* communion, sharing, fellowship, participation – all more or less adequate ways of conveying the single Greek term *koinonia* found in the New Testament. As the first chapter of 1 John explains, the life of the church is defined by the intersection and inseparability between ‘our fellowship... with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ’ (1 John 1.3) and our ‘fellowship with one another’ (1 John 1.7). It is not possible to have one without the other. 2 John spells out the corollary of this: if someone comes to adhere to a form of teaching that prevents fellowship with the Son, fellowship with them in the body of Christ cannot continue unimpeded either.
27. Anglicans are likely to be familiar with the phrase ‘communion of saints’ from the Apostles’ Creed. In the ancient languages used for the first circulation of the creed, the same words could also be translated to mean ‘sharing in holy things’. Both meanings belong together: we are in a relation of communion with one another because we all have a share in the same things, and we are made holy in that relation because what we share in is holy and has a transforming power for those who recognise and confess its holiness. While we may rightly speak of the holy things in which we participate in the life of the church, we can also say that all of that is held and encompassed in one, not one thing but one person, Jesus Christ, so that the church as his body becomes ‘the fullness of him who fills all in all’ (Eph. 1.23), the one in whom ‘all things hold together’ (Col.1.17).
28. The theological claim of any community or institution to be the church of Jesus Christ is therefore an affirmation of communion in Christ with the one holy God and with all who are being made holy together through him. At the same time, any such community or institution continues to be a human community and institution, within which the ordinary dynamics of human interaction will be found. The divinity of Christ does not diminish his humanity, and the awesome reality of the church as communion with God does not mean that it bypasses the creaturely paths of human discussion, learning, negotiation and action, within which the movement from agreement via disagreement to fuller agreement has its proper place.

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<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission, *Final Report*, 1981, especially the Introduction, which highlights this theme; ARCIC II, *Church as Communion*; International Commission for Anglican – Orthodox Theological Dialogue, *The Church of the Triune God: The Cyprus Statement*, 2006, available at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/103818/The-Church-of-the-Triune-God.pdf>; WCC, *The Church*.

*Conflict, communion and sin*<sup>14</sup>

29. Yet because it is called to be a kind of sacrament – a sign and instrument – of ‘intimate communion with God and the unity of the entire human race’,<sup>15</sup> there is particular scope within that movement for sin to take hold in ways that are deeply corrosive of the church’s life as communion and of its witness to the world of the reconciliation that is God’s gift through the cross. Indeed, the language of spiritual warfare may be part of an appropriate response in some cases here. The New Testament contains numerous passages warning against sins associated with occasions of conflict in the Christian community.<sup>16</sup> Of the fifteen ‘works of the flesh’ that Paul sets against ‘the fruit of the Spirit’ in Galatians 5, eight – the majority – relate to situations of conflict that disagreement can generate and indeed be used to legitimate: ‘enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy’ (Galatians 5.20–21).
30. Recognition that the conflicts associated with disagreement provide particular opportunities for sin to take hold in the life of the church underlines the need for the corresponding and counteracting virtues, to which the New Testament also gives attention and to which this report returns in its final section (paragraphs 83–88 below). It also indicates a need for care in understanding how what were just referred to as ‘the ordinary dynamics of human interaction’ operate in this context, including their emotional dimension. Conflict can trigger feelings of being threatened and rejected on the one hand, and of anger and aggression on the other – quite possibly for the same person at the same time, who may then experience an interior conflict as they pull in different directions. This is particularly likely in the case of disagreements that are at that moment very much at the ‘practical’ end of the spectrum described in the previous chapter, with their tendency to slide into ‘demonization’ by one side of the other (paragraphs 8–12). Moreover, the perpetuation of disagreement even at what may seem a low emotional temperature to most participants can nonetheless have a very serious existential cost for those who feel that their identity, their acceptance and their worth are bound up with questions the church appears unable or unwilling to resolve.
31. Appreciation of this theological, spiritual and emotional context needs to inform the way that Christians engage in the disagreements that were argued, in the previous chapter, to be a normal part of the church’s life on earth – mindful that while we are called to disagree well as the body of Christ, it is always possible for disagreement to feed into destructive forms of conflict in the church as in any other human community or institution (paragraph 17 above). Because of our

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<sup>14</sup> On the relationship between communion and conflict, see Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, *Communion, Conflict and Hope*.

<sup>15</sup> Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 1964, §1, available at

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html) (translation altered). Cf. ARCIC I: ‘The Church as

koinonia requires visible expression because it is intended to be the “sacrament” of God’s saving work. A sacrament is both sign and instrument,’ Introduction to the *Final Report*, 1981, §7, available at [http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/105260/final\\_report\\_arcic\\_1.pdf](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/105260/final_report_arcic_1.pdf). More recently, there is a careful discussion of this important theme in WCC, *The Church*, §§25–27.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. Romans 13.13, 16.17; 1 Corinthians 1.10, 3.3; 2 Corinthians 12.20; 1 Timothy 6.3–5; 2 Timothy 2.23–24; James 3.14–16.

communion in Christ, we are commanded to fulfil the law of love: ‘Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour’ (Romans 12.9–10). There is a specific challenge in how we continue to pray for the love of God to be poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit to fulfil that law in the midst of disagreement, including disagreement that borders on intense communal and institutional conflict and touches on profound theological conviction. The prayer here needs to be not only for the holiness of love in motivation, attitude and behaviour in church conflicts, but for the body of Christ to grow towards the fullness of his stature as its members speak the truth to one another in love.<sup>17</sup>

32. Thinking of the church as communion has implications for how we think about its unity and therefore for how we respond to disagreements that carry the risk of undermining that unity. Part of the appeal of the idea of communion for understanding the church has been its parallel use for understanding God and in particular the mystery of God as Trinity, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is communion, and the church as communion shares in the divine communion. While there is a rich vein here for theological exploration, there is also a need for caution that we do not end up recycling our own, culturally conditioned ideals of human community, unreflectively transposing them onto the eternal life of the Godhead and then applying them back to our expectations about church life as if now somehow divinely sanctioned. Rather, we need to listen carefully to what God has revealed about divine unity as communion, and then ask how the church as a creaturely reality might respond to the communion of divine persons that constitutes the life of the Holy Trinity.<sup>18</sup>
33. The challenge presented by disagreement in the life of the church is not, then, primarily about managing difference or finding a way to let competing points of view coexist. It is shaped rather by our shared desire to speak and do God’s truth, in communion with one another, and thereby to build up one another in love and promote the growth to maturity of the whole body of Christ, through our disagreement as through every other aspect of our life with one another (Eph. 4.16). Three particular dimensions of how the church has sought to put that vision into practice might be identified from Scripture and its outworking in the tradition of the church: consultation that includes all, councils in which some deliberate on behalf of others, and concern for the conscience of each one.

#### *Consultation that includes all*

34. The first dimension, consultation that includes all, reflects the reality of the church’s communion as a body in which each member has its place. Moreover, each member of the body has a share in perception of the truth of God’s revelation and in the task of listening to what that truth calls for from the church today, and the body as a whole enjoys the gift of divine wisdom. We read in the

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<sup>17</sup> On holiness, see the supporting paper to this report by Christopher Cocksworth and Julie Gittoes, ‘Richard Hooker on Scripture, Tradition and Reason: Responding to Disagreement’, available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/work-other-churches/faith-and-order-commission.aspx>.

<sup>18</sup> Ephraim Radner, *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2012), pp. 8–12.

first letter of John that 'you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge' (1 John 2.20) – not as something that we possess aside from our relation to Christ, but only insofar as we 'abide in him' (1 John 2.27).

35. Different Christian traditions work out the practical and theological implications of this teaching in different ways. While placing great authority in the hands of the abbot, St Benedict in his *Rule* also insisted that every member of the community, including the most junior, should have the opportunity to speak in the meeting of the community before important decisions are taken. The 'congregational' tradition in church polity, reflected for instance in Baptist Churches and in the United Reformed Church in this country, gives much weight to the Church Meeting as the place where the congregation finds together the mind of the risen Christ, who alone rules in the church and who is present here and now in the midst of the congregation in the power of the Holy Spirit. Contemporary Roman Catholicism provides extensive resources for reflection on the *sensus fidelium* (the insight or understanding belonging to the faithful), its relation to the *sensus fidei* (the insight or understanding they have of the faith given to them) and its convergence in *consensus fidelium* to inform the counsels of the church.<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis drew on this in framing the consultation process for the Synod on the Family held in 2015, although it remains the case that there is little by way of formal requirement within Roman Catholicism to reflect and enact this. Within the particular polity of the Church of England, is the lack of any immediate parallel a weakness? Or do our practices of synodality at all levels of the church (not least Parochial Church Councils and Annual Parochial Church Meetings), discussed in the next section, which include representation of all 'members' through election, in fact address this area adequately?

#### *Councils in which some deliberate on behalf of others*

36. A second dimension of how the church has addressed disagreement through its history has been councils in which some deliberate on behalf of others. Whatever forms consultation may take, in Anglican practice as in many other churches deliberation and decision-making are generally entrusted to what we might broadly term 'councils of the church', in which some take decisions on behalf of all. In the case of the Church of England, Parochial Church Councils, Diocesan Synods and the General Synod with its three Houses belong within a long tradition that stretches back to the account of the so-called 'Council of Jerusalem' in Acts 15. Such councils have a critical role in addressing difficult questions, through processes of discourse, attentiveness and resolution. They are also an intrinsic part of the life of the church as communion, and their fundamental purpose is to serve and sustain that communion. They need to keep in mind at all times that what unites the church is not in the final analysis a common cause, let alone a passing alliance of factional agendas, but Jesus Christ the Lord, and in

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<sup>19</sup> International Theological Commission of the Roman Catholic Church, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, 2014, available at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140610\\_sensus-fidei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html).

him we have fellowship with one another that makes us truly one body, one new creation, and fellowship also with the maker of heaven and earth.

37. At the same time, since church councils are places where people who disagree with one another come together and make decisions, in a context where consensus will not always be possible, compromises will be necessary and some will be left deeply disappointed by the outcome (paragraph 22 above). They will therefore reflect to some extent at least prevailing political models for how authoritative decisions should be taken at an institutional rather than communal level. In the case of the Church of England's General Synod, for instance, there is an evident relationship to Parliamentary procedure regarding the conduct of business. This is not simply a matter of the church following society: the history of parliament in this country has in fact been profoundly shaped by its overlapping with ecclesial governance.<sup>20</sup> A resistance to formal 'parties' underlines the weighty responsibility on each member of Synod to judge what the Spirit may be saying to the church, through – amongst other things – prayerful attention to all other members. Although the mechanics of church governance change over time and vary between places, yet in every time and place, the challenge remains for the ethics and the spirituality of debate in church councils (debate being the form in which disagreement is properly expressed in such contexts) to be informed by a profound appreciation of how such councils belong within the communion of the church and are called to serve and sustain it.
38. The Church of England is in part distinguished, however, by the way that it holds together strong conciliar traditions of church government with an episcopal church polity in which the authority of bishops does not derive from that of synods and councils. Indeed, one way of thinking about the Church of England is as a communion of 'local' churches, each under the authority of the bishop in communion with the synod. Where there is serious disagreement, there is good reason both for bishops and diocesan synods to take counsel on behalf of the diocese as a whole, and for diocesan bishops to meet together to deliberate on behalf of the whole Church of England, alongside their membership in the General Synod with clergy and laity. The legal procedures at national level of the Church of England provide clear guidelines for how these different contexts for consultation and decision making relate to one another and when they need to be involved in distinct ways. Nonetheless, as the principal minister of the word as well as the sacraments within the diocese, the bishop 'has a special, though not exclusive responsibility for maintaining the Church in the faith, feeding the people with the truth of the gospel, and discerning how the revelation once and for all given and embodied in the Scriptures is to be applied to the changing world of the present.'<sup>21</sup> This corresponds with the specific responsibilities of the House of Bishops at national level with regard to doctrine and worship – again emphasizing the close connection between these two.

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<sup>20</sup> Eric Kemp, *Counsel and Consent: Aspects of the Government of the Church as Exemplified in the History of the English Provincial Synods* (London: SPCK, 1961).

<sup>21</sup> Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Church of England, *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church*, 2007, p. 127, available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/work-other-churches/faith-and-order-commission/foag.aspx>. On the episcopal office, see also Appendix II of Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, *Communion, Conflict and Hope*.



39. An understanding of church as communion also underlines the truth that each church is only the church in relation to other churches. 'Each church is the Church catholic and not simply a part of it. Each church is the Church catholic, but not the whole of it. Each church fulfils its catholicity when it is in communion with the other churches.'<sup>22</sup> Just as no church can exist in isolation from other churches, so no church should approach deliberation and decision-making in a spirit of corporate autonomy, as if there were nothing to be learned from consultation with other churches or as if the implications for relationships with them were of merely secondary interest.<sup>23</sup> The saying that 'It takes the whole world to know the whole Christ' is attributed to Max Warren, one time General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society, and underlines the need for what Paul Murray has referred to in a rather different theological idiom as 'catholic conversation – i.e. conversation in service of "thinking according to the whole."<sup>24</sup> There are clearly real challenges here, within the 'full communion' relationships of the Anglican Communion and beyond them, beginning with those other churches with which the Church of England is also in communion.<sup>25</sup> Disagreement within churches inevitably intersects to some extent with disagreement between churches; indeed, there is perhaps a significant obligation to attend to such intersection where it is especially dense, as potentially indicating the scope in addressing this disagreement for us to think with what might be called 'a catholic mind', that is, one that thinks 'according to the whole'.

#### *Concern for the conscience of each one*

40. A third dimension of how the church attends to disagreement that is crucial within the New Testament is concern for the conscience of all involved.<sup>26</sup> One of the key causes of disagreement in the congregations Paul served was food, as comes out particularly clearly in 1 Corinthians 8–10 and Romans 14. Scholars are not unanimous in their views of what precisely the issues were here or what Paul wanted to say about them (which may not have been quite the same thing in both cases), but one area he clearly believed to be relevant was what might happen to the conscience of believers in this situation (1 Cor. 8.7–13). This touches on what might be termed the psychology of disagreement from a theological perspective.

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<sup>22</sup> WCC, 'Called to Be One Church', statement agreed at 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly in Porto Alegre, 2006, §6, available at <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2006-porto-alegre/1-statements-documents-adopted/christian-unity-and-message-to-the-churches/called-to-be-the-one-church-as-adopted>.

<sup>23</sup> See ARCIC II, *Gift of Authority*, §37, which stresses the responsibilities of bishops in this regard.

<sup>24</sup> Private correspondence; see also Paul D. Murray, 'Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning – Establishing the Agenda', in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, ed. Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 5–25.

<sup>25</sup> Questions of diversity in relationships between churches within the Anglican Communion and ecumenically are considered in Goodall and Worthen, 'The Limits of Diversity'.

<sup>26</sup> On this subject, see the extended discussion in the supporting paper for this report by Loveday Alexander and Joshua Hordern, 'Communion, Disagreement and Conscience', available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/work-other-churches/faith-and-order-commission.aspx>.

41. We need to be careful about not reading back into Paul's context ideas that actually come from a much later period. For instance, the question here is not about the 'rights' of conscience as this came to be articulated in the dissenting tradition of English Christianity, much less the idea that conscience is the source of moral intuitions that neither the person themselves much less anyone else should dare to question. This is, however, a deeply serious matter for Paul. Wounding the conscience of another believer may not only hurt them but lead to them being 'destroyed' (1 Cor. 8.11; cf. Rom. 14.20). There are various ways to interpret this: destruction may come in a downwards spiral into despair as the believer, slipping into sin, fears that he or she has passed out of the grace of God and into idolatry, or the passage may be referring rather to a desensitization of the conscience that leaves the believer defenceless against sin's consuming power. Either way, if conscience is understood to be at the core of a person's being, one is seeking to destroy that person in asking them to go against it.<sup>27</sup>
42. Because of our fellowship in Christ with every believer, we cannot simply write off such hurt as collateral damage in the necessary task of coming to a decision. Where disagreements focus on practical questions – what should be done, what may not be done – then, as part of its deliberation, the church needs to attend to the possibility of consciences being wounded. Given the relation between conscience and selfhood, it also needs to reckon with the possibility of persons being seriously hurt because their faith in Christ is threatened, and thereby the fabric of communion itself severely damaged. Of course, if what the person claims to be doing 'in conscience' itself undermines faithfulness to Christ and therefore union with him, then the damage is already being done and a questioning of the person's actions or convictions which aims ultimately at the relief of their conscience may be needed. That underlines the point that disagreements in the life of the church are not all of the same character, and there is a need for very specific discernment as to what that character is. That is the central concern of the next chapter.

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<sup>27</sup> This comment touches on the fundamental relationship between conscience and self-consciousness, analysed in Alexander and Hordern, 'Communion, Disagreement and Conscience'.



### 3. Elements of Communion and Types of Disagreement

#### *Five 'elements' of communion*

43. As well as the moral and spiritual qualities described by Paul and others, good disagreement within the communion of the church requires affirmation of agreement in faith as its context and fuller unanimity in confession of God's inexhaustible truth as its goal (paragraphs 17–20 & 25 above). This in turn means tracing the relationship between agreement, disagreement and communion in each particular case, in order to discern the character of the disagreement and therefore the kind of conversation that may be needed to address it. One way to begin to do this would be to ask how it relates to the five 'ecclesial elements' that are stated to be required for 'full communion' in the recent convergence text on ecclesiology from the World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*:

communion in the fullness of apostolic faith; in sacramental life; in a truly one and mutually recognized ministry; in structures of conciliar relations and decision-making; and in common witness and service in the world.<sup>28</sup>

44. The sequence should not be read hierarchically, as if composed in descending order of significance. Witness and service in a particular *place* in the world has shaped and indeed defined the Church of England and the way that it has lived communion in Christ. The strength of commitment here has been another crucial factor alongside common forms of worship (paragraph 20 above) in forming the distinctive manner in which the Church of England has held diversity in unity and pluriformity in unanimity. While secularisation and institutional church decline have brought new strains, the Church of England remains committed to supporting a Christian presence in every community in England. Moreover, commitment to mission in one nation has also been expressed in willingness to adhere to a framework of Canon Law that is itself inseparable from the law of the land, and to sustain a distinctive role in the political, social and cultural life of the country.

#### *Apostolic communion*

45. Nonetheless, there is a particular significance in the context of this document regarding the first element: communion in apostolic faith, which will be referred to in the remainder of this chapter as 'apostolic' communion.<sup>29</sup> Where disagreement

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<sup>28</sup> WCC, *The Church*, §37. See also the discussion of the relationship between communion, unity and diversity in Goodall and Worthen, 'The Limits of Diversity'.

<sup>29</sup> The terminology of 'apostolic' and 'ecclesial' communion used in this report overlaps with other such distinctions but may not correspond precisely. For instance, while ecumenists sometimes speak of 'spiritual' communion, 'apostolic' communion is used here to highlight the importance of the faith 'that was once for all entrusted to the saints' (Jude 3) for communion in Christ. Again, the category of 'ecclesial' communion in the next section is significantly different from the way it is used in Principle 94, 'Ecclesial Communion', in *Principles of Canon Law Common to the Churches of the Anglican Communion* (available at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/124862/AC-Principles-of-Canon-Law.pdf>), which defines 'full communion' in a way that overlaps with the use of 'ecclesial communion' here. In the

touches on this element, there is the potential for it to be concluded that some of the views being expressed are not compatible with continuing witness to the truth of the gospel as received with and from the apostles, and that therefore they should be excluded from the public teaching of the church. In such a case, where some people insist in maintaining those views, it could be decided that they no longer belong within the communion of the church that rests on shared reception of the one gospel. Where disagreement touches on this first element, one possible outcome may be that the participants cannot agree that they all share communion in Christ and therefore all belong to the one universal church of Jesus Christ. Disagreement relating to the first element could lead to the identification of heresy and to separation from those persisting in identification with it, as was noted at the outset of this document (paragraph 3 above).<sup>30</sup> We might cite the Christological and Trinitarian controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries as examples of such disagreement.

46. Notions of ‘degrees’ of communion in relation to the ‘full’ communion with one another to which Christ calls us have been familiar in the ecumenical movement for at least fifty years. More recently, they have been used to speak of limitations in relationships between and indeed within churches of the Anglican Communion, initially arising from different approaches to the ordination of women and then to issues of same-sex relationships. Communion can be impaired by a lack of sharing regarding any of the five elements listed above, though in the context of Anglicanism it is often around the sacraments that such impairment becomes concretely and painfully visible. Yet what has just been termed apostolic communion has a particular role in enabling confidence between Christians that there is *some* communion between us, however impaired – that we are able to recognise one another as being ‘in Christ’ by our response together to the apostolic proclamation, and can therefore recognise our disagreement as taking place in the life of the church. The difficult question is what kind of commonality in practice and belief can confirm such apostolic communion, thereby enabling the recognition of one another as being in communion with Christ and hence in some degree of communion with one another.

### *Ecclesial communion*

47. Anglican involvement in the faith and order strand of the ecumenical movement has tended to emphasize that communion in sacraments and ministry, including episcopal ministry, is essential for Christians to be in a relationship of ecclesial communion, though this is not perhaps as straightforwardly the case now as it may have appeared in the past (see paragraphs 67–68 below). ‘Ecclesial communion’ is used here to mean both the kind of communion that enables Christians to be members together of one particular church, and the kind of communion that enables particular churches to be ‘in communion’ with one another. Following the Chicago – Lambeth Quadrilateral, Anglicans have insisted on the presence of the historic episcopate in those churches with whom they

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ecclesiastical law of the Church of England, the phrase ‘in communion’ defines the Church of England’s relation with some other churches; the phrase ‘full communion’ does not appear.

<sup>30</sup> See Section VIII, ‘Heresy, Schism and the Church’, in International Commission for Anglican – Orthodox Theological Dialogue, *Church of the Triune God*.

share 'in a truly one and mutually recognized ministry' as an integral dimension of ecclesial communion. Disagreements that touch on these elements, while not of themselves threatening mutual recognition of participants as members together of the body of Christ, sharing what was just called 'apostolic' communion, could disclose a gulf in understanding and practice so wide as to make it impossible to be one in 'ecclesial' communion. Disagreement relating to the second and third elements at paragraph 43, therefore, could potentially lead to church division, without necessarily implying a charge of heresy on any side or a refusal to recognise one another as true, apostolic churches.

48. The same might also be said about the fourth and fifth. Disagreements as to who should be part of 'structures of conciliar relations and decision making', and indeed who is competent to make which decisions, loom large in church history. The current process of reception across the Anglican Communion of proposals for a Covenant shows some of the continuing tensions here for global Anglicanism. Member churches want to remain 'in communion' with one another, and sometimes face decisions that on the face of it would best be taken together as an international Communion, yet hesitate to commit to 'structures of conciliar relations and decision making' with clear authority. Moreover, the Church of England is committed to continuing 'in communion' with for instance the Old Catholic Church and the Lutheran churches of the Porvoo Communion of Churches on the basis of sharing in sacraments and ministry, but also without structures that would enable authoritative decisions as opposed to useful consultation. By contrast with Roman Catholicism, then, Anglicans tend to think that full ecclesial communion does not depend on clear-cut agreement as to how to proceed on this point.
49. Finally, the history of Christian mission, as already observed, provides plenty of examples of conflicts over what 'witness and service in the world' might mean in a particular context (paragraph 21 above).<sup>31</sup> The depth of disagreement here may mean that churches split from one another, though perhaps this is most likely when other elements are also involved in the situation. Indeed, churches where the degree of communion is relatively low so far as the sacraments, ministry and conciliar structures are concerned may in fact be able to share very fruitfully in specific initiatives around witness and service, while churches in apparently 'full' ecclesial communion may sometimes struggle to engage together in this area.
50. Of course, communion with regard to each of these five elements does not rest on some notional form of complete agreement. It is rather a question of sharing at the level of practice – sharing here meaning common forms, joint activities or both – which in turn implies some measure of theological agreement. Within any church, indeed within any congregation, a variety of views are likely to be found with regard to all five elements, and while there may be no overt conflict, the theological observer might well be able to identify significant tensions and even contradictions. Nonetheless, life in communion requires some kind of common commitment to ways of acting and speaking with regard to these elements, within which pluriformity of various kinds can be embraced and disagreements held without undermining the unanimity of believers in praise and proclamation.

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<sup>31</sup> See Chapman and Dakin, 'Dialogue and Difference'.

### *Irenaeus on ecclesial diversity*

51. Irenaeus, writing in the second half of the second century, provides rich resources for reflection on these issues.<sup>32</sup> In a crucial period for the formation of the scriptural canon, he affirmed the irreducible plurality of the four gospels as intrinsic to the church's witness to the one apostolic tradition, in the face of a strong preference in some quarters for a single, unified and self-evidently consistent account. In the case of Pope Victor's demand for common Sunday observance of the date of Easter, he successfully (it would seem) defended the right of some churches to continue following the Jewish dating for Passover, which meant it could fall on any day of the week. Where Victor saw in the diversity of Easter observance grounds for breaking relationships of ecclesial communion, Irenaeus argued that it simply reflected the pluriformity of the life of the church (and indeed the pluriform apostolic witness of the gospel tradition) as it shares in God's mission in history. In such contexts, differences need not and should not lead to serious disagreement.
52. Yet in other contexts, Irenaeus' judgment was that the apostolic faith was indeed at stake and therefore orthodoxy needed to be clarified and teachings that fell outside it excluded from the church, along with teachers who persisted in advocating them and 'gospel' writings that conveyed them. A critical move in engaging with disagreement in the life of the church has always been discernment as to how far it touches on communion in faith and therefore what kind of response is needed in order to address it. Disagreement can arise in the life of the church because a particular manifestation of pluriformity looks to some like a departure from truth, when in fact it has come about because of the different strands of the church's missional history. In such cases, clarification of the issues should lead to the laying aside of disagreement and the acceptance of a legitimate diversity.<sup>33</sup> Yet it would be quite wrong to presume all disagreement can be interpreted in this way. Where it is not a matter of misreading pluriformity, nor of sinfulness creating conflict where none is necessary, then there is a disagreement needing serious attention that in one way or another touches on theological truth.

### *Three types of disagreement*

53. This brief analysis suggests that we might then usefully distinguish three different types of such serious theological disagreement in the life of the church (which is not to say that the list could not be expanded or indeed a different classification applied). The first is a disagreement that puts in question our agreement in the truth of the gospel and therefore what was referred to earlier in this chapter as *apostolic communion*, our communion with one another in Christ. The second is a disagreement that places a question mark against our ability to sustain common commitments to shared forms of practice with regard to sacraments, ministry, decision-making, witness and service, and therefore our ability to remain one *ecclesial communion*, without it being denied that all participants remain within

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<sup>32</sup> For a fuller account of Irenaeus' continuing relevance, see the supporting paper for this report by Alexander and Ludlow, 'Irenaeus and the Date of Easter'.

<sup>33</sup> On the notion of legitimate diversity, see Goodall and Worthen, 'The Limits of Diversity'.

the universal church. The third is a disagreement that raises significant issues regarding one or more of the elements for communion that can nonetheless be addressed within the context of those common commitments that hold us securely within a single ecclesial communion. The critical question, then, concerns the nature of the agreement on which those involved can rely in tackling disagreement. Is it the kind of common commitment to shared beliefs and practices that enables us to be in a relation of ecclesial communion, or is the very reality of apostolic communion itself being doubted in the disagreement, or is neither of these currently in question, although serious theological issues have been raised?

54. Another concrete example may be useful here. It has been the case from the beginnings of the church that people have used a variety of language and imagery to explain how we are saved through the death and resurrection of Christ. Within the Church of England, there have in the recent past been some sharp exchanges around so-called penal substitution as a way of understanding the atonement. Theological convictions run deep on both side of this debate, but nonetheless most of the participants would see the affirmation that Christ was 'handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification' (Rom. 4.25) as constituting agreement in the gospel that holds in communion with one another those who may disagree passionately when they come to explain how that salvation was achieved. Moreover, although the debate pertains to the interpretation of the apostolic scriptures and therefore at some level to the proper articulation of 'the fullness of apostolic faith' (the first element of communion), there seems to be no imminent prospect of one group leaving the Church of England or calling for the expulsion of another. Those involved can remain within the same ecclesial communion, committed to the same practices with regard to sacraments, ministry, decision-making, witness and service.
55. Yet that is not to say that the disagreement is not serious, or that all the views expressed have their place in the teaching of the church as part of its proper pluriformity through history. It remains possible that the ultimate outcome of the debate could be that the various approaches are eventually seen as not contradictory after all – that there is in fact no serious theological disagreement at stake here. Yet it is also possible, and indeed perhaps more likely, that the outcome will be that a consensus begins to emerge on one side or the other within the Church of England, and ultimately some opinions that have been identified in the debate will be generally recognized as wrong ways to articulate Christian teaching and others as fitting expressions of the gospel message. In the meantime, however, faithful people can disagree well as members together of the same church. In this case too, the ultimate goal of good disagreement is fuller unanimity in the truth of the gospel.
56. The example is also a reminder of the centrality of scriptural interpretation for theological disagreement in the life of the church, noted in chapter 1 (see paragraph 14). In this case, so long as those involved share sufficient common understanding about the meaning of Scripture – for instance, that it speaks of how God has reconciled the world to himself through Christ – then there can be constructive, illuminating debate about the meaning of particular phrases and passages that explicate salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ

between those who recognize one another as being in Christ. Suppose, however, that someone joins the conversation who denies the historical existence of Jesus but believes he remains a powerful spiritual symbol.<sup>34</sup> The disagreement opening up would seem to be wide enough to cast doubt on whether it can be held within a relationship of being together in Christ, let alone as members together of one church.

### *The need for discernment*

57. When theological disagreements persist in the church, therefore, careful discernment is required as to what kind of agreement and common commitments may be at stake. Clearly the boundary is somewhat fluid between the three types of disagreement set out at paragraph 53 above. The idea of a decisive action of discernment, immediately accepted by all, is unrealistic in many cases. Such discernment takes time and is itself likely to be contested. Moreover, once reached it may remain stable for a while, even centuries, and then shift again. For instance, the disagreement about Origen's teaching from the third century was taken to belong to the first type of disagreement described in paragraph 53 by the early Middle Ages, a disagreement relating to apostolic communion, but is increasingly seen today as pertaining instead to the third, the evaluation of different answers to significant theological questions that are not considered to be church-dividing. That is not to say that the ideas associated with him which were condemned in the sixth century would now be deemed acceptable, but rather that communion can be sustained with those exploring theological viewpoints that may ultimately be 'recognized as wrong ways to articulate Christian teaching' in light of the weight of agreement on matters pertaining to apostolic faith (paragraph 53 above).
58. The distinction between these three types of disagreement cannot be mapped neatly onto a line between beliefs and practices, what we say and what we do; as has already been noted (paragraphs 5–7), the two are interwoven. Two significant occasions in twentieth-century church history when some Christians claimed apostolic communion was at stake, and are perceived with hindsight to have been correct, both hinged on issues of practice and the doctrine bound up with it, not on a simple denial of the creeds. The 'German Christians' who endorsed Hitler's government and the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa that supported apartheid both claimed that their practices were part of the pluriformity of the church in history, when others argued forcefully that not only did they raise major theological questions but that the answer to those questions meant that communion had to be broken if they persisted in error, because of the depths of the denial of Christian faith being enacted by them. It was the practical component in these disagreements that called for urgent and decisive action, including theological condemnation and the termination of normal church relations (see paragraph 10 above).

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<sup>34</sup> According to recent research, only 57% of adults in England under the age of 35 believe that Jesus was a historical person; see Barna Group on behalf of the Church of England, Evangelical Alliance and HOPE, *Talking Jesus: Perceptions of Jesus, Christians and Evangelism in England*, 2015, available at [https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2392609/talking-jesus\\_booklet.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2392609/talking-jesus_booklet.pdf).

59. As these examples indicate, one of the factors tending to compound disagreement in the life of the church is that people may take different views on what type of disagreement it is that has arisen: one that has a bearing on apostolic communion, one that calls into question our ecclesial communion, or one that while it concerns matters of theological importance can nonetheless be held as an argument within the common life of one church. Finally, some may see no need to disagree or debate at all because they believe that all the views expressed can be accommodated within the pluriformity of the church's witness to apostolic truth and are essentially cultural variations.

### *Examples from Scripture*

60. To take a relatively simple example, it seems reasonable to extrapolate from the evidence of Galatians that the question of whether or not Gentile converts should take on Torah observance in terms of Sabbath laws, diet and circumcision was a matter of agreement in the gospel both for Paul and for his opponents there, who had come to divergent conclusions about the same fundamental question. What had changed with the resurrection of Christ from the dead, and how did this affect the call to the Gentiles to be gathered in to God's people? Paul's passionate arguments in Galatians arise from his deep conviction that the heart of the gospel is at stake in the answer here. Yet Paul is also infuriated by the shifting stance, as he perceives it, of Peter and Barnabas (Gal. 2.11–14), whose discontinuance of eating with Gentiles is characterized as 'not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel'. We cannot be sure of their perspective, but it is possible that for Peter and Barnabas the issues here were in fact perceived as relating to a theological debate that was not church-dividing, perhaps even as a matter of legitimate pluriformity in mission. Gentile Christians might decide for themselves how much they took on in terms of Sabbath laws, diet and circumcision. Jewish Christians might decide not to share table fellowship with those who held back from full acceptance of Torah observance. For Paul, however, this was an evasion of the need for an unequivocal decision on a question that was fundamental to communion in Christ: Gentile Christians do not need to take on Jewish Torah observance to be in Christ, and therefore Jewish Christians should embrace full table fellowship with them regardless of it.

61. The same lack of consensus about the type of disagreement being faced might also be identified in the New Testament passages already commented on regarding food offered to idols. For some, we might infer, what is at stake here is the nature of the victory of God in Christ over the powers of darkness. That victory put an end to the influence of the demons behind the idols to whom the meat is offered, and therefore to eat it knowing its origin is to proclaim the Lordship of Christ. For others, Christ may have freed us from the powers of darkness, but their reality and influence remains, and therefore any potential contact must be avoided. To suggest otherwise is to jeopardise faithfulness to Christ and therefore our communion with one another, a form of false teaching that needs to be categorically rejected (cf. Rev. 2.14 & 19). Although this is not a perspective that Paul shares, he nonetheless sees that it would be highly irresponsible to encourage those who hold it to put themselves back into the orbit of the demonic powers they continue to fear. The issues here are far from

straightforward, but we might characterise Paul as wanting in this case to recast the debate as one about important theological points that needed resolving in relation to doctrine and practice, but that were not church-dividing, i.e. did not have a direct bearing on either apostolic or ecclesial communion. Therefore disagreement about them could be held within the on-going life of communion in Christ and within united churches, while that resolution was worked out over a period of time.

62. To emphasize a point already made, that is not to say that the discussion that needs to be had in such cases is not theological, nor that all viewpoints must be considered as somehow equally valid; it seems reasonably clear that Paul himself considers that the perspective of the 'strong', that there is no problem with Christians eating meat offered to idols, is broadly correct.<sup>35</sup> The theological issues raised, however, do not (within certain limits) have a decisive bearing on what we are calling apostolic communion, and because of that the character of what Paul has to say in 1 Corinthians 8–10 and Romans 14 is very different from that of Galatians. It does not make matters straightforward either: the argument of Paul in these chapters is actually rather difficult to follow, and finding the right way to speak about and frame the issues here is something he clearly found highly challenging. Speaking the truth in love to build up the body of Christ in the face of significant disagreement does not become an easy task just because the discernment has been made that the agreement in faith that underpins our communion is not (yet) at stake.

#### *Examples from later Christian history*

63. As already observed, such discernment may take some time, and concentrated effort on the part of many. So, for instance, over the long decades of the Arian controversy in the fourth century, the weight of the opposition to the Nicene position that came to define Christian orthodoxy belonged not with those who thought it was dangerously wrong but those who saw it as an unhelpfully narrow attempt to define the church's faith on a point where this had never been done before. For many church leaders, there was a range of views on how to articulate the relation between the Father and the Son, and this was an important debate that needed sustained attention. It had its limits and needed to be handled carefully at various levels, but the gospel and the substance of faith were not at stake. Athanasius, on the other hand (after experimenting with various formulations himself), came to a very different discernment. For him, the diversity of expression that had arisen on this point did raise matters bearing directly on agreement in the gospel and therefore had needed to be resolved authoritatively by the church through a new formulation excluding error: the Nicene creed. Athanasius' argument that this kind of authoritative resolution was necessary persuaded many, even if they disagreed about which particular formulation should be accepted. As rival credal Trinitarian statements multiplied in the latter half of the fourth century, the Church council at Constantinople eventually affirmed both the need for a definition and the specific formulation agreed at Nicaea.

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<sup>35</sup> See Alexander and Hordern, 'Communion, Disagreement and Conscience'.



64. Such discernment, therefore, is of decisive significance and may not always be straightforward, even with hindsight. Anglicans look back to the writings of Richard Hooker from the end of the sixteenth century for a classic exposition of the distinction between what are sometimes called ‘fundamentals’ on the one hand and *adiaphora* (‘things indifferent’, i.e. on which different positions may be taken) on the other.<sup>36</sup> Yet it is easy to forget that for all Hooker’s irenic mode of writing, he was taking contentious positions in matters of great controversy and not just expounding theological common sense. Where one drew the line between fundamentals and *adiaphora* in the context of the Protestant Reformation depended crucially on scriptural hermeneutics: where is the authority of the Bible telling us directly what we *should* believe and do (in which case our response needs to be obedience), and where is it providing us with guidance and examples as to what we *could* do (in which case we may exercise some judgment of our own)? While it is easy to agree that we should all agree on fundamentals, it is much harder to agree on just what these fundamentals actually are, particularly, in a post-Reformation context, when doctrines of the church, sacraments and ministry increasingly become the focus of disagreement. So, for instance, in the repeated attempts in the sixteenth century to overcome the differences between Lutheran and Reformed Christians in Continental Europe, one of the most significant obstacles was not simply disagreement over the theology of the Eucharist but disagreement as to the extent to which agreement in this area was necessary in order for churches to be in ecclesial communion with one another. Was it part of the ‘fundamentals’ or not?<sup>37</sup>
65. After the Protestant Reformation, ecclesiology becomes an area of doctrine over which Christians separate from one another, deciding that their disagreements prevent them from belonging to the same church, even though they do not necessarily deny that they are members together of the one body of Christ throughout the world. The confessional map of Western Christianity gets drawn against questions about baptism, eucharist and ministry, with issues of church polity – including the relation between church governance and civil power – having a significant role here. While different answers to these questions to some extent reflected different approaches on prior theological commitments regarding issues such as the means of grace, the sufficiency of Scripture and the doctrine of justification, it was the ecclesiological differences that came to provide the clearest boundaries on that map.

### *Full communion and the contemporary Church of England*

66. The burden of much of the modern ecumenical movement, as expressed in for instance *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*,<sup>38</sup> has been to sift such historic

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<sup>36</sup> On this distinction, see Cocksworth and Gittoes, ‘Richard Hooker on Scripture, Tradition and Reason’.

<sup>37</sup> Ashley Null, ‘Good Disagreement and the Reformation’, in Andrew Atherstone and Andrew Goddard, *Good Disagreement?: Grace and Truth in a Divided Church* (Lion Books, 2015), pp. 83–108.

<sup>38</sup> WCC, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper no. 111 (Geneva: WCC, 1982); text available at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text>.

disagreements to define where there is agreement regarding the five elements of communion mentioned at paragraph 43 above, where disagreement can be held within relationships of ecclesial communion, and where in fact we need to recognise the pluriformity of the church across different times and cultures. The aim of such sifting has been to enable churches to affirm the degree of communion they currently share and identify steps for moving beyond that to a fuller degree of ecclesial communion.

67. At the same time as the ecumenical movement has been seeking to help churches grow towards relationships of greater communion, communion within particular churches has come under particular strain for a number of reasons, including divergent responses among Christians to what has been termed 'the relationship revolution' of the past century, with radically changed social attitudes to e.g. the roles of men and women in society, marriage and divorce, and sexual behaviour, including same-sex attraction. With regard to the ordination of women to all three orders of ministry, the Church of England has found an agreed way of proceeding that accommodates on-going difference in belief and practice. This is summed up in the 'Five Guiding Principles' from the House of Bishops, which form part of its Declaration on the Ministry of Priests and Bishops (GS Misc 1076). The principles begin by affirming the Church of England's 'unequivocal' commitment 'to all orders of ministry being open equally to all, without reference to gender.' Regarding those who are 'unable to receive the ministry of women bishops or priests', it pledges that 'Pastoral and sacramental provision for the minority within the Church of England will be made without specifying a limit of time and in a way that maintains the highest possible degree of communion and contributes to mutual flourishing across the whole Church of England.' There is a recognition that not all are willing to receive sacraments administered by all duly ordained ministers, and a consequent acceptance of significant impairment of communion so far as both the second element (communion 'in sacramental life') and third element (communion 'in a truly one and mutually recognized ministry') identified in the quotation from *The Church* are concerned (paragraph 43 above). This does not however negate a concern for seeking 'mutual flourishing' within 'the highest possible degree of communion'.
68. This has taken place in a context where not only communion 'in the fullness of apostolic faith' and 'in common witness and service in the world' has been maintained, but also communion 'in structures of conciliar relations and decision-making' – the other three elements of communion noted in *The Church*. The Church of England maintains a common form of governance, including a shared code of ecclesiastical law with a single jurisdiction in each diocese. This is a remarkable adventure in how ecclesial communion can be sustained without agreement in belief and practice on something that has been considered to be of decisive importance for 'full' communion. The Church of England has sought to create a space between the second and third types of disagreement noted in paragraph 53 above: this is a disagreement that really does have a bearing on our ability to be fully in communion as one church, and yet we have found a way to bear the impairment to communion that inevitably follows from it without ceasing to be one church. We want to say that ecclesial communion can be significantly impaired with regard to some of its key elements, yet still remain truly ecclesial, knowing that this claim will be regarded with scepticism or

incomprehension by many outside the Church of England, as well as by some within it. Experience so far however seems to be that bonds of communion relating to all five elements, but crucially the first (faith), the fourth (structures of conciliar relations and decision-making) and the fifth (common witness and service), are proving resilient enough to make this a living way of bearing the pain of disagreement without the resolutions either of making only one position acceptable or of ecclesial separation.

## 4. Sustaining Conversation in Serious Disagreement

### *The need for patience*

69. Church history contains regular reminders that disagreements may take many years, sometimes centuries, to be effectively addressed. Even in the case of apparently clear-cut cases from church history of theological disagreement being resolved by renewed agreement, we need to keep in mind the effort involved, the difficult journey towards consensus and the sometimes abiding scars. History witnesses to the need for patience, for not always settling on the resolution that appears most readily achievable, even while such patience goes hand in hand with a certain impatience for unity in truth.<sup>39</sup> For instance, the fourth-century controversy on the divinity of the Son resulted eventually, as noted above (paragraph 63), in the adoption in a common creed of a new formulation that one group believed to be critical for articulating the apostolic faith in the light of disagreements that had arisen. On the other hand, the fifth-century Christological controversies led to a text at the Council of Chalcedon that carefully balanced and sought to honour affirmations important to both leading parties in the debate that had been raging, while nonetheless firmly excluding certain points of view associated with them. In neither case was there an immediate and straightforward acceptance of the new articulation of theological agreement. Indeed, substantial groups of churches would not be reconciled with those who adopted them – a situation that has persisted to some extent to this day in the case of Chalcedon.
70. The process of sifting historic disagreements in post-war ecumenism, referred to in the previous chapter (paragraphs 65–66), has led to some remarkable achievements, themselves the fruit of patient persistence in probing what appeared to be fixed oppositions. It has proved possible to affirm fundamental agreement about the area of theology in question, while identifying that there has been real diversity of emphasis and expression, accepting that continuing differences are not insignificant but neither are they church-dividing, and acknowledging that human sinfulness played a part in fomenting and sustaining divisions. The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation is perhaps the most famous example here. Work in recent decades between those who accepted the doctrinal formula of the Council of Chalcedon and some of those who did not, including the Oriental Orthodox Churches, has attended to divisions lasting for one and a half millennia.<sup>40</sup> As noted in the first chapter of this report, the passing of time has helped these disagreements to shift from the practical to the

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Tom Greggs's presentation of the dialectic of patience and impatience in the theology of Daniel Hardy, in 'The Eschatological Tension of Theological Method: Some Reflections after Reading Daniel W. Hardy's "Creation and Eschatology"', *Theology* CXIII.875 (2010): 339–47.

<sup>40</sup> Anglican – Oriental Orthodox International Commission, *Christology: Agreed Statement by the Anglican – Oriental Orthodox International Commission*, 2014, available at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/103502/anglican-oriental-orthodox-agreed-statement-on-christology-cairo-2014.pdf>.

theoretical register, thereby allowing a different kind of treatment from those involved (paragraphs 8–9 above).<sup>41</sup>

71. Responding to disagreement may take time, and perhaps the first thing that ought to be said here is that recognition of the church as communion in Christ should make us willing to commit to taking the time that is needed for this to be done well. Of course, there is an ever-present danger that the church will ‘become over-concentrated on its “inner meaning”’. We need to learn how to persist with our tasks in the world.<sup>42</sup> Our relationships with one another, however, are not simply means to an end, as if having to attend to those things that make them difficult were an irritating distraction from the ‘real’ work of the church. Relationships in the life of the church are part of its witness to God in Christ. We preach that God has made all things new by sending his Son, that he ‘was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross’ (Col. 1.20). If our life together does not speak of peace, this message will struggle to be heard, and indeed received in its fullness.
72. The choice between the call for deeper communion within the body of Christ and the call for sharing the gospel with those who have not heard it is always at root a false one. We are called to be one, as the Son is one with the Father, so that the world may believe (John 17.21). At the same time, the ground of this unity is the Son in us as the Son is in the Father (John 17.23), and therefore we will not discover its depths unless we are united to the Son in doing his work, that for which he has sent us, which is making known the only true God and the one whom he has sent (John 17.3). Communion and evangelization grow together and grow in and through one another, as is being recognized afresh in the ecumenical movement. As with the apostles after Pentecost, our witness to the risen Christ draws power from both the experienced reality and the public perception that ‘the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul’ (Acts 4.32). The unity that witnesses to Christ is a unity that gathers together the glorious diversity of humanity in unanimity, of which the experience of the apostolic church following Pentecost remains an enduring sign. Because it is the unity of a church whose heartbeat is evangelization – receiving and proclaiming the gospel – it is a unity that will continually be in dynamic motion as the church encounters, questions and transforms new aspects of human culture and experience. In order to do that, it has to find space for the interaction of agreement and disagreement that is always likely to accompany that process, as set out in chapter 1 of this report.

### *Good disagreement requires commitment to conversation*

73. Theological disagreement in the church, then, can take time to address and work through: time that may be measured in decades and even centuries, and time

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<sup>41</sup> The supporting paper by Goodall and Worthen on ‘The Limits of Diversity’ notes the limitations of the strategies of twentieth-century ecumenism for addressing the pressing disagreements facing the churches in the twenty-first.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel W. Hardy, with Deborah Hardy Ford, Peter Ochs and David F. Ford, *Wording a Radiance: Parting Conversations on God and the Church* (London: SCM, 2010), p. 106.

that should not be seen as wasted if it deepens our witness to the reconciliation of all things in Christ. What should Christians do, though, in that space of disagreement? They may, more or less consciously, seek to establish ‘facts on the ground’ that will make it difficult for anyone to operate or even survive in the church who has different convictions from their own. Disciplinary action may be taken – in the era of Christendom, even criminal or military action – against those who think and act differently. On the other hand, Christians today may be more likely simply to separate from one another (paragraph 23 above), so that disagreement effectively ceases because each separated church only holds or permits a single view as normative. Or a de facto theological relativism may prevail that says the difference between contested theological views does not matter, because we have no way of adjudicating between them and judging truth from falsity in such matters is beyond us – which is another way of avoiding disagreement.

74. None of these responses appear to meet the criteria for good disagreement outlined in the first chapter of the report (paragraphs 17–20 & 25 above). Those criteria require from disagreeing Christians some kind of commitment to conversation – not without limit, not pursued without any interruption and not without certain goals and values, but nonetheless a conversation in which the participants face one another and recognise in one another those who are one because of their fellowship in Christ, their sharing of the Spirit. Even disagreement of the first type noted in the previous chapter (paragraph 53), disagreement where what is being called apostolic communion seems to be at stake, originates in a context where we *have* recognised one another as members together of the body of Christ on the basis of faith and baptism at least. We cannot establish whether that remains the case with our backs turned towards one another, refusing to listen to one another but rather defining one another by the positions we attribute to one another without waiting for any response (see paragraph 12 in chapter 1). That is not to say there is no place for discipline in the life of the church, a point made at paragraph 16 above, though as has recently been observed clear-cut examples of church discipline in the New Testament relate to individuals, not to whole congregations or churches.<sup>43</sup>

#### *Types of disagreement and kinds of conversation*

75. If good disagreement in the life of the church requires a willingness to engage in a certain kind of conversation, the distinction between the three types of disagreement in the previous chapter implies that the particular kind of conversation may vary, and indeed the subject of the conversation is not necessarily the same. Are we talking about the basis on which we can affirm our belonging in the universal church of Jesus Christ through faith and baptism, or about something that touches on the bonds that enable us to belong together in this particular ecclesial communion with its common sacraments, ministry and oversight, or about different interpretations of Christian truth that can continue to

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<sup>43</sup> Michael B. Thompson, ‘Division and Discipline in the New Testament Church,’ in *Good Disagreement*, ed. Atherstone and Goddard, pp. 43–62. The exception that perhaps proves the rule here is the discipline implied by the words of the risen Christ in the letters to the seven churches in Revelation (e.g. Rev. 2.4–5 and 3.16 & 19).

be debated while we remain within such a single ecclesial communion and without threatening that? Clearly there is likely to be a greater sense of urgency in the second than the third, greater still in the first than the second.

Disagreements of the first two types have a direct bearing on how we relate to one another, how we see each other, how we behave towards each other: as disagreements with a definite 'practical' component, they therefore tend to generate 'highly charged' and 'peremptory' reactions (paragraph 11). Whatever conversation we are able to have is likely to be accompanied by various forms of action that affect the way we relate to one another, for decisions of all kinds will have to be made, even if they are decisions to postpone specific action that some consider to be immediately required.

76. Yet as was noted in the previous chapter (paragraphs 57 & 63 above), it is not necessarily a straightforward matter to know what kind of disagreement we are having, and indeed in most really serious, sustained disagreements in the history of the church from the New Testament onwards one of the cardinal features is a lack of consensus on this precise point. Serious disagreements are to some extent defined by the fact that we cannot agree what it is that we are actually disagreeing about – how to describe it, or how to evaluate it.
77. To take an example from the Reformation era, the argument about infant baptism has been considered by some to be an argument of the first type (acceptance or rejection of infant baptism defines membership of Christ's church), for some an argument of the second type (we can recognise a degree of communion in Christ with those with whom we disagree on this but such disagreement makes actual ecclesial communion impossible), and for others of the third (the United Reformed Church, for instance, is committed to accommodating a diversity of practice as well as theology on this issue). Christians who fervently believe it is a disagreement of the first type, however, are likely to struggle to frame a constructive conversation with those who are convinced it actually belongs to the second or third. It may even be easier for them to debate with people who agree it belongs to the first type of disagreement but hold an opposed view on the theological question than with people who may agree with them that infant baptism is or is not true apostolic practice, but believe it should nonetheless be treated as the second or even third type of disagreement.
78. Part of what characterizes serious disagreement in the church is then the absence of consensus about the type of disagreement, and therefore varying judgments about the kind of conversation that should be taking place. A particular challenge, therefore, for disagreeing well arises when two or more such conversations are being pursued together at the same time in the life of the church, some people being clear that one kind of conversation is necessary, others another kind, while others perhaps are still waiting to complete the process of discernment that would enable them to arrive at a judgment about that in the first place. It is not only a matter of people coming to different conclusions about the type of disagreement that is happening and therefore how it should be addressed, but of being at different stages in the task of discerning what kind of disagreement it really is. Differences here constitute a third dimension of disagreement that needs to be taken into consideration. If that is not recognised, the result is likely to be miscommunication, frustration and repetitive,

unproductive conversations, with all involved feeling that they are not being 'heard' – and with some justification, for they are actually speaking in different conversations, with different implicit rules and different goals.

### *Making choices and forming a judgment*

79. Where this occurs, a choice has to be made, and perhaps made with a reasonable degree of self-consciousness and clarity. For instance, the body with the appropriate authority could make the discernment that, at least at the level of governance and decision making, one type of conversation is to be pursued and others suspended, perhaps to be returned to at a later point. It could decide that more time is needed for that discernment to be made and consider what kind of process might be helpful for that. In that case, how to accommodate those who have already made up their minds about the type of disagreement that is at stake and are trying to press on with the corresponding form of conversation nonetheless needs to be considered. There has to be a serious attempt to live with the difficult reality of several different conversations with contradictory guiding premises carrying on at the same time. In light of its responsibilities within the polity of the Church of England (paragraph 38 above), the House of Bishops has a particular role in that task of discernment as to the nature of the disagreement that is happening in the life of the church, and therefore the shape of the conversation that it calls for.
80. At times, discernment as to the bearing of the issues at stake on communion in the life of the church struggles to find consensus in the councils of the church. Rather than simply enduring indefinitely the frustration of multiple conversations with conflicting premises, it may be possible to test the character of the disagreement by focusing on one conversation at a time. So in the case of the ordination of women to the priesthood and the episcopate in the Church of England, although the various lines of conversation have by no means been cleanly separated, it is possible to distinguish an initial phase where the focus was on establishing whether or not this could be considered a development congruent with the doctrine of the Church of England. Once broad agreement was reached on a positive answer to that question, while it also became clear that a substantial minority who were staying within the church were not convinced, attention shifted to the conversation about how a continuing disagreement bearing directly on life together within the church could nonetheless be held within one church with a strong measure of continuing common agreement about the elements of communion referred to at paragraph 43 above. Most agreed that this was a disagreement that could be held within our fundamental apostolic communion, *and* within the ecclesial communion of the Church of England – though at the price of limiting that communion in significant ways (paragraphs 67–68 above).
81. What happens, however, when the first step here seems impossible – a conversation leading to a judgment as to whether some of the views being expressed in the debate may be ultimately incompatible with continuing apostolic communion, or with ecclesial communion within the same church? To begin with, it perhaps needs to be emphasized that for a church to deem that it is not able to come to such a judgment is a very serious matter. The claim to be a church is, in



part, the claim to be able to arrive at such judgments and therefore enable communion in faith. To give up on fundamental doctrinal judgment is to give up on something about what it means to be a church. That is not to say that the judgment has to be made today. It might take many years, even decades. Nor does it have to be made alone. Given the inseparability of each particular church from the universal church, any judgment about doctrine undertaken by one particular church should involve consultation with others as part of a serious seeking for the *sensus fidelium* across the whole church of God (see paragraphs 34-35 & 39 above). Still, a particular church needs to have and to show some kind of commitment to reaching such judgment and some kind of confidence in the resources it has by the grace of God to do that. It cannot just say: 'This is too difficult for us.'

82. Where the decision is taken that such a conversation is required, and that it will take extended time to arrive at a judgment, then the councils of the church have to consider not only what may need to happen in that time to support it, but also how to respond to the fact that many faithful people have already made up their minds about the question being considered and are pressing for a different kind of conversation at this point, indeed are already pursuing such conversations. No church that takes seriously both consultation of the faithful and practices of conciliarity as set out in chapter 2 can imagine that attempting to force a suspension of such activity would be either possible or desirable. Somehow a way needs to be found to make space for different kinds of conversation about the same issues, requiring different kinds of interaction between agreement and disagreement, to be contained within the church without simply muddling and indeed obstructing one another, while the councils of the church – in the case of the Church of England, the General Synod with a distinctive role for the House of Bishops – nonetheless stay focused on just one of them at a time.

*The virtues needed for disagreeing well in the life of the church on earth*

83. For all involved, sustaining good disagreement in such circumstances is likely to be highly demanding, not least in requiring a particular kind of empathy. The empathy needed in such a situation is not simply a willingness to enter as it were passively the experiences and beliefs of the other to see how the world looks from inside them. More than that, it means being ready to inhabit actively the conversation that the other believes to be needful when I believe that a different kind of conversation is in fact required – while remaining conscious of the tension between what I am doing in the act of empathy and the convictions that lead me to my own, contrasting belief. To practise good disagreement under these constraints in the life of the church calls for the virtues that the New Testament expects to characterise it: humility, meekness and patience, and being prepared to bear with one another and with one another's faults and complaints (Col. 3.12–14). Such patience and forbearance are not based on an attitude of resignation to present realities, but on the hope that comes from knowing that 'When Christ who is your life is revealed, you will be revealed with him in glory' (Col. 3.4). Humility and meekness mean an utter commitment to the good of the other, which may nonetheless be expressed in denying the legitimacy of the view they are expressing when this is perceived to be tending to their destruction.

84. Such virtues are not simply intended to be pious aspirations for those who call themselves Christians. They are to be expressed and embodied in attitudes and in behaviour. The practice of the virtues requires a willingness to submit ourselves to forms of discipline that allow them to shape what we do and the way that we do it, in order to give space for the sanctifying work of the Spirit of God among us. There is an especially serious challenge here for us today around communication. The prevalence of social media makes it remarkably easy to provoke conflict or engage in controversy. There is also considerable appetite within the mainstream media for stories that are framed as unyielding conflicts, and it is all too easy for Christians wittingly or unwittingly to accept that framing, or even to play up to it for the sake of national attention. The price, however, is high. What might some of the disciplines be that Christians need to submit to in order to exemplify humility, meekness, patience and the willingness to bear with one another and with one another's faults and complaints, in order that, as Colossians 3.16 goes on to say, the word of Christ might dwell in us richly as we teach and admonish one another in all wisdom? Might one of the disciplines required by commitment to these virtues amidst serious disagreement within the church be that we address one another directly, and where possible face to face, and resist using social media or the mainstream media in a manner which undermines the possibility of such address?
85. Four things may perhaps be underlined at this point. The first is that the willingness to persist in disagreement in the face of inability to discern its character decisively and therefore address the issues effectively together rests on the conviction that who 'we' are is given by our communion in Christ, and therefore our disagreeing is framed and held by some level of agreement in the gospel with one another. Re-articulating and reaffirming that agreement is likely to be vital here. That is not the same as conceding that there is nothing in the matter of our disagreement that threatens this communion or contradicts that faith. It is however to say that the life of the church, in terms of its authoritative statements and representative practices, has not yet reached the point where that communion has been decisively broken or the teaching of apostolic faith rendered impossible. If a significant number of people came to believe that this point had come, then we would not be disagreeing as one church any longer, and we might need to look instead at models from ecumenical or even interfaith relations for how we are to continue to engage with one another.
86. The second is the reality that the church on earth is always a 'mixed body', to use a term from Augustine's reading of the parable of the field in Matthew 13.24–30, which was shaped in part by his own experience of the deep pain and lasting bitterness caused by disagreement and conflict in the church, in what is known as the Donatist controversy. The church contains wheat and tares, saints and sinners, those who hold to the truth and those who doubt it and in various ways depart from it. Moreover, the line between these two also runs through every member of the body, as part of our daily discipleship. The language of 'impaired' communion<sup>44</sup> that has been borrowed in recent Anglicanism from its origins in ecumenical theology can suggest that a state of truly 'full' communion actually exists between some Christians in some church here on earth, when the fullness of communion in Christ, as the fullness of Christ's truth, in fact lies ahead of us,

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<sup>44</sup> Lambeth Commission on Communion, 'Windsor Report', §§29 & 50.

and our enjoyment of it here on earth is always flawed and partial.<sup>45</sup> Archbishop Michael Ramsey famously said of Anglicanism that ‘Its credentials are its incompleteness, with the tension and the travail in its soul. It is clumsy and untidy, it baffles neatness and logic. For it is sent not to commend itself as “the best type of Christianity”, but by its very brokenness to point to the universal Church.’<sup>46</sup> The kind of serious disagreement that has been described in this final chapter makes such imperfection painfully palpable. Yet perhaps we cannot truly see the glory and beauty of Christ’s church here on earth and in history’s time without immersion in the human mess and frailty.

87. Third, this chapter began with some reflections on the Christian virtue of patience in relation to disagreement. Although it is not a word with any immediate parallel in the teaching of the New Testament, it is worth considering how loyalty relates to patience and what it might mean for Christians in this context. Loyalty is one of the factors that weighs against ‘exit’ when conflict and disagreement emerge in contemporary society (paragraph 23 above), and it might be said that our culture does little to foster it. Christians are not called to be ‘loyal’ in an absolute sense to particular ecclesial communities and institutions, but to seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness. Yet the life of communion implies a depth of sharing that requires commitment on the one hand to particular others in the life of the church, and not just to the church as an abstraction, and on the other to the church catholic, and not just to ‘our’ church. Part of Augustine’s argument against the Donatists was that in cutting themselves off from communion with the catholic church for the sake of their own holiness, they were offending against love and therefore making themselves in truth unholy. To return one more time to the opening of Philippians 2, Paul tells his readers: ‘Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others’ (Phil. 2.3–4). Obedience to such teaching must bring with it steadfastness both in seeking the good of those with whom we are in communion and in willingness to learn and receive from them. This too is part of the potentially costly ‘bearing with one another’ that is asked for in Col. 3.13.
88. Finally, Christians are committed to remaining in the highest possible level of communion while they navigate inevitable disagreements with their many challenges, frustrations and temptations, because ‘faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love’ (1 Cor. 13.13) – ‘that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee’ (Collect for Quinquagesima, Book of Common Prayer). They know that the purpose of Christ is sure, ‘to present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish’ (Eph. 5.27). Therefore they do not give up on asking God, ‘who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly,’ for the wisdom the church may be struggling to find in its current situation, with single-minded expectation (James 1.5–8). Hope sustains faith that Christ will lead us ever more deeply into love through every trial and every challenge, as the church journeys

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<sup>45</sup> Nicholas Sagovsky, *Ecumenism, Christian Origins, and the Practice of Communion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> Michael Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (London: SPCK, 1990), p. 220.

through history in the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit toward the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

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