

Dear [name of SCCF church leader],

Grace to you and peace! May the triune God, the One we have known in Jesus Christ, bless your ministry richly.

This letter comes to you from the Faith and Order Commission of the Southern California Christian Forum, a commission whose mandate is to promote the visible unity of the church, especially by examining important theological texts produced in the wider ecumenical movement. Over the past several months, our focus has been on *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (TCTCV), a convergence document on ecclesiology written by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The purpose of this letter is to describe this text and to commend it for study in your congregation(s).

The WCC's Faith and Order Commission has long been recognized as the most comprehensive theological forum in the Christian world, including among its members leading scholars from the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, and Pentecostal traditions, from six continents. Among the Commission's past accomplishments is the highly-acclaimed text of 1982, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. This document has influenced numerous subsequent dialogues, become standard fare in many seminary courses, and been included among the authoritative texts of several churches.

The underlying issue for Faith and Order, however, has always been the nature and purpose of the church. Thus, beginning with a world conference in 1993, Faith and Order sought to produce a statement that, drawing on Scripture and the church's living Tradition, articulates what the churches can say together about the Church. The Commission completed discussion and drafting in 2012, sending TCTCV to the churches for official response.

Our local commission—which in recent years has included representatives from the Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Episcopal, Lutheran, Disciples, Christian Science, and independent Evangelical traditions—has studied TCTCV carefully and has unanimously concluded that it deserves the attention of all churches in Southern California. Indeed, we believe that this document, if taken seriously by the churches of our region, could help strengthen their understanding of what it means to be the body of Christ.

For example, TCTCV emphasizes that the church is fundamentally a gift of God, a creation of Word and Spirit—a claim which counters the wide-spread perception of the church as a purely human organization, a voluntary association of like-minded believers. The text lifts up the idea of the church as koinonia (fellowship, sharing, participation), a vital corrective, in our judgment, to overly static or institutionalized conceptions of church. TCTCV stresses the relationship of the local and universal in any adequate ecclesial understanding, and thus undercuts the tendency of some Christians to act as if the church were only their congregation or of some church leaders

to give little respect to local differences. The text explores the essential connection of unity and diversity, and insists that the church is, by its very nature, missionary. A brief summary of the document is appended to this letter.

In this era of social turmoil, when many churches report a loss of direction and vitality, it is essential for the community of Christ's followers to reaffirm or recover its fundamental character as a basis for moving creatively into the future. We are convinced that ecumenical dialogue is a key to such recovery, and we, therefore, commend this important ecumenical text, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, for your consideration.

In Christ's peace,

Rev. John George Huber, The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod

Rev. Dr. Ray F. Kibler III, Chair of Faith and Order Commission (Lutheran)

Rev. Dr. Michael Kinnamon, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Madelon Maupin, Member, Ecumenical National Team, Christian Science Church

Denis E. McGrath, Ph.D, Roman Catholic participant

Gabriel Meyer, Executive Director, Southern California Christian Forum (Greek-Catholic)

[list further names]