The nature and mission of the Church

A response from the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain to the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Paper 198, *The nature and mission of the Church: a stage on the way to a common statement*

At a Meeting for Sufferings
held in London
7 February 2009

S/09/02/ 2: The Nature and Mission of the Church: Introduction

Further to our minute S/8/09/5 of September 2008 and our discussion then, we have heard a brief introduction to the revised draft response from Quaker Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations to the World Council of Churches document: The Nature and Mission of the Church (paper S/09/02/A).

We have also received an additional paper including minute 09/11 of the Quaker Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations meeting held from 30 January to 1 February 2009 recording their approval of the response.

Whilst concern was expressed from within our meeting that the document might be misinterpreted as a statement of what all Friends believe today, our lengthy discussion led us to a sense that we should embrace the spirit of this response.

We have heard that the time may be right for a new ecumenical agenda seeking a "unity based on love, rather than intellectual agreement" (from section 4.4 of the document).

We offer this document humbly to other churches, acknowledging that it does not represent the beliefs of all

our members, and that we will continue to wrestle with its challenges ourselves.

Signed

Susan Seymour

Clerk

Meeting for Sufferings is the standing representative body for Quakers in Britain.

1. Preamble

1.1 This response to Faith and Order Paper 198, *The nature and mission of the church*, is submitted on behalf of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain. It has been prepared by our Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations after wide consultation with Friends.

1.2 Although the response is written by, and on behalf of, one Yearly Meeting, the writers recognise that there is a variety of Quaker practice throughout the world. We speak only for ourselves, but we have shared our draft response with other appropriate Quaker bodies and are therefore satisfied that our views are not significantly at variance with what would be said by a wider spectrum of Quakers.

1.3 Our consultation within the Yearly Meeting has shown that there are those among our members who are uncomfortable with expressing our faith in traditional Christian language. We believe that faith cannot be adequately expressed in words: it is for this reason that we resist using creeds or even subscribing to a basis of belief. Nevertheless, we have to try to explain ourselves whilst recognising that whatever is written will be partial and inadequate.

1.4 This response is set out in the following way. We believe that our previous response to Faith and Order Paper 181, *The nature and purpose of the church* is still of relevance.

Slightly edited, it appears as section 2 of this response. Our new comments relating to the current document appear as section 3. We have tried not to repeat what was said before, but to build on that earlier foundation. After some initial considerations, we have focused on the material to be found in the boxes and the sections of the response have the titles of the boxes to which they refer. In our section 4, we respond to the questions raised in paragraph 8 of Faith and Order Paper 198.

2. Response to *The nature and purpose of the church*[1]

A The approach of the response

2.1 The approach of the response is to start from our own theology and understanding rather than from the questions asked. We hope that by doing this we shall be able to put forward a sustained and coherent account of our own ecclesiology in the interests of furthering understanding.

2.2 Part B of this document thus addresses Quaker ecclesiology. Part C looks at the issues raised in the 'boxes' in *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, and part D answers the questions to which a response is requested.

B Quaker ecclesiology

2.3 For the first Friends, Quakerism was 'primitive Christianity revived', Christianity as it ought to be. Quaker concepts of the church were drawn up, positively on the basis of an understanding of the New Testament, and negatively, in contrast to the church practices of the seventeenth century which were seen as unbiblical. The Quaker tradition of ecclesiology has to be seen as much in what it rejects as in what it affirms. The tradition of rejection of 'outward forms' can now be a difficulty for us in ecumenical endeavours.

2.4 The traditional, formal description of the church is that set out by Robert Barclay, a second generation Quaker who in his '*Apology*' of 1675 published the first, and some would say still the definitive, systematic Quaker theology. Barclay uses the word 'church' in three ways:

i) it is all those called and gathered by God to walk in his Light and Life, thus forming the invisible, catholic church of all those who do the will of God and are obedient to the Light in their hearts; Barclay is clear that this church is not limited by nation, language, or religion. "There may be members therefore of this catholick church both among heathens, Turks, Jews, and all the several sorts of Christians, men and women of integrity and simplicity of heart ... [who] loving to follow righteousness, are by the secret touches of this Holy Light in their souls, enlivened and quickened, thereby secretly united to God...."

ii) it is the visible church gathered by God's Spirit, of those who profess the Christian faith, meet together to wait upon God in worship, bear testimony to the Truth, and care for one another. This description, especially of the worship, shows that he here means the Quaker church.

iii) it is also used for the 'church of the apostasy', all those particular churches which have let the outward form triumph over the inward life.

Whilst we as Quakers now would not wish to describe the other churches in this way, it is salutary to remember that all of us can fall into apostasy if we lose our sense of the

pre-eminence of the inward truth over the outward order in which it is embodied and expressed.

The invisible church

2.5 For us the most important aspect of this is that the 'true' church is the invisible church of those who respond to God. The church is neither a formal organisation nor an institution, nor even visibly religious: it is the community of those who are called and gathered by God. It is God's work, not primarily our work. To be church is to receive God's gift and to respond to it in conversion of life. The potential membership of this invisible church is universal; every human being has the capacity to be reached by God. Whether everyone is so reached is known only to God. However, its universality rests securely not on humanity but on the Light, 'the Light that enlightens everyone' as John 1:9 puts it. We would suggest that in discussions of the nature of the church it is a mistake to concentrate only on the visible church and to neglect this greater field within which God works creatively and redemptively. We must always ask, 'how do we recognise the work of God?'

The visible church

2.6 The consequence of this approach is to see the visible church in a humble capacity as a sign and a servant of God's purpose. The visible church witnesses to the Light in every aspect of its life, its worship, its decision making, its organisation, its mission and its service. It tries to know in itself and to make visible and active in the world, the will of God, the love of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

It shows what life is like when it is transformed by God, and it becomes God's instrument in the transformation of the world.

The nature of the church

2.7 The nature of the church is that it is dependent on and defined by its relationship with God. Just as God is mystery and yet known to us, so the church cannot be confined by our descriptions and yet can be a secure home. Whilst many metaphors for the church are possible, the Quaker tradition has been to speak in terms of the Light (of Christ) and the Holy Spirit. We do not often use terms such as 'One, holy, catholic and apostolic' but we would explain them by pointing to the way in which the visible church, like the invisible church, is dependent on the Light. It is 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic' only as it shares in the qualities of the Light and is a channel for the activity of the Light. Its unity depends on it turning to the Light; its holiness on the submission of its whole life to the sanctifying power of the Light; its catholicity on the recognition of the Light wherever it may be found; its apostolicity on its response to the same Spirit and Light known by the apostles. All members of the church share in the responsibility of living in the Light themselves and of helping others to do so.

2.8 The church is also a community under the direction of the Holy Spirit which guides, leads, directs, inspires and empowers individual members and the gathered meeting. As a creative Spirit, it can lead into new understandings

and activities: as the eternal Spirit, it is not changeable but inspires words and acts of love, peace, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, mercy and grace. Our discipline and our way of worship, and all of our tradition is directed towards bringing us into and keeping us within the life of the Spirit. We learn to discern the movement of the Spirit and to distinguish it from our own wills. We know that the Spirit works in, with and through those who are faithful and obedient. In our experience therefore the inward reality of what others would call the sacramental life, is the work, gift and call of the Holy Spirit and requires from us no outward rites, but only the response of a willing heart.

The purpose of the church

2.9 For us as Quakers, the purpose of the visible church is to witness to the life of the kingdom of God. The church in Quaker tradition is not a church of the interim waiting for Christ to come again, but finds the coming of Christ within time, in our present experience. "Christ is come to teach his people himself", as George Fox said, and the silent meeting for worship, waiting for the presence of Christ and expecting his direct teaching through words spoken in ministry or in the silence of the heart, is both a sign of the kingdom of God and a means to it. Quakers claim to be a people of the presence of Christ, a claim which implies a realised eschatology. This should be seen not only in church life but also in the quality of the lives we live in the world, both individually and as a people. It is from this understanding that our distinctive testimonies

– peace, justice, integrity, equality, simplicity – come. They are not a random selection of ethical principles; all these testimonies demonstrate what life is like when God reigns.

Gospel Order

2.10 The organisation of the visible church also contributes to this purpose of witness. Quakers call this Gospel Order, and it is central to the way in which the Quaker church is organised; it is the one feature which all meetings and yearly meetings have in common. It is the working out of an ecclesiology in which Christ exercises his offices of leader, shepherd, priest, teacher, overseer, directly within the meeting, choosing whom he will to speak and act for him on each occasion. Gospel Order refers to the structures, the way in which meetings relate to each other; to the business, the maintenance of gospel life in the church and the world; and to the way in which the meeting is conducted, in worship seeking the will of God. At such a meeting, Christ presides and leads, and the meeting submits itself to his authority. This can be seen as a way of the cross for it requires the surrender of personal will and opinion in order to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit. When such a meeting is 'gathered' it can become a power-house of the Spirit; transformed itself, it becomes an instrument through which God can change the world.

2.11 Many features of the ways in which we worship, in which we order our church and make decisions, and in

which we seek to live our lives, are for us an essential part of how we understand our relationship to the kingdom of God. Though we may fail in our practice, we cannot lightly set aside our tradition: it is not a mere 'heritage' but a witness to the Truth that has been revealed to us.

C The issues raised

This section deals with those areas in which the Faith and Order Commission believed that there was a significant divergence of understanding requiring further work.

The institutional dimension of the Church and the work of the Holy Spirit

2.12 It is our experience that 'the power and reliability of God's truth … grounded in the sovereignty of [God's] Word and Spirit… works through, but if necessary also counter to, the given institutional structures of the church.' This we affirm both of the institutional structures of other churches, such as ordained ministry as this document describes it, and of our own institutional structures. It is a positive expression of our faith in the living God, who raises up speakers and hearers of truth in every time and place. With this in mind, we would certainly 'agree that God creates the Church and brings it to [Godself] through the Holy Spirit by means of the living voice of the Gospel'. We would, however, hold that this living voice is heard neither exclusively nor invariably 'in preaching and in the sacraments', where these are understood as particular forms of worship. The 'activity of

the Spirit through the divine Word which comes about in an immediate internal action upon the hearts of the believers' is known and witnessed by us in our Meetings for Worship and in our daily lives. We recognise that preaching and the sacraments can be witnesses to that activity, but not that they are the only witnesses.

2.13 The Religious Society of Friends in Britain, in its organisation and practice follows a common and distinctive discipline, comparable in many respects to the forms of 'institutional continuity' discussed in this document. We recognise this discipline, rooted in our perception of 'Gospel Order', as guiding, challenging and testing us concerning our faithfulness to God's truth. Our continuity in the apostolic faith, however, does not depend on this or any other form of 'institutional continuity', but on the dwelling in us of the same Spirit that the apostles received, and our obedience to [its] guidance.

The Church and Sin

2.14 The word 'sin' is not one which we often use. Rather, we affirm from our experience and our tradition that the Spirit of God working in us leads us, individually and as a people of God, into holiness. To be convinced of our failure is at the same time to be convinced that the love of God overcomes it, and that this love can be manifest in our lives and our existence as a community. This is the context in which we would 'agree that there is sin – individual and corporate – in the Church's history', and

would also say that 'sin' in the Church can become systemic and also affect the institution. Our history of external persecution within 'Christian' states, and of internal conflict, gives us ample evidence of this.

2.15 In Quaker tradition the divine reality of the Church is the universal, invisible Church, into which all are called and gathered by the 'true Light that enlightens every one'. This universal Church is holy and can be said to be without sin. For the 'visible Church' to claim to be a divine reality, and therefore perfect despite the failures of its members, would be to obscure its nature as a servant community that awaits and witnesses to the establishment of the reign of God on earth.

Church and 'Sacrament'

2.16 The reality of the Church as a sign and instrument of God's design may be expressed in many ways. For Quakers, one of the most important is the concept of 'testimony'. Testimony is the unity of word and action whereby we both bear witness to God and become instruments of God's purposes. Reflection on our history may lead us to identify particular Quaker 'testimonies' – to peace, simplicity, truthfulness and equality. We are called to make our whole lives, individually and corporately, a testimony to the world. In this way we can be 'a pointer to what God wants for the world', effective signs which signify and convey the grace of God, signs of God's promise. We are also called to recognise when other

people and communities are given to us as signs and instruments of God.

2.17 We would not refer to the Church as a 'sacrament', but this is because we do not generally use the term 'sacrament' to designate aspects of our life and worship, not because we want to make a clear distinction between church and sacraments. We do however recognise that to use sacramental language of the church may be appropriate provided that the meaning of the language and its metaphorical nature are made clear. Since we talk of 'the whole of life as sacramental' we cannot exclude the church from this description. What we mean by sacramental includes the connection between the human and the divine, the incorporation of the material creation into God's purposes, and the active presence in the world of God the creator, the redeemer and the bringer of new life.

Koinonia

2.18 We rejoice in the sense in which *koinonia* recognises communion in community rather than focusing exclusively on eucharistic celebration as the only valid expression of unity. Not only does this allow our church to share more fully in the ecumenical enterprise, it also embraces the concept of the invisible church, since *koinonia* is a broad enough concept to include all who are committed to the realisation of Kingdom values, all who share the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by whatever name this is known.

Diversity and mutual recognition of gifts

2.19 While recognising that each of the churches has distinct gifts and insights to bring to the expression and understanding of the Gospel, we find it more helpful to relate these to the service of Christ in today's world than to the concept of 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church'. The Religious Society of Friends worldwide embraces very different understandings of the Gospel and we have begun to heal our own divisions only in the last century. This experience leads us to affirm that unity must be sought at a deeper level than that of order and doctrine in the discovery of a shared response to the inward calling of Christ.

Authority and the local church

2.20 For us, authority is found within Gospel Order, which gives us a structure of local, regional and national meetings through which decisions can be made at an appropriate level under the discipline of gathered waiting to discern the will of God. The Yearly Meeting, an annual gathering open to all its members, can alone rule on matters of significance to Friends throughout the country. At whatever level a decision is taken, it is recorded in a Minute, approved in the meeting, which embodies the sense of the meeting and, once accepted by those present, carries the authority of that meeting.

Apostolic faith

2.21 As a non-credal church, the Religious Society of Friends vests its understanding of apostolicity and faithfulness in the extent to which it demonstrates that it is true to the example and teaching of Christ and the apostles in its corporate life and the lives of its members. From the earliest days of the Quaker movement, Friends sought to embody their faith in practice rather than in doctrine, making their lives a testimony to the grace of God which liberated and empowered them. What became known as the 'testimonies' were all witness to the grace of God and the consequent parameters of Christian discipleship.

Baptism

2.22 *(For a fuller response to this and the two following paragraphs, we would refer you to our response to the WCC Faith and Order paper,* Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, *entitled* To Lima, with love*).* We are glad to see the recognition in the final sentence of this text of those who do not celebrate the rite of Baptism (with water) yet share in the spiritual experience of life in Christ. We wonder if the seriousness of the challenge that our position poses is fully recognised.

Eucharist

2.23 Our experience of communion at the deepest level in the silence of a gathered meeting for worship leads us to see this as a ground of unity free of the apparently

intractable problems associated with the different understandings of the significance of the eucharist in other churches. For us, an obstacle to treating the Eucharist as a symbol of unity is its dependence in most churches on an ordained ministry.

Ministry

2.24 The priesthood of all believers is a concept which has been central to Quaker faith and practice from the outset. In Britain, even the practice of recording as ministers those with a recognised gift for spoken ministry – prayer, teaching, counselling, exhortation – during meeting for worship was discontinued in the last century. In some other Yearly Meetings where pastors are employed, they are not ordained but rather described as 'released for service'. Our Yearly Meeting maintains the principle that such ministry should be unpaid; freely received, it is freely given. It is essential to our Quaker understanding of the Gospel that every member should undertake the responsibilities of priesthood, all ministering to one another and 'answering that of God in everyone'.

Episkope and hierarchy

2.25 As stated in the document, from the beginning [of the Christian community], contact was maintained between local churches by collections, exchange of letters, visits and tangible expressions of support. These are means of exercising 'the ministry of co-ordination' which can be practised by all members of the community. The Religious Society of Friends in Britain has sought to maintain a

sense of collective responsibility for the functions of *episkope*. Local groupings of congregations – 'Monthly Meetings'[2] – appoint for most congregations groups of elders, who have a particular responsibility for nurturing the spiritual life of the community and its individual members, and groups of overseers who ensure that pastoral care is carried out. The Monthly Meeting also decides issues of church membership and sends representatives to national decision-making bodies.

2.26 As a community within which the ministry of oversight is exercised in 'synodal' form ('elders' and 'overseers' meeting as a group locally and regionally), we are asked in the document to consider whether the continuity with the Church of the apostles can find expression in the successive laying on of hands by bishops and whether such a sign can serve that continuity itself. We could recognise the episcopate as one way in which other churches express continuity with the faith of the earliest Christians. We would ask these churches to consider, however, whether an emphasis on this sign could detract from the insight that apostolicity and apostolic succession belong to the whole Church, and that there is continuity with the apostolic faith and mission where all live under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. The 'set apart' ministry of *episkope* is of value only insofar as the effective and faithful life of the community is served. We affirm with gratitude the reminder that 'the model for the exercise of all oversight in the Church is Christ's own exercise of authority, as exemplified by his

washing the disciples' feet'. We remember how Jesus' own feet were washed by Mary of Bethany, and that Jesus gladly received her ministry.

Communal, personal and collegial existence; conciliarity and primacy

2.27 Our communal life as a people of God is grounded in our experience of the Spirit of God present with us, sustaining our worship and service and guiding us into unity, without the visible sacrament of baptism (p. 49). It is central to our communal life that the whole body of the faithful be involved in decision-making processes, and that all be encouraged to participate in the discernment of truth. We seek to ensure that our representational structures strengthen this process of common discernment. Like all churches, we have constantly to be reminded of the need for all members to take seriously their potential to exercise the gifts they receive from the Holy Spirit.

2.28 On the issue of primacy and 'presidency', we ask other churches to consider that the need for someone to summon and preside over a gathering for the sake of good order does not imply that the individual concerned should exercise more influence or should be accorded more authority in determining the outcome of decision-making processes. The clerk of a 'Meeting for Worship for Church Affairs' is designated as simply the servant of the Meeting, who records what the whole community, met in worship, discerns to be the guidance of the Holy Spirit, for

it is God alone who presides over the gathered Church, who gives voice to the voiceless and who upholds unity in diversity. To ascribe these functions either to an individual or to a small group would, for us, be to lose sight of this basic truth.

Service in and for the world: faith and ethics

2.29 Service in and for the world is central to our understanding of what it means to be a people of God, and we welcome the statement that the Church of God exists only in relation to the common destiny of humanity and all creation. Indeed, it has been our experience that we learn who we are – our 'nature' as a community – by following our vocation of service – fulfilling God's 'purpose' for us. Our consideration of complex ethical questions, and our obedience to divine guidance in resolving those questions, is part of what forms our Christian discipleship. Our discernment of the call of God in the world today challenges us to witness and action that continues our historic testimonies.

2.30 To join with others of good will in addressing issues of society is, we find, possible even where we adopt a clear and uncompromising ethical stand, rooted in our experience of Christian discipleship and our faithfulness to the teachings of Jesus. Adherence to our peace testimony has been the basis of, not an impediment to, our participation in public debate on issues related to violence and the non-violent resolution of conflict.

2.31 Since the World Council of Churches has had such a significant role in bringing key ethical issues to the attention both of member churches and the wider world, we hope to see this work emphasised in any ecumenical consideration of the 'nature and purpose of the Church'.

2.32 Like so many churches, we have experienced internal conflict over moral stances taken by individuals and groups of members, for example, when some have felt called to take direct action against military installations in breach of the law. It is important to address such issues with discernment, accountability and Christian charity. We should not accept without question the narrow definition of 'morality' that dominates public discourse in Britain and elsewhere. Issues of human sexuality are important, and potentially divisive within and among churches; but the moral struggles of humankind in the contemporary world are far wider. We are called not only to respond to the world's questions, but to live out the passion for the transformation of the world that the indwelling Spirit of God, the Spirit of absolute love, mercy and justice, instils in us.

D Responses to the Questions

Churches were asked whether they could accept the 'convergence' of understanding in the paper; whether they were aware of issues omitted from it; and what challenges the paper presented to their own self-understanding.

2.33 We see in this Faith and Order Paper much which we can affirm. However, it is largely directed towards convergence between some of the numerically stronger Christian traditions and runs the risk of marginalizing the smaller voices. This is because, however well stated the basic theology, the problems which the document addresses are those of the visible church as institution. Most of these issues are ones which our tradition specifically rejects. We have the dilemma that even if the rest of the church reached a complete agreement on baptism, eucharist and ministry, we would still consider these to be outward and unnecessary.

2.34 The paper gives some attention to the laity but gives little attention to the implications of the church being the 'whole people of God.' We consider that, like the church, the paper's analysis needs to be turned 'upside-down'. It is the people of God, women, men and children, who are the channels of God at work in the world. How can the structures and worship of the church assist, inspire, encourage, strengthen and serve that work? Are the sheep being fed? Are they enabled to share their food with 'the other sheep who are not of this fold?'

2.35 The other major area which needs to be dealt with in a document on the nature and mission of the church is the invisible church, and how this relates to those of other faiths and no faith. How do we recognise the Spirit of God at work in another?

2.36 For us the challenge of convergence is to recognise that of God in other visible churches and in traditions

which we have rejected. We have to acknowledge that there are members of the invisible church in other churches; and that they find helpful and important to their faith structures and rituals which we regard as unnecessary. We are challenged to recognise what is valid and significant for others without needing to incorporate it into our own ways. We are also challenged to express more clearly our own interpretation of the nature and purpose of the church in the interest of mutual understanding.

3. Response to *The Nature and Mission of the Church*

Developments since the last consultation

3.1 Since our 2001 response to *The nature and purpose of the church* was written, we note that there has been a number of developments.

3.2 In Britain, there has been an apparently growing secularisation, accompanied by a decline in church attendance. Communities of other major world faiths are an established presence, and ongoing migration ensures that the make-up of faith communities is continually changing. The British Government has set up various initiatives around security concerns and community cohesion. At the same time, disparities in income are increasing with attendant negative impact on social well-being. The 'credit crunch' and recession are causing increasing hardship. There is much increased awareness of the impact of anticipated climate change, continuing changes to accepted understandings of family and relationships, and new moral issues raised by ongoing scientific advances. All of these changes pose challenges to churches.

3.3 Quakers are not immune from the effects of the world in which we live. Our beliefs in religious freedom and equality mean that we are disposed to look positively for the work of God in new situations and ideas. We are particularly conscious of the truths to be found in, as well

as the challenges posed by, other major world faiths. As we try to be 'open to new Light from whatever source it may come'[3] we have to struggle to see where and how it is right to change or develop our tradition and where we have to stand firm in our religious principles and practice.

3.4 The ecumenical movement also is changing. Amongst British churches, we are aware of growing ecumenical cooperation coupled with a growth in single congregations without institutional attachments and a growing tendency amongst churchgoers to regard the differences between churches and the ordinances of church discipline as irrelevant to the life of faith. Internationally, the growing diversity and inclusiveness of the ecumenical movement, embodied in the Global Christian Forum, is leading to the development of relationships with churches that had previously been marginal to the ecumenical process. This has, for all involved, led to a broadening of the concept and experience of church. The time is ripe for a shift of emphasis from the institutional to the relational.

Biblical insights

3.5 In considering the biblical insights noted in the discussion paper, we have welcomed the recognition that diversity has been a feature of the church since its inception. We are encouraged in our belief that the unity of the Church does not consist in simple uniformity of doctrine or practice. We have been further encouraged by the recognition in paragraph 17 that the Bible is a witness

to the Word of God rather than itself being the Word. This is in keeping with our tradition. In our reflections, we have been struck by the account provided in John 20:22 of the giving of the Holy Spirit, whereby the Risen Christ breathes the Holy Spirit on his disciples. This, we feel, reflects our own experience of encountering Christ in our Meetings for Worship, where we too may receive the Holy Spirit together with the gifts of joy, peace, mission and the power to forgive sins.

3.6 We welcome the understanding of the Church as the body of Christ, and feel that this model is helpful in expressing unity in diversity. There is much that might be explored in understanding the vocation of the Body of Christ in doing the work of Christ. We also wish to reflect on the vulnerability, weakness and humility of the Body of Christ in the world, as reflected in Matthew 25:31ff when Christ is found in the homeless stranger, the hungry, the naked, the sick and the prisoner. The 'broken body' is all around us waiting for the servant who brings hope with love. The Church does not exist for itself but for its mission.

3.7 We understand the Church as a prophetic sign that points beyond itself. In its prophetic aspect, the Church is charged with recognising the truth of situations and speaking about it. We must stand against false hope and explore the right response to likely eventualities. If, as seems likely, the world is due to undergo significant climate change with its attendant consequences, can we find the necessary spiritual resources to address the need

for restraint and accommodation? We are called to engage with hard issues and to help individuals and communities to cope with the inevitable losses that they face.

3.8 Since Robert Barclay (1648-1690), the Religious Society of Friends has distinguished between the visible and the invisible church, the institutions which witness to God's call and the people who have responded to God's call. (See paras 2.4 - 2.8.) We have been led to consider the images by which we understand our own ecclesiology, in particular, our use of the term 'meeting' to translate ekklesia. The Church is not, as we see it, so much an organisation as it is an encounter between members of the community and with God. The visible church is an assembly in which diverse voices are heard in a 'space in which obedience to truth is practiced.'[4]

3.9 We have been struck by the absence of the images of "family" and "friendship" in the account of biblical insights provided by the discussion document. We are reminded that, in Mk. 3:31f, Jesus overturned the accepted model of the family, and, in Jn. 14-16, called his disciples 'friends' in so far as they obeyed his command to love one another. As Thomas Story (1662-1742) notes, "the unity of Christians never did nor ever will or can stand in uniformity of thought and opinion, but in Christian love only."[5] How might the ecumenical endeavour look if we sought a visible unity based on love, rather than intellectual agreement?

The institutional dimension of the church

3.10 In the seventeenth century, Quakers regarded other churches as 'in the fall' and apostate, even though their adherents might be members of the invisible church. We now accept that the Holy Spirit has guided different churches into different ways that are appropriate for their own condition. We do not believe that the Holy Spirit has left any church without guidance. Although for at least the last century we have acted as if this were true, we believe that this is the first time that we have explicitly stated it.

3.11 We recognise that the ways in which the particular churches work were given by the Spirit, interpreted by always fallible human beings, for particular places, times and cultures. To say that we recognise the work of the Holy Spirit in other churches is not to say that we agree with or approve of all the practices which have resulted. It is to say that we have to take seriously the challenges which come from difference and to appreciate the gifts which have been given to other churches and from which we can learn.

3.12 All churches seek to balance faithfulness to the tradition they have been given with openness to new leadings of the Spirit. It is our experience that too often greater weight is placed on the embodiment of past guidance in our institutions than in the ongoing, and continually renewed, leading of the Holy Spirit. That Spirit is not known to us primarily in either preaching or outward sacraments, but in the living encounter with

Christ through and with each other. We note that the document distinguishes between those churches that regard institutions as the guarantee of apostolicity and those that see the church manifest wherever there is witness to apostolicity and we would claim that to be apostolic is to be in that Spirit which the apostles were in. Apostolicity rests in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

3.13 The Society of Friends worldwide exhibits a diversity of practice that demonstrates that no one form is a full expression of the grace of God. In this light, we ask, what in our structures and practices is temporary, and what is of God's eternal reign? 1 Cor. 13:13 suggests that the eternal elements are faith, hope and love. What in the structures and practices of each church has ceased to embody those elements?

3.14 In the experience of the Religious Society of Friends, one key sign of God's reign is equality (Cf. Gal. 3:28). In this light, we welcome the greater participation of women in the institutional life of the churches and encourage further development of this and the integration of other marginalised groups into the corporate life of the churches.

The Church and sin

3.15 We have been challenged by the discussion on p.14 to consider the relationship between sin and holiness in the Church. We have no doubt that the church as an institution consisting of fallible human beings can and does commit sins. Nevertheless God is able to rescue us,

transform us and set our feet on the path to holiness. We have found that the work of Christ restores us in openness to each other. In our Meetings for Worship, we experience the way in which the Light shows us our darkness and brings us to new Light so that we find "the evil weakening... and the good raised up"[6]. In our practice of composing testimonies to the grace of God as shown in the lives of our members, we note that, as we look back over these lives, we have experienced the work of the Holy Spirit. We are reminded of Julian of Norwich's claim that, "sin is behovely", that God can work with and through human sinfulness. Sin can offer no barrier to God's Spirit.

Limits of diversity?

3.16 In our understanding, diversity is to be welcomed. It is, as Paul suggests in 1Cor 12, involved in being part of the body of Christ. We all have different tasks as we all have different gifts. It seems to us that, for the foreseeable future, Quakers safeguard particular truths in trust for the whole church. These would include "the immediate and perceptible guidance of the Holy Spirit ... and of the waiting worship and inspirational ministry."[7] They also include our constant reminder to the other churches that the spiritual life, whilst it may be helped by sacramental practice, does not depend on it. We feel that it is appropriate to seek to discern the particular gifts and tasks of each church. Can we accept the challenge to name and appreciate the gifts we receive from one another?

3.17 Nevertheless, we must ask ourselves, as well as the other churches, how it is that we prevent our appreciation of the gifts we have been given from becoming idolatrous. It is always a temptation to regard a particular well-loved practice as being part of the eternal order on which we are founded. We must remember that gospel always exceeds any particular institution or practice.

3.18 We maintain that the Church exists wherever Gospel is rightly lived, where Christ is present, where the guidance of the Holy Spirit is followed and where the love of God is made manifest. In this regard, we emphasise that it is not adherence to doctrine that makes us disciples, but faithfulness to the will of God. As such, the Religious Society of Friends has differed from other churches in regarding positively those who doubt the historic statements of faith. However important doctrine may be, faith is not words but lived experience. While the Quaker avoidance of credal statements can lead us into difficulties when we try to explain what we believe, it is our experience that the practice of Quaker worship can bring together very diverse people who, in obedience to the inward teacher, are led to a shared, if sometimes inarticulate, understanding.

Baptism

3.19 We welcome the recognition of our position expressed in the paper under headings (f) and (g). We understand our position to be based biblically on such passages as Mk. 1:8, Acts 8:16 and 10:47. In these, and other, passages, it is

evident that it is baptism with the Spirit that is seen as creating the community and entry into new life. The baptism of the Spirit may be confirmed by water baptism, but baptism by water in the absence of baptism in the Spirit is clearly not a proper baptism. Has the serious challenge which our position poses to the other churches yet been recognised? Were it to be recognised, could this help with other ecumenical problems? If water baptism is not our basic bond of unity, then what is? Surely, it can only be the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, in which case it is our duty and our joy to seek to recognise and to encourage the work of the Spirit in each others lives, whether formally members of the church or not. If we see the baptism of the Spirit in the transformation of the Spirit working in our lives, how do the other churches understand Spirit baptism?

3.20 Nevertheless, we can see the value that the other churches find in the practice of water baptism. In that practice we see a symbol of the equality of all members of the Church, since all are equally baptised. As such, it loses its power if it is not grounded in the reality of the life of the church. We see also the value of a public ceremony incorporating a declaration of faith, or pledge of allegiance to the agenda of God, acting as a reminder to the whole congregation. We can recognise the parallels in our own practice, but, again, are reminded not to invest too heavily in any one such sign.

Eucharist

3.21 With respect to the discussion of the Eucharist, we find in our own experience that the presence of Christ in the Church does not depend on a Eucharistic ritual, but rather in being "gathered in my name" (Matt. 18:20). The origins of the Eucharist in table fellowship extended to all leads us to question whether the practice of Eucharistic rituals has become a means of excluding some from the community of God's people. Sadly, too often, it functions rather as a symbol of division than of unity. It is regrettable that Jesus' practice of the widest and most inclusive hospitality should have been thus reduced to a practice of exclusivity.

3.22 We find helpful the comment in paragraph 81 that "God's judgement demands that our behaviour be consistent with the reconciling presence of God in human history." We therefore welcome the challenge posed by Eucharistic practice to live justly and share equably. We note, however, that this challenge can be found equally in other aspects of the Church's life. The "Our Father", in which the believer is adopted into the family of God also functions in this way.

3.23 We question whether there is really a need for a growth in understanding between the churches, as opposed to greater humility and discernment. In this light, we ask whether it is time for the churches to cease their concentration on the Eucharist and to focus rather on a consideration of those practices that can be shared?

Ordained ministry

3.24 We start from an understanding that ministry is a function of all the faithful. Each of us is called to witness as best we can to the reality of God's order. In our tradition since Christ is the only true priest, prophet and teacher, then such functions are not the exclusive preserve of any individual or group. The Quaker experience that anyone may be a channel for the Spirit of God leads to a recognition that each member of the meeting has a responsibility to exercise ministries according to their gifts and call.

3.25 In this regard, we regret that Faith and Order Paper 198 omits the understanding of the ordained ministry as being "under" the people of God. In our own practice, our functional ministries are undertaken as a service under the discipline of the whole Meeting. We note that the model of leadership practised by Jesus, most clearly in the washing of his disciples' feet, is often barely recognisable in the institutions of ordination maintained by churches.

3.26 We would see the practice of ordination as a means by which the other churches seek to make individuals accountable to the church. This has led us to reflect on the means by which Quakers understand the accountability of all members of the Church to one another and to God for each other. We recognise that there is a place for particular individuals to be called to particular tasks, though believing that they may also be called to lay down those tasks and to take on others. However, we see that the crucial issue is the turning to God recognised by the

other churches in their baptismal rituals, and cannot accept that there is a further special status for those called to exercise particular responsibilities for a time.

Episkopé, bishops and apostolic succession

3.27 The primary administrative units of our Society, the Area Meetings, exercise oversight of their members, which can be through the appointment of elders and overseers, while the yearly meeting exercises a ministry of oversight through the publication of our *Discipline*. Elders and Overseers act corporately in the exercise of this ministry, and it is our belief that the emphasis given to individual episcopacy detracts from the sense that apostolic succession belongs to the whole Church.

Conciliarity and universal primacy

3.28 We note that the pattern of leadership under the presidency of Christ attested to in the New Testament is not one based in the power of particular individuals. Rather, we believe, leadership is dispersed, with different functions performed by different individuals at different times to enable the community to respond to Christ. We would particularly urge a re-examination of the role of Peter as a model for leadership, since it is clear from the witness of the gospels that he was far from constant in faith. Very often, it is the nameless who emerge as the true leaders (Cf. Mk. 14:8-10). Amongst Jesus' followers, it is the women who were true disciples, present at the crucifixion and witnesses to the resurrection. The

"Twelve" are depicted as having betrayed, denied and failed to live out the Gospel.

3.29 Do the churches need to learn again that the security of their 'house' is not given by the strength of its earthly foundations but by God alone? It may be that particular institutions, even the visible church as a whole, might be lost. Yet God's grace would continue.

4. Response to the Questions

4.1 With respect to the questions raised in paragraph 8 inviting specific response, we would, in general, make the same responses as in our previous statement.

Does this study document correctly identify our common ecclesiological convictions and differences?

4.2 We would argue that the document does not say enough about the invisible church and the relationship of God with all humanity, including those in other faiths. Further to paragraphs 37 and 38 of our previous response, we have recognised that the challenge to us of convergence has been to recognise God at work in traditions that we have rejected.

Does this study document reflect an emerging convergence on the nature and mission of the Church?

4.3 We would argue that the document neglects the idea of *living* Gospel. The ecumenical process is only valuable if it helps with the development of relationships and the reconciliation of the estranged.

Are there significant matters in which the concerns of your church are not adequately addressed?

4.4 We have identified throughout section 3 matters where we believe our concerns might receive fuller consideration. These include:

a. To what witness are the churches currently called?
b. How do we discern what features of the life of the churches have ceased to embody God's agenda?
c. What in the structures and practices of our churches is temporary, and what is of God's eternal reign?
d. What is the eternal basis of the unity of the faithful?
e. What is the nature of baptism in the Spirit?
f. Is it time for the churches to cease their concentration on the Eucharist and to focus rather on a consideration of those practices that can be shared?
g. Can we name and appreciate the gifts we receive from one another?
h. We are concerned also that the mission of the church remains strangely elusive within the Faith and Order paper. What is the mission of the church? What is it that the church is called to do that no-one else can do?
i. How might the ecumenical endeavour look if we sought a visible unity based on love, rather than intellectual agreement?

How can this study document help your church, together with others, take concrete steps towards unity?

4.5 We note that paragraph 123 of Faith and order paper 198 claims that "if the churches were able to agree together to a convergence statement on the Church, this would further significantly the process of mutual recognition on the way to reconciliation and visible unity." We would have to respond that for us, mutual recognition and reconciliation

must come first. We can have no part in professing a converged statement that is not grounded in the lived experience of the churches. We would suggest that documents such as this should be a reflection of a conversation, rather than an attempt to achieve a definitive statement. We fear that the convergence approach tends to sideline less powerful voices. We are minded to ask, what would happen if the document began from the concerns of such smaller voices, rather than starting with the issues which separate the larger churches?

4.6 We have recognised other churches as each, in its own way, being a visible sign of God at work in the world, each showing a measure of faithfulness in its life to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and each being a place where the Risen Christ can be met. Can the other churches similarly recognise this in us and each other? And if they can, what more would be required by the ecumenical movement?

What suggestions would you make for future development of this text?

4.7 In our previous response, we raised several questions that have not yet been addressed by the Faith and order consultation:

a. How do we recognise the Holy Spirit at work in each church?

b. How is Christian witness manifest in each church's life?

c. How is membership of the visible church recognised and made manifest amongst you?

d. How do you express your faith and how do you find the words to state eternal truth in new words to new times?

e. How do you ensure that gifts and ministries are recognised and used for building up the church and serving the world?

f. How does your worship bring you into the life of Christ and empower you to live in the life of the Holy Spirit as you carry out God's will?

g. How do we recognise the invisible church? And how do we understand the relationship between the visible church and God at work in the world?

h. How do we recognise God at work in other faiths? And how do we envisage extending our ecumenical understanding and relationships to include members of other faiths?

4.8 We suggest that if the future development of the text focused on discerning through questions such as the ones raised throughout this section, how God's agenda is made manifest in the life of the various churches, and how we should distinguish between those features that are of God's reign and those that are but interim, the ecumenical impulse might be better served.

4.9 We suggest also that it may be time for a new development of the ecumenical agenda, one which for a time lays aside the concentration on the traditional areas of difference and difficulty and which tries instead to hear each church's experience of the empowerment of the Holy

Spirit, of the embodiment of God's love, of the presence of Christ in the midst, and of the call to mission and service which guides its life.

4.10 In 1659 Isaac Penington[8] wrote,

> Even in the apostles' days Christians were too apt to strive after wrong unity and uniformity in outward practices and observations, and to judge one another unrighteously in those things……
>
> And oh, how sweet and pleasant it is to the truly spiritual eye to see several sorts of believers, several forms of Christians in the school of Christ, every one learning their own lesson, performing their own peculiar service, and knowing, owning and loving one another in their several places and different performances to their Master, to whom they are to give an account…… For this is the true ground of love and unity, not that such a man walks and does just as I do, but because I feel the same Spirit and life in him.

4.11 We pray that God will guide and bless the work of Faith and Order as it seeks the way forward.

Signed on behalf of the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations of Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

Janet Scott, Clerk

March, 2009

Notes

1 Britain Yearly Meeting (Society of Friends). Committee on Christian and Interfaith Relations. – *Response by the Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations to WCC Faith & Order paper no. 181,* The nature & purpose of the church, *in, From Friends, with love : a sequel to* The challenge of ecumenism for Friends : papers produced at the turn of the twenty-first century to explain to other churches and other yearly meetings British Friends' understanding of their Quaker identity, especially in relation to ecumenism and the church : book 2. – [London] : Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations, [2004]. – p. 18-32.

2 Following a decision of Britain Yearly Meeting in 2007, now 'Area Meetings'.

3 *Advices and Queries* 1.02.7, in Britain Yearly Meeting, *Quaker faith and Practice:The book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain,* 1995

4 Palmer, Parker J. – *To know as we are known*. – San Francisco : Harper & Row, 1983. – p. 69.

5 Story, Thomas. – *Discourse at Horslydown*. – 1737. – Quoted in, Britain Yearly Meeting, *Quaker faith & practice :* op. cit. - §27.12.

6 Barclay, Robert. – *Apology for the true Christian divinity*, prop. 11, sect. 7. – London ed. – 1678. – p. 240.

7 North Carolina Yearly Meeting of Friends (Conservative : 1904-). – *Discipline of the North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) of the Religious Society of Friends.* – [Woodland, N.C.? : North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) of the Religious Society of Friends], 1974.

8 Repr in Penington, *Works,* 1681, pp 240 and in *Quaker Faith and Practice,* op.cit. 27.13

Further copies and a large print version of this resource are available from the address below.

A leaflet from the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR)

QCCIR can provide advice and support to Quakers and Meetings who want to broaden and deepen their encounters with other churches and faiths.

Contact:
QCCIR c/o Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ
Email: marigoldb@quaker.org.uk
Telephone: 020 7663 1060
www.quaker.org.uk/qccir

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