

**The Jamaica Baptist Union (JBU) Response**  
**to**  
**WCC Faith and Order Convergence Paper No. 214**  
***The Church: Towards a Common Vision***

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1. The Jamaica Baptist Union (JBU) through its Faith and Order Commission (F&OC) offers a formal response to the World Council of Churches' publication: "The Church-Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV- F&O Paper 214)" as part of our commitment to the ongoing ecumenical work being done and as part of our ecclesial understanding of the nature and mission of the church both local and universal. We consider it a privilege to join with others in the faith in shaping a common understanding of the visible unity of the church to which we are all called. The JBU wishes to affirm areas of common understanding and seek for greater discussion on selected areas of our common work and witness. We view this document as both instructive and challenging, as it calls for renewal in our expressions and embrace of the other, in order to give the visible unity for which Jesus prayed.
  
2. We concur with the statement that, "agreement on ecclesiology has long been identified as the most elemental theological objective in the quest for Christian unity" (TCTCV, p. viii). Hence, we laud the efforts of the WCC F&OC in its attempt to bridge this gap by calling the church to visible unity. As part of the church universal and in our quest for visible unity we approach this process with the understanding that "the Holy Spirit enables the church to hear the Scriptures afresh and so to be renewed in every generation." (Baptist World Alliance, 1999, p.24)<sup>1</sup> It is our understanding that as the Scriptures are heard afresh and guided by the Spirit the church will constantly be renewed. As such, the Baptist church, together with other churches, must open herself to listen to the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit in our generation.
  
3. In this response, we seek to summarize the main points of interest in each chapter and offer brief comments from the perspective of the Jamaica Baptist Union comprising over 330 churches in Jamaica and Haiti. Our formal response is made with the

intention to contribute positively to the ongoing discernment of the nature and mission of the church as we seek a common vision/visible unity.

#### **4. Chapter one: God's Mission and the Unity of the Church**

- a. We commend the approach taken in the paper as chapter one broken into three sections focuses on: (A) The Church in the Design of God, (B) The Mission of the Church in History, (C) The Importance of Unity.
  
- b. The JBU joins in affirming that "the mission of the church is rooted in a vision of God's great design ('or economy') for all creation: the 'kingdom' which was both promised and manifested in Jesus Christ." (1)<sup>2</sup> We further agree that the church was called to be a community of, "witness," "worship," and "discipleship." (2) We concur that the "origin of the church is rooted in the plan of the Triune God for humankind's salvation." (3) and that "the mission of the church ensues from the nature of the church as the body of Christ, sharing in the ministry of Christ as mediator between God and his creation." (4) Additionally, we acknowledge the unique "challenge for the church to proclaim the Gospel of Christ in a way that awakens a response in the different contexts, languages and cultures of the people who hear that proclamation." (6) The churches of the Jamaican Baptist Union are intimately aware of the unique challenge raised in paragraph (6) of the paper, given our history of enslavement and colonization, and have much to reflect and share from our varied experiences on our journey to self-understanding.
  
- c. The challenge to the church's mission and self-understanding that chapter one outlines are issues that as churches of the Jamaican Baptist Union we struggle with among ourselves and within our varied ecumenical groupings. The issues such as "religious pluralism," "communication," "emerging churches," "global secular culture," as well as "relevance" have not escaped us. They prompt us to ongoing introspection and call us to hear afresh the Spirit and the Scripture as we proclaim the Kingdom of God. Coupled with this is the inability of some

churches within ecumenical groupings or outside to “recognize in one another the authentic presence of what the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople (381) calls the “one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church.” (9) This inability amongst us and others have not served the work and witness of the church in Jamaica or across the world very well and is a contributing factor to the issues raised in (7) and (6). If there is to be a visible unity the church must come to a renewed understanding of who we are as “Members of the body of Christ” and be willing to walk the journey together. The JBU continues to remain open to the Spirit as we seek for greater self-understanding and to find ways to embrace others as they embrace us.

## **5. Chapter Two: The Church of the Triune God**

- a. This chapter which comprises the larger section of the paper invites us to reflect on: (A) Discerning God’s Will for the Church, (B) The Church of the Triune God as Koinonia, (C) The Church as Sign and Servant of God’s Design for the World, (D) Communion in Unity and Diversity, and (E) Communion of Local Churches. Throughout this chapter the paper seeks to lay the foundation for the church as communion and how Scripture and tradition guide the church in her self-understanding on issues of Faith, and her expressions/ structure with regard to Order. While the church has agreed on the normative nature of Scripture, and as the JBU we affirm the authority of Scripture in all matters of faith and practice, we hold that there is still room for us to reflect as the JBU on the “living tradition” and its value to faith and practice. However, we hold that tradition must be subjected to the Spirit of Scripture. Nevertheless, we are open to embrace others who differ in their self-understanding and do not see this as a major obstacle towards visible unity.
  
- b. Given our struggles as Baptists throughout the Reformation and later colonization, as the JBU in particular we affirm together with other Christians that “legitimate diversity is not accidental to the life of the Christian community...but an aspect of our catholicity...and that salvation is incarnational.” (12) However,

legitimate diversity must find root in the image and mission of God in Jesus Christ. Hence, we do not dismiss diversity within the communion but see diversity as an expression of Koinonia into which we are all called.

- c. We concur that the church is a “divinely established communion” and it is into this “Koinonia” that the church finds her common understanding and life. Therefore, the church is and ought to be a reflection of the Triune God who calls her into the divine “Koinonia“. The church in communion “does not belong to herself and does not exist for itself...hence the church by nature is missionary” (13).The visible unity of the church that we seek is manifested in “the proclamation of the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.” (14)
- d. In the Koinonia we affirm, “that the whole people of God is called to be prophetic people...a priestly people, offering the sacrifice of a life lived in discipleship and a royal people serving as instruments for the establishment of God’s reign;” (19) and that “all members of the body, ordained and lay are interrelated members of God’s priestly people”...and that “Faith in Christ is fundamental to membership of the body.” (21)This is critical to our self understanding as Baptists and is very much reflected in our expression of Faith and Order. For us as the JBU, Koinonia is grounded in faith in the Triune God, and lived out in a community of priestly and royal people.
- e. We also concur with the understanding expressed in (31) “each local church contains within it the fullness of what it is to be church; it is wholly church, but not the whole church.” Upon this premise the JBU understands and orders ministry. Therefore, the autonomy of the local church does not preclude her from the wider communion. The fullness of God’s mission will be made manifest when the church sees itself as part of the universal Koinonia/church of Jesus Christ scattered in various places and forms.

- f. From our history we have witnessed firsthand how cultural and other differences have divided the church and how this has served to undermine the unity we seek. The scattered church must be allowed to experience and express her self-understanding of God in her varied cultures and languages and we acknowledge that no cultural expression is more authentic than the other. As Baptists we continue to affirm that the local church is autonomous under the authority of Jesus Christ and that authority resides within the collective voice under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. While we acknowledge other groups with varied structures/understanding we hold that all authority is entrusted, not inherent or intrinsic. Yet the church in her common mission may need to see this as part of her diversity and a means of learning from the others.

## **6. Chapter Three- The Church: Growing in Communion**

- a. Chapter three invites us to reflect on (A) Already but not Yet, and (B) Growing in the Essential Elements of Communion: Faith, Sacrament, Ministry. The focus under these headings has been some of the most controversial and divisive for the church. We are once again reminded that “the church exists in two forms the already and not yet, in that the church is an eschatological reality, anticipating the fullness of the kingdom but living in the reality of present.” Hence, the church can rightly be characterized as “a pilgrim community contending with the reality of sin.” (35) We wish to note that for us as Baptists referring to the church as sinning does not take away from her holiness as sin relates to the human condition and holiness to the divine. Holiness we agree “expresses the church’s identity as the Body of Christ...while sin stands in contradiction to this identity.” (36) And even “though sin is contradictory to the true identity of the church it is real.”(35).
- b. Given the convergences on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, there is no need to explore these issues in-depth. We confess that as Baptists we have made great strides in our self understanding and our embrace of others. Notwithstanding, there lingers the debate amongst us with regard to sacrament vs ordinance. This

document calls for us to clarify more explicitly our self-understanding on this issue, as at present both expressions are used. We engage in two ordinances, Baptism and The Lord's Supper and do so in obedience to Christ's word and example. However, there maybe the need for us to reflect together on how we view and engage others who perform other rites as we move towards a fuller mutual understanding.

- c. The document outlines that the ministry within the local church and the ecumenical community struggles with the acceptance of the ordained ministry as some "do not consider ordained ministers as "priests" nor do some understand ordination in sacramental terms." (45) "There is also disagreement over the traditional restriction of ordination to the ministry of word and sacrament to men only." (45) However, "the New Testament offers us no single pattern in how ordained ministry is to be understood, ordered and exercised." (46). And as such, the debate surrounding the threefold pattern of ministry "episkopos-presbuteros-diakonos" continues to be divisive. The JBU must continue to wrestle with our understanding and seek for unity amidst the plurality of understandings, given that the New Testament did not outline a single pattern but offers a range of patterns for the believing community. The issue then becomes, can we see God at work in the varied approaches to ministry and affirm same in each other?
- d. The above issue draws us into the debate on authority within the church. We acknowledge and affirm that the church's authority comes from the head-Jesus Christ. Notwithstanding, we understand the debate with regards to the different sources of authority and the weight to be accorded to each. In light of this, we concur with the statement that "Authority within the church must be understood as humble service, nourishing, and building up the Koinonia of the church in faith, life and witness...it is service (diakonia) of love, without any domination or coercion." (49) And those who seek to draw from or exercise the various sources of authority must be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We like other

Christians, acknowledge that all authority is entrusted through the people and not inherent.

- e. On the issue of the ministry of oversight (episkope) we hold the view that, “each member of the Body of Christ, by virtue of baptism, has his or her place and proper responsibility in the communion of the church. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the whole church is synodal/conciliar, at all levels of ecclesial life.” (53) While we do appreciate that churches share varied views and structure on this issue, this does not warrant a disregard for the other. What is critical in our quest for visible unity is a common understanding of Christ as head of the Church who offers leadership through the power of Holy Spirit and therefore the church is always called, no matter the order/structure to open herself to the leadership of Christ through the Spirit.

## **7. Chapter Four- The Church: In and for the World**

- a. The final chapter focuses on (A) God’s plan for creation- the kingdom (B) The moral challenge of the Gospel, and (C) The Church in Society. The need for us to reaffirm an understanding of the church’s mission as outlined is vital to our visible unity- our mission is “to proclaim in word and deed the Good News of Salvation in Jesus Christ.” (59) Further, we welcome the call to see evangelization as constitutive of justice and peace. Given the religious pluralism which exists and the claims of salvation outside of belief in Jesus Christ, we as Baptists hold to the teaching that salvation is found in Jesus, and while we are called to evangelize, evangelism must be done in a manner of respect and love.
- b. We agree that current happenings/developments have led the church to reflect on issues of morality. This debate has not always served the church well and has been and continues to be a source of division regarding “what principles of personal or collective morality are in harmony with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” (63)

- c. We affirm that the church in society is impelled to “work for a just social order, in which the goods of this earth may be shared equitably.” (64)

## **RESPONSE TO GENERAL QUESTIONS:**

### **8. To what extent does this text reflect the ecclesiological understanding of your church?**

- a. The Jamaica Baptist Union takes the position that “the church is a community of professing believers who have found new life through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.” (Baptist World Alliance, 1999 p.3)<sup>3</sup> Our self-understanding as Baptists is generally in line with the views expressed in this paper. Even though there are differences in our emphasis in some areas, we see these as legitimate diversity based on doctrinal constructs while we remain united in the mission of Christ in the world. We hold that the church of Jesus consists of the called up, called out and calling assembly. Therefore, we are the body of Christ and members of each other connected and affected by the other. We concur with St. Augustine, “in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things charity.” And while we often spend much time debating the non-essentials, the church through this document is being called to find unity in the essentials grounded in the mission of Jesus and his love.

### **9. To what extent does this text offer a basis for growth in unity among the churches?**

- a. The paper both affirms and challenges the local church in her self-understanding. It calls the church to see and embrace the fullness of her being the people of God scattered throughout the world, diverse in structure and expression yet one in her faith and mission. It is to this visible unity of oneness that the church is being challenged to grow and that growth/movement begins with the local church.
- b. In a world where ecumenism is on the decline and where other groupings have become suspicious of main-line churches there is the need for us to re-examine our approach to ecumenical dialogue. The churches of the JBU and across the world must engage in introspection to determine whether there is a need to

redefine ecumenism and how it is organized. Recounting our history, we are of the view that the visible unity we seek for the church must emerge from what we call grass roots ecumenism, and while we commend the work of WCC and other such organizations, the work of ecumenism must be from the bottom up. It therefore means that as Baptists we must encourage our congregations to become part of this grass roots ecumenism where churches in communities work together by, and under, the power of the Spirit of God to effect the mission of Jesus in the world.

- c. Further to this we are called to pause and examine critically issues of diversity. Are our diversities and distinctives legitimate when they lead to Christianity based on denominational affiliation rather than the mission of God? Through this document, we are forced to ask ourselves as Baptists if the distinctives that served us coming out of the Reformation continue to serve the same cause in light of our present realities or are they only hindrances to greater unity? Is there need for us hear the Scriptures and Spirit afresh within our generation so as to once again advance the work and witness of Jesus Christ?

**10. What adaptations or renewal in the life of your church does this statement challenge your church to work for?**

- a. The churches of the Jamaica Baptist Union still see themselves as a group of believers on a journey to greater self-understanding and expression. As such there are and will continue to be areas for adaptation and renewal in the life of the church. As Baptists there is need for us to see that our self-understanding is not the only expression of legitimate diversity and that we must seek at all times to affirm and embrace others who work and witness in the cause of Jesus Christ. There will also be the need for us to strengthen our efforts to engage other Baptist groups locally and to have conversations with other indigenous churches as we find ways to serve together. Steps in that direction have been taken with the resuscitation last year of our local Fellowship of Baptists (a forum that involves Baptist groupings outside of the JBU); and, more recently the

establishment of bilateral relationships with the Pentecostal City Mission – an indigenous church founded in the 1920s.

**11. How far is your church able to form closer relationships in life and mission with those churches which can acknowledge in a positive way the account of the church described in this statement?**

- a. The JBU throughout its history has sought and continues to seek out ways to facilitate and engage in ecumenical discussions and understanding through our work with the Jamaica Council of Churches, regional groupings as well as international organizations. It is our belief that our faith in Christ compels us to seek visible expression of the Koinonia and as such we aspire to same.

**12. What aspect of the life of the church could call for further discussion and what advice could your church offer for ongoing work by Faith and Order in the area of ecclesiology?**

- a. In light of recent trends the following areas warrant further discussion as they offer the greatest challenge to the visible unity of the church. These include: issues relating to legitimate diversity, religious pluralism which offers other means of salvation, as well as the moral challenge of the gospel and its implications.
- b. There is need for a continuous reflection on the human construct of denominationalism. We once again reiterate that while denominationalism offers distinctives and diversity it also comes with the challenge of putting one over or against the other. The visible unity that we seek must continue to challenge us to guard against any human construct that seeks to facilitate disunity within the church. We take note of the current trends among the emerging churches which are “down-playing” denominationalism. The emerging churches offer us a perspective for deeper reflection as they are increasingly finding a new sense of unity through mission and crisis. There may be need for us to re-examine our approach and begin to see mission, as outlined in this document, as the means and the expression of the unity of the

church, where the greatest unity is found in the midst of the everyday reality/crisis of a people.

- c. The journey towards visible unity calls us to see theological education as a vehicle that can facilitate this process. Theological education within the Caribbean enables mutual interaction but also sees the insertion of denominationalism which militates against unity. There is need for the church to show in deeper ways our common identity and seminaries offer opportunities to stimulate, promote and model the visible unity of the Church.
- d. As we seek to engage with each other through the WCC there is need for the church to reflect on current geo-political and global realities and the implications for the church. Christianity which was exported from traditional centres of main-line denominations is experiencing a shift as there is a move away from these traditional centres/ groupings. This shift is driven by renewed self-understanding and contextual realities which have nothing to do with denomination. The move suggests people are coming together to address their realities. Therefore, denominationalism continues to lose its place in the midst of oppression and injustice, which have no colour or creed. Contextual realities are fostering the breaking down of denominational barriers. This demands that the church affirm the place of distinctives but never allow distinctives to discount the one common mission shared by all, that is, the mission of Jesus Christ.

### **13. Conclusion**

- a. The WCC through this engagement does acknowledge that the “the unity of the body of Christ consists in the Koinonia, which is manifested in three interrelated ways: unity in faith, unity in sacramental life, and unity in service.” (67) While we acknowledge that “the liturgy of the celebration of the Eucharist serves as dynamic paradigm for what Koinonia looks like in the present age,” it is important that greater focus be given to Koinonia as unity in service witnessed in

this document. It is in this area that the church finds greatest consensus and one that offers us the opportunity for visible unity. Issues relating to the Sacramental life will continue to hit the walls of long standing doctrinal positions and be legitimized as diversity. Therefore it calls for us to see again Jesus offering himself fully to a group of diverse disciples gathered in the upper room. The church is being called again to wait together, as God through Jesus pours upon us afresh his vision for the mission. The church must engage the process opening herself to the Spirit and listening afresh to Scripture. It therefore means a willingness to open traditions, creeds and other doctrinal understandings to the voice of the Spirit and Scripture as we seek to be faithful to God in our present age.

### Notes

- 1 Baptist World Alliance (Study and Research Division) *We Baptists*, 1999.
- 2 The numerals in brackets throughout this response refer to the numbered paragraphs in the paper: *The Church Towards a Common Vision* (TCTCV-F&O Paper 214), from which the referenced citations have been made.
- 3 Op. cit.