

# The Work of Faith and Order Thirty Years after BEM: Perspectives on Reception; Perspectives for the Future.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Something unexpected happened at the 2009 meeting of the Faith and Order Plenary Commission. A panel discussion on *The Nature and Mission of the Church* included a Syrian Orthodox bishop from India, HE Metropolitan Geevarghese Mar Coorilos, who is also the moderator of the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism. He gave an appreciative critique of the text, but in the end, posed a profound challenge to its methodology, and to that of Faith and Order work in general:

One of the fundamental ecclesiological assertions that the NMC makes is that “the Church is centred and grounded in the word of God...it is the word of God made flesh: Jesus Christ incarnate, crucified and risen”. It could be deduced from this statement that the Church, in real terms, is the approximation of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ, an extension of “the Word becoming flesh and pitching the tent among the people” (Jn.1:14). This incarnational aspect of ecclesiology and therefore of mission is not adequately explicated in the text. Differently put, the real lacunae of the document lies in the fact that the words of the text are not embodied and incarnated among “the tent dwellers” of our times, the dispossessed and the disempowered. Let us remind ourselves, in this context, yet again, of the challenge the younger theologians at Kuala Lumpur posed to the Faith and Order Work of the WCC, that “these formulations would go to waste if they were not integrated into the realities of our lives.”

What I found truly extraordinary were not the metropolitan's remarks—I have heard him speak before—but the response of the Plenary Commission. His presentation was greeted by a four minute ovation. In the discussion that followed, one of the senior members of the commission announced that whether he liked it or not, Faith and Order work on ecclesiology had entered a new phase.

This anecdote has seemingly little to do with *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, or with perspectives on the reception. Yet at another level, it has everything to do with BEM, reception, and the future work of Faith and Order.

## Reception:

Reception is an increasingly important topic in ecumenical theology. Beyond simply a canonical or synodical judgement on an ecumenical text—as integral to the process though that may be—current understandings of reception are much broader and more organic, involving the life of the churches in a receptive process.

Such an understanding is evident in the definition of reception that comes from the 2005 Eighth Report of the Joint Working Group of the Catholic Church and the World Council of

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<sup>1</sup> Properly speaking the title of this paper ought to be 29 years after BEM, since 1982 marks the year the Commission on Faith and Order declared its work on the text to represent a convergence.

Churches. In its reflection on “The Nature and Purpose of Ecumenical Dialogue,” the JWG states:

Reception is the process by which the churches make their own the results of all their encounters with one another, and in a particular way the convergences and agreements reached on issues over which they have historically been divided. As the report of the sixth forum on bilateral dialogues notes: “Reception is an integral part of the movement towards that full communion which is realised when ‘all the churches are able to recognise in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness’.” Thus reception is far more than the official responses to the dialogue results, although official responses are essential. However, even though they are not concerned with the full range of interchurch relations, the results of the international theological dialogues are a crucial aspect of reception, as specific attempts to overcome what divides churches and impeded the unity willed by our Lord.<sup>2</sup>

While the JWG’s understanding of reception is broad, it does recognise the specific and indispensable place of the reception of doctrinal convergences and agreements in terms of official responses.

A concurrent but slightly different definition of reception comes from the 2006 Agreed Statement of the International Commission on Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue, *The Church of the Triune God*:

Reception has become a basic theological concept in the modern ecumenical movement. But whereas the classical idea of reception assumed a united Church with known and agreed organs of reception, Christians now hold different views about how reception operates. Yet the divided churches are being called not only to receive from one another but also to receive one another. This raises fundamental ecclesiological questions, since in the context the highest degree of reception is not doctrinal agreement but mutual recognition. Ecumenically, reception is coming to be seen as a process, guided by the Holy Spirit, in which churches are called to acknowledge elements of sanctification and truth in one another. This implies that they are being called to recognise in one another elements of Christ’s Church. Reception in this sense is a difficult and complex process, which does not replace the classical view of reception but builds upon it.<sup>3</sup>

And lastly, the recent statement from the Ninth Forum on Bilateral Dialogue in March of 2008 in Breklum, Germany, said the following about reception:

We believe that it would be profitable to keep in mind right from the beginning of any phase of dialogue the reception of its results. As each dialogue is in some way a “learning process,” each needs to consider how this learning process may be shared with the wider membership of the two communities involved.

Only an abiding commitment to the ecclesial reception of ecumenical texts can allow these statements of convergence or consensus to have a reconciling and transforming effect in the life of our churches.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “The Nature and Purpose of Ecumenical Dialogue” in the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, *Eighth Report* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), pp. 82-83.

<sup>3</sup> *The Church of the Triune God: The Cyprus statement of the International Commission for Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue 2006* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 2006), pp. 97-98.

<sup>4</sup> “The Breklum Statement” of the Ninth Forum on Bilateral Dialogue, Recommendation 2, <http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p2/breklum-statement.pdf>

## **Reception of the ecumenical movement:**

The reception of any particular text of agreement, consensus or convergence from a multilateral or bilateral dialogue, such as BEM, needs to be seen within the widest perspective on the reception of the ecumenical movement as a whole.

Since the early 1980s it has been fashionable to speak of the “winter of ecumenism.” Is the ecumenical climate really so wintry? Or perhaps have we become so acclimatized to the current ecumenical climate that we can no longer remember the chilling relationships between the divided-churches just a few generations ago?

Mr Georges Lemompoulos, current Deputy-General Secretary of the WCC, makes the intriguing comment that the source of the current crisis of the ecumenical movement is its own success. In short, the ecumenical movement has been so successfully received into the lives of Christians and the churches, that for many of us, it is almost impossible to imagine any other way for the churches to relate to one another in contemporary Christianity.

Taking the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 as a common point of departure for the modern Ecumenical movement, it is important to remember that the eve of that event was one of ghastly relationships between the churches. In terms of inter-church relations, those days were characterized by mutual hostility, fear, suspicion, misunderstanding, and antagonism.

This was acutely clear in the mission field, where the churches and their missionary societies were often in competition with one. Around the world, missionaries actively proselytized Christians of other churches. For instance, in Latin America Protestant missionary societies understood mission to include converting Roman Catholics; in the Eastern Mediterranean from the 1820s western missionary societies understood the conversion Orthodox Christians as a legitimate consequence of their diaconal work as the Ottoman Empire receded.

Across the world, divisions within the churches were reflected within society. In my own country, Canada, for instance, from the late eighteenth century education from primary to university levels were, and in some significant instances still are, separated by religion. The same divisions between the churches were seen in hospitals and health care. Even cemeteries in Canada are distinguished from one another in terms of divided Christianity.

Whenever Christians moved from one church to another, re-baptism was often considered normative. Re-baptism is an explicit rejection of the ecclesial reality of the “convert’s” prior Christian and ecclesial identity.

Within my own lifetime, “mixed marriages”—more appropriately referred to today as “inter-church marriages”—were highly problematic, and resolved in a variety of ways, which were in and of themselves problematic, such as re-baptism.

Questions of worshipping together, let alone receiving Holy Communion together, seldom arose. Inter-church visiting rarely happened, and when it did at weddings and funerals, most Christians would not have given receiving Holy Communion a second thought. Few would have been scandalised by the breach of eucharistic communion because different ways of worship were some of the ways we defined ourselves against the others.

Because the shift from one ecumenical reality to another has taken place over generations, there is a sense of amnesia about the profound impact the ecumenical movement has played in the life of the churches. In short, it takes a massive exercise of historical imagination to begin to understand Christianity and the huge shift in relationships between Christians and their churches prior to the beginnings of the ecumenical movement in 1910. Thankfully, it is a church-world largely unrecognisable today.

That there has been a lack of enthusiasm for the ecumenical movement in recent decades is undeniable. But rather than seeing this as an ecumenical failure, it may be more helpful to see this as a profound though only a partial success, as though only about 68% of the ecumenical programme has been “downloaded into the ecclesial hard drives. Albeit it incomplete, the degree of reception of the ecumenical movement has been successful enough that the ongoing divisions which continue to distort the nature and mission of the Church are no longer a source of scandal and an impetus to unity. The *status quo* is manageable.

A feature of the winter of ecumenism is the failure to receive the insights, convergences and agreements of too many of the ecumenical theological dialogues. One of the stellar exceptions is *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Yet I will argue that BEM’s own success is part of the current crisis of reception.

### **The BEM Process:**

Until the Third World Conference on Faith and Order at Lund in 1952, the basic methodology of ecumenical dialogue was a comparative one. In the wake of new confidence with the successful union in the Church of South India in 1947, and of the creation of the World Council of Churches in 1948, the new WCC Commission on Faith and Order embarked on a new methodology. The goal of ecumenical dialogue was to articulate what the churches could say together, that is, towards a consensus or convergence methodology, proposing to the churches areas of agreement as a necessary stage on the way to unity.

The single instance of convergence text by the Commission on Faith and Order is BEM. Part of its success is due to the receptive process which guided every stage of its evolution.

The BEM process was a receptive one that did not begin in 1982, but rather in 1963. As the preface to BEM states: “The three statements are the fruit of a 50 year process of study stretching back to the first Faith and Order Conference at Lausanne in 1927.”<sup>5</sup> The first reception is the receiving of Faith and Order’s own lengthy reflection on baptism, eucharist, and ordained ministry.

Between the launching of what would become *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* in 1963, the Faith and Order sent three earlier texts of what would become BEM to the churches for response. The 1975 WCC Assembly authorized the distribution of *One Baptism, One Eucharist, and a Mutually Recognised Ministry*. Over 100 churches from around the world responded to the text; these responses were studied by the commission, and gave shape to new text that would become approved by the Faith and Order Commission in Lima in 1982, and later authorized by the 1983 WCC Assembly to be sent to the churches for ongoing response and reception. So, the second reception is between the Commission on Faith and Order and the fellowship of the churches. In a sense, the churches participating over those years in the BEM process were being prepared to receive and respond to the text from 1982.

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<sup>5</sup> BEM, preface, p. xii

A third reception is the receiving of the fruits of the bilateral dialogues which has emerged in tandem with the BEM processes from the mid-1960s. A number of prominent commission members were also members of the various bilateral dialogues.

A fourth reception was of the fruits and insights of the liturgical movement. The liturgical movement was always characterized by an ecumenical membership and readership. It is extraordinary the numbers of scholars who appear in the lists of both movements, and who were involved in the BEM process. Liturgical texts that emerged from the 1960s on Christian initiation, the Eucharist, and ordained ministry bear an ecumenical family resemblance.

### **The Reception of BEM:**

The World Council of Churches claims BEM to be the most published, translated, and examined document in the history of the Ecumenical movement. It has gone into 40 printings, most recently in September, 2010. By 1986, 186 churches replied to Faith and Order's request for official responses to it "at the highest level of authority".

These responses themselves began to signal convergences that would initiate new possibilities in the relationships between the churches.

Given the organic nature of reception, it is impossible to provide a complete accounting of how the text has been received. The partial assessment that follows nevertheless is illustrative of the successful reception process.

#### *Reception in the Bilateral Dialogues*

If the BEM process was in itself receptive of the insights of the bilateral dialogues, it is equally straightforward to track the reception of BEM in these dialogues from 1982 onwards. The following instances are from the international dialogues that contained in the Faith and Order series *Growth in Agreement II* and *III*. More important work on the reception of BEM in national, regional, and local bilateral and multilateral dialogues would give a much fuller account. Hence, the following can only be illustrative.

One of the places that made significant use of BEM, particularly the section on Ministry, was in Anglican-Lutheran dialogue. The Cold Ash report of 1983 commends BEM to both communions.<sup>6</sup> The 1986 continuation committee notes that the Anglican and Lutheran responses to BEM shed a new light on the dialogue between the churches.<sup>7</sup> The 1987 Niagara report on episcopate draws heavily on the ministry section of BEM.<sup>8</sup> The 1995 meeting of the Anglican-Lutheran dialogue was devoted to a study of the diaconate, which likewise drew heavily on the insights of BEM.<sup>9</sup> The 2002 "Growth in Communion" recalls the importance of the ministry section of BEM and its treatment of apostolicity.<sup>10</sup>

The Anglican-Methodist dialogue made use of BEM; the 1996 "Sharing in the Apostolic Communion" cited BEM frequently.<sup>11</sup> "God's Reign and Our Unity" of the Anglican-

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<sup>6</sup> *Growth in Agreement II* (GA II), pp. 5, 7.

<sup>7</sup> GA II, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> GA II, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> GA II, pp. 38, 44, 49, 50, 51, 52.

<sup>10</sup> *Growth in Agreement III* (GA III), pp. 401, 413.

<sup>11</sup> GA II, pp. 55, 65, 70, 71, 74-76.

Reformed dialogue notes the unifying role of BEM<sup>12</sup>; BEM's teaching on the Eucharist is cited<sup>13</sup> as well as on ministry.<sup>14</sup> The 1990 Baptist-Lutheran "A Message to our Churches" states that BEM is a "significant point of reference."<sup>15</sup> The 1987 Disciples-Reformed dialogue report "No Doctrinal Obstacles" cites the responses to BEM to be of significance<sup>16</sup> and drew on the section in ministry.<sup>17</sup> The 1984 Lutheran-Methodist report on "The Church: Community of Grace" notes how the convergences in this bilateral dialogue are reflected in BEM, and commends the Faith and Order text to their mutual churches.<sup>18</sup> The 1984 Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue report "Facing Unity" cites BEM on baptism<sup>19</sup> and on ministry<sup>20</sup>; there is a single reference in the 1993 "Church and Justification."<sup>21</sup> The 2001 report of the Methodist-Roman Catholic dialogue, "Speaking the Truth in Love" cites the ministry section of BEM.<sup>22</sup>

The 2005 Anglican-Baptist text *Conversations Around the World, 2000-2005* notes a particularly poignant reception of BEM in Myanmar, where the Myanmar Baptist Convention made the decision on the basis of BEM's teaching on baptism to refrain from re-baptising those coming to the Baptist Church from other traditions.<sup>23</sup> The Myanmar Baptist convention affirmed BEM as "a matter of faith as well as order."<sup>24</sup>

The 1982 fifth report of the Joint Working Group between the World Council of Churches and the Catholic Church refers to the significance of BEM in several instances.<sup>25</sup> The 1990 sixth report of the JWG notes the following:

The BEM process is probably the most significant instance for many years of rapprochement between Roman Catholics and Christians of other traditions.<sup>26</sup>

The 1998 seventh report of the JWG notes the significance is found not only the convergence reflected in BEM itself, but also of the convergences that appear in the responses of the churches.<sup>27</sup> In its 2004 report on the "Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of a Common Baptism, the JWG refers extensively to BEM on baptism.<sup>28</sup> In its report on "The Nature and Purpose of Ecumenical Dialogue", BEM is cited as the multilateral case study.<sup>29</sup> In the 2005 Eighth Report, the JWG recognises:

The importance of multilateral dialogue has been effectively illustrated by the fact that the Faith and Order convergence text *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM) has contributed

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<sup>12</sup> GA II, p. 116.

<sup>13</sup> GA II, pp. 132-33, 134.

<sup>14</sup> GA II, pp. 137, 146, 149, 150.

<sup>15</sup> GA II, p. 155.

<sup>16</sup> GA II, p. 182.

<sup>17</sup> GA II, pp. 184-85.

<sup>18</sup> GA II, p. 217.

<sup>19</sup> GA II, pp. 461-62.

<sup>20</sup> GA II, pp. 469, 474.

<sup>21</sup> GA II, p. 530.

<sup>22</sup> GA III, p. 160.

<sup>23</sup> GA III, p. 347.

<sup>24</sup> GA III, p. 336.

<sup>25</sup> GA II, pp. 833, 835, 839.

<sup>26</sup> GA II, p. 853.

<sup>27</sup> GA II, p. 917.

<sup>28</sup> GA III, pp. 559-65, 567, 569-72, 574, 577, 583.

<sup>29</sup> GA III, pp. 598-99.

significantly in various ways to reconciliation and/or new relationships between separated churches.<sup>30</sup>

While it is remarkable where BEM has been cited, and received to some degree or another, in the international dialogues from 1982-2005, there are whole series of bilateral dialogues that do not specifically make any reference to it, even though many members of these bilateral dialogues were also members of the Commission on Faith and Order. There is no reference to BEM in the bilateral dialogues of the Old Catholic Church, even where questions of baptism, eucharist, and ordained ministry are raised. The same is true for the many bilateral dialogues between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches. It must be acknowledged, though, that many of the Orthodox dialogues with each other and with the Western churches touched on issues of fundamental theology such as the Trinity and Christology. The reception of BEM in the bilateral dialogues seems to be of particular interest to Anglicans, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics in their dialogues with each other, and with other ecumenical partners.<sup>31</sup> Yet it would not be fair to limit the reception of BEM to the more “high” Western ecclesiological traditions.

In addition to the official responses to BEM, and the instances where elements of the text have been used in the bilateral dialogues, is in its effects on the life of the churches that BEM is most powerfully received by the churches. Unlike the 186 official responses to BEM, and its 40 printings, this level of reception is impossible to measure. Again, the following practical instances of reception of the three major sections of BEM are merely.

### *Baptism*

An important way in which BEM has been received is in the area of Christian initiation, specifically a common understanding of Baptism as a basic bond of unity among Christians. The responses signalled a common understanding of BEM that made re-baptism much less frequent, and marked a significant stage toward the recognition of a shared Christian and ecclesial identity, and with it the recovery of baptismal unity as central to the ecumenical agenda.<sup>32</sup>

In many churches baptismal practice was renewed because of BEM’s accent on baptism as the sacrament of faith, intrinsically rooted within the Church, the community of faith. My own context in the Anglican Church of Canada, for instance, was much altered by the challenge posed in the text about the “indiscriminate” way infant baptism was practiced in large European and North American majority churches. Many churches received this criticism of indiscriminate baptism and initiated programs of baptismal preparation, and a renewed insistence on baptism as the sacrament of initiation into the Christian community. As well, other traditions ceased the practice of indiscriminate re-baptism.

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<sup>30</sup> GA III, p 513.

<sup>31</sup> For instance, Mary Tanner has written: “There can be no doubt that, from the perspective of the Church of England, BEM has been a crucially important—if not the most important—ecumenical document of the ecumenical century.” In, “The Effects of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* on the Church of England” in Thomas F. Best and Tamara Grdzeldze, eds., *BEM at 25* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007), p. 140.

<sup>32</sup> A summary of BEM’s influence on baptismal theology and practice is found in the Joint Working Group’s eighth report entitled “Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of a Common Baptism: A JWG Study” (2005).

In different regions and countries around the world today, there are many examples of churches agreeing to recognise one another's baptisms, including the use of a common baptismal certificate. This development since 1982 may rightly be identified as a practical reception of BEM.

BEM's teaching baptism has been re-received by Commission on Faith and Order in its recent 2011 study-text, *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition* (Faith and Order Paper No. 210).

### *Eucharist*

Many Christians will never read BEM, but they have prayed the text when they gather for celebrations of the Eucharist. The reception of BEM's teaching on the Eucharist is reflected in the newer families of Western eucharistic rites emerging in the liturgical movement from the 1960s, 70s, 80s, and beyond. The recovery of ancient texts and practices gave rise to a common "shape" of the liturgy, and the renewal of the Eucharistic prayer particularly from anaphoral tradition of Eastern Christianity, have had significant ecumenical impact. Of particular significance to ecumenical dialogue have been the recovery of the *anamnesis* and *epiclesis* in the Eucharistic prayer, and the subsequent healing of many of the historic Western divisions around eucharistic sacrifice and the eucharistic presence of Christ.

BEM's teaching on the Eucharist marks a major achievement in ecumenical theology on some of the most conflict-ridden issues of the sixteenth century. As Horton Davies has observed:

The present relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican and Lutheran and Reformed churches is so changed, at least among the liturgical leaders of the churches, that it seems as if the sixteenth-century battle between the proponents of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation has not only been forgotten but also buried, and buried deep.<sup>33</sup>

The remarkable feature of this expression of ecumenical reception is that it belongs not to professional ecumenists and church leaders, but is received by all who pray liturgically, and recognised by those who worship ecumenically. Because a liturgically-grounded reception of BEM is so grass-roots, it can easily be taken for granted. But consider the experience of the countless Christians who worship with communities of other traditions, either at Sunday celebrations of the eucharist, or at the rites of Christian Initiation, weddings, funerals, or other celebrations; more often than not they observe how similar it is to "what *we* do." This experience of recognising oneself in the other is at the heart of ecumenism, and the goal of reception.

### *Ministry*

One of the most problematical obstacles to unity has been the inability of the churches to recognise and receive one another's ordained ministers. The convergence of Faith and Order on Ministry has been one of the least received insights of BEM, especially in its commendation of the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon. And yet, it is one of sections that in some places has made mutual recognition most visible, especially in its expansive understandings of apostolicity and of the apostolic succession of the Church as a whole.

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<sup>33</sup> Horton Davies, *Bread of Life & Cup of Joy: Newer Ecumenical Perspectives on the Eucharist* (Grand Rapids: 1993), p. 257.

An important instance of a reception of BEM's teaching on ministry is found in Anglican-Lutheran dialogue, most conveniently in the Porvoo Common Statement (PCS) between the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran churches, and the Anglican churches of the Atlantic Isles. British Anglicans had been involved in ecumenical conversation with Nordic and Baltic Lutherans since 1909, with some limited successes, particularly with the Church of Sweden and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. The historic Anglican difficulties lay with the ordering of the ministries of the other Nordic and Baltic Lutheran churches—which were not uniform within themselves. The problem was the historic episcopate and the related questions around apostolicity.

In their forward to the PCS, the co-chairmen note the influence of BEM in the introductory essay in *Anglican-Lutheran Agreements: Regional and International Documents 1972-2002*, Professor Michael Root and Bishop David Tustin state:

The groundbreaking 1982 text from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM), especially its discussion of episcopacy and threefold ministry, helped set the context for new answers to questions related to episcopal succession, the one issue that had blocked greater Anglican-Lutheran communion in the first two-thirds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *The Niagara Report* (1987) is an extension of the logic of BEM, and the texts in this volume which have led to full communion between Anglican and Lutheran churches can all be seen as regional applications of the argument of BEM and Niagara.<sup>34</sup>

The heart of the Porvoo Common Statement, where the ground is broken and something new emerges, in Section B.IV: “Episcopacy in the Service of the Apostolicity of the Church.” This section of the statement is solidly rooted in the Ministry section of BEM, which it cites (if not directly quotes) nine times. BEM's statement on Ministry is reflected in every paragraph of section IV.

From BEM, this section of PCS roots apostolic ministry and apostolic succession within the historic episcopate within the apostolicity of the whole Church (PCS 35): “The primary manifestation of apostolic succession is to be found in the apostolic tradition of the Church as a whole (PCS 39; BEM Ministry 35).” That “whole” includes witness to the apostolic faith, proclamation and interpretation of the Gospel, the celebration of baptism and the eucharist, transmission of ministerial responsibilities, prayer, mission, and service, and unity (PCS 36; BEM Ministry 34). PCS's description of episcopate and the bishop's ministry is directly from BEM (PCS 42-43; BEM Ministry 29). BEM's language of “personal, collegial communal” of ordained ministry in general is developed in PCS by applying in a particular way to episcopal ministry (PCS 44; BEM 26). Like BEM, PCS treats historic episcopal succession as a sign (PCS 50; BEM 35, 38), although not a guarantee of apostolicity (PCS 51; BEM 38).

### *Summary*

The influence of BEM is still being felt in the churches; the process of reception continues. So far, its reception has been unprecedented, although it has far from universally been received. It has enabled many churches to draw closer on the dominical sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, with ecclesiological and ecumenical consequences that are still unfolding. It has proposed convergences around the reconciliation of ministries which have had some successes.

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Root and David Tustin in *Anglican-Lutheran Agreements*, p. 14

BEM helped some churches in different parts of the world to enter into new relationships with one another. It has paved the way for many movements towards greater unity amongst the churches on the questions of Christian initiation, the theology and practice around the Eucharist, and the ministry of the Church, both lay and ordained.

The published responses to BEM became in themselves convergence texts, and were equally received by the churches as they moved into new relationships with one another.

The churches who received BEM experienced a renewal in their practices in Baptism and the Eucharist that produced an ecumenical family resemblance which stimulated another, more grass-roots reception of BEM, and also renewed relationships between the churches.

There is a sense in which BEM is the culmination of the reception process, and its best exemplar. What it did not become was the paradigm of ongoing reception. And, tellingly, BEM is the only instance of a convergence text to come from the Commission on Faith and Order.

For some, BEM is tantamount to an “iconic” ecumenical text; it was at the very least a *kairos* text. Today there is considerable nostalgia about the success of the reception of BEM, and a longing for those halcyon days of 1982. Yet for many others, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* remains largely unknown, although in its effects it has been received much like the ecumenical movement which gave rise to it: in hidden, forgotten, and unseen ways.

### **The Crisis of Reception:**

The nostalgia around BEM—for some of us, at least—is due not only to the text itself and its reception, but also to the huge disappointment that followed. Ecumenical dialogues have continued to find agreement and consensus; they continue to hold excellent consultations and publish superb reports and study texts. These efforts largely go unnoticed and un-received by the churches. The hope of the Breklum meeting of the Forum on Bilateral Dialogues is not achieved, that “an abiding commitment to the ecclesial reception of ecumenical texts can allow these statements of convergence or consensus to have a reconciling and transforming effect in the life of our churches.”<sup>35</sup>

There are many reasons for the decline in the reception of ecumenical texts after BEM, both at the bilateral and multilateral levels, some of which can be associated with the so-called winter of ecumenism.

Since 1982, there have been new church dividing issues between churches—and as often, within them—which are different in nature as well as intensity from the classical ecumenical questions. Developments such as the ordination of women, or the emergence of ethical issues such a globalization, stem-cell research, issues of marriage and human sexuality have provoked strained relationships between the churches and new divisions that make the ecumenical goal seem more remote, if not an impossibility.

Since 1982 the context of Christianity has been changing. It has become much more apparent that the centres of Christianity had shifted from the global north to the global south, and with them, a shift in the ecumenical agenda. This change if often overlooked in both the agenda and the membership of the ecumenical theological dialogues. Kenyan Anglican theologian and Faith and Order commissioner Professor Jesse Mugambi has written that “Despite their

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<sup>35</sup> “The Breklum Statement.”

numerical strength, the churches in Africa were under-represented in the WCC in general and in Faith and Order in particular.”<sup>36</sup> The massive lack of reception in the churches of the global south exposes a gap between the ecumenical agenda in those parts of the world and the convergences achieved in the theological dialogues. It is referred to as a “North Atlantic” discourse, methodology and agenda which do not resonate in most of the Christian world today.<sup>37</sup> Again, Jesse Mugambi observes that despite the success of BEM in some churches, “it did not find an echo in other churches and in several regions of the world, especially in the South.”<sup>38</sup> Even European theologians are aware of this reality. Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima notes that,

... although BEM has been translated into many non-European languages and is considered the first ecumenical document with a large distribution and publication round the world, having penetrated to all corners of the world—in spite of its geographical distribution and translation, BEM has remained a concern of *first world* theologians.<sup>39</sup>

There are ecumenical partners today who were not part of the BEM process, such as new expressions of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity, the African Instituted Churches and the “mega churches.” Their presence will change the character of the ecumenical movement, and with it, theological ecumenism, as much as the entry of the Catholic Church did in wake of the Second Vatican Council.

Within this changing situation, what are the consequences for the future and viability of theological ecumenism? Clearly, the churches have not kept pace with their official and formal bilateral and multilateral agreed statements. After fifty years of sustained dialogue, not enough of the agreed statements have been formally received. I mostly, but not entirely, agree with Dame Mary Tanner that it is not the dialogues that have failed—they have, on the whole, been quite successful—but rather the process of reception has been the stumbling block.<sup>40</sup>

There are a variety of recent illustrations from Faith and Order which illustrate such a non-reception. The first is the 1998 statement on ecclesiology, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*. This otherwise fine multilateral text on the Church received only 44 responses from churches, the academy, ecumenical institutes, and the like. Its 2005 successor, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, had received 84 responses by 2011, but only 26 from the churches, despite repeated pleas for responses.

Reasons for this can be adduced from lack of publicity on the part of WCC, regional and national ecumenical organizations, and even members of the Commission on Faith and Order themselves who have not promoted their own work. The decline in financial and human resources on ecumenical work has a role to play.

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<sup>36</sup> Jesse N. K Mugambi, “Some Problems of Authority and Credibility in the Drafting Processes of the BEM Document” in Thomas F. Best and Tamara Grdzeldize, eds., *BEM at 25* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007), p. 185.

<sup>37</sup> Mugambi, “Some Problems”, pp. 185-201.

<sup>38</sup> Mugambi, “Some Problems”, p. 190.

<sup>39</sup> Gennadios of Sassima, “Memory against Forgetting—the BEM Document after Twenty-Five Years” in Best & Grdzeldize, eds., *BEM at 25*, pp. 164-165

<sup>40</sup> Mary Tanner, “From Vatican II to Mississauga—Lessons in Receptive Ecumenical from the Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue Process,” in Paul Murray, ed., *Receptive Ecumenism* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp. 262 ff.

I come to wonder, at least within Faith and Order, how much of this crisis is due to the dialogue itself. Why is it that in years since the publication of BEM, the Commission has produced fine reports of consultations and excellent study-texts for the churches, but not another convergence text? Do Faith and Order and the various bilateral dialogues respond to questions that significant numbers of the churches are asking? Do they use methodologies that are appropriate to global Christian audiences?

I have also wondered to what extent the BEM paradigm itself has become an obstacle to reception. I believe that as long as we follow the methodology of BEM, and as long as we write for the churches as though we were working on BEM, and as long as we expect the churches in 2011 to respond to our texts in the same way as they did in 1982, that an uncritical nostalgia for BEM will inhibit theological ecumenism from moving forward, and will lead to its slow decline and disappearance through lack of reception. Without reception, there is no future to this enterprise.

The kind of ecumenical confidence from the late 1940s to the early 1980s has declined, through no fault of the theologians. And yet the crisis of reception is also an implicit non-reception of the consensus methodology of ecumenical dialogue used by theologians, which in the case of Faith and Order has reigned since 1952. The changed ecumenical context is not one of confidence, but rather a sad mixture of indifference and cynicism.

I agree with the General-Secretary of the WCC, who frequently reminds us that the unity of the Church is not an option, but a Gospel imperative. I am also convinced that theological dialogue is central to that imperative. Those engaged in multilateral and bilateral dialogues have a vital role and function. And, I still believe in receptive processes, such as that which was practiced by the Commission on Faith and Order from 1963 to 1982. I also believe that the classic agenda of Faith and Order is inescapable until we have achieved the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship. And with the *Eighth Report* of the JWG, I would want to say:

If the agreements reached through ecumenical dialogue are to have an impact on the life and witness of the churches and lead to a new stage of communion, then careful attention needs to be paid to processes for receiving the agreements so that the whole community might be involved in the process of discernment.<sup>41</sup>

But, that is not all that I would say. I think the present context calls for new approaches about how Faith and Order undertakes its purpose “to proclaim the oneness of the church of Jesus Christ, and to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship.” BEM and its receptive process and convergence methodology were appropriate to its time and context. The signs of the times and the contextual realities today call for different paradigms and different methodologies.

And so I return to the 2009 Faith and Order Plenary Commission meeting with the intervention of Metropolitan Geevarghese Mar Coorilos, the response of the Commission, and the observation that Faith and Order work on ecclesiology, at least, has entered a new phase. There are three complimentary ways of interpreting this event. One is a clear call for a more contextual approach to ecclesiology; the second is a call to recover a comparative methodology; the third is a call to return to the kind of ecclesiology of the 1968 Uppsala Assembly as seen in the “Holy Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church” which saw the quest

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<sup>41</sup> JWG, *Eighth Report*, p. 82.

for the unity of the Church as inseparable from the unity of humanity, and indeed, of the cosmos.

Perhaps an example of such a contextual and comparative agenda can be adapted from the methodology of the Global Christian Forum, namely deep sharing of faith and experience of the *Church* of Jesus Christ; such witnessing is none other than the fundamental task of ecclesiology. The new challenges do not mean that the work of Faith and Order on ecclesiology or any other classical theme is over, only that it is more difficult, and possibly more exciting. As veteran ecumenist Geoffrey Wainwright wrote in 1983: “To seek and confess the ecclesiological location of one’s community is an act of discerning and proclaiming the gospel itself.”<sup>42</sup>

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4 July 2011

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<sup>42</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, *The Ecumenical Movement* (Grand Rapids: 1983), p. 190.