

## **Faith and Unity Commission**

### **Appendix 2**

#### **Response to *Moral Discernment in The Churches*, Faith and Order Paper 215 (WCC, 2013)**

This summary response to a request for discussion and comment from the WCC is made on behalf of the Faith and Unity Commission of the National Council of Churches of Australia.

Responses to the document were offered by the following member churches. Anglican Church of Australia, Church of Christ, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Roman Catholic Church, Salvation Army, Society of Friends (Quaker) and Uniting. This summary response attempts to summarise the respondents' comments under the varying sections of the document.

The Faith and Order paper opens with a lengthy introductory section detailing both the background of the study and outlining the purposes of engaging in the study. One stated hope of the paper is that it should "be a tool to aid churches in both developing a deeper self-understanding of their own processes of moral discernment, offering a framework within which dialogue about moral disagreements can take place." (Paragraph 4 Page 2) Another statement of the intention of the study is that it should "identify principles and practices of moral discernment we hold in common as churches and to discover where we diverge. Our goals are to claim the common ground we share, to help us understand how and why we often come to different conclusions, and to search together for ways to prevent our principled differences from becoming church-dividing." The purpose of the study was later clarified "to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of theological difference and disagreement in order to develop study material and resources that facilitate difficult conversations and theological discussions about moral issues." (Paragraph 8 page 8)

One response (Uniting Church) focussed strongly on this introductory section of the study and examined in critical detail the history of the study of moral discernment within the international ecumenical councils.

Following the introduction, the paper is structured into four sections.

Methodology and Method

Sources for Moral Discernment

Causative factors in disagreements within and between churches

Conclusion

One response received (Lutheran) was structured under these headings and others, to varying degrees, address the issues raised in each of these sections of the study. Indeed, the Lutheran study offered some detailed reflection on the structural basis of the study.

#### **I Methodology and Method**

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This section is subdivided into ‘Three Methodological Assumptions’ for engaging in moral reasoning. All respondents addressed the assumptions in one way or another and most spent some time addressing the issue of the actual and the ideal when dealing with moral issues and the people who, in their living, engage with morality.

*First, it has been noted that all communities, ecclesial or otherwise, are constituted by human persons. Therefore, any study of moral discernment must begin with a clear articulation of the assumptions from which it proceeds regarding the nature of the human person. (Paragraph 24 page 18)*

“All human beings are called to joy or ‘beatitude’. This is a consequence of being made in the image of God. As a corollary, our happiness is also found in right relationship with each other. In their lives, human beings do, or do not, conform to the good promised by God. God, who desires happiness for all people, offers the grace to grow in virtue and to avoid sin. – Roman Catholic response.

“All human beings are also created to honour and serve God above all, and live to the praise of his glory. Human beings struggle to realise the good, both in decision and action. Human moral discernment is always negatively affected by this reality” – Lutheran response

“For Wesley, and Salvationists, (holiness) is anchored in the core statement that God is love, and, that in response to God’s love His children are also called to perfect love, which is both a response to God’s love and a gift from God. Holiness and perfect love, then, form the basis for moral discernment and pastoral concern. The Wesleyan view of prevenient grace states that God’s grace is actively at work in every person. That is, that Christ is in culture as a transforming presence. Every human endeavor is a possible site of God’s redeeming and transforming grace”. – Salvation Army response

“Anglicans would want to affirm the comprehensive and inclusive nature of the document which, in the context of our humanity, understands our nature made in the image of God but also limited – with hope in Christ” – Anglican response

*Second, ethics, as the discipline of studying human moral behaviour, can be divided into two kinds of activity. Descriptive ethics is concerned with what human persons actually do in their moral reflection, judgment and activity. Prescriptive or normative ethics is concerned with what human persons should do in the moral reflection, judgment and activity. (Paragraph 25 page 19.)*

“Theology is not done in the abstract, but by people who not only live in the world of the church, and have been formed by various traditions and practices within it, but also a rapidly changing moral framework in the world around them.” – Lutheran response

“The teaching office seeks to give clear guidance about the morality of certain actions. These statements are to be understood as judgements about the objective morality of particular actions. The subjective moral state of individuals still needs to be worked out. An individual will work out the right moral action in their circumstances by listening to a number of sources, including the church’s teaching authority and (perhaps) the arguments of moral theologians. We are speaking here about a process of discernment. This is a spiritual process that involves prayer and study. The aim of such prayer and study is to form the conscience so that it is able to make a reasoned and informed judgement”. – Roman Catholic response

“While some parts of our church may wish to focus on the approach of ethical normativeness asking what is good right and why, other sections focus on descriptive ethics asking what is happening here? What is believed to be right by these people and why?” – Anglican response

*Third, this study affirms that Christian morality, understood both in terms of discernment and activity in relationships, and should always be understood in light of the unavoidable limitations of the physical world and the eschatological hope of the ultimate realization of the reign of God. (Paragraph 26 page 20)*

“The end of all moral discernment is that all people recognise both this reality, and the reconciling work of God in Jesus Christ as the basis of the renewal of all things” “The church hopes that the decisions made reflect the core Christian hope: “this hope is a hope for the end of inhumanity, injustice and suffering in the world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” – Lutheran response

“If they (people) sin, they trust in the mercy of God, calling them to repentance and restoring that charity that was lost in sin” – Roman Catholic response

## **II Sources for Moral Discernment**

The next substantial section of the study examines varieties of sources for both prescriptive and descriptive moral reasoning. The section groups these sources into ‘faith’ sources and ‘human reasoning and other sapiential sources’. Some respondents focussed more upon this section, explaining which sources are predominantly used in their own traditions

### **Faith Sources**

The study lists these as ‘guidance of the Holy Spirit’, ‘Scripture’, ‘Tradition’, ‘Teaching authority’, ‘Spirituality’ and ‘Church culture’.

### **Holy Spirit, Scripture and Tradition**

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“Regarding Churches of Christ in Australia and considering what their main sources are in moral discernment, the priority list would include Scripture, Holy Spirit and Teaching Authority. Moral discernment takes place as we faithfully read Scripture individually and corporately and pray together as we wait for the leading and guiding of the Holy Spirit” - Churches of Christ response

“The gift and role of the Holy Spirit is rightly the starting point. The discernment process is not simply rational, but is the arena where the renewed mind seeks to reflect the mind of God through spiritual transformation (Romans 12:1-3). Moral discernment is rooted in Scripture and in the confidence that it is the primary arena of the Holy Spirit’s guidance of the church, both corporately and individually. The Lutheran Confessional documents, contained in the Book of Concord of 1580, are the “lower-case ‘tradition’” to which the LCA looks for guidance. Holy Scripture alone is the Word of God, and the Confessions are the human answer to that word. The LCA also possesses another level of confessional documents, the Theses of Agreement (TA), which resulted from the twenty-five-year process that led to the establishment of one Lutheran Church of Australia out of two predecessor bodies.” – Lutheran response

“Sources usually highlighted by the Orthodox Churches – namely, the Holy Trinity, the Holy Scriptures and Holy Tradition – indispensable in their own right” and also said that “Through the help of her rich liturgical worship, her offering of the Word of God, her rich Tradition (beyond the scriptural and liturgical, also the creedal, dogmatic, patristic, ascetic, prayer, hagiographical, canonical and iconographic), the church enables persons to be gifted with an “ecclesial mindset [phronema]” as they seek to live out their salvation in the world.” Greek Orthodox response noted.

“Quakers believe that the Light of Christ is given in some measure to all people and that this applies corporately as well as individually. The nearer we come to God, the nearer we come to each other. Therefore, the sense of being led into unity with one another becomes a hallmark of the Divine. We must not expect to be delivered from differences of opinion – indeed our life as a religious community would be dull and unprofitable if we were – but we do need to hold firmly to our conviction that Divine guidance is there to be found” – Quaker response

“Salvationists hold that the Bible is divinely inspired and is the definitive source for Christian doctrine and ethics. Faith is understood as relational rather than propositional, and experienced in personal relationship with Jesus. Wesleyans believe that the Spirit of God is just as involved in the inspiration of readers as in the inspiration of the writers. The same Spirit present then, is present now. And so we seek to understand principles of Scripture, rather than proof texts, and seek discernment from the Holy Spirit for contemporary issues and questions.” – Salvation Army response

#### Teaching authority

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This source for moral reasoning is present in most of the responses. For some Churches this level of authority resides primarily in people engaging with moral issues in the light of received tradition and/or confessional documents. Some churches have only the authority of shared discernment with congregation fellowship.

Concerning the issue of teaching authority, the LCA locates moral and theological decision making in the synodical gathering of the church. This body is composed of two-thirds lay representations from all the parishes of the LCA, and one-third pastor delegates elected by their colleagues. Not only are decisions made here, but congregational delegates are free to place matters for discussion and decision before the church at these triennial gatherings. These resolutions are then acted upon by the bishops of the church, and the elected General Church Council". – Lutheran response

"The Catholic Church will recognise and use a number of the sources for moral discernment identified in the document (chapter II). The emphasis placed on one or other of these sources has varied across the centuries. In the minds of many there is a strong emphasis on the church's teaching authority in matters of morals. The role of this teaching authority is multi-faceted. On the one hand, the teaching office seeks to give clear guidance about the morality of certain actions. These statements are to be understood as judgements about the objective morality of particular actions". – Roman Catholic" response

"The Religious Society of Friends has no codified doctrine of 'oughts' and 'shoulds', it has no Catechism, it has no creed, it has no ordained clergy in Australia. As business is brought before the Meeting, Quakers try to continue in a spirit of searching for Divine guidance. It naturally follows that there can be no rightful or satisfactory decision of a matter until there is a large measure of unity. What is being sought for in our business meetings and decisions, we like to call "the sense of the Meeting". The exercise of proper discernment requires guidance from the gathered Meeting. No one person sees the whole truth. The entire Meeting, as the Body of Christ, can see more accurately than one person" – Quaker response

"The International Morals and Social Issues Council (IMASIC), responsible under the authority of the General, produces international statements of position on contemporary issues for the Salvation Army. The Salvation Army follows a process of consultation and discernment at the local level to develop statements which are endorsed by Territorial Leadership, before being reviewed internationally, for authorisation by the General" – Salvation Army response

### Spirituality and Church culture

"The Theses of Agreement both bear witness to the historical situation which birthed them, the spirituality and church culture (§36 & 37), and also recognise that this context is always relevant and always changing. This reflects one of the key principles of the Reformation, *Ecclesia semper reformanda est*, that is, the church is always reforming, a call to the church to have the courage to continually engage in this process of moral discernment, in relation to changes in the context in which it serves" – Lutheran response

“Our Church is not only Catholic and reformed but also, as a world-wide Church has diverse social backgrounds. In addition the (Anglican) Church may also be seen as having people from the “Global South” and “Global North” – Anglican response

**Human reason and other sapiential sources – natural law, sciences, moral reasoning, conscience, experience, civil law**

“In practical response, our discussions seeking to understand God’s will on ethical, moral and theological matters are not only based on Scripture, but are also informed by Church tradition, reason including science, and the experience of God’s people, sometimes known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” – Quaker response

“A consistent characteristic of Catholic moral discernment has been its use of a principle of natural law. The reliance on natural law has meant that the Catholic Church has considered itself able to engage with both believers and non-believers in the public forum on moral issues” – Roman Catholic response

“In moral decision making, the Catholic Church emphasises the primacy of conscience. The following text from the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World expresses it thus: Deep within their conscience individuals discover a law which they do not make for themselves but which they are bound to obey, whose voice, ever summoning them to love and do what is good and to avoid what is evil, rings in their heart when necessary with this command: Do this, keep away from that. For inscribed in their hearts by God, human beings have a law whose observance is their dignity and in accordance with which they are to be judged. Conscience is the most intimate sanctuary of a person, in which he or she is alone with God whose voice echoes within them. (Gaudium et spes, #16) – Roman Catholic response

“Reason is to be used with much caution, and always in the context of faith. Rationality is a divine gift peculiar to human beings, to be cherished but also exercised under divine authority. Reason is first of all the handmaiden of faith, not the other way around. Lutherans have not as strongly appealed to the theory of natural law (§41) as some other Christians. This hesitancy has come about because of the conviction that God’s intention for creation has been totally disrupted through the fall and sin.” – Lutheran response

“While Scripture remains the primary source for moral discernment, the traditions not only of The Salvation Army and other Wesleyan churches, but also of the wider church and the historic church, along with reason and the insights of science and philosophy, and the shared experience of Christians, together inform moral decision making.” – Salvation Army response

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To this list (Scripture, Holy Spirit and Teaching Authority) we would add human reason, as was a stated emphasis of Alexander Campbell.” – Church of Christ response

### III Causative factors in disagreements within and between churches

This is the most significant section of the paper in terms of space allocated (21 pages or roughly 30% of the statement) and the fact that it highlights the purpose of the study which is to investigate different approaches with a view to identifying a possible basis for ongoing dialogue. This large section was divided into two sections Social and Ecclesial Factors that Shape and Affect Communication and Influence of Historical and Cultural Contexts. This section of the paper uses 13 case studies to examine some of the issues involved.

None of the responses sought to engage with the different approaches of the various ecclesial traditions and factors in these sub-sections and indeed, that could only really occur in committed bilateral dialogue. Several respondents however reflected on different approaches to moral reasoning within their traditions and how these have changed and developed over time and two respondents used a case study from within the methodology used by their own tradition.

The Orthodox response noted “right from the outset, that there are distinctly divergent approaches to moral issues within the different Orthodox Churches. On the contrary, however, when it comes to matters of doctrine or worship, there is, to a large extent, unanimity and congruity across these Churches. In light of the increasing number of moral dilemmas facing the world today, it is surely important for Christian Churches more generally to be committed to working together, learning from one another, so as to respond more effectively and with relevance to such contemporary concerns.”

The Roman Catholic response noted the efforts made to bridge the gap between official teaching and pastoral practice in matters of morals. “There has been a renewal in Catholic moral theology as it sought to develop a theology that was faithful to moral teaching but also took account of pastoral practice. To put it in stark terms: often in the past, there was a teaching that was rigid and unbending and a pastoral practice that was merciful, and the two operated quite separately from each other. This challenge for renewal was partly brought about by the shift in moral theology away from a view that was predominantly juridical to one that was truly theological”.

The Lutheran response engaged with this section of the study in examining its way of dealing with the issue of ordination of women. Firstly the acknowledgment of a range of factors that influenced how attitudes were formed and changed. These include the history of the Lutheran church through its connection to the social and political events of Germany in two world wars, it’s ‘outsider’ position in Australian culture for a long period and the transition from being a predominantly rural to an growing urban context. Secondly through the development of five principles of dialogue to guide discussion at the various levels of Lutheran church life.

The Salvation Army response noted the developing nature of moral discernment with their tradition. “The relationship between Scripture and the informing nature of tradition, reason and experience can be best understood as a hermeneutical spiral. As each generation tackles the questions of life, the questions are taken to the text, to interpretation, and then back to the text, before proceeding to further interpretation. By taking into account the history of interpretation we are able to progressively develop more sophisticated and nuanced formulations of the truth about God. “

#### **IV Conclusion**

The paper noted that the common sources for moral discernment used by member churches of the WCC. Our NCCA respondents also demonstrated a similar range of sources with scripture and Holy Spirit the most prominent. The following general concluding comments were made by respondents.

Roman Catholic - The study document, “Moral Discernment in the Church”, provides a good basis for Roman Catholics to enter into dialogue with other churches concerning moral decision making.

Church of Christ – we encourage each church to take up the task of engaging in this helpful document to gain self-understanding of their particular congregational process of ‘how’ they engage in the process of discernment concerning moral and ethical matters. This task of seeking self-awareness should be followed up by inter-church and intra-church dialogue, which may prove difficult given the high level of congregational autonomy offered throughout the movement. That being said, it is helpful to remind Churches of another ‘mark’, that is carried within our movement: ‘in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things love”.

Lutheran - It is fitting that the paper calls the church to reflect on the divisions between and within churches, and how these cause damage to the church’s mission and witness to the world

Orthodox - To the extent that this document sheds light on the significance of, and need for, a better understanding of moral discernment as practised within one’s own and others’ traditions – in the hope of overcoming historical tensions – it is an important first step. Indeed, in light of the many and growing moral dilemmas facing humanity and the world at large, this WCC study document needs to be furthered as all churches will continue to face increasing challenges in this area, another factor underscoring not only the need, but also the value, for continued reflection on moral discernment.