A Spirit-led Church

A response from the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain to WCC Faith and Order Paper No 214, The Church, Towards a Common Vision, Geneva 2013.

Prizing as we do our personal and corporate experience of God, Quakers are very conscious of the limitations of language in conveying this experience. Yet we have a rich verbal tradition and we value the precision of language in our corporate decision-making. In responding to a theological document we are using more highly-wrought language than Quakers would usually deploy. We ask all our readers to bear in mind that religious language is necessarily metaphorical and partial, even as it seeks to express the deepest truths.

QUAKERS

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain made a similar response to the first Faith and Order convergence text, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (Geneva,1982); this was published as *To Lima with Love* (London, 1987). We have also responded to both earlier drafts of the present paper, *The nature and purpose of the church* (F&) 181) and *The nature and mission of the church* (F&) 198. This second response incorporates the earlier one and is available at: www.quaker.org.uk/nature-and-mission-church-response-rsofpdf. These responses include references to the normative texts for Quaker ecclesiology, such as Robert Barclay's Apology (1675), which we have not felt it necessary to repeat here.

There is also useful material on Quaker understanding of ecclesiology in 'One in the Spirit' (1995), our response to the Churches Together in England 'Called to be One' process; published in *From Friends, with Love*, book 1 (London: Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations, 2004).

1. Introduction: Our vision for the church

1.1. Quakers in Britain have consistently felt called to offer gifts from the heart of our tradition to support the urgent task of ecumenical dialogue. The latest WCC paper, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* challenges us as Quakers not merely to articulate the sources of our faith, but to express how the spiritual treasures of our Quaker Way sustain us in the world today. What inspires us from our historical experience and what strengthens us in the present? At the heart of our Quaker faith is the vision of a church unmarred by bitter ruptures, held together in bonds of love. Yet unity does not consist in uniformity of belief or practice, but rather in a mutual recognition between people - expressed in care and a joyful acceptance of difference. Such an affirmation of diversity is rooted in our historic understanding of the universal ministry of Jesus. As the Quaker Samuel Fisher wrote in 1660: 'Gentiles as well as Jews, Heathens and Indians as well as Englishmen and Christians (so called)... all have some measure of that Grace nigh them, which in the least measure is sufficient to heal and help them' (Hooks, *Works of Samuel Fisher*, London: 1660:656). Our task is to heed working of that grace, expressed in diverse tongues (Acts 2:4). In harmony with this inclusive vision of the religious life, our meetings frequently include those from other faith traditions or none, who are drawn to our Spirit-led practice. By holding a space for the seeker, the pilgrim and the doubter, Quakers seek to safeguard the sources of prophecy in our midst. In opening our doors and opening our hearts to new light, we attempt to mirror the words of our Teacher: 'I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd' (Jn. 10:16).

1.2. Yet, such remarks beg the question; what is the church? For many the word has become connected with burdensome structures, moral condemnation and institutional navel-gazing at the expense of the building up of love and truthfulness. For those disillusioned with the path of discipleship, the word 'church' may signify the letter and not the Spirit (1 Cor 11, 25). In place of the life-giving presence of a

loving God, many feel the pressing weight of ritual conformity and soulless hierarchy. From our earliest days, Quakers have sought to return the church to that radical spirit which summoned Christian faith into being. We understand the church, not merely as another human institution, but rather a gathered community of mind and heart, where each soul journeys into the love of God. Such a voyage of discovery can be undertaken anywhere and is not limited to premises set aside for 'religious worship'. The still small voice of God can be found at all times and places. When done in a spirit of prayer, any aspect of life, no matter how ordinary, can be made a pathway to the holy. It is not that Quakers refuse to say where the church is; only that we refuse to say where the church isn't. From this perspective, we understand the marks of true church in the lives of people corporately transformed by 'the God of peace' (Heb. 13:20). And yet many churches continue to struggle with matters of outward form to the detriment of communal and personal transformation. Over the centuries much blood and ink has been spilt by Christians in disputes regarding the role of the sacraments and the organization of special priesthoods and yet they have done little but create hatred and distrust.

1.3. How should the church now find healing? At the centre of our corporate life as Quakers is our practice of silent worship. By affirming the potential sacramentality of all aspects of life, we have found ways of honouring God anew in the very midst of our lives. Springing from this experience, Quakers hold that Christian commitment cannot be limited to a system of numbered sacraments, nor can our obedience to Christ be measured solely according to formulaic modes of worship. In making this declaration, Quakers find no barren negation, but a drawing closer to the life and substance of Christ's leadings. As Jesus tells the Samarian woman by the well: "An hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth... God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn.4:23-5). In this teaching, Quakers find a beautiful expression of a great transformation in store for the people of God. In place of the shadows of outward priesthood (Col 2:17) those who are born again in the Spirit (Jn. 3:5) are called to put aside the relative safety of outward observance and instead seek God in the temple of the heart. In these invisible cloisters, we find both the cleansing waters of Baptism and

the nourishment of the Eucharist. As Jesus tells us again and again in the Gospels, the path to communion with Him is simple. All we need is to be open to the possibility of God's call: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me" (Rev. 3:20).

1.4. Yet, reconciliation between Christians will only be achieved if the roots of strife are addressed in the life and practice of the church. Just as our Quaker Way finds no need for outward sacraments, we also shun the need for physical defence of our spiritual priesthood. It is our abiding testimony that war and the preparation for war are inconsistent with the spirit of Christ. In the past, some within the Christian family have through formal structures looked for easy consolation in worshipping God by serving Caesar. At such times of confusion, these disciples of Jesus have made the mistake of measuring the glory of the church by the glories of the world. This has left some Christians feeling that they must adopt the patterns of the State. In this roving spirit, some have seen the church as a power among others, struggling for domination. Yet, in imitation of Jesus, we are called to refuse the tempting offer of 'the kingdoms of the world' (Matt 4:1-11) and instead content ourselves with the powerlessness of the Cross. As Paul tells us: 'our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephes 6:12). By unburdening ourselves of these outward things, we find that we can better follow the Spirit which is the fountain of our religious life.

2. Finding the Spirit in an Age of Uncertainty

2.1. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, European Christianity finds itself increasingly ailing in the face of declining numbers and an emboldened atheism. The churches of Africa and Asia struggle to live faithfully in the midst of political instability, war and material inequality. Quakers have been here before. Quakerism was born in such an age of uncertainty. The people of the English Commonwealth had seen their faith in established religion and politics shaken to the core by the ravages of civil war. People sought the love of God, yet everywhere there was despair and spiritual fakery. The

answer of early Quakers to such religious loss resounds down the centuries: 'the kingdom of God is in your midst' (Lk.17:21). The church will not find renewal through structures alone. True unity can only come about if we look to the Living Christ within. Only the guidance of the Spirit can sustain and refresh the church in its mission. What does our own context tell us about the character of the church's vocation? As Quakers living in an increasingly secular society, we sense new growing-points for energised discipleship and spirit-led witness. As Christianity's automatic privileges of political access and respectability decline, new opportunities emerge for Western Christians to serve as radical voices in the face of political power. Instead of feeling 'useful' in ways defined by the secular officialdom, a church living 'after Christendom' can walk more faithfully in the way of Jesus; emptying itself of power and prestige; 'taking the very nature of a servant' (Phil 2:7). In this context, declining numbers and privilege is not merely a threat but a liberation. In putting aside models of state-sponsored protection and the allure of administrating 'a Christian society', new-found powerlessness may teach Christians to attend to the powerless, the outsider and stranger. In making this claim, Quakers make no sectarian conclusions regarding the leadings of other confessions. We cannot see the future, nor do we have all the answers, but we offer this tentative response, in the hope that the Universal Church will discover anew its countercultural voice in a divided world.

2.2. To recover such a radical tone we need the courage to be different. The Universal Church is not one organisation among many vying for worldly influence. Rather the gathering place of God's people is an expression of the divine will for the world: the triumph of cultures of peace over societies of strife. In ever-closer bonds of unity, the church may yet re-learn its own prophetic language capable of standing against cultures of callousness and carelessness. Yet such tides cannot be resisted unless and until love prevails among the disciples of Jesus. We cannot expect the world to heed the call of Christ generously unless his disciples can make his call tangible in their own lives. For too long the disciples of Jesus have spoken to and for themselves, seeking their own peace and security in a world of faiths. The time for such insularity is long past. In an age when humanity is both ever more connected and yet seeming further apart, we must stand in solidarity

with those who 'dream dreams and see visions', offering them succour and encouragement. The Spirit is calling us to throw ourselves into the fray with all the love and courage we can muster.

3. Signs of the Spirit in the present age

3.1. The WCC text underlines for Quakers the pressing moral and spiritual challenges facing the church today. From the pace of technological change, the force of secularism and the challenges of environmental destruction, the document reflects: '[while] tensions about moral issues have always been a concern for the church, in the world of today, philosophical, social and cultural developments have led to the rethinking of many moral norms, causing new conflicts over moral principles and ethical questions to affect the unity of the churches' (63). In recent years these challenges have been joined by the systemic failure of the global financial system and the rapid rise of fundamentalist forms of religious violence. Far from being 'the end of history' the crises of our century are just as ominous as those of the last. How can the church speak faithfully in these turbulent conditions? What parts of the church's moral language are needed to see us through? In finding a place to stand, Quakers reflect keenly on the promise of Jesus to his disciples: "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). Our Divine Teacher does not abandon us even if it feels as if we are 'sheep among wolves' (Matt 10:1). Rather, the Spirit stands in solidarity with us, kindling the Kingdom of God in our hearts; guiding our restless souls to their final rest. In the midst of worldly trial, the church must seek out-growing points for the Spirit of Christ in wider culture, ever ready to bear witness to the ongoing revelation of God in diverse lives. Ours is not an age of darkness, but an epoch of prophecy, if we heed the promptings of the Spirit.

3.2. What are these signs of prophecy? Firstly, we live in a time of intense spiritual hunger. In the rich nations, people are increasingly turning from the pursuit of worldly success and, in a deeply joyless culture, seeking connection, friendship and joy that is not to be found in consumerism. Likewise, in the 'developing nations' we see people become scornful with prosperity for its own sake. More are asking: what is the purpose of wealth? And how can material wealth best

serve the common good? If we wish to answer these questions adequately, we must re-orientate the church away from vestiges of power and towards an ethic of service. To contest materialism, there is need for the kind of home-spun spirituality favoured by Jesus himself. We must form a pattern of church capable of meeting people where they are: in their homes, at work, on the street. The rise of house-churches speaks of a new longing for the simplicity of the apostolic witness. Quakers welcome these questing communities and call on the wider church to cherish these new expressions as the work of the Spirit in our midst.

3.3 Alongside these new formations, the Spirit is equally at work in world politics. While the political upheaval of the present era is undoubtedly great, we know that God moves human hearts to justice. From the protesters of Tahrir Square to the global Occupy protests, we find the upsurge of a new culture able and willing to hear God's call afresh: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free' (Lk. 4:18). In an effort to make this proclamation a reality, British Quakers continue to work for stability and peace in regions of the world torn apart by ethnic, political and religious hatred. Beyond these terrains of struggle and peace-making, Quakers know by experience that the Spirit is known in the ordinary and the everyday. In the care of family and friends, strangers and neighbours, we know ourselves trained in the ways of the Prince of Peace. As Jesus 'emptied himself out' for the love of others, Christians daily and invisibly dedicate themselves to the wellbeing of others. In these acts, we see also the restorative power of the Spirit.

3.4 How does the church give these Spirit-led people the space to flourish? This is both an individual and a structural question for the people of God. For Quakers such openness for service can only be established if each human being is understood as a precious and unique child of God. While such language is deeply figurative, this image of childhood has taught us that no person exists for themselves alone. We live in cities, communities, families and faiths. Our lives are not private possessions, but windows of grace; their possibility

kindled by the tenderness of others. If we wish to foster service, the church must offer opportunities for genuine fellowship and hospitality. Because of our understanding of ministry, Quakers try hard to recognise and affirm one another's gifts. This is one way in which we recognise the experience of being the body of Christ. We welcome the text's inclusive claim that 'every Christian receives gifts of the Holy Spirit for …his and her part in the mission of Christ' (18) and that 'the authority of God can be recognised by the church when articulated by any of its members' (50). We share the experience that 'authority emerges whenever the truth which leads to holiness is expressed' (50).

3.5. Quakers see themselves as a Spirit-led church, with its origin in the experience of Pentecost, as the text describes (3, 21). We feel ourselves continually strengthened and renewed by the Spirit. In this way, we agree that 'The Spirit equips the church with its essential gifts, qualities and order.' (16) Recently, Quakers in Britain have experienced a remarkable example of the Holy Spirit outrunning our expectation. In 2009, after many years of prayerful preparation, and during an exercise of corporate discernment and waiting on God, we came to understand that, in our experience, God was marrying same-sex couples and that we needed to recognise this and witness to it in our own procedures and in our relations with the state. We could not have foreseen that, five years later, the state would recognise same-sex marriage. We correctly foresaw that some in our own church, especially in other parts of the world, and many of our fellow-Christians would have difficulty in understanding why we had taken this step. The process of seeking to explain ourselves has been at times painful. But we are in no doubt that, in our efforts to follow the leadings we have been given, we have felt the Spirit working strongly amongst us.

3.6. We believe that the Spirit leads us into unity, and we welcome the increasing signs which the text identifies of churches working more closely together. We share the pleasure expressed in the text that 'the churches have come so far in fellowship with one another that they are aware that what one does affects the life of others, and in consequence are increasingly conscious of the need to be accountable to each other with respect to their ethical reflections and decisions'.

(62) Yet, accountability does not mean religion by consultation or faith by committee. It means being sensitive to where each community is on the walk of faith. It means listening generously, showing patience, self-restraint and consideration for each member of the Christian family. Such virtues do not guarantee that there will never be dislocation, misunderstanding or hurt, but they do provide a foundation for continuing dialogue and collaboration.

3.7 The text rightly highlights the manifold ways in which Christians are presently divided by matters of moral discernment. Our responses to the sometimes emotive issues of abortion, same-sex relationships, euthanasia and capital punishment, speak not only to problems of public justice, but point to a deeper question: what is the purpose of the human creature? How we respond to issues of sex and death reveal what we value most about human life. Those who have been characterised as 'liberal' on these matters have been accused of being obsessed by personal freedom to the neglect of moral faithfulness. Opponents of 'moral traditionalists' maintain that a church of arbitrary rules frequently silences the lived experience of those who live under such rules. Quakers do not pretend to have easy solutions to these persistent quandaries, but our historical experience places us on the side of radical openness. British Quakers have found that ethical reflection must be sustained by a deep act of faith. Moral discernment is not only related to immediate human needs and concrete institutions but serves as a channel for divine love and creativity. In this way our ethical practice must always be capable of transformation and adjustment if our behaviour conflicts with the character of a God of peace and justice. At the heart of this dynamic conception is a vision of life which is framed by the ongoing revelation of God. To journey with such a God means to unlearn what we think we know in the name of love and truth. As Jesus declares: "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth" (Jn. 16:12-24). The text offers a challenge which Quakers in Britain would gladly accept, that of working with other churches to address the question 'How might the churches, guided by the Spirit, discern together what it means today to understand and live in fidelity to the teaching and attitude of Jesus' (63, italics).

4. The role of the Spirit outside the church

4.1. Quakers warmly endorse the text's recognition of the action of the Holy Spirit outside the body of Christ (25. 60). As we search for ecclesial harmony, Quakers also urge a closer allegiance with other faiths. While we should be wary of merely simplifying the distinctive logics of other religions to fit our own assumptions, we should nevertheless search gently and attentively for points of deep convergence between the religions in expectation that Truth will be found. Indeed, Quakers affirm that while the outward practices of human religiosity differ we know through experience that '[t]he humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion' (William Penn, Some Fruits of Solitude). Such people may not know the Gospel in the discursive sense, yet our faith insists that they dwell invisibly and mystically with the Eternal Christ who enlightens all who come into the world (Jn 1:9). In this way 'the gospel of salvation is preached to every creature under heaven' (George Fox, Epistle 388) even if this proclamation is beyond our mortal hearing.

In the light of these mysteries, we find ourselves in deepest unity with these words from the WCC document: 'Together with the adherents of other religions as well as with all persons of good will, Christians must promote... the social values of justice, peace and the protection of the environment' (62) and 'Christians will seek to promote the values of the kingdom of God by working together with adherents of other religions and even with those of no religious belief' (64). We count ourselves among those who 'advocate peace, especially by seeking to overcome the causes of war' (64), and we welcome the respect that is expressed in this text for 'the elements of truth and goodness that can be found in other religions and among those with no religion' (25). Let us go forward with this work with humility, a sense of adventure and above all a loving heart, for in our openness we may discern the face of Christ in unfamiliar places.

4.2. The text regrets that many in today's world 'question the very possibility of faith, believing that human life is sufficient unto itself, without any reference to God' (7). While our worship-lives convince us as Quakers of a world full of spiritual depth and meaning, we recognize

that the theological language of past centuries has the capacity to alienate, exclude and bewilder. As people of faith we need to be brave enough to find new ways of speaking about God which sustains our reflection and worship. In this age of longing, we must attempt to articulate the Good News in ways which respond to the hopes of a world in need of love and grace. Such a renewed proclamation should not be tainted with superiority or egotism, but suffused with humility and love. In this open-handed spirit, we affirm and uphold those among us who struggle daily with the very idea of a Personal God expressed in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. In our Meetings there are those who find the use of traditional Christian language problematic or spiritually deadening. To meet their need for spiritual guidance many seek a new language to express a sacred vision of life. It is our conviction as Quakers that this development is not to be feared, but mined for the riches it may contain. Our task as people of God is not to castigate or condemn people's desire for a new way of speaking about faith, but to offer prayerful support for those who seek that eternal light which is in each one of us. In this task, what matters is unity in our desire to seek the right spiritual path rather than a conformity of words.

5. Belonging to the church: communal discipleship

5.1. At the core of the church's life and teaching is the act of trust made in a living God who stands beside us, heals us and wipes away our tears. The assembly of God's people is the place where that trust is found, tested and cherished. In prayer, worship and service we not merely come into relation with what we trust, but through the guidance of the Spirit, we are formed into new people, capable of compassion, forgiveness and courage. The church can be a place of holy transformation, where weakness becomes strength and fear becomes hope. Yet in our contemporary culture the transformational dimension of church-life is all too easily obscured by an increasingly consumer attitude towards the treasures of faith. Instead of seeking to be renewed, an increasing number of people want the church to cater for their needs and conform to their personal expectations and preferences. In the West 'shopping around for a church' is becoming more pressing than the demands and joys of discipleship. While the

church should always be mindful to speak to the conditions of those it serves, the marketing of the Christian message in this way can sap the radical message of the Gospel. Instead of staying put and waiting to be called, our contemporary world induces many of us to rootlessness. What is desperately needed is a return to a grounded vision of discipleship. In this mould the church is not a private club to satisfy a set of complacent members, but rather a window into a New Creation. In calling for a return to the language of discipleship, Quakers recognize that Christian vocation is a living, changing reality. In affirmation of this truth, we heartily embrace the endorsement which the text gives to legitimate diversity within the church: 'Legitimate diversity is not accidental to the life of the Christian community but is rather an aspect of its catholicity' (12) and 'Legitimate diversity in the life of communion is a gift from the Lord' (28).

5.2. We endorse the text's view that the local church 'is wholly church but not the whole church' (31). Springing from this sentiment, we believe that the statements of common purpose cannot be seen as an end in themselves, but rather an invitation for disciples of Jesus to come to know each other in the 'things which are eternal'[1]; a call to find something of that invisible catholicity which animates the inward lives of diverse confessions of faith. We hope and pray that the years ahead will see a greater nurture of this inward knowing, as Christians come to define themselves not by outward forms, but rather look to the eternal love of God to fortify and unite them. As the early Quaker theologian Robert Barclay observed in 1678, the church is not a collection of doctrines or institutions but rather 'the society, gathering or company of such as God hath called out of the world and worldly spirit to walk in his light and life'. Barclay went on to write: 'Under this church ... are comprehended all, and as many, of whatsoever nation, kindred, tongue or people they be, though outwardly strangers and remote from those who profess Christ and Christianity in words and have the benefit of the Scriptures, as become obedient to the holy light and testimony of God in their hearts' (Apology for the true Christian divinity, prop10, sect2; 1678).

[1] From Britain Yearly Meeting's Advices and queries, section 1.02 of *Quaker faith & practice*

6. The experience of worship: experiential, mystical but knowable by all

6.1. At the core of our Quaker faith is a lament for a church in exile from itself. Scarred by spiritual coldness, ritualistic excess and callous privilege, early Quakers turned their backs on the diverse sects of Christendom and instead waited upon Christ to lead them 'into all truth' (Jn. 16:13). In their own 'holy experiment' Quakers summoned the church back to the adventure of the Apostles, to a community transformed by the leadings of the Spirit. In Quaker worship we are invited to experience the astonishing power of the Holy Spirit. In this energetic space, we can know salvation in the present. In worship, we become part of an eschatological community. As Quakers, we unite with the text's conviction that the church is both a divine and a human reality (23). Quakers entirely understand the concept of 'already but not yet' (33). We are a church which looks not to a future Second Coming but to the present experience of Christ in the heart. Quakers still hold dear George Fox's core insight, that 'Jesus Christ is come to teach his people himself'.

6.2. To be truly in a state of worship is to participate in a community of moral imagining. In the act of opening ourselves to God, we are inducted into another way of seeing. By attending to the Light within, we are able to picture 'the just earth', without want, degradation or oppression. We are able to make a leap beyond the cynicisms and distortions of our injured world and glimpse something more. When we bring 'the signs of times' to the still centre of Meeting for Worship, we believe we are led into the Way of Jesus. In the power unleashed by the gathered community, we come to understand that Christianity is more than a theory or philosophy of things, but ever and always a practical relationship. To walk with Jesus of Nazareth means to live as Jesus lived - as a healer, lover and restorer. We cannot be a Christian by virtue of some human vocabulary or outward set of rituals or precepts, but only by the inward experience of the Living Presence. Once we start conceiving of Christianity not as a sublime intellectual exercise but as a practical path to be trod, life becomes deeper and more wonderful than we dare to imagine.

6.3 The text specifically acknowledges 'those communities who affirm that their vocation does not include the rites of baptism and the Eucharist, while affirming that they share in the sacramental life of the church' (40). British Quakers are one such community. Our understanding of the sacramental activity of the church is grounded in a prayerful openness to the ongoing presence of the Spirit. The issue for Quakers is not whether we should use outward signs to express God's work (since Quakers use the outward sign of speech in our worship) but what external forms allow God to be best heard. As people inspired by the simplicity of the early church, Quakers have found that sacramental rites in the ways practiced by other churches are not required for God's love to be fully felt and fully heeded. Laying down our own will and action before the judgement of God is enough. Our Inward Teacher needs no ceremonial forms to accomplish the divine purpose. 'Holiness', 'sanctification' and 'grace' are words for the invisible shaping of the human heart into the generous pattern of Christ. In this way, some Quakers use the language of 'communion' and 'baptism' as ways of describing their experience of God's healing power in their daily lives.

6.4 Such a transformative encounter requires no man-made ritual to mark or confirm it. Rather, God's action can be readily observed by its fruits: 'in love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Gal. 5:22-23). As Quakers we are invited to partake in the gifts of God whenever we eat together, offer hospitality or give comfort to those in need. It is these acts of care, prayerfully enacted, which constitute '"the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3,5) incorporating believers into the body of Christ and enabling them to share in the kingdom of God' (41). This sense of sacrament as practical action emerges from our historic understanding of the outpouring of God's Spirit on 'all flesh' (Joel 2:28). When we allow ourselves to be led by the promptings of God, ceremonies and rites are not required. All our devising is subsumed into the living Word, which nourishes our action and speech. God is not removed from us - in need of secondary mediation - but in our midst (Lk. 17:21).

6.5. In saying this, Quakers do not seek to condemn or belittle the

experience of others. For Quakers the worth of any outward sign should be judged according to the intent of the one performing it. There is a world of difference between ritual and 'ritualism'. As early as 1678 Quakers have affirmed that the Eucharistic rite continues to possess genuine spiritual value for many Christians. As the Quaker theologian Robert Barclay observed - if performed 'from a true tenderness of spirit, and with real conscience towards God... in the same way and manner as did the primitive Christians recorded in scripture I should not doubt to affirm but they might be indulged in it and the Lord might regard them, and for a Season appear to them in the Use of these things' (Barclay, Apology Prop 13. Sec.11). The key phrase is 'for a Season'. It is a source of deep sorrow for Quakers that disagreements over the status of these practices continue to cause pain and distress among the disciples of Jesus. We hope and pray that the divisions the text describes regarding 'who may be baptized, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the relation of the Eucharist to Christ's sacrifice on the cross' will be left behind in the search for a deeper unity. The cause of building up love is not served by ceremonial conformity across churches, but in the recognition of the Spirit in the paths of others. In all these matters Quakers suggest that the wrong questions are being asked. The issue is not who should be baptized, since it is for God, and not for us, to say who is invited into a New Life. Similarly regarding the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, we should ask rather: Where is the presence of God being denied in the church? Does the Eucharistic table (however defined) help us model Jesus' ministry or is it a site of exclusion or oppression? On the matter of the relationship between the Eucharist and the cross, we should ask ourselves: Do our practices of fellowship help us to imitate the sacrificial giving of Jesus? Do we learn a new way of living or are we ensnared in old patterns of thinking and acting?

7. Repentance and service: the church's vocation to the world

7.1 While Quakers work in hopeful expectation of human flourishing, our tradition teaches us that the human character is always partial, flawed and conflicted. Mirroring this universal predicament, the church continually falls short of its best hopes and visions. We welcome the document's clear-sighted recognition of our collective failings as people of faith. It acknowledges our complicity with secular authorities as well as the ways in which evangelisation has been used to bolster colonial oppression (6, 65). At this time of commemoration of the First World War, we should also record our failure over the last century to speak out effectively against the waging of war on an unprecedented scale and the insufficient urgency given to international peace-building. Quakers have not been exempt from many of these failings; we continue to be complicit in the unjust economic structures of our own day. As Quakers living in the rich West, we are acutely conscious that the Quaker Way can become reduced to a privileged lifestyle for the few. We urge our ecumenical partners to remind and strengthen us, as we struggle to make our communities hospitable for all those in need.

7.2 In this convergence document, the question of the relationship between the church's holiness as the Body of Christ, and the reality of human sin, is left unresolved (35). Quakers have no difficulty in recognising that the visible church is scarred by imperfections. But in the long debate about original sin versus human perfection, our understanding is neither wholly optimistic nor pessimistic. Whilst we acknowledge the continuing estrangement between God and humanity, we are confident that Christ can gift moral perfection to those who hold fast to the Inward Light. The early Quaker William Dewsbury expressed this experience of being perfected: 'I was crying to the Lord, to free me from the burden I groaned under; the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "My grace is sufficient for thee, I will deliver thee". And by the power of this word, I was armed with patience to wait in his counsel; groaning under the body of sin in the day and hour of temptation, until it pleased the Lord to manifest his power to free me... I witness that I am regenerated and born again of

the immortal seed, and having partaken of the first resurrection, over such the second death hath no power (The Life of William Dewsbury, p. 38-9).

7.3 Rooted in this dual knowledge of failure and restoration, we join thankfully in the document's passionate engagement with the church's mission for transformation in the world (64). The historic Quaker concept of the Lamb's War (Rev. 17.14), a spiritual struggle waged against the spiritual forces of evil, seems to us to have increased resonance in today's chaotic world. We respond eagerly to Pope Francis' vision, 'I see the church as a field hospital after a battle…heal the wounds, heal the wounds'. We continue to try to live in solidarity with those who suffer oppression and indignity; we are conscious that walking with Jesus in this way cannot be without personal cost.

7.4 Quakers also try to perceive and contest the structural oppression which causes such human tragedies. Our traditional understanding of Testimony leads us to witness for peace, truth, simplicity and equality; we are also being led to witness for sustainability, as we acknowledge the damage being inflicted on the world through avarice, neglect and ignorance. We believe we are being led by the Spirit towards both an individual and a collective response, for example in our recent decision corporately to disinvest from fossil fuel extraction companies. Quakers in Britain wholeheartedly endorsed the WCC text, Economy of Life, Justice and Peace for All, and welcome the emphasis in the present text to 'opposing the abuse and destruction of the earth and participating in God's healing of broken relationships between creation and humanity'. (66)

7.5 We fight the Lamb's War, not in an effort to hold back an impending darkness, but in a spirit of anticipation, at the breaking in of the living Christ into history. We rejoice in the coming together of the churches in this prophetic ministry and we joyfully affirm these words of the WCC report, 'One blessing of the ecumenical movement has been the discovery of the many aspects of discipleship which churches share, even though they do not yet live in full communion.' (68)

Appendix

The five WCC questions:

1. To what extent does this text reflect the ecclesiological understanding of your church?

Although we bring our own understandings to these terms, we unite with the document's understanding that the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic (22). Quakers have a strong sense of the reality of the universal church, and though we frequently fall short, a sense of trying to be a particularly pure manifestation of it! We consider that the text is most valuable when it tries to describe what the life of such a church might be. We find those sections which try to identify institutional ways towards mutual recognition are less useful. We believe that the church, as the community which lives in and is sustained by the divine presence, can only be recognised by its fruits.

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

Our Quaker understanding is that church unity does not have to be created, it has to be recognised, realised and lived. So the question becomes, how can we help one another understand this more deeply, and act on it? This is a task which has to be undertaken as much within churches as between them. Within Britain, the Religious Society of Friends wrestles to retain its core insights while being open to new light; worldwide Quakers differ greatly in their understandings of Christology and Biblical authority and in liturgical practice. We have our own struggle to make mutual recognition a reality; yet we share a common conviction of the one Spirit as the source of all our lives, and we rejoice at the occasions when we can come together to express this.

So while we appreciate the inclusive spirit in the text which leads it to welcome legitimate diversity (28), we are concerned at the corollary, that there are limits to diversity which can be identified by 'common criteria' or 'mutually recognised structures'. (30, italics). It is our experience that this approach is not helpful. Rather we grow in unity as we recognise one another in the Spirit and join together to seek God's will for the church.

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

We hope that the whole process of responding to this document, with its challenge to articulate how we understand our corporate life as a church, will help Quakers in Britain grow in unity. We hope this will be true of other churches too.

Back in the 17th century, Quakers believed other churches are 'in the Fall', and even in the 21st century some in our membership, especially those who have entered Quakers from other churches, still take this approach. But it follows from our insistence on the importance of mutual recognition that we no longer believe this; rather we accept that the Holy Spirit has guided different churches into different ways that are appropriate for their own condition and from which we can learn. We made this point in our response to The Nature and Mission of the church, WCC paper 198, (our para. 3.10); we are happy to reiterate it here.

4. 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?

We are willing to recognise and form closer relationships with other churches, not so much because they acknowledge any particular account of the church, but because they represent a visible sign of God at work in the world. We hope other churches could go forward in mutual recognition on this basis. We welcome the text's invitation to churches 'to recognise and honour each other's commitment to seeking the will of God in the ordering of the church' (24, italics).

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

We particularly welcome the section on inter-religious dialogue, with its expression of appreciation of 'whatever elements of truth and goodness are present in other religions' (60). As we have indicated, for Quakers this is an essential part of witnessing to the Gospel, and underlies our peace-building work, including that with the World

Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). We hope that addressing questions of religious pluralism will have an important part in the ongoing work of Faith and Order.

While welcoming the reference to the 'abuse and destruction of the earth' (66), this seems a faint echo of the work which the WCC has been supporting for decades on 'Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation'. Can Faith and Order provide a stronger theological underpinning for this work, and bring it before the churches once again as a matter of urgency?

With regard to our comments on the validity or otherwise of legitimate diversity, we invite Faith and Order to help the churches engage with the key question:

How can we learn to recognise the Holy Spirit at work in each church's life?