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INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN  
THE ORIENTAL ORTHODOX FAMILY OF CHURCHES AND  
THE WORLD ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES

**Report of the international theological dialogue between the  
Oriental Orthodox family of churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches  
(1993-2001)**

*Adopted at the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia in Antelias, Lebanon, January 23-28 2001*

**Introduction**

1. Impelled by the prayer of our Lord "that all may be one" (Jn 17.21) and helped by the Holy Spirit, we, the participants in the Oriental Orthodox-Reformed dialogue, seek to understand each other's traditions and grow together towards holistic Christian fellowship and visible unity.
2. Reformed churches and the Oriental Orthodox family of churches live side by side in several countries. However, decades of separate existence have caused them to drift apart, resulting in little or no relationship between the churches. In general, biases about each other have kept the contact between these two communions to a minimum in spite of the inherited Christian faith expressed in the Nicene Creed.
3. The Oriental Orthodox churches are living Christian communities in Egypt, Syria, Armenia, Lebanon, Ethiopia, India and Eritrea, and in lands of immigration. They are ancient apostolic traditional churches in the East which believe in the Creed composed at the holy ecumenical council at Nicea in 325, and completed at the second holy ecumenical council at Constantinople in 381. They also follow the teaching of the third ecumenical council at Ephesus in 431. As such they believe in the Holy Trinity and in the divine incarnation of the Son of God. They follow the teaching of St Cyril of Alexandria about one incarnate nature of the Word of God. They reject both the teaching of Nestorius and Eutyches. The one incarnate nature of Jesus Christ to them does not mean that the humanity of Jesus Christ was absorbed in His divinity and thus ceased to exist, but that they were united without separation and without change and continued to exist in the union.
4. During and after the council of Chalcedon in 451, the Oriental Orthodox churches formed a family of churches since they did not accept the condemnation at this council of their St Dioscorus, the successor of St Cyril of Alexandria, and due to differences in expressing the mystery of incarnation of the Son of God. Now the misunderstanding that happened during the Council of Chalcedon is being removed and Christological agreements are being reached among Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian churches. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches has been involved for about four decades in bilateral theological dialogues with several other world Christian communions. In 1992 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches evaluated the results of bilateral dialogues and reaffirmed the significance of such dialogues for the future relationship of Christian churches in the world.
5. The Oriental Orthodox family of churches have been in recent years in theological dialogue with the eastern Orthodox family of churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran and Anglican churches. The unofficial dialogue with the eastern Orthodox started in 1964 and became official in 1985.
6. Informal conversations and contacts among the Reformed and Oriental Orthodox churches during earlier ecumenical gatherings eventually paved the way for officially organizing such dialogues between these two Christian communions. Unlike the Reformed churches, which have the World Alliance of Reformed Churches as a structure to promote international fellowship, the autocephalous Oriental Orthodox churches participating in this dialogue (namely, the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, the Armenian Apostolic Church [Catholicosate of All Armenians in Holy Etchmiadzin and Catholicosate of Cilicia in Antelias], the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church) do not have such a central structure, hence the decision to engage in conversations with the Reformed Christians had to be agreed to by each

- of the Oriental Orthodox churches. After an informal assurance that these churches were open to dialogue with the Reformed family, a formal letter of invitation was sent out by the general secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to the head of each of the churches in November 1991. In his letter the general secretary indicated that Reformed Christians were engaged in several other bilateral dialogues and that they were committed to work for Christian unity.
7. Such contacts and conversations led to a first meeting on August 27, 1992 among a group of authorized representatives of the Oriental Orthodox churches and representatives of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches at the Ecumenical Centre, Geneva, Switzerland, on the occasion of the central committee meeting of the World Council of Churches. This meeting was co-chaired by His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St Mark, and Dr Milan Opočenský, then general secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.
  8. The representatives of both families were of the opinion that they and their respective churches were enthusiastic about the possibility of engaging in dialogue and were committed to pursuing it with all sincerity and prayer so that these two families could move towards greater Christian fellowship. An invitation graciously extended by His Holiness Pope Shenouda III to hold the first meeting at Anba Bishoy Monastery, Wadi-El-Natroun, Egypt, from May 2 to 5 1993 was accepted, and the meeting was held accordingly.
  9. Subsequent meetings were held at “Kerk en Wereld”, Driebergen, The Netherlands from September 10 to 15 1994, at the invitation of the Netherlands Reformed Church; at the Sophia Center, Orthodox Theological Seminary, Kottayam, India from January 10 to 15 1997, 16. at the invitation of His Holiness the Catholicos Moran Mar Baselios Mar Thoma Matthews II of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church; and at Union Theological Seminary and the Presbyterian School of Christian Education, Richmond, Virginia, USA from January 10 to 15 1998, at the invitation of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and UTS/PSCE; at St Ephrem Syrian Orthodox Seminary, Ma’arat Saydnaya, Syria from January 10 to 15 1999, at the invitation of His Holiness Moran Mar Ignatius Zakka I, Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, at the Carberry Tower conference center, Musselburgh, Scotland from January 11 to 15 2000, at the invitation of the Church of Scotland, and at the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, Antelias, Lebanon from January 23 to 28 2001, at the invitation of His Holiness Catholicos Aram I, where this report was presented and discussed and then submitted for consideration, as the result of the seven sessions of the dialogue, to the churches represented on both sides of the dialogue. During these conversations both families were informed and challenged in the process of mutual understanding and listening to each other. The Oriental Orthodox churches, living in the eastern tradition, and the Reformed churches, originating from the western Latin tradition, have inherited different doctrinal approaches to the mystery of God, accompanied by differences and some misunderstandings of each other’s positions. Therefore, the objective of the dialogue has been to create an atmosphere of openness and sincerity in order to facilitate our witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, in accordance with the apostolic faith in the face of contemporary realities. So the dialogue started by dealing with the understanding of scripture and tradition in each other’s churches. But such a search was connected to the mission and ministry of the church today. Needless to say, the progress has been slow, but also productive.
  10. One of the highlights of these dialogues has been the adoption, at the session in Driebergen, The Netherlands, on 13 September 1994, of the agreed statement on Christology emerging from the biblical teaching and the patristic roots to which both the partners in dialogue owe their allegiance. This statement is reproduced below:

## AGREED STATEMENT ON CHRISTOLOGY

### Introduction

11. In our search for a common understanding of differences in Christology that have existed between us, we have thought it appropriate to focus upon the Formula of Union, AD 433. This formula represents an agreement reached by Antioch and Alexandria following the Third Ecumenical Council in 431, and as such, provides a common point of departure for both parties. We find the interpretations in this agreement to be in accord with the Christological doctrines in both of our traditions.

### Agreed Statement

12. “We confess our Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity consisting of a rational soul and a body, begotten of the Father before the ages according to his divinity, the Same, in fullness of time, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, according to his humanity; the Same, consubstantial with the Father, according to his divinity. For a union had been made of two natures. For this cause we confess one Christ, 14. one Son, one Lord.
13. “In accordance with this sense of the unconfused union, we confess the holy Virgin to be Theotokos, because God the Word became incarnate and was made human, and from the very conception united to himself the temple taken from her. As to the expressions concerning the Lord in the Gospels and Epistles, we are aware that theologians understand some as common, as relating to one Person, and others they distinguish, as relating to two natures, explaining those that befit the divine nature according to the divinity of Christ, and those of a humble sort

according to his humanity." [Based on the Formula of Union, AD 433]

14. The four adverbs used to qualify the mystery of the hypostatic union belong to our common Christological tradition: "without commingling" (or confusion) (*asynychytos*), "without change" (*atreptos*), "without separation" (*achoristos*), and "without division" (*adiaretos*). Those among us who speak of two natures in Christ are justified in doing so since they do not thereby deny their inseparable, indivisible union; similarly, those among us who speak of one united divine-human nature in Christ are justified in doing so since they do not thereby deny the continuing dynamic presence in Christ of the divine and the human, without change, without confusion.
15. Both sides agree in rejecting the teaching which separates or divides the human nature, both soul and body in Christ, from his divine nature or reduces the union of the natures to the level of conjoining. Both sides also agree in rejecting the teaching which confuses the human nature in Christ with the divine nature so that the former is absorbed in the latter and thus ceases to exist.
16. The perfect union of divinity and of humanity in the incarnate Word is essential for the salvation of the human race. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (Jn 3.16 KJV)

### **Conclusion**

17. In offering this statement, we recognize the mystery of God's act in Christ and seek to express that we have shared the same authentic Christological faith in the one incarnate Lord.
18. We submit this statement to the authorities of the Oriental Orthodox churches and to the executive committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches for their consideration and action.
19. Signatures of co-chairmen on behalf of the representatives of the two church families:

His Grace Metropolitan Bishoy, general secretary of the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church  
Rev. Dr Milan Opočenský, general secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches

### **CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES ON TRADITION AND HOLY SCRIPTURE, THEOLOGY, CHURCH AND MISSION, PRIESTHOOD/MINISTRY AND SACRAMENTS**

21. The particularity of the various dialogue sessions has been retained in the presentation of the third part of this report. This third part is organised on the basis of the themes addressed during these sessions. Thirty papers were presented, commented upon, discussed and analysed. Despite a variety of differences in the views of the two sides, areas of convergence have emerged.

### **Tradition and holy scripture**

22. The understanding of tradition and holy scripture by the two families was extensively discussed during the first, second and third sessions of the dialogue.

### **THE ORIENTAL ORTHODOX VIEW**

23. The Oriental Orthodox distinguish the tradition of the entire church regarding matters of faith from local traditions of the various churches. They understand both tradition and holy scripture as constituting one reality emerging from the continuing life of the church. Tradition must be essentially in agreement with the intention of holy scripture, and the authority of the fathers of the church is recognized from their acceptance by the church as a whole.

### **THE REFORMED VIEW**

24. While the Reformed churches respect the position of the Oriental Orthodox churches, they affirm the normative character of holy scripture, which itself embodies the "tradition", in the sense of what was received and handed down by the apostles (apostolic testimony). The Reformed churches affirm a critical distance of holy scripture in relation to "traditions", in the sense of teachings, practices, customs and interpretations of or alongside the one scriptural tradition. Hence, the church must always examine and reform its traditions in the light of holy scripture.

### **Areas of emerging convergence**

25. Both sides acknowledge the deep relationship between the early traditions (the total life) of the church, as guided by the Holy Spirit, and the emergence of holy scripture. The incarnate Word of God is both the source and the judge of the tradition and the holy scripture of the church which bear witness to him.
26. Both sides agreed on the normative function of holy scripture for the life of the church. The Word incarnate makes use of human means, including human language and culture. So holy scripture and its correct interpretation, guided by tradition, witnesses to the Word of God in our different contexts.

### **Areas needing further clarification**

27. It was recognized that the following areas need to be further clarified:

- Concepts of history and revelation, with special attention to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries historical-critical Bible study in the Reformed understanding
- Methods of interpreting holy scripture and evaluating tradition
- How our historical contexts affect our understanding of holy scripture
- The question of canonical books in our respective traditions
- Understanding of the holy scripture: its authority and its inspiration

#### **THE ROLE OF THE THEOLOGIAN IN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY**

28. The role and function of theology and the theologian in the community was discussed at the third session. The two families affirm that

- Almighty God's eternal divine essence cannot be comprehended. Human reason can approach God only when illumined by the Holy Spirit, through prayers and holy scripture.
- Theology is not only an act of thinking but should be practically related to life and to our salvation.
- A Christian theologian is one who is rooted in the faith community and nurtured by it.
- Theologians are called upon to express the beauty and splendour of the divine presence in their theological work. Story and poetry, music and iconography, art and architecture, rites and rituals have been used in various Christian traditions precisely to bring out this aesthetic dimension of theology.
- Our ultimate goal to reach a common theological understanding which is rooted in our Lord Jesus Christ, is based on the holy scriptures, and is related to the needs and sufferings of humanity at large.

#### **The nature of the church and her mission**

29. The nature of the church and her mission were among the themes discussed in the first and the fourth sessions. The Oriental Orthodox and the Reformed participants prepared statements expressing their views regarding this topic.

#### **THE ORIENTAL ORTHODOX VIEW**

30. Regarding the church, the Oriental Orthodox affirm that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone. We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Many names have been given to the church to describe her nature and mission. Some of these names are:

- The people of God (1 Pet 2.9)
- The mother of the believers (Gal 4.31)
- The body of Christ (1 Cor 12.27)
- The new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5.17)
- The bride of Christ (Rev 19.7; Mt 9.14-15)
- The dwelling place of Christ (Eph 2.21)
- The house of faith and salvation (2 Pet 3.20-21)
- The community of love and joy (1 Jn 3.14,16; 4.7,8)
- The communion of saints (Heb 12.1)
- The temple of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 6.19)
- The church of the first-born (Heb 12.23)
- The icon of heaven (Heb 8.5-6)

31. Unity is a natural characteristic of the church which reflects her unity with the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, and one baptism.

32. Unity in Christ harmonizes the diverse gifts of the Holy Spirit in our different contexts. The continuity of the church in Christ is maintained and guided by the Holy Spirit through the holy tradition and the apostolic succession. The renewal of the church is a constant growth and joy in this new life.

33. Regarding mission, the Oriental Orthodox affirm that the church, as the living body of Christ, constantly called together and renewed by the Holy Spirit, worships the triune God on behalf of all God's creation. This is mission in its totality. The good news (gospel) of Jesus Christ crucified and risen is the heart of the worshipping community. The church announces the gospel of life in diverse ways, always respecting the norm of God's love and compassion for the world. Proclamation of the Word of God is directed to bring about and foster the signs of the rule of God in human history. The good news of the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus Christ is proclaimed with the aim of bringing salvation to those who believe in him and are baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity. The church's prayer and pastoral care, struggle for justice and search for communion are all vital expressions of her participation in the mission of Jesus Christ, her Lord and Saviour. This redeeming mission calls upon members of the body of Christ to refrain from all forms of aggression and cultural domination in the name of Christ, and instead, to encourage healing and forgiveness, justice and human dignity, peace and mutual respect among all the peoples on earth. Our freedom in Christ as children of God enjoins us to be compassionately open to all human initiatives for realizing God's will for the created world. The ultimate form of the church's mission is to carry the whole creation in all its brokenness and misery before the transforming presence of the triune God in a perpetual act of praise and thanksgiving.

## **THE REFORMED VIEW**

34. According to the Reformed tradition the church is called together by Jesus Christ to be his body in the world through worship, service and witness. Together with believers through the ages, the Reformed confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and in him is their hope and peace. United by the Spirit to the risen Christ, our participation in the mission of the triune God flows out in service and witness to the world. Confessing the lordship of Jesus Christ over the church and the whole world, we affirm that we are called not for our benefit alone but for mission and service in the ministry of reconciliation. In response to that call we participate in the mission of the triune God, through which God is at work redeeming and perfecting the whole of creation. As we grow into the likeness of the triune God, we are conscious that we are called to grow in fellowship with those who confess the name of Christ, and also to join and welcome those of other faiths and worldviews who work in God's mission. In order to communicate the Christian faith, we have the task of translating the message in different cultural contexts, in ways which are both appropriate and authentic. This is an ongoing task which involves both teaching and listening, a task done in obedience to Christ who draws everything together in him.
35. We are aware that we have sinned and fallen short of all that God calls us to do and to be. However, recognizing the power of God's forgiveness, and confident that God will reconcile all things in heaven and earth, we press on in hope towards the goal where every tear will be wiped from every eye and God will be all in all (Rev 21.4; 1 Cor. 15.28)

### **Areas of emerging convergence**

36. Transcends any attempt to describe it in purely historical or sociological terms. Biblical teachings, and titles and images of the church contained therein testify to the church's origin in the eternal purpose of God. Participating in the mission of Christ, the church 36. announces the gospel of life for the healing and redemption of all humanity.

### **Priesthood/ministry**

37. The fifth session of the dialogue was devoted to discussion of priesthood/ministry. It included papers and discussion on the understanding of this topic as well as the identification of points of agreement and disagreement on this matter.

## **THE ORIENTAL ORTHODOX UNDERSTANDING**

38. The Oriental Orthodox churches understand priesthood to be one of the seven sacraments of the church. It is a divine order and calling instituted by the Lord Jesus Christ when he ordained his twelve apostles: "Then Jesus said to them again: Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I also send you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained:" (Jn 20.21- 23). Also, during the Last Supper the Lord Jesus Christ gave his body and blood to the apostles and ordered them "do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11.24). This divine command of celebrating the holy eucharist with bread and wine links our priesthood to the priesthood of Melchizedek through Christ who is the High Priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. (Heb 6.20)
39. Priesthood in the Old Testament – The early patriarchs such as Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob offered sacrifices as the priests of the Lord. Their priesthood was exercised in a clear way. This same priesthood of the Old Testament was developed in an organized way through the Mosaic priesthood. It begins with the divine orders revealed to Moses after which he organized the priesthood of Aaron. Aaron's descendents were chosen from among the male Levites to serve as priests.
40. Priesthood in the New Testament – In the New Testament priesthood was not cancelled but changed from the Levites' priesthood to the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek: "For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must be also a change of the law" (Heb 7.12).
41. The Lord chose a special group of believers. He ordained them and called them his apostles (Lk 6.13, Jn 15.16). He entrusted to them the responsibility of leading his church. He appointed them to tend to his flock, leading them into the path of truth and salvation (Mt 28.20). He gave them the power to hold and absolve sins (Mt 18.18), and to administer the sacraments for the believers.
42. The apostles in turn gave these gifts to their successors, the bishops, by the laying of hands (Acts 20.28). They charged them to instruct and teach the faithful and to ordain presbyters and deacons: "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you" (Titus 1.5). See also 1 Tim 6.2.
43. The apostles understood themselves to be priests, and as such, ministers of the sacraments of God: "To be a minister of Christ Jesus to the gentiles with the priestly duty proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (Rom 15.16).
44. Jesus Christ on the cross, not as separate from the holy eucharist, but indeed shown and expressed in the holy eucharist. The Lord Jesus Christ said regarding the eucharistic cup: " This cup is the new testament in my blood" (Lk 22.20 and 1 Cor 11.25). St Paul also writes the following: "For as often as you eat this bread, and drink this cup, you do show the Lord's death till he comes" (1 Cor 11.26).
45. If Jesus Christ is the High Priest after the order of Malchizedek, who used bread and wine for his offering, it follows necessarily that the priesthood of the New Testament is an office to celebrate the holy eucharist by offering

- bread and wine. This eucharistic offering is not a repetition of the sacrifice of the cross, but is the sacrifice of the cross present in the church everywhere and in all generations, beyond time and space limitations.
46. The Lord Jesus Christ commanded his apostles: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mat. 28: 19). The apostles were able to ordain baptized believers as bishops, priests and deacons even out of gentiles without being necessarily descendents of the people of Israel. This was prophetically mentioned in the Old Testament: " And they shall declare my glory among the gentiles. And they shall bring all your brethren for an offering unto the Lord out of all nations. ...And I will also take of them for priests and levites, says the Lord" (Is 66.19-21).
  47. Spiritual priesthood - Any believer in Christ can offer up spiritual sacrifices to God. This applies to both Old Testament and New Testament, as is written: "Let my prayer be set forth before You as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice" (Ps 141.2) and "By Him therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name" (Heb 13.15). But this does not mean that those who are offering spiritual sacrifices, like praying and praising the Lord and helping the poor, are official priests offering the eucharistic sacrifice and ministering in the church.
  48. A kingdom of priests - It was equally mentioned in the Old Testament and the New Testament that the people of God are a kingdom of priests: " And you shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6) and "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people" (1 Pet 2.9). This does not imply at all that the whole people of God are officially priests serving the altar in the church.
  49. In view of the last two points we can understand (1 Pet 2.5): "You also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ."
  50. Threefold priesthood - While we acknowledge the spiritual priesthood of all believers in Christ, three ranks of priesthood - episcopos, presbyter and deacon - were instituted in the holy church through the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Tim 3.5; Titus 1.5; Acts 6.5-6).
  51. The role of laity - The participation and involvement of the faithful in the whole liturgical and sacramental life of the church is very important and this is always affirmed throughout the life and witness of the church.
  52. The dual role of the priesthood: In offering the holy eucharist the priest acts as the representative of the whole creation. Priest represents the people of the church in front of God and represents God in front of the people and he performs his service by the power of the Holy Spirit.
  53. Laying on of hands and apostolic succession: Laying on of hands was practised by the apostles for different purposes. It is not used only for ordination, but for many other purposes - for blessing the people as Jesus has done with the children (Mt 19.13), for healing the sick (Mk 15.18), for confirmation (Acts 8.15-17) and for ordination (Acts 6.2, 6.6; Acts 13.3; 1 Tim 4.14; 1 Tim 5.22).
  54. The authority of laying on of hands for ordination, consecration and confirmation was confined to the apostles so that Philip, the ordained deacon and preacher, after baptizing the people of Samaria could not lay hands on them to grant them the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the church sent the apostles St Peter and St John especially to Samaria to pray and lay hands upon the people in order to receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 6.5; 8.5, 12, 14-17). The apostles passed on the authority of laying of hands to some of the presbyters whom they have ordained by making them bishops who were able to ordain presbyters (1 Tim 5.22; Titus 1.5).
  55. This apostolic succession remained unbroken in the church as the Lord has promised: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit- fruit that will last" (Jn 15.16).
  56. Service of women in the church - Women are honoured in the church and can become saints who are venerated at all levels. St Mary is the most venerated saint in the church, but she was not a priest serving the altar. They can serve as deaconesses without having a priestly order. They do not serve in the sanctuary or officiate at the sacraments of the church, but they can help the bishop and the priest in many pastoral offices. Women can be prophets, but cannot be priests or teachers of the church.
  57. The church is following the teachings of the holy scriptures which declare that the man is the head of the woman although they are equal in nature: "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God" (1 Cor 11.3; see also Eph 5.22,23,32). Also, the holy scriptures tell us that women are not allowed to teach men or have authority over them (1 Tim 2.11, 15; 1 Cor 14.33,34-38). There were no women priests in the Old Testament, too. The icon of Christ and the church can be seen in the relation of man and woman in the church.

#### **THE REFORMED UNDERSTANDING**

58. The Reformed understanding of ministry begins with the ministry of the whole people of God who, as the body of Christ, continue Christ's ministry to the world. This ministry, empowered by the Holy Spirit, follows the pattern of Christ's threefold ministry of prophet, priest and king through the proclamation of the faith, the practice of Christian love and the search for justice and peace in the world. This ministry is the privilege and responsibility of every believer by virtue of their baptism into Christ. In this context the Reformed tradition speaks of the "priesthood of all believers". In addition to the general priesthood of all believers the Reformed tradition also maintains a ministry of elders. Elders are chosen and appointed from the congregation to form a conciliar body that is responsible for spiritual discipline, the exercise of public worship and the governance of the life of the church.

59. The Reformed tradition also maintains a particular ministry of the word and sacrament. This ministry is bestowed on those who the church recognises as being called and empowered by God to be set apart to this function. The minister of word and sacrament is an elder with a particular responsibility for teaching and the celebration of the sacraments. There is equality between teaching elders (ministers of word and sacrament) and the ruling elders. The ministry of word and sacrament is vital for the upbuilding of the church and the edification of God's people. The importance of this ministry can be demonstrated by reference to the traditional Reformed criteria for the recognition of a true church, namely a church exists wherever the Word of God is faithfully preached and heard and the sacraments administered according to the Word of God.
60. Admittance to the ministry of word and sacrament follows the preparation of the candidate through a programme of theological training and examination by the church. Ordination to the ministry of word and sacrament requires the call of God's people and is administered by a prayer of invocation of the Holy Spirit and the laying on of hands by elders of the church. In this unrepeatable act of ordination the ministry is formally entrusted to the ordinand and the ordinand vows to be faithful to God in their practice of ministry. Most Reformed churches ordain both women and men to the ministry of word and sacrament. On the basis of their one baptism and their participation in the priesthood of all believers women and men are called by the Holy Spirit to the ordained ministry.
61. The Reformed tradition regards the institutional expression of ministry as belonging to the *bene esse* of the life of the church rather than the *esse*. As such the precise organization and pattern of ministry is in principle revisable as the church responds, under the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit and in faithfulness to the scriptures, to changing historical circumstances. Generally speaking, member churches of the Reformed family do not have a personal episcopate. The exercise of episcopate is vested in communal and conciliar bodies where ruling elders and teaching elders are represented on equal basis. The Reformed tradition believes itself to be in continuity with the faith of the apostles as evidenced by its proclamation of the gospel, its celebration of the sacraments, its acceptance of the creeds and its service to the world.

#### **Points of agreement**

62. Both traditions acknowledge that the Lord Jesus Christ is the foundation of all ministry in the church.
63. The celebrant of the sacraments in the church should be an ordained priest/minister who should have a special gift through the power of the Holy Spirit.
64. Baptism and eucharist are accepted sacraments in each tradition in spite of the difference in understanding of the essence and implications of these sacraments. These differences require further discussion.
65. Spiritual/universal priesthood (as distinct from official ordained priesthood in the Oriental Orthodox understanding) is granted to all who believe in Christ, including men and women.
66. Conciliarity of the church and conciliar forms of government are expressed and practised in both traditions.

#### **Points of disagreement**

##### **THE ORIENTAL ORTHODOX VIEW**

67. The concept of priesthood in the Oriental Orthodox differs from the Reformed tradition. The Oriental Orthodox believe in a clear distinction between the official priesthood and the spiritual priesthood of all believers in Christ in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.
68. The unbroken apostolic succession by the laying on of hands is essential for the continuity of priestly ministry in the church.
69. The bishop is the successor of the apostles. Only the bishop is entitled to perform ordination by the laying on of hands.
70. Three ranks of priesthood, namely bishop, priest and deacon, are clear and distinct in the Oriental Orthodox tradition from the beginning of the early church.
71. In order that the Lord Jesus Christ should be believed as the High Priest after the order of Melchizedek, it follows necessarily that there should be also priests in the church offering the eucharist using bread and wine.
72. The priestly offering of the eucharist makes the sacrifice of the cross present everywhere and in every generation beyond space and time limitations, and as such is not understood as a repetition of the sacrifice of the Lord on the cross.
73. The following seven sacraments are recognized and practiced in the life of the church: baptism, confirmation, repentance and confession, holy eucharist, matrimony, anointing the sick and priesthood.
74. The ordination of women to priestly ministry is unacceptable based on the teachings of the holy scriptures.

##### **THE REFORMED VIEW**

75. It is a common Reformed understanding that a uniform church order which is universally applicable in all times and all places cannot be found in the New Testament. The Reformed understanding of holy scripture does not necessarily suggest the practice of a hierarchical pattern of ministry. The Reformed churches assert that they are in continuity with the succession of apostolic faith. The uninterrupted episcopal succession does not in itself guarantee the pure proclamation of the gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments.
76. In relation to the ministry of word and sacrament, Reformed churches affirm that the ordained minister does not

differ from any other believer except in function. The ordained minister does not possess a distinct character or "imprint". The ordained ministry belongs to the wellbeing of the church (*bene esse*). Since the priestly ministry has been fulfilled by Christ, a minister of a Reformed church does not perform any special priestly function. The Reformed tradition asserts that the power to ordain is not vested in an individual person or office but belongs communally to the church. The call of God, adequate ministerial formation and the invocation of the Holy Spirit are the indispensable prerequisites for ordination. The act of ordination does not simply depend on the "laying on of hands".

77. Most Reformed churches do not agree that the ordained ministry is withheld from women. According to the Reformed understanding there are no biblical or theological reasons for denying ordination to women.

### **Sacraments**

78. The last two sessions of the Oriental Orthodox-Reformed dialogue discussed extensively the doctrine, number and practice of the sacraments in the two families. Variations and differences between the two traditions concerning the nature and number of the sacraments were openly expressed.

### **THE ORIENTAL ORTHODOX VIEW**

79. The Oriental Orthodox family of churches believes in seven sacraments; namely, baptism, chrismation, repentance and confession, eucharist, priesthood, marriage (matrimony) and unction of the sick..
80. A sacrament performed by a canonically ordained priest in a concrete form of a special material is an unseen work of the Holy Spirit.
81. The role of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments is essential because the gifts of God are "from the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit." (Saint Athanasius wrote: "The Father does all things through the Word in the Holy Spirit", First Letter to Serapion, Chapter 28, "Concerning the Holy Spirit" - Shapland pp.134/135).
82. The minister of the sacrament is the steward of God as is written by St Paul: "Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor 4.1), "For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God" (Titus 1.7).
83. In the Oriental Orthodox presentations, the role of the Holy Spirit in the seven sacraments was clarified based on the holy scripture. Therefore, the role of the Holy Spirit cannot be divided from the sacraments.
84. The sacraments of the church are experienced as a life that one lives inside the church and not as something that one just hears about. One tastes its efficacy and experiences its effect in his life, and the more he experiences such effect the more his belief in it increases.

### **THE REFORMED VIEW**

85. The two sacraments administered by the Reformed churches, baptism and the eucharist, are always celebrated in the context of worship. A major difference between the two families is in the number of sacraments observed. Although the Reformed tradition does not recognise marriage, ordination, confirmation and confession and onction as sacraments, their importance as religious ordinances is not ignored. For example, our worship books contain several different orders of worship such as morning prayer, Sunday public worship (including confession and eucharist), baptism, wedding, memorial service, ordination, installation, healing, and confirmation. These rich and varied liturgical practices show that we have these rites in common with the Oriental Orthodox family. From the perspective of our lay people or members, these ceremonies are very important.
86. For the Reformed family of churches, two of these practices are dominical sacraments, namely baptism and eucharist. Based on the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ (Mt 26.26-28; 28.18-20), we regard them as means of grace made available by God to all people through the church. While affirming that baptism and the eucharist are essential, we do not limit God's grace to these means. God's power to save is in God's hands alone.
87. In which way are the sacraments means of salvation? We understand grace to be communicated by God, not in any automatic way. We do not believe there is anything mechanical about the process of God's salvation. In the final analysis, it is God's grace rather than human action and it is normally a lifelong commitment.
88. Word and sacrament are very closely linked in the Reformed tradition: "It is the efficacy of the word that is brought to light in a sacrament, for a sacrament is a proclamation of the gospel - different in form, but not in function, from the preaching of the word".
89. Reformed liturgies were developed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the protestant Reformers, confronted with worship practices they considered unacceptable, went back to the original sources of scriptures and worship practices of the early church. Over the centuries, there have been renewed attempts to reappropriate the biblical meaning of worship. Such changes are implemented by the highest synodal levels of our churches. They involve lengthy consultations with theological experts and church members.
90. Reformed churches regarded the full participation of lay people as essential to both sacraments. The administration includes always lay and clergy participation. They are in fact corporate acts of the congregation. For instance, baptism liturgies commit parents and the congregation equally to the Christian nurture and development of a child. Lay people participate together with the ministers in the preparation for the sacraments. In the eucharist, this includes prayer, confession and proclamation.

## **Emerging convergence**

91. While differing on many points concerning the number and nature of the sacraments, both families affirm that the sacraments are the gracious gifts of God for nourishing and maintaining the life of the church and for strengthening her union with Christ.

## **CONCLUSION**

92. Our seven sessions of dialogue have been only the beginning of a process of acquaintance and mutual knowledge between two Christian traditions that have never officially engaged in dialogue with each other before. Centuries of separation and minimal or non-interaction on the ecclesiastical, theological and spiritual levels - but also on the cultural level - have made our dialogue both exciting and slow. Exciting, because we felt that we were breaking new ground by simply getting to know each other and how we understand and express our Christian and ecclesial identities. Slow, because we realized that we needed to catch up with each other on many levels and required much more time together to bear lasting fruit in our encounters. Nevertheless, the results we did achieve were quite significant and certainly historic, eg, the agreement on Christology that resolved a centuries-old theological controversy. We realize that there are many areas of theological difference which still exist and need further dialogue.
93. The Oriental Orthodox-Reformed dialogue has already given the opportunity to discuss issues of mutual concern. None can foresee the results clearly today. Any activity intending church unity is an answer to the call of Jesus Christ that churches exhibit Christian unity in order to bear witness to his mission in the world. Who knows how the Holy Spirit has led this dialogue in planting unity among the Reformed and the Oriental Orthodox families of churches in generations to come? Hope for Christian unity is both present and future. We pray that God may use us for the fulfilment of this hope.
94. We submit this Report to the authorities of the Oriental Orthodox churches and to the executive committee of the World Alliance of Reformed churches for their consideration and action.

## **Appendix I: papers presented**

### **First session: Anba Bishoy Monastery, Wadi-El Natroun (Egypt), May 2-5, 1993**

Introduction to the Oriental Orthodox churches (Bishop Matta Roham Mar Eustathius)

The main characteristics of the Reformed churches (Dr Karel Blei) Oriental Orthodox view of tradition and scripture (Pope Shenouda III)

A Reformed view on tradition and scripture (Dr Silke-Petra Bergjan)

The nature and the mission of the church: an Oriental Orthodox view (Dr Kondothra M George)

The nature and the mission of the church: a Reformed view (Dr Samuel Habib)

### **Second session: Driebergen (The Netherlands), September 10-15, 1994**

Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries (Dr George Sabra)

A survey of the recent bilateral agreements between the Oriental (non-Chalcedonian) Orthodox churches and the Eastern Orthodox church and other Christian communions (Metropolitan Bishoy)

The bilateral agreements between the Oriental Orthodox and the Eastern Orthodox: a Reformed response (Dr Silke-Petra Bergjan)

Tradition and its role in the Syrian Orthodox Church (Bishop Matta Roham Mar Eustathius)

Holy Scripture and tradition: a Reformed perspective (Dr Rebecca Weaver)

Holy Scripture: its use and misuse from an Oriental Orthodox perspective (Dr Kondothra M George)

The use and abuse of the Scriptures in relation to mission, evangelism and proselytism from a Reformed perspective (Dr Peter McEnhill)

### **Third session: Sophia Centre, Kottayam (India), January 10-15, 1997**

Theology and Theologian: their Function and Authority in the Orthodox Church (Dr Kondothra M. George)

The Beauty and Service of Theology (Dr Milan Opočenský)

A Brief History of the Reformed churches in India (Dr Franklyn J Balasundaram)

Holy Scripture, its authority and its inspiration (Dr Karel Blei)

### **Fourth session: Richmond, Virginia (USA), January 9-16, 1998**

Mission: An Oriental Orthodox Perspective (Dr M George Kondothra George)

The Nature of the Church from a Reformed Perspective (Dr Christopher B Kaiser)

Some Key Issues in Contemporary Mission Debate (Dr HS Wilson)

### **Fifth session: St Ephrem Syrian Orthodox Seminary, Ma'arat Saydnaya (Syria), January 10-15, 1999**

The Understanding of Ministry in the Reformed Tradition (Dr Peter McEnhill)

Ministry in the Orthodox Tradition (His Grace Archbishop Aphrem Karim Mar Cyril)

**Sixth session: Musselburgh, Scotland, January 11-16, 2000**

Introduction to the Sacraments of the Church (Metropolitan Bishoy)  
The Mystery/Sacrament of Baptism (Very Rev. Nareg Alemezian)  
Introduction to the Sacrament of Holy Liturgy/Eucharist (Geevarghese Mar Coorilos)  
An Interrogation of the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist (Dr J Jayakiran Sebastian)  
The Reformed Understanding of the Sacraments (Dr George Sabra)

**Seventh session: Catholicosate of Cilicia in Antelias, Beirut (Lebanon), January 23-28, 2001**

Introduction to the Sacraments: an Oriental Orthodox Perspective (Metropolitan Yohanna Ibrahim Mar Gregorios)

## Appendix II: participants

### *Oriental Orthodox*

#### **In the 1992 planning meeting**

His Holiness Pope Shenouda III (Co-chair), Patriarch of Alexandria, Coptic Orthodox Church  
His Grace Archbishop Aram Keshishian, Armenian Apostolic Church  
Dr Kondothra M George, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church  
His Grace Metropolitan Yohanna Ibrahim Mar Gregorios, Syrian Orthodox Church  
His Grace Archbishop Timotheos, Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

#### **In the dialogue sessions held between 1993 and 2001**

His Holiness Pope Shenouda III (Co-chair), Patriarch of Alexandria, Coptic Orthodox Church [1993, 1994]  
His Grace Metropolitan Bishoy (Co-chair from 1997), Coptic Orthodox Church [1993, 1994, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001]  
Very Rev. Father Nareg Alemezian, Armenian Apostolic Church [1999, 2000, 2001]  
His Grace Bishop Vicken Aykazian, Armenian Apostolic Church [1993, 1997, 1998]  
His Grace Bishop Dirayr Panossian, Armenian Apostolic Church [1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001]  
His Grace Bishop Moussa, Coptic Orthodox Church [1993, 1994, 1997]  
His Grace Bishop Serapion, Coptic Orthodox Church [1993]  
His Grace Bishop Youssef, Coptic Orthodox Church [1998]  
His Grace Bishop Antony, Coptic Orthodox Church [2000]  
His Grace Archbishop Abuna Kerlos, Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church [2000]  
Rev. Seife Selassie Yohannes, Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church [1994, 2000]  
His Grace Geevarghese Mar Coorilos, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church [1993, 1994, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001]  
Dr Kondothra M George, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church [1993, 1994, 1997, 1998]  
His Eminence Metropolitan Philipos Mar Eusebius, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church [invited 1997]  
Mr PC Abraham, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church [invited 1997]  
Mrs P Lukose, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church [invited 1997]  
Father John Mathews, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church [invited 1997]  
Father John Thoma, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church [invited 1997]  
His Grace Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim Mar Gregorios, Syrian Orthodox Church [1998, 1999, 2000]  
His Grace Archbishop Aphrem Karim Mar Cyril, Syrian Orthodox Church [1998, 1999, 2000]  
His Grace Bishop Matta Roham Mar Eustathius, Syrian Orthodox Church [1993, 1994, 1999]

### *Reformed*

#### **In the 1992 planning meeting**

Dr Milan Opočenský (Co-chair). Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren  
Dr Silke-Petra Bergjan, Evangelical-Reformed Church, Germany Warc Staff  
Dr HS Wilson, Church of South India

#### **In the dialogue sessions held between 1993 and 2001**

Dr Milan Opočenský (Co-chair), Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren [1993, 1994, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000]  
Dr Jana Opocenska, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren [1993]  
Dr Silke-Petra Bergjan, Evangelical-Reformed Church, Germany [1993, 1994, 1999, 2000]  
Rev. Dr Karel Blei, The Netherlands Reformed Church [1993, 1994, 1997]  
Dr Samuel Habib, Synod of the Nile of the Evangelical Church, Egypt [1993]  
Rev. Dr Abdel Masih Istafanous, Synod of the Nile of the Evangelical Church, Egypt [1993]  
Dr Christopher Kaiser, Reformed Church in America [1994, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, Co-chair 2001]  
Dr Peter McEnhill, Church of Scotland, U.K. [1994, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001]

Dr George Sabra, National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon [1993, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2001]  
Dr J Jayakiran Sebastian, Church of South India [1993, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001]  
Dr Eugene Turner, Presbyterian Church (USA) [1993, 1994, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001]  
Dr Harold Vogelaar, Reformed Church in America [1993]  
Dr Rebecca Weaver, Presbyterian Church (USA) [1993, 1994, 1997, 1998, 1999]  
Rev. Emile Zaki, Synod of the Nile of the Evangelical Church, Egypt [1997, 2000]  
Dr HS Wilson [1999], Wartburg Theological Seminary, USA

*Consultant*

Dr Franklyn Balasundaram, Church of South India [1997]

*Visitors*

Rev. Dr CS Calian, Presbyterian Church (USA) [1998]  
Rev. Dr Victor Makari, Presbyterian Church (USA) [1998]

*Warc staff*

Dr HS Wilson, Church of South India [1993, 1994, 1997, 1998]  
Dr Odair Pedroso Mateus, Independent Presbyterian Church of Brazil [2000, 2001]