Living in communion: visible unity and the Porvoo Common Statement

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Abstract
Living in communion is no mere organizational measure; it means sharing in a common life that is anchored in love, solidarity and mutual accountability. In the classic vision of the ecumenical movement, this is expressed through the goal of a visible and structured unity. The Porvoo Common Statement, in providing the basis for fellowship between Anglican and Lutheran Churches in Europe, is comparable to this goal. However, on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the signing of the text, it should be asked if today’s Porvoo communion lives up to the aspirations in the Porvoo statement.

Keywords
Anglican–Lutheran fellowship, communion, ecumenism, Porvoo Common Statement, Porvoo communion, ‘reconciled denominationalism’, visible unity

Thanks to the Porvoo Common Statement (PCS), Anglican Churches in Great Britain and Ireland and Lutheran Churches in Scandinavia and the Baltic nations are in communion. Currently, this fellowship incorporates 15 members and one observer. Thus, Porvoo is one of the prime examples of accomplished unity across denominational borders. I had the fortune of serving on the team that authored PCS, representing the Church of Norway. In 2021, we celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the signing of the Porvoo statement.
There has been some discussion about how ‘full’ the achieved fellowship is. In my view, this is a largely pointless discussion. There is ‘communion’ and ‘no communion’ – or division. And there is certainly growth in communion. But ‘half-full’ or ‘half-empty’ communion are peculiar notions. Accordingly, we should assume that the Porvoo fellowship is ‘full’ and real, while possessing a potential as well as a need for continual progress.

Yet, open questions linger 25 years after the initial signing in 1996. What has PCS led to in the lives of the signatory Churches? Have the intentions of the text been kept up throughout the reception process? Does its outcome compare to the classic vision of the ecumenical movement? The following remarks are not intended as full answers to these issues, but rather as an invitation to reflect on whether this great gift of communion has been duly realized.

The ecclesiology of communion – vertical and horizontal

In the New Testament, communion primarily pertains to persons and groups of persons. However, this ‘personal’ approach can and should also be applied to Churches. The foundation is vertical and Trinitarian: in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, we are granted real koinonia with the Father. This includes participation in divine realities. Or, to express it with St Athanasius in De Incarnatione: God became man in order that we shall become God.

However, communion is no pie in the sky. It becomes manifest within a horizontal human community that transcends all man-made borders and is open to God’s creation as a whole. This is reflected in the Eucharist. In bread and wine everything is kept together: humanity and deity; creation and redemption; earth and heaven; past, present and future; physical food, especially for those who hunger, and spiritual nourishment.

The communio-ecclesiology depicts the Church as a vertically grounded, socially directed and ecumenically committed fellowship.2 As affirmed in the narrative of the first Church in Acts 4.33–35 (NIV), a life of mutual sharing and solidarity is at the core here:

God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

This is firmly founded in the Incarnation, Christ’s ‘emptying’ of himself in order to be our brother in everything life may bring. And while exposing evident parallels with the Marxist ideal ‘from each according to ability, to each according to need’, the earliest Christian practice is miles away from the gloomy contention that ‘there’s no such thing as society’.

Ecumenism is not about a political fusion, it is not an organizational concern, it does not aim at larger and allegedly more effective entities. It is about living unity
in him who ‘emptied’ himself for our sake, it is about sharing and solidarity, it is about ‘the bond of love which binds [everything] together in perfect unity’ (Col. 3.14). Despite disparities in context, the communion of the first Church sets the goal for our ecumenical endeavours.

Here it should be added that neither the Church nor its unity can be seen as ends in themselves; they are means to accomplish a greater good: the unity of human-kind and eventually of God’s creation in its totality. Here, our ‘hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God’ (Rom. 8.21) is at stake. This is what our ecumenical efforts ultimately aim at.

The unity vision of the ecumenical movement

I look back at the pioneers of the modern ecumenical movement with the deepest esteem and gratitude. For them, ecumenism was a burning passion and a yearning to fulfil God’s will, not an occupation – as it often has been for me – or some kind of pastime. Can we rekindle the flame, regain their profound passion, recover the longing for the gift of unity?

Within the ecumenical movement, having the World Council of Churches as its chief instrument, several vital statements that express its goal have been issued. However, 60 years after its pronouncement (here’s yet another anniversary!), the unity formula of the New Delhi General Assembly in 1961 in my view still holds a pivotal position. I quote:

We believe that the unity which is both God’s will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people.

A similar approach is expressed more recently in the Catholic–Lutheran dialogue text Facing Unity: models, forms and phases of Catholic–Lutheran church fellowship from 1984:

The unity of the church given in Christ and rooted in the Triune God is realized in our unity in the proclaimed word, the sacraments and the ministry instituted by God and conferred through ordination. It is lived both in the unity of the faith to which we jointly witness, and which together we confess and teach, and in the unity of hope and love which leads us to unite in fully committed fellowship. Unity needs a visible outward form which is able to encompass the element of inner differentiation and
spiritual diversity as well as the element of historical change and development. This is the unity of a fellowship which covers all times and places and is summoned to witness and serve the world. (§3, cited in PCS §26)

Here, we are taken far beyond the level of a static recognition or peaceful coexistence. Both the New Delhi formula and Facing Unity describe communion as a visible, structured and tangible entity. They envision a Church that is capable of serving as a forceful sign of unity in our divided world. Regrettably, this vision has been notably undermined in recent years.

Speaking of an ‘ecumenical winter’ may be a bit too harsh, but there is much evidence that our ecumenical commitment has been considerably weakened during the last few decades. This has a number of reasons – including internal tensions between ‘liberals’ and ‘conservatives’, particularly on ethical questions; pressures stemming from reduced membership and influence; the sad fact that some reunion proposals have stalled, and so on. Such challenges make the need for a real implementation of PCS even more pertinent.

Unity and diversity – a question of balance

Church unity should not be confused with uniformity. Rather, it embraces a substantial amount of diversity. And this diversity is not a solely practical or tactical concern; it is pneumatologically based – reflecting and conveying God’s rich gifts to us in the Holy Spirit. I quote from another Catholic–Lutheran dialogue statement, Ways to Community:

"Living unity in Christ is essentially manifold and dynamic. [It] does not exist despite and in opposition to diversity, but is given with and in diversity. The work of the one unifying Spirit of God does not begin with the uniting of the already separated, but rather creates and maintains diverse realities precisely in order to lead them into the unity of love. (§§33–4)"

However, ecclesial diversity is neither static nor stagnant; it is vibrant and vigorous – not least in the sense that it is directed towards continual growth in unity. Diversity is a great gift that must be treasured. But unity is a greater gift, for separated Churches as well as for a massively divided humanity. Occasionally, the commitment to visible and structured unity has been replaced with a notion of ‘churches that remain separate churches and yet become one church’. I have elsewhere described this as ‘reconciled denominationalism’, an approach that clearly falls short of the original vision of the ecumenical movement.

Unity and diversity must be properly balanced. They are both essential, but diversity belongs within a processual advance towards increasing unity. Moreover, the Church is a visible body – consequently, its unity requires visible embodiment. And there is a need to emphasize the crucial fact that the reunited Church lies beyond all present ecclesial realities.
What is the specific role of structures in building communion? First, ecclesial structures do exist, also where this is denied. And since they are often denominationally conditioned, they must be ecumenically reshaped. Second, structures provide frames for the common decision making that belongs to church unity. Third – and most importantly – structures are required in shaping, expressing and serving the visible nature of communion. This suggests that our ecumenical goal is best described as a visible unity in structured form.

Surely, Yves Congar is right in claiming that diversity is an ‘intrinsic value of unity’. But when unity vanishes, the value of plurality is diminished – at least in the context of the Church. Then diversity is converted into a static, if peaceful, coexistence where there is no progress in communion, no tangible or credible fellowship, and no effective sign of unity for a divided world. Here, two opposing ditches must be avoided: confusing communion with rigid uniformity, and detaching diversity from the goal of visible unity. Only when these impasses are avoided will our fellowship be able to make the world see and believe (John 17.21).

**Communion according to the Porvoo statement**

PCS plainly affirms the necessity and legitimacy of diversity, particularly in regard to its approach to the key question of apostolicity and apostolic succession. This point can be described, briefly, as follows: apostolicity should not be exclusively identified with one of its signs, the historical episcopal succession. This means that apostolic continuity can also be continued in periods when some of its signs are lost. However, *signum* and *res* – the sign and the ‘thing’ itself – should never be torn apart completely. And no Church can afford to neglect any feasible sign of the apostolic foundation that is essential to Christian life. Porvoo invites the involved Churches to share their varying signs of apostolicity within a living communion.

This points towards the following solution to a long-standing ecumenical challenge:

[Those churches in which the sign [of succession in the episcopal office] has at some time not been used are free to recognise the value of the sign and should embrace it without denying their own apostolic continuity. [While] those churches in which the sign has been used are free to recognise the reality of the episcopal office and should affirm the apostolic continuity of those churches in which the sign ... has at some time not been used. (PCS §57)]

Simultaneously, PCS describes church fellowship along these lines – emphasizing its visible nature:

[Disunity must be regarded as an anomalous situation. Despite our sins and schisms, the unity to which we are summoned has already begun to be manifested in the Church. It demands fuller visible embodiment in structured form, so that the Church may be seen to be, through the Holy Spirit, the one Body of Christ and]
the sign, instrument and foretaste of the Kingdom. In this perspective, all existing denominational traditions are provisional. (§22)

Having asserted that ‘visible unity ... should not be confused with uniformity’ (§23), PCS goes on to list ‘bonds of communion’ that are fundamental in visualizing fellowship:

Communion with God and with fellow believers is manifested in one baptism in response to the apostolic preaching; in the common confession of the apostolic faith; in the united celebration of the eucharist which builds up the one body of Christ; and in a single ministry set apart by prayer and the laying on of hands. This unity is also manifested as a communion in love, implying that Christians are bound to one another in a committed relationship with mutual responsibilities, common spiritual goods and the obligation to share temporal resources. (§24)

These ‘bonds’ are visible and concrete. PCS departs from a loose ‘mutual recognition’ and maintains the classic vision of the ecumenical movement. The word ‘visible’ pops up 17 times in total in the statement when church fellowship is described. In hindsight, the ‘structured form’ of communion could have been spelled out more explicitly. Here, references to an obligation to consult and permanent procedures for consultation, the necessity of making common decisions, amendments of existing church practices and laws, measures to secure the participation of God’s people as a whole, and so on would have been helpful. But the commitment to a visible, structured fellowship is amply clear in PCS.8

The Porvoo communion – its state and prospects

Living in communion means implementing what the Church is intended to be. This is a most profound and joyful experience. Yet, the transition to a shared communal life can be demanding. The needs and desires of others must be heeded, and all members of the unified ecclesial body are obliged to work towards the common good. Individual aspirations must yield to what serves the fellowship, and varying practices must be duly respected.

Within the Porvoo context, other challenges are added. First, we are dealing here with a considerable number of Churches with varying backgrounds and distinct traditions. Second, even within the two confessional families concerned there are notable divergences. Third, and most significantly, the signatories are located in different nations. With the exception of some congregations abroad, they are not neighbour Churches. Porvoo is a communion at a geographical distance, making visible manifestations complicated.

My knowledge of the current Porvoo work is limited.9 However, I belong to one of the member Churches and have to say that I hear little or nothing about the achieved fellowship – on either the national or the local level. I try to observe the frequent conferences and meetings that take place, but struggle a bit to find key
Porvoo concerns on the agenda. Even if the Porvoo prayer diary is an excellent initiative, these prayers have never been used in services I have attended. And I have the impression that the situation is pretty much the same in the other Porvoo Churches. The initial enthusiasm has faded; Porvoo appears to have ended up as an organizational project rather than a lived and living communion.

This fate is not unique for Porvoo. Quite a few of the current ecumenical enterprises have tended towards a stagnant diversity that lacks a sound prospect for continued growth in unity and a joint advance towards the fullness in Christ. Far too often we endorse solutions that in effect come close to ‘reconciled denominationalism’. I ask if the ecumenical movement has become a victim of its own, relative, success: fierce animosity across church borders is a rare thing today, making it easier to settle for a friendly but static coexistence. The goal of a visible and structured communion largely appears to have been stranded in oblivion.

I cannot offer solutions to these challenges, but I dare to propose some steps for consideration. First, the classic unity vision of the ecumenical movement – as expressed in the New Delhi statement, the Lima document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, and texts from bilateral dialogues such as Facing Unity and Ways to Community, among others – must be reaffirmed. Renewal is needed in our search for fellowship, but not a constant reinvention of the wheel. Second, a processual approach where unity is realized through successive stages and intermediate steps must be put into practice. An ‘all or nothing’ attitude, assuming that we have either ‘full’ communion or no communion whatsoever, is a dead end. Third, our ecumenical endeavours must be directed at and measured against the needs of humanity as a whole, a divided world and a wounded creation. Only a Church that serves as an effective and tangible unity sign can respond fully to these needs.

Turning more specifically to Porvoo, it is my impression that recent activities are losing their foothold in the text that was signed 25 years ago. I may be wrong, but I have a feeling that the Porvoo communion is in danger of drifting away from the Porvoo Common Statement. This is an impasse; without PCS there can be no Porvoo communion. A renewed study, assessment and affirmation of PCS is necessary. Such a study should not settle with repetitions; PCS must be actualized and further developed. However, its key concern – the commitment to visible, structured unity – must be maintained. This would be a fruitful way to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the signing of PCS in Trondheim, Tallin and London.

Among the members of the commission that drafted PCS, there were differing views. Yet, we shared a joint determination: we were aiming at more than friendly coexistence; we sought and longed for a full and perceptible life in communion. This aspiration has only partly been accomplished in the post-Porvoo process. But it is never too late, for nobody wants fellowship as passionately and resolutely as God. He has already granted us a basic unity in Christ. And he calls us to develop and visualize this unity, for the sake of his world. If Porvoo needs a new beginning, this is already available in God’s design.
I conclude with a quote from PCS that expresses this far better than I am able to:

Our times demand something new of us as churches. Our agreement . . . has implications for the ways in which we respond to the challenge of our age. We have come to see more clearly that we are not strangers to one another, but ‘fellow-citizens with God’s people, members of God’s household . . . built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone’ (Eph. 2.19–20). By the gift of God’s grace we have been drawn into the sphere of God’s will to reconcile to himself all that he has made and sustains (II Cor. 5.17–19), to liberate the creation from every bondage (Rom. 8.19–22) and to draw all things into unity with himself (Eph. 1.9f). God’s ultimate purpose and mission in Christ is the restoration and renewal of all that he has made, the coming of the Kingdom in its fullness. (§14)

Notes

1. Conversations between the British and Irish Anglican Churches and the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches: the Porvoo Common Statement (London: Council for Christian Unity, 1993) <http://porvoocommunion.evlutkirkko.fi/porvoo_communion/statement/the-statement-in-english/> (accessed 7 April 2021). On the contents and theological vision of PCS, cf. Ola Tjørhom (ed.), Apostolicity and Unity: essays on the Porvoo Common Statement (Grand Rapids MI and Geneva: Eerdmans and WCC Publishing, 2002). The name of the statement reflects that its drafting was completed in Porvoo (Borgå), Finland.

2. See Ola Tjørhom, ‘The ecclesiology of communion: on the Church as a vertically grounded, socially directed and ecumenically committed fellowship’, The Heythrop Journal, Vol. 51, no. 6 (2010), pp. 893–900.

3. On this compelling story, cf. Ruth Rose, The History of the Ecumenical Movement: 1517 to 1948 (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1967). See also the essays on history in Paul McPartlan and Geoffrey Wainwright (eds), The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies (Oxford and New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2021).

4. Ways to Community (1981) was originally published in German as Wege zur Gemeinschaft in 1980.

5. Approaches that point towards ‘reconciled denominationalism’ have mainly occurred among continental European Protestants (‘Ökumene in Gegensätzen’, ‘ein geordnete Miteinander bekenntnisverschiedener Kirchen’, etc.), but a similar view is – interestingly – expressed in the earlier writings of Joseph Ratzinger. On these ideas and the relationship between unity and diversity in general, cf. Ola Tjørhom, ‘A question of balance; unity and diversity in the life of the Church’, Pro Ecclesia, Vol. 15, no. 2 (2006), pp. 186–205.

6. See Yves Congar, Diversity and Communion (London: SCM Press, 1980), p. 40.

7. The approach to apostolicity in PCS, sometimes referred to as an ecumenical breakthrough, is discussed in Ola Tjørhom, ‘Apostolicity and apostolic succession in the Porvoo Common Statement: necessary or a mere “optional extra” in the Church’s life?’ in Tjørhom (ed.), Apostolicity and Unity, pp. 162–81.
8. It should be noted that Porvoo’s account of communion is anchored in a biblically grounded ‘portrait of a Church living in the light of the Gospel’ (PCS §20). This rich ecclesiological portrait is recommended for study.

9. For updated information on the work of the Porvoo communion, see <http://porvoo communion.org>.

10. A collection of essays was issued on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of Porvoo. See Beate Fagerli, Leslie Nathaniel and Tomi Karttunen (eds), Towards Closer Unity: communion of the Porvoo Churches 20 years (Helsinki: Porvoo Communion of Churches, 2016). This volume contains many important contributions, but few of them aim explicitly at a development of PCS. For more on this, see Ola Tjørhom, ‘The demise of visible unity: challenges in the implementation of the Anglican–Lutheran Porvoo statement’, Pro Ecclesia, Vol. 27, no. 1 (2018), pp. 70–80.

11. World Council of Churches, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982) <www.anglicancommunion.org/media/102580/lima_document.pdf>.

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