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**A Response by the Commission on Christian Unity
of the Massachusetts Council of Churches to
The Authority of the Church in the World,
a Faith and Order Study Document
of the National Council of Churches in Christ, USA**

May 5, 2009

**Purpose and
Composition of
the Commission**

1

1. Beginning in October 2008 and continuing through April 2009, **the Commission on Christian Unity of the Massachusetts Council of Churches met five times to study and develop this formal response** to

4 the National Council of Churches in Christ, USA Faith and Order Study Document, the 2004-2007
5 text, *The Authority of the Church in the World*. The Rev. John Castricum, serves as Commission Chair,
6 Dr. Brian Flanagan serves as Secretary, and Laura Everett, Associate Director of the Mass. Council
7 of Churches staffs the Commission on Christian Unity.

8

9 **2. The Commission on Christian Unity (CCU) addresses Faith and Order matters** as part of
10 the mission of the Massachusetts Council of Churches. The Commission is composed of
11 ecumenists, pastors, and scholars who are the officially designated representatives of the following
12 Christian judicatories: the American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts; the Diocese of the
13 Armenian Church in America (Eastern); the Eparchy of Newton, Melkite; the Episcopal Dioceses of
14 Massachusetts and Western Massachusetts; the Evangelical Covenant Churches, East Coast
15 Conference; the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, New England Synod; the Greek
16 Orthodox Metropolis of Boston, Massachusetts; the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ;
17 the Malankara (Indian) Orthodox Church; the Presbyterian Church, (USA) Synod of the Northeast;
18 the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, and the Roman Catholic Dioceses of Fall River,
19 Springfield and Worcester, Massachusetts; the Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese of America and
20 Canada; the Council of Christian Churches Within the Unitarian Universalist Association; the United
21 Church of Christ, Massachusetts Conference; and the United Methodist Church, New England
22 Conference.

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24 **3.** This Response will be shared not only with the Office of Faith and Order of the National Council
25 of Churches in Christ, but also with the national ecumenical offices of the judicatories represented
26 on the Commission.

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**The Choice of
*the Authority of
the Church in
the World***

4. During 2006-2008, the CCU studied and responded to World Council of
Churches Faith and Order Study Document, Paper 199, (2005), *Christian
Perspectives on Theological Anthropology*. In Massachusetts, questions of

31 theological anthropology and the varying views of the churches were especially prominent during
32 the debates around the legalization of same-sex marriage in our state. Additionally, the

1 Massachusetts Council of Churches has a long history of engagement in political issues such as the
 2 environment, tax policy, church/state relations, death penalty opposition and gambling expansion,
 3 on behalf of the member churches. In order to assist the churches in their common Christian
 4 witness in public life, the members of the Commission on Christian Unity decided to study *the*
 5 *Authority of the Church in the World* during the program year 2008-2009.

6

Process for Dialogue

5. Commission members chose **guidelines for dialogue** that included a
 commitment to speak with the voice of their traditions while recognizing the
 9 diversity of approach and method among traditions and even within a particular tradition. They also
 10 agreed to use the categories for ecumenical conversation of “resonance, dissonance and
 11 nonsonance” developed by John T. Ford,¹ and also used by the Faith and Order Commission of the
 12 National Council of Churches.

6. The CCU process for discussion of the text closely follows the format set out by the National
 Council of Churches in Christ Faith and Order Commission in the text, *Ancient Faith and American-
 16 Born Churches*. A commissioner or group of commissioners from the same tradition were asked to
 17 submit a response paper for their designated section in advance of the meeting. At the meeting, the
 18 response paper was presented detailing where there was resonance, dissonance or nonsonance from
 19 the presenter’s tradition. Fellow commissioners were then invited to reflect on the response paper
 20 from the perspective of their own tradition.

Date	“Authority of the Church in the World”	Primary Presenter
Tuesday October 7, 2008		
Tuesday November 4, 2008	Preamble, Section I “Introduction” pgs. 1-4 & Section II “Authority in Christian Teaching pgs 4-9	Evangelical Covenant Church
Tuesday December 2, 2008	Section III “The Church in Authority” pgs 9-18	Roman Catholics
Saturday January 24, 2009	MCC Annual Meeting	
Tuesday February 3, 2009	Section IV “The World” pgs 18- 26	Episcopalians
Tuesday March 3, 2009	Section V “Exercising the Authority of the Church in the World” pg 26-29 and MCC	Orthodox

¹ Ford, John T., “Learning the Language of Ecumenism,” *Ecumenical Trends*, 26/9, (October 1997), pp. 139-143.

	1996 doc “Christian Political Responsibility”	
Tuesday March 31, 2009	Review of collected minutes and draft report to NCCC	
Tuesday May 5, 2009-	Plenary meeting	

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**Preamble &
Section I
“Introduction”**

7. We began the formal discussion of the text on Election Day

5 November 4, 2008 and ended the session by signing the hymn promoted
6 by the National Council of Churches in Christ USA, “In Times of Great Decision.” Turning to the
7 text itself, the commissioners concurred with the assessment that authority is a “vexing problem for
8 the Church.” Someone representing the evangelical tradition opined that not all of their number
9 would agree with the statement of the cover letter that, “there can be no doubt but that visible unity
10 among the churches would enable a more credible witness in the world,” which suggests that there is
11 a continued need to proclaim Christ’s prayer for unity (Introduction).

11

12 8. The primary presenter for the day briefly noted the separation and attraction between American
13 evangelical churches and political life. Rev. Douglas Cederberg of the Evangelical Covenant Church
14 wrote “the injunction uttered by Jesus in Matthew 22:21 (Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s
15 and give to God the things that are God’s) is the key issue for evangelical Christians regarding the
16 authority of the church in the world.” A number of other traditions resonated with this assessment
17 and pointed to conflicts within the denominations about what are appropriate levels of involvement
18 with the particulars of the political and electoral process. Others noted that the Caesar/God
19 dichotomy is can be overstated, returning to the scriptural belief that all things are God’s and even
20 government can be an instrument for God’s will in the world. This conversation becomes especially
21 difficult as we look to individual elected officials within traditions as they invoke the authority of the
22 Church, pointing to the debates about former President Bush’s self-consciously Christian political
23 rhetoric or Roman Catholic elected officials who hold positions counter to the church’s teachings.
24 The Episcopalians referenced their internal discussions about the propriety of the Bishop of the
25 Diocese of Massachusetts’s decision to take his sabbatical interning with an Episcopal Congressman.
26 This action raised questions within the diocese about the ‘proper’ spheres of authority. Christian
27 political engagement is further complicated by the historic experiences of the churches as detailed in
28 § I, 5. a. **Christian traditions in America have radically different historical experiences of their**

1 **tradition’s engagement with the local and national government here and abroad**, from the
2 outright persecution of Roman Catholics in America, to the experience of the church intertwined
3 with the state in Greece, to Reformed or Anabaptist Christian communities intentionally set apart
4 from the rule of the state. This is particularly clear in our setting, where various Christian traditions
5 in Massachusetts hold a range of historical experiences from being the established church to being
6 driven from the state.

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**Section II “Authority in
Christian Teaching”**

9. Commissioners affirmed the biblical exposition of the role of
‘authority’ in grounding the theological discussion. The statement in §
II, 8, that “any authority that the Church claims to possess derives
ultimately from God and is manifest through Jesus the Christ” is a strong and helpful theme
throughout the entire document. Pointing to the ‘secondary’ nature of the authority of the Church in
the world serves to remind all of the true source of the Church’s authority. We are grateful for the
trace of this point of agreement from the beginning of Scripture, to the experience of the early
church and through the history of Christianity.

**Section III “The
Church in Authority”**

10. Commissioners affirmed the document’s use of both *The Nature
and Mission of the Church* and *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* as a

helpful means of **establishing this document in the midst of other ecumenical conversations.**

Commissioners were especially grateful for Section III organization by the shared marks of the
Church. By discussing the authority of the Church under the headings of “one, holy, catholic and
apostolic,” we had a shared language for articulating the particularities of each tradition in this area.
A number of Commissioners noted that this was an especially usable section for teaching this
material in a parish setting.

Additionally, the wise formatting decision to ‘box’ blocks of text on issues where the churches are
still divided was affirmed. After having reviewed other ecumenical consensus documents, we have
found a tendency to flatten areas of disagreement while only naming the points of consensus. **The
‘boxed’ areas are especially useful to our discussion of areas of disagreement, while allowing
us to continually name and claim the areas of strong agreement on the nature of the
Church’s authority.**

1 We are grateful for the creative potential of § III, 35,c on the prophetic witness of individuals as a
2 place where churches can appreciate the particularity of the witnesses from within various traditions.
3 The text claims that the witness of these individuals “transcend any particular church body or
4 institution.” Yet, the fact that many of us needed to look up the biographies of these listed
5 individuals points to the need to learn more about each other’s saints/holy witnesses. **We see great
6 potential in the naming of individuals (both as a tool for teaching and learning together
7 about various churches’ understandings of prophetic authority and for the building up of an
8 ecumenically shared such list)**, but this does raise some questions, such as: where are the ‘faith &
9 order’ saints? Where are the Orthodox saints on this list? What do you do about individuals
10 considered ‘saints’ by one church and ‘heretics’ or schismatics by another? The names listed in the
11 document, while certainly profound in their witness, have a sense of prophesy ‘light.’
12 Commissioners noted that true prophets often make us uncomfortable and may not have the
13 blessing of the institutional church. Noting that Francis of Assisi seems to be the saint unlike the
14 others on the list, we wondered what conversation about the Church and authority could be spurred
15 by naming more controversial individuals, like Jon Sobrino or James Cone. We found helpful
16 sharing the Orthodox perspective that saints need not be entirely perfect, noting the praise for
17 Mother Theresa’s personal piety mixed with the criticism that there was little structural challenge to
18 extreme poverty or Billy Graham’s passion for evangelism with his harsh anti-Roman Catholic and
19 anti-Semitic words.

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21 Commissioners took exception at the characterizing of the Orthodox Church § III, 36, as being a
22 too “other-worldly.” One commissioner explained, “the Orthodox Church wants to engage the
23 present reality, but would like to take everyone to some place better” and suggested that “we need to
24 be thinking not in “transformative” terms, but in “transfigurative.”

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**Section IV
“The World”**

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28 11. With clergy from the Episcopal Dioceses of Massachusetts and Western
29 Massachusetts presenting for this section, the preparatory document traced the
30 Church of England’s interaction with ‘the world,’ particularly noting Celtic influences and the slave
31 trade §IV 52-53. Noting the Episcopal Church’s past support of social Darwinism, the
commissioners discussed the dynamics of ‘reward’ and ‘punishment,’ in Scripture, the ecclesial
phenomenon of the “prosperity Gospel” in America, and the larger dynamic relationship between

1 the churches and culture(s). One commissioner asked “has the world infiltrated our
2 denominations?”

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4 **12. Commission members suggested that Section IV spend more time considering the**
5 **missionary movement and its influence on “the Church and the world”** noting specifically the
6 relation between the Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries in Latin America and colonization.
7 Additionally, commissioners recalled the historic difference between ‘established churches’ in a
8 ‘Christian’ state and ‘anti-establishment eclessiality’ found in radical monasticism of some of the
9 Eastern Churches. A number of the Commissioners recalled the Confessing Church in Germany
10 and the Romanian Church during Communism as examples of conflated relationships between the
11 church and culture. Surely these international examples have influenced how the American
12 churches/churches in America think about the authority of the Church in the world.
13 **Commissioners suggested that a consideration of ecclesial humility throughout the text but**
14 **most prominently in §IV 60, would provide a helpful correlative to ecclesial authority.**

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**Section V “Exercising
the Authority of the
Church in the World.”**

13. Commissioners considered § V along side of a 1996 text from the
Massachusetts Council of Churches on “Christian Political
Responsibility” (see attached), as a local example of how the churches
19 in this place have understood their role in exercising the authority of the Church.

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21 **14. Commissioners suggested that a further discussion of ‘holiness’ in §V 68,’ would**
22 **enhance the document and our understanding of the Church’s grounds for Authority.** The
23 presenter for this section, Rev. Fr. Nicholas Apostola from the Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese
24 wrote, “The Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae says that the holy person’s word had power
25 because it is not filled with lies (i.e., lacking integrity). This understanding of holiness as a necessary
26 component of authority is taken up in § 17, but not taken sufficiently seriously in terms of how the
27 lack of holiness undermines witness or authority. It isn’t simply that the Churches lack unity (§ 68e);
28 it is that we lack the holiness, the holy witnesses, that are the basis of an authoritative witness, as
29 referenced in § 68f.” Commissioners agreed with Fr. Apostola’s assessment. This relates as well to
30 remarks made above in paragraph 10 regarding each other’s holy witnesses.

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1 **15.** The Commission concluded the study of *The Authority of the Church in the World* by expressing
2 their gratitude to the drafters of this text. We are grateful for the opportunity to discuss this
3 document with the churches in Massachusetts and with our counterparts in the National Council of
4 Churches in Christ.

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6 We believe this to be a good broad, general document that we are called make specific and concrete
7 in our local settings. Because of this document, we are considering reworking our 1996 statement on
8 Christian Political Responsibility to better reflect the churches' shared understanding of authority,
9 and how a council of churches might help the churches manifest that unified witness in the world.
10 We are also interested in sharing this document with elected Christian leaders to think about how
11 this language indigenous to the churches might be translated in ways appropriate for our witness in
12 the public sphere.

13
14 The members of the Massachusetts Council of Churches Commission on Christian Unity are
15 grateful to our counterparts in the NCCC who worked for 7 years to complete this text. We are
16 curious about what outcomes you would like to see from this piece. How does this document affect
17 the way the NCCC (rather than individual traditions) speaks on political issues or Church World
18 Service presents its case for relief and development? What are the actions that you hope would
19 follow from this? We look forward to continuing the discussion of the authority of the Church in
20 this place and hopefully strengthening the faithful witness of the churches together through the
21 Massachusetts Council of Churches.

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