Moral Discernment in the Churches

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Faith and Order studies and texts are offered to the churches and become authoritative only insofar as they are received by the churches and prove helpful in addressing issues of theology and practice which continue to divide them. Faith and Order texts are distributed widely in order to promote the broadest possible discussion among the churches of issues related to unity. But not all texts are at the same stage of development or have the same "status" in relation to the Faith and Order Commission itself.

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Moral Discernment in the Churches

A Study Document

Faith and Order Paper No. 215

World Council of Churches Publications

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WCC Publications is the book publishing programme of the World Council of Churches. Founded in 1948, the WCC promotes Christian unity in faith, witness and service for a just and peaceful world. A global fellowship, the WCC brings together more than 349 Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican and other churches representing more than 560 million Christians in 110 countries and works cooperatively with the Roman Catholic Church.

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World Council of Churches
150 route de Ferney, P.O. Box 2100
1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland
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INTRODUCTION

One of the major challenges in the 21st century is the division that exists between churches – and within churches – over moral issues, divisions that threaten the aim of Faith and Order for visible unity in one faith and one Eucharistic fellowship. While the Faith and Order movement agreed to move beyond the comparative method since the third World Conference on Faith and Order in Lund (1952), the complexity of factors that contribute to division over moral issues make it necessary to engage in preliminary tasks before work toward convergence on moral issues can even begin. Debates about moral issues reflect the following realities that complicate the task of ecumenical dialogue:

1. Moral questions reflect deeply-held theological beliefs about sin and human nature.

2. Moral questions are often encountered within the context of personal experience and are therefore deeply emotionally charged.

3. Certainty about the rightness or wrongness of one's own or another's position on a moral issue – whether based on the authority of church teachings, spiritual guidance, or individual discernment – can make dialogue across lines of difference extremely difficult.

4. Churches engage in the process of moral discernment in culturally and ecclesiologically distinct ways that are often not known or understood by one another.

The difficulties that arise from this complexity are reflected in all levels of discourse about moral issues – from the individual to the community, as well as within churches or church families and across communions. While churches draw on many common sources in the process of moral discernment, the ways in which they engage these sources and the authority that they give to them vary from church to church. In some churches the approach to moral questions will vary depending on the nature of the question as well as which sources are appealed to in addressing the issue.

Status of the Text

This study text does not focus on moral questions per se, but rather on the *discernment process* (cf. §§ 9, 18, 20, 23, 25). This is a necessary *prerequisite* for ecumenical dialogue about specific moral issues. To that end, this study identifies sources that churches use for moral discernment (cf. §§ 30-48) and articulates some of the causative factors of the disagreements within and between churches over moral issues as a prolegomenon to ecumenical dialogue that seeks unity (cf. §§ 49-85).

This study aims to be a tool to aid churches in both developing a deeper self-understanding of their own processes of moral discernment and offering a framework within which dialogue about moral disagreements can take place (cf. §§ 86-110).

In no way does this document recommend particular methods for moral discernment or attempt to advocate any moral position that any church would need to take. The text contains many examples that describe different moral positions held by different churches. However, it acknowledges that different churches hold different positions on moral issues, and in no way intends to suggest that all positions are morally equal (cf. §§ 85, 102). There is a general recognition of the existence of universal truths (cf. § 30).

The purpose of the study is to *describe* the causative factors of disagreement over moral issues and to prepare the ground for future ecumenical dialogue around moral issues. The present text can be seen as a report on the *first stage of a study process* that is called to continue, in particular by studying how the churches of different traditions arrive at moral discernment, decision-making and teaching.

As with all Faith and Order work, the ultimate aim of the study is to facilitate ecumenical dialogue that seeks the visible unity of the Church.

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Orthodox Addendum

The Orthodox participants of the Faith and Order Standing Commission meeting in Penang (June 2012), who then also met in Bossey (November 2012), where the final draft of "Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document" was presented, valued the work contained in the text. The study document, from the academic point of view, could be used in Orthodox theological schools and academic circles. It contains tools to understand different causative factors that divide churches over moral issues.

However, the Orthodox members of the Standing Commission expressed their concerns regarding the whole study process. The Orthodox read the text in ways that do not reflect their tradition; in particular, they identify the following areas:

- *working methodology of the study leading to the relativistic approach;*
- *the same methodology applied to church unity;*
- *overemphasis on the non-theological academic approach;*
- *lack of broader ecumenical approaches;*
- *lack of spiritual and theological aspects, for example, experience of the people of God in the Church, consensus fidelium;*
- *assumptions running throughout the paper that should not be made.*

The same relativistic approach is applied also to the sources; but for the Orthodox there are three initial capital sources for moral discernment: the Holy Trinity, the Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition. These sources cannot be placed at the same level with the other sources.

The Orthodox participants of the Faith and Order Standing Commission meeting in Penang suggest this text go to the 2013 WCC Assembly as a preliminary step in a more extensive study. Their recommendation is that the Faith and Order Commission in the future places on its agenda further theological discussions in the field of Moral Discernment.[1]

[1] Catholics would share concerns similar to those mentioned in this Orthodox addendum. They therefore endorse the recommendation, included in the "Introduction" to the text itself, that it go to the 2013 WCC Assembly as a preliminary stage of a study that Faith and Order might continue into the future.

BACKGROUND

1. Moral and ethical questions are closely linked with ecclesiology and are thus a matter of faith and order. They have been on the agenda of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches since the early 1990s, when issues in the field of moral theology and ethics resulted in a new awareness of controversies in and between churches, some of which even threaten their unity.

The Way toward a Study on Moral Discernment

2. An awareness of ethics as an integral aspect of ecclesiology developed in the beginning of the 1980s. A study on "The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community" was proposed at the Faith and Order Standing Commission meeting at Annecy (France) in 1981, discussed at the Plenary Commission meeting in Lima (Peru) in 1982[2] and confirmed by the WCC assembly in Vancouver in 1983[3] with the aim "to clarify the theological inter-relation between two fundamental ecumenical concerns: the quest for the visible unity of Christ's Church and the implementation of the Christian calling to common witness and service in today's world."[4] As a result of this study process the Commission on Faith and Order published the 1990 document "Church and World,"[5] which focuses on the understanding of the Church as oriented toward the Kingdom of God and therefore as a prophetic sign.

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[2] Cf. *Towards Visible Unity: Commission on Faith and Order Lima 1982, Volume I: Minutes and Addresses: Faith & Order Paper No. 112* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982) 11-124; *Volume II: Study Papers and Reports: Faith & Order paper No. 113* (Geneva: WCC, 1982)121-230.

[3] Cf. David Gill, ed., *Gathered for Life: Official Report VI Assembly World Council of Churches, Vancouver, Canada, 24 July – 10 August 1983*, (Geneva: WCC Publications 1983), 50, § 24.

[4] Commission on Faith and Order, *Minutes of the Meeting of the Standing Commission 1986 Potsdam, GDR: Faith and Order Paper No. 134*, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986). 28.

[5] *Church and World: The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community: A Faith and Order Study Document: Faith and Order Paper No.151* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990).

3. Parallel to these activities, the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches started, as early as 1987, to look into topics that would potentially be sources of new divisions between and in the churches. In the course of its work it focused on personal and social ethical issues, which resulted in a study document on "The Ecumenical Dialogue on Moral Issues."[6] This document describes how potentially or actually divisive issues "may best be approached in dialogue…"[7] with the purpose of being able to give common witness. Consequently it offers "guidelines for ecumenical dialogue on moral issues."

4. In 1993 the participants at the fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostela recommended on the one hand a study on "Ethics and Ecclesiology," "which should be directly linked to local experiences of the interconnectedness of faith and action and move between an investigation of the moral substance of traditions and the moral experience of the people of God today."[8] Secondly it recommended work on anthropology and the theology of creation,[9] adding that "it is essential for the churches to recognize that the threats to human survival on this planet are real and that the tasks before us, in response to God's sustaining and redeeming work, are urgent. …The urgency of the hour demands a renewed Christian anthropology as well as a renewed emphasis on the call that Christians have to participate in God's healing of the broken relationship between creation and humankind."[10]

5. The work on "Ecclesiology and Ethics" was done jointly between Faith and Order and the WCC Unit on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation and resulted in three study documents: "Costly Unity," "Costly

[6] Published in *Ecumenical Review*, no. 48 (1996): 143-154.
[7] Ibid., Foreword.
[8] Thomas F. Best and Günther Gassmann, *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order: Fait and Order Paper No. 166* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 261, §38.
[9] Ibid., 262.
[10] Ibid., 260, § 34.

Commitment," "Costly Obedience."[11] These texts pointed out the close link between ethics and ecclesiological reflection and named "the ethical dimension as a datum of ecclesiology."[12] The Church was characterized as "moral community," a notion that was further developed as being expressed "in the practice of 'moral formation.'"[13] This led finally to understand the ecumenical movement itself as a "moral community."[14]

6. This work was the basis for further studies of the Faith and Order Commission in the field of anthropology. While this issue had been mentioned at the fifth World Conference in Santiago de Compostela[15] from the perspective of the integrity of creation, it also came up at the WCC assembly in Harare in 1998 from another angle, namely questions around human sexuality.[16] The Faith and Order Commission discovered that the question had become a burning issue also in some of its studies during the 1990s, a fact which revealed that it was now time to undertake a study on theological anthropology.[17]

7. The result was a study document, published in 2005 under the title "Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology. A Faith and Order Study Document."[18] This text employed an inductive methodology that allowed participants to reflect "theologically on

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[11] Published in: Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra, eds., *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997).
[12] Ibid., x.
[13] Ibid., xi.
[14] Ibid., xi.
[15] Cf. footnotes 9 and 10 above.
[16] Cf., Diane Kessler, ed., *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications Geneva, 1999), 145.
[17] "The issue of theological anthropology has emerged as an underlying theme in several of the questions addressed by the Faith and Order Commission (ethnic and national identity, baptism, authority and authoritative teaching, ordination of women), and in issues facing the WCC as a whole (human sexuality)…." (*Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Board 15-24 June 1999 Toronto, Canada: Faith and Order Paper No. 185* (Geneva: WCC, 1999), 89), cf. also *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission 9-16 January 2002 Gazzada, Italy: Faith & Order Paper No. 191* (Geneva: WCC, 2002), 69.
[18] *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology: Faith and Order Paper No. 199* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005).

specific instances of contemporary human experience which challenge our understanding of what it means to be human beings, made in the image of God."[19] The results of the study process include "Ten Common Affirmations on Theological Anthropology,"[20] that are intended as a common starting point for ecumenical dialogue that touches on issues of human nature. The document ends with "A Call to the Churches," which points out common understanding and differences, and proposes: "Most differences in understanding and strategy in the realm of theological anthropology need not prevent our churches from facing together the challenges to humanity today. In many areas of need, the churches can exercise a common (and therefore far more effective) witness to the world in defense of human beings made in the image of God."[21] As a follow-up the Standing Commission on Faith and Order decided in 2006 to "conduct a study of the ways in which the churches formulate and offer teaching and guidance with respect to moral and ethical issues – especially those that are or may become church-dividing, e.g. human sexuality."[22]

The Study Process on Moral Discernment in the Churches

8. This study was started under the working title "Moral Discernment in the Churches" at the meeting of the Standing Commission in Crans-Montana in 2007.[23] The Commission decided to "explore the various ways churches make decisions about moral issues. Through this study we hope to identify principles and practices of moral discernment we hold in common as churches and to discover where we diverge. Our goals are to claim the common ground we share, to help us understand how and why we often come to different conclusions, and to search together for ways to prevent our principled differences from becoming

[19] Ibid., 15, § 21.
[20] Ibid., 51f , § 127.
[21] Ibid., 50, § 123.
[22] *Minutes of the Standing Commission on Faith and Order, Faverges, Haute-Savoie, France 2006: Faith & Order Paper No. 202* (Geneva: WCC, 2006), 107.
[23] *Minutes of the Standing Commission on Faith and Order meeting in Crans-Montana, Switzerland 2007: Faith & Order Paper No. 206* (Geneva: WCC, 2007), 43.

church-dividing."[24] The purpose of the study was later clarified "to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of theological difference and disagreement in order to develop study material and resources that facilitate difficult conversations and theological discussions about moral issues."[25]

9. At Crans-Montana it was also decided to employ a case study approach as the foundational method for the study. Consequently a consultation of the Standing Commission's Working Group for the study on Moral Discernment, held in March 2008 in New York, first harvested and reflected on work that had already been done on the issue in bilateral and multilateral documents, within the academic world, and within WCC. Secondly the meeting set out a study process, subsequently approved by the Standing Commission in Cairo in June 2008, which in a first phase would "provide a descriptive account of the issue that offers examples of how particular communities of Christians engage in moral discernment in relation to particular moral issues."[26] For this purpose the group refined the case study method by developing criteria for cases, which would help to understand the differences and the commonalities in the different standpoints in moral discourse and to develop an awareness and sensitivity for how conflict emerges. Although the case studies would deal with a variety of moral issues, their purpose was not to solve the respective issue, but to bring the different standpoints on a certain issue into a discussion in a narrative way, in order to facilitate the analysis of the different factors involved in various potentially church-dividing moral issues.

10. Consequently four case studies were produced that highlighted different forms of ecclesial division – intra-church division (within churches or church families), inter-church division (between different churches), division between churches in the global North and the global

[24] Ibid., 43.
[25] *Minutes of the Standing Commission on Faith and Order meeting in Cairo, Arab Republic of Egypt 2008: Faith & Order Paper No. 208* (Geneva: WCC, 2009), 54.
[26] Ibid.

South, and divisions between different cultures. The topics were: a) the use of stem cells in research with a focus on the discussion between the Catholic and Protestant churches in Germany; b) Issues related to human sexuality with a focus on homosexuality and the struggle within the Anglican Communion over the issue; c) the issue of neoliberal economic globalization and its discussion at the 24th General Council meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Accra, Ghana in 2004; d) the ethical issues involved in mission work and evangelism, especially as they are experienced by some churches as proselytism in Russia.

11. In October 2009 the Plenary Commission on Faith and Order at its meeting in Crete discussed the case studies in small groups, with each Commission member engaged in the study of one of these cases. They were asked to "analyze the dynamics of the case with the intention of identifying the points of divergence and disagreement and discussing potential strategies and resources for helping the churches continue to stay in dialogue with one another in the midst of their disagreement."[27]

12. In June 2010 the Working Group on Moral Discernment in the Churches met in Armenia to analyze and discuss the results of the work at the Plenary Commission meeting. The following text results from this analysis and from further discussions at a drafting meeting in Erfurt (Germany) in February 2011, the meeting of the Standing Commission in Gazzada (Italy) in July 2011, another drafting meeting in Bossey (Switzerland) in April 2012 and the meeting of the Standing Commission of Faith and Order in Penang (Malaysia) in June 2012. It was finalized in November 2012 at a joint meeting at the Ecumenical Institute Bossey of members of the study group with the Orthodox participants at the Penang meeting. The text is offered as a study document based on the findings of the study group. Included in the text is a set of suggestions for facilitating constructive discussions on controversial moral and ethical issues. The usefulness of these suggestions in contributing to moral discernment processes needs to be further tested.

[27] Ibid., 56.

CLARIFICATION OF TERMINOLOGY

In order to engage in a common discussion of moral discernment in the churches across a variety of traditions and cultures, it is necessary to clarify the use of some common terms in this study text.

a. While the term *moral* has several definitions and usages, and sometimes is equated with "ethics" (see definition below), "moral" refers here simply to aspects and expressions of human life that pertain to "right" and "wrong" or "good" and "bad."

b**. Moral decision-making** here refers to the process of assessment and evaluation of a moral problem, question, or situation that leads to a response or resolution. In this study, moral decision-making refers to the common human phenomenon of making such judgments, without necessarily utilizing a faith perspective or appealing to sources that are authoritative for persons of faith.

c. **Moral discernment** here refers to moral decision-making that occurs within the Church. It is the process by which a person or community of faith attempts to discover God's will for understanding and responding to the dilemmas and questions that human beings face when seeking the "right" and the "good." The task of moral discernment is an essential aspect of the Christian life. For most Christian communities, as "moral communities," the process of moral discernment is not simply one of prayer, meditation, or supplication before God, but it involves two additional elements – the turning to various sources and the use of critical thinking to animate and guide the discernment process.

d. Moral **Reasoning** here describes several different general approaches to moral decision-making and moral discernment. One general approach, for example, centres on a person or community's duties when pursuing the "right" or the "good." Another approach centres on the consequences, or states of affairs, that result from human choices and

actions. Still another sees character and the formation of character as the locus of moral discernment. Christian communities may draw on more than one form of moral reasoning, or may utilize different forms of moral reasoning in response to different situations and issues.

These three approaches are known in the field of ethics as deontology, teleology, and virtue ethics.

e. Finally, the term **ethics** refers here to the study of human behaviour in relation to moral issues, moral decision-making, and moral reasoning. Ethics typically takes one of two forms, "normative ethics" and "descriptive ethics." **Normative ethics** centre on asking what is "right" or "good" and why. Normative ethics are prescriptive, expressing how persons or communities should respond or behave. When persons or faith communities strive to articulate and defend a moral position on an issue through the process of moral discernment, they are engaging in normative ethics. **Descriptive ethics**, in contrast, centres on asking and answering the questions: "What is going on in this moral situation?" "What is believed to be right/wrong or good/bad by the involved persons and communities?" And "what is the basis for their moral positions?" Descriptive ethics thus examines and analyzes both the context of moral dilemmas and the processes used by individuals, communities, and churches to engage, understand, and respond to moral issues.

THE CHALLENGES OF MORAL DISCERNMENT IN AND BETWEEN CHURCHES

13. The history of the Church, its achievements and its failures, can be read as the story of how the Church and its members have dealt with moral issues. Theological reflection, ecclesial structures, liturgical practice, and personal conversion have all, at times, been developed in response to the moral questions of the day. Likewise, theology, ecclesiology, liturgy, and spirituality have played an important role in identifying the moral significance of issues and in offering the language and interpretive frameworks from which to take action to address them, be it at the level of the broader political community, the church community, or the individual believer.

14. Sometimes, in this history, moral issues identified in society, in the Church itself, or even at the level of personal lifestyle, and the Church's efforts to deal with them, have led to painful and often costly divisions within and between churches that are inconsistent with the Lord's own prayer for the Church that "they all may be one" (John 17:21). In the search for visible unity in the Church, the role of moral issues as a church- and community-dividing factor should not be underestimated. Addressing questions of how moral issues become church-dividing can contribute to increased unity as well as help to avoid the pain and human suffering that often results from such division.

15. Today, as before, moral questions and the issue of moral discernment have been and are being discussed in many churches as well as in the ecumenical movement. There are many similarities between churches or between factions within churches, as well as differences concerning the appropriate sources for moral discernment, the relative authority of these sources, and indeed the foundational theological and philosophical assumptions that should guide moral reflection.

16. Moral discernment in the Church is complicated by the fact that the church does not operate in a vacuum: it is part of wider society.

Sometimes developments in the wider society challenge the Church to reflect anew some of the moral stances it holds; sometimes the Church calls moral developments in society into question. Sometimes the Church is a persecuted minority, and develops its moral teachings accordingly; sometimes it is closely tied to the political majority and wields power and influence in ways that can hinder good moral discernment.

17. The process of moral discernment in the churches is a complex one. On the one hand, it is persons who engage in theological reflection, persons who work through ecclesial structures, persons who worship in liturgies, and persons who pray. So too, it is persons who encounter, discern, and act upon moral questions. These human persons are, moreover, fundamentally moral beings. That is, they engage in a moral world, and their moral behaviour is an important factor in their own self-understanding as being a good or a bad person, as being a person living a meaningful and purposeful life, or a person in the depths of despair. The interests of individuals and of communities – both internal and external to the church – will always exert an influence on how moral debates and decisions are made in and between churches. On the other hand Christians believe that the Holy Spirit works through the community to guide and assist moral discernment.

18. Given that both differences and similarities in moral positions and in processes of moral discernment appear to exist in and between churches, between the Church and broader society, and between the individuals who constitute all churches and society, this study aims to address the preliminary issues that lay the groundwork for future discussions about moral issues that are potentially church-divisive. To this end, emphasis is placed on identifying the factors that lead to these differences and especially to church division on moral issues. A future issue that needs to be addressed is how might church members at all levels and in all contexts engage constructively in a dialogue about moral issues that witnesses to the visible unity of the church while also seeking to avoid

the often painful and costly consequences that sometimes flow from division?

19. Earlier work by the Joint Working Group between the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church, in a study on ecumenism and moral issues,[28] identified *different* "pathways" churches use for reaching ethical and moral decisions based on the *same sources* as well as on *different authoritative means* for moral discernment.

20. The current study, while building on these earlier results, analyzes the causative factors for the similarities and differences and makes suggestions about how to resolve them. The goal is neither to develop any explicit moral judgments of its own nor to resolve any specific moral issues, but rather to facilitate constructive dialogue and minimize exclusion, animosity, and division.

21. The present document consists of four parts. The first part introduces three important methodological assumptions that underpin the present study and explains the case study method that was used to analyze the causative factors of differences in moral discernment. The second part presents the first of the study's findings, namely, a descriptive account of the various sources appealed to when engaging in moral discernment. The third part presents, in light of part two, the causative factors of difference and division on moral issues that this study has identified, together with brief illustrations of how these might work. A fourth part summarizes the study's conclusions and brings together the "suggestions for reflection" that correspond to the individual causative factors of division listed in the previous section. These suggestions are offered as a foundation for further reflection in the churches about how to navigate moral discernment within and between churches.

[28] "The Ecumenical Dialogue on Moral Issues: Potential Sources of Common Witness or of Divisions," *Ecumenical Review*, no 48 (1996): 143-154;
And in: Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer and William G. Rusch, eds., *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000), 900-910.

I. METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

22. Perhaps even more than doctrinal disagreements, conflicts over moral issues are often perceived as being controversial and divisive, even when communities on different sides share substantial common ground. The desire for developing a deeper understanding about why Christian communities disagree about moral issues is influenced by the assumption that engagement in more critically aware ethical discourse yields deeper understanding about self and other that can contribute to more faithful Christian dialogue that witnesses to love of neighbour and compassion for the other. By achieving a more nuanced understanding of the causes of the disagreements, Christian communities will be better able to engage in more faithful dialogue that promotes understanding and respect.

Three Methodological Assumptions

23. The scope of this study is bounded by the desire to identify causal factors of moral difference and to facilitate moral discussion, and not to resolve any particular moral issue, be it church-dividing or otherwise.

Moreover, given the historical fact that church division and moral issues have often gone hand in hand, this study in no way proposes to be able to provide a solution to all church division. In light of the scope of this study, then, three methodological assumptions guide its workings.

24. First, it has been noted that all communities, ecclesial or otherwise, are constituted by human persons. Therefore, any study of moral discernment must begin with a clear articulation of the assumptions from which it proceeds regarding the nature of the human person. Following the "Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology" study, this study affirms:

a. Human persons are created in the image of God and called to relationship with God.[29]

b. As such, each human person has a unique dignity and is "called to live and find fulfillment in the human community and to experience and preserve harmony with all creation."[30]

c. In their pursuit of this fulfillment of meaning and purpose in life, human persons, as part of God's good creation and as created co-creators, are capable of goodness.[31]

d. At the same time, bound by the limitations of the created world and sin, human activity is often characterized by brokenness, both individual and corporate.[32] As a result, human persons, though desiring goodness, frequently fall short in their concrete attempts to realize it.

e. In addition to the affirmations (a) – (d) based on the Faith and Order study on "Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology," the present study further asserts that it is this being in relationship to all things in a limited and historical world,

[29] *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology: A Faith and Order Study Document: Faith & Order Paper 199* (Geneva: WCC, 2005), 51.
[30] Ibid., 48, § 117; 52, §127, point 4.
[31] Ibid., 11,§10; 19, §29; 31, §70; 39, §91.
[32] Ibid., 15, § 22; 52, §127, points 2 and 5.

> together with the desire to realize goodness through a meaningful and purposeful life, that makes the human person a fundamentally moral being. That is, morality, as the discernment of and acting for the good and the right, is the way in which human persons navigate through both the meaning-affirming and meaning-threatening relationships in which they find themselves. Thus, though united by a common desire to realize meaning through goodness, individuals and communities, limited and historical as they are, may find different ways to navigate toward what they variously believe embodies this goodness. Sometimes, these different goals and ways will be complementary; at others, these different goals and ways may lead to conflict.

25. Second, ethics, as the discipline of studying human moral behaviour, can be divided into two kinds of activity, as outlined above (box following §12). *Descriptive ethics* is concerned with what human persons *actually* do in their moral reflection, judgment and activity; it *describes* what the case is. *Prescriptive* or *normative ethics* is concerned with what human persons *should* do in the moral reflection, judgment and activity; it *prescribes* what ought to be the case by developing *norms* for human moral behaviour. Accordingly, this study aims to engage in descriptive ethics to identify and describe the factors that contribute to differences regarding moral issues. This descriptive task is in no way normative in that it does not seek to develop prescriptive norms about what should be done about particular moral issues or about church-dividing situations. Rather, the purpose of a descriptive study is to help the churches gain deeper insight into the causative factors of disagreement with the hope that a deeper understanding of difference and division can pave the way for improved ecumenical dialogue about moral issues. Given the limitations of human personhood described above, it is hoped that if a common witness on moral issues cannot be achieved in and between churches, then an improved understanding of the causes that underlie divisions, and the often irresolvable nature of these divisions, will at least help to avoid the frequently unnecessary pain and costs associated with church divisions over moral issues.

26. Third, this study affirms that Christian morality, understood both in terms of discernment and activity in relationships, and should always be understood in light of the unavoidable limitations of the physical world and the eschatological hope of the ultimate realization of the reign of God with the following provisions:

a. Since a person's self-understanding as having a meaningful and purposeful life is dependent on the extent to which he or she believes that he or she is realizing goodness, human moral discernment and activity are characterized by the hope that what is done does in fact contribute to that realization of goodness.

b. For the Christian, this hope is a hope for the end of inhumanity, injustice and suffering in the world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.[33]

c. This hope, together with the brokenness that plagues human existence and activity, means that all moral discernment, judgment and action is necessarily conditioned by the fact that, though one hopes otherwise, one may nonetheless be wrong.

d. Consequently, this study is characterized by a humility that seeks first to understand why and how people and churches engage in moral discernment. Real insight into this why and how is necessary if one is to avoid the pitfalls of moralism, i.e., the destructive division of people into them and us, the bad and the good, the demonic and the truly human, the damned and the chosen, and so on. From this insight, it is hoped, will flow instead a readiness to agree to love even those who differ from one's own moral point of view, especially where no conclusive argument exists for one position or another. This love, it is hoped, will likewise be a humble love, characterized as a genuine willingness to appreciate the other as one like oneself, seeking the realization of God's reign of goodness in the world.

[33] Ibid., 25f, § 52.

Method: The Case Study Approach

27. In order to determine the causative factors of division on issues of moral discernment in and between churches, a case study approach was employed. This approach is in line with the methodological assumptions outlined above in that it aims to derive an inductive description of the sources of morality that churches and individuals appeal to in moral discernment as well as an account of the causative factors of difference and division.

28. Four cases were written based on contemporary church-dividing moral issues[34]. The aim of the cases was to present a narrative representation of debates around particular moral issues that provide an accurate depiction of the different positions in the debate, the sources of morality to which they appeal, and the kinds of moral reasoning they employ. These positions were represented by various characters in the fictional narratives that open each case study.

29. The first phase of the case study process involved submitting the case studies to small groups comprised of members of the Plenary Commission for Faith and Order. These groups were asked to analyze the case studies and to identify and explore the causative factors that contributed to misunderstanding, difference, and discord. These results provided the initial findings of the study, which were compiled into a supporting document for the cases studies that discussed the various sources to which people appealed and the differences in forms and styles of moral discernment. In a second phase, the case studies were distributed to volunteer participants at university faculties in a number of countries. These volunteers organized analyses of these case studies with groups of students and reported their findings. For the most part, this second phase confirmed the findings of the first phase and offered nuanced insight into several of the categories. The combined result of both phases is presented in this document.

[34] Cf. § 10 above.

II. SOURCES FOR MORAL DISCERNMENT

30. The task of moral discernment is a complicated process through which churches, communities, and individuals consider and analyze a moral challenge and seek to find an answer in a responsible manner. For Christians, moral discernment also involves a desire to act in agreement with their belief, the centre of which is faith in the Triune God. Engaging in a process of moral discernment implies, therefore, taking recourse to a wide variety of sources, some of which originate from what might be considered distinctively Christian or faith related sources, while others might be used by all who engage in moral decision-making. Whereas churches would agree on the existence of these sources, they might differ in the authority attached to them, and, depending on the moral dilemma being confronted, on the way in which they should be used.[35] While there is general recognition of the existence of universal

[35] While each of these sources has generated their own bodies of scholarship, the brief descriptions presented here represent a necessarily succinct identification of the source for purposes of establishing a common vocabulary for this text.

truths, there are different positions in different churches about how these truths are revealed and known. Furthermore, Christians may also disagree about what role universal truths play in the process of moral discernment. The listing of the sources below is neither exhaustive, nor intended to rank relative authority of sources in a definitive hierarchy. Of course, when churches engage in moral discernment they do rank these sources. What follows is a description of a variety of sources that faith communities consult when engaging in moral discernment.

A. Faith Sources for Moral Discernment

31. Faith sources are ways through which Christians access the ultimate source of truth and authority, which is God as revealed in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

a. Guidance of the Holy Spirit

32. All churches believe in the working of the Holy Spirit within individuals, as well as in the community, as a source and assistant in the process of moral discernment. Churches might differ in the ways in which they identify the working of the Holy Spirit. In some churches, it is understood that the Holy Spirit might "inspire" a particular individual with wisdom, to which the rest of the church community needs to listen. For some, the Holy Spirit is best discerned and encountered in the gathering of the faithful, at a congregational meeting or Synod. Others, again, hold that the Holy Spirit works in the whole church, but that those who exercise oversight or exercise teaching authority have a special role in discerning the authenticity of the Holy Spirit, and in determining the corresponding binding force of a certain doctrine. All believe, however, that the Holy Spirit assists God's people to discern, develop and possibly even reconsider moral evaluations, as was, for example, the case with regard to slavery.

b. Scripture

33. Holy Scripture is an essential source for moral discernment in all the churches. It is the inspired witness to the life and meaning of Jesus Christ, the living Word of God. Scripture never stands alone and is always interpreted within the life of the Church. Within the Church there are different ways of reading the Scriptures and different hermeneutical keys for opening them up. These include exegesis, historical critical method, semantics, and so on. There are also different ways of using Scripture: either as starting point or as secondary source after a social analysis, for example. The ways in which the Scriptures are used in relation to issues of moral discernment are not all the same, even though all the churches agree in turning to Scripture for wisdom on moral and ethical issues.

c. Tradition

34. The word "tradition" refers to that which has been handed on. In 1963 Faith and Order stipulated distinctions between the terms "Tradition," "tradition," and "traditions." At that time, "Tradition" was defined as the "Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the Church, Christ himself present in the life of the Church." The lower-case, "tradition," was defined as the "traditionary process," or the process of handing on the community's beliefs and practices. Finally, "traditions" was defined as the different denominations or "confessional traditions."[36] Consequently those churches that recognize Scripture as the exclusive source of Christian life would agree that they also use some kind of tradition or authorities from the past (especially their own confessional past) for consulting within the process of interpretation of Scripture.

[36] Patrick C. Rodger and Lukas Vischer, eds., *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order: The Report from Montreal, 1963, Faith and Order Paper No. 42* (London: SCM Press, 1964), 50.

d. Teaching Authority

35. All churches have some form of teaching authority, which has the responsibility to preserve the faith in moral convictions, determine the binding force of a doctrine, and consequently identify whether, or to what extent, diversity on a given moral issue is possible. This teaching authority, however, has different forms and bears different weight in the different churches (e.g. *magisterium*, synods, presbyteries, general assemblies).

e. Spirituality

36. In all churches, prayer plays an important role in decision-making, whether at the individual or communal level, and prayer is a central aspect of moral discernment in the churches. For some, this will be experienced most profoundly when one Christian falls on his or her knees to seek the guidance of God in a very difficult situation, demanding a moral answer. For some, the moral principles of the faith are carried within forms of common prayer and liturgy. These both express and shape the kinds of decisions that are made. Liturgy and hymnody are the living memory of the Church and they exercise a powerful authority in which the wisdom of the faith becomes part of the memory. Given that the paschal mystery is central to most Christian worship and liturgy, it can be said that because Christian spirituality commemorates the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is a fundamentally ethical spirituality, calling Christians to an imitation of Christ's self-sacrificing love.[37]

f. Church Culture (Customs, Habits, Identity)

37. In addition to the shared doctrines and practices that define each of the Christian traditions, a church community – either in a geographical region and/or across regions – often has additional unwritten or unofficial practices, beliefs, or values that reflect a particular ecclesial

[37] *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology*, 52, § 127, point 3.

culture or ethos. This church culture may, at times, be deeply influenced by the broader culture within which a Christian community lives; however, at other times, a community's church culture may contrast sharply with the broader culture's norms and customs. In the context of moral discernment, members of a church may appeal to "the way they do things" or to their church's culture as a source for responding to moral issues.

B. Human Reason and other Sapiential[38] Sources for Moral Discernment

38. Churches not only use what may be called faith related sources, but also other sources of authority that are, indeed, neither particular to specific church communities, nor exclusively Christian, but which Christians believe are sources through which the wisdom of God may be discerned, and in which the Holy Spirit is at work as well.

a. Reason

39. Human reason is required for moral discernment in general. Any act of moral decision-making involves the faculty of reason. However, in some cases, reason is given a particular authority. The authority of reason derives from two distinct, though compatible, arguments. First, the "reasonableness" of an argument is reflected in its logic, cohesiveness, cogency, and so on. Second, the human faculty of reason, the ability to think rationally, is understood as a central aspect of human nature that was created by God.

40. Though all churches accept that reason is central to moral decision-making, they may differ in the relevance and weight they give to the use of reason relative to other sources of authority. Some would identify reason as authoritative, arguing that it is God who has given us our rational nature, and who has made creation in such a way that it conforms to patterns that can be rationally discerned. For others, reason

[38] "Sapiential" here denotes sources of moral relevance that derive from human attributes and capacities.

is to be used with much caution, and always in the context of faith. For others, again, human reason is not always to be trusted, because of human sin and our capacity for self-deception.

b. Natural Law

41. A specific instance of the appeal to the authority of reason is found in the theory of natural law. Natural law draws its moral authority from the claim that human beings, endowed with reason and free choice, can participate in the eternal law that constitutes God's rational plan for creation. It is called "law," precisely, to denote the claimed authority of the moral precepts derived from the application by reason of the principles of practical rationality, insofar as these precepts are seen to participate in the eternal law. These precepts are further held to be knowable and binding for all human beings because all human beings have both a natural inclination to the good and particular goods, and the faculty of practical rationality. This fundamental inclination and the faculty of human reason enable human beings, first, to recognize, and, secondly, to articulate as normative that which is good for human flourishing. There has been, and continues to be, a great deal of debate about how and whether the natural law should be applied in concrete moral issues. Often these differences on how the natural law should be applied are heavily influenced by different styles of moral reasoning.

c. Moral Reasoning

42. Moral reasoning concerns the methods that one applies in assessing a moral issue. There are various methods of moral reasoning at one's disposal. Typically these are categorized into three groups: those that focus on questions of the actors intentions and character (virtue ethics); those that focus on the moral goodness or badness of particular actions in themselves (deontological or value ethics); and those that focus on the consequences or outcomes of an action (teleological or consequentialist

ethics).[39] These methods of moral reasoning have, over time, developed into distinct schools of thought in their own right and people may appeal to the apparent authority of a well-established school or prominent thinker as a source of moral discernment. Sometimes, this can be done in an uncritical, axiomatic way, such as an appeal to Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative as an authoritative source. At other times, engaging critically with this body of knowledge, worked out over thousands of years, can be very fruitful in obtaining a better understanding concerning what is at stake in a particular moral situation and a useful aid to moral discernment.

d. Natural, Social, and Human Sciences

43. Science may include natural, social and human sciences. Just as science has challenged some of the aspects of Christian faith, and led to their critical reappraisal and valuable theological reflection – concerning, for example, the place of the Earth in the universe – so too, new findings of science concerning, among other things, gender and sexuality, moral culpability, human impact on the environment, the causes of violence, the nature of mental and physical illness, as well as possible cures, and so on, call for theological and moral reflection. Development in these sciences can present new moral challenges. Sometimes, the findings of science may be appealed to in a normative ethical manner; sciences sometimes claim to show not only what is done or what can be done but also what ought to be done. More often, however, they form the data for moral discernment about what ought to be done in light of what is known from science. Thus, the findings of the sciences may also assist churches or individuals in the moral discernment process. Disciplines like biology, economics, psychology, sociology, medicine, and anthropology have enormous potential to contribute to the process of moral discernment. As Christians evaluate

[39] Various combinations also exist. For example, rule utilitarianism focuses on maximizing the goodness of the outcomes (and is in this sense teleological) but proscribes certain means to achieve those outcomes (and is in this sense deontological).

scientific developments through the lens of their faith, they often adopt different approaches in using them.

e. Conscience

44. The term "conscience" is used in other religious and non-religious contexts, but it also has explicitly Christian meanings. In the context of moral decision-making, "conscience" is used in at least three different ways, all of which pertain generally to a moral sense or awareness internal to human persons. First, conscience sometimes refers to a human being's capacity to will the good, distinguish right from wrong, and accept responsibility for a course of action. A second usage stems from references in both the Old and New Testaments to the moral law written on human beings' hearts, and thus refers to a person's God-given awareness of right and wrong.[40] A third meaning of conscience is manifest in common parlance, where it refers to honouring deeply-held moral convictions (e.g., being a "prisoner of conscience").

f. Experience

45. The lived experience of individuals and groups directly involved in particular moral issues is a critical component of the process of moral discernment. It can affect how people perceive, understand, and define the problem, as well as what they understand to be at stake in the moral issue. For some, experience can make a problem life-threatening or life-affirming in such a way that it compels action, possibly even to the point of self-sacrifice. Experience can give false perspectives or even prejudices; but experience, well interpreted (often with the wise direction of others) can be an important source for moral discernment. For some Christians, and indeed perhaps for all in certain ways, it is into their own experience that God speaks. Respect for and listening to the experiences of others (particularly those who have very different lives from our own) can radically affect our discernment of moral issues.

[40] This is sometimes known as "natural law," see § 41 above.

Human experience has always to be interpreted (like a living document), but it can often be a place of insight into God's design.

g. Civil Law and Human Rights

46. Civil law is one of the ways in which human beings govern behaviour. Different countries have different legal systems and different laws in place to govern a vast array of activities that are morally relevant. In addition, international law and legal instruments, such as multinational agreements, govern relationships that can also have moral consequences. Since laws are intended to govern moral behaviour, they are often appealed to as if all laws are always and everywhere morally binding. For example, a person might say that something should not be done because it is illegal. More nuanced approaches to the law recognize laws as codifications of human moral wisdom, but not as immutable or incontrovertible. Additionally, it should be noted that the history of international law sometimes reflects the dominant power relationships embedded in colonialism and has sometimes been used in ways that harm minorities. Either way, laws and legal language frequently find their way into moral discourse and discernment.

47. Some kinds of legal instruments do not so much regulate specific activities as offer a normative moral vision of how activities should be regulated by governments and their laws. This is typical of the language found in national constitutions, bills of rights, and international documents like the United Nations 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the 1966 Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Human rights, together with associated concepts like human dignity, are internationally endorsed standards that reflect inalienable rights due to individuals based on a recognition of their status as human beings, and that are assumed to contribute to human flourishing. In moral discernment, some will recognize their Christian beliefs as expressed in human rights language; others will appeal to human rights because they hold the status of regional or international law and/or authority. While some highlight

the rights of individuals, others point more to the duties and responsibilities related to human rights.

h. Culture and Cultural Artifacts (and Language)

48. The social structures, language, narratives, values, practices, media, and works of art that together constitute a culture or cultural heritage have an inescapable impact on a society's members. More specifically, the surrounding culture influences persons and communities engaged in moral decision-making in both subtle and profound ways, influencing not only people's beliefs about what is right and wrong, or good and bad, but also about what even constitutes a moral issue or problem. In addition, people frequently appeal to elements and artifacts of a culture (e.g., civic rituals, popular culture, works of literature) as being authoritative sources for moral decision-making. Christians, too, may find valuable sources for moral discernment within their local culture. Yet, Christians may also encounter moral dilemmas when real or perceived cultural expectations are in conflict with their faith commitments thus making it important to recognize and differentiate this source.

III. CAUSATIVE FACTORS IN THE DISAGREEMENTS BETWEEN AND WITHIN CHURCHES

49. The case study approach employed in this study (as described in par. 9 and 27-29) yielded two categories of factors that typically contribute to disagreement. The first category includes social and ecclesial factors that shape and affect communication. The second category includes factors stemming from different approaches to moral discernment. It should be noted that in the practice of moral reasoning these factors overlap. For purposes of analysis these factors are highlighted separately. The discussion of each factor will address how it can contribute to confusion and misunderstanding, and will be followed by an example presented in a grey box. These examples are intended as illustrations of the specific causative factors of disagreement to help the reader follow the point. They are *not* intended to be authoritative or exhaustive in any way. Each section concludes with a suggestion for reflection by those engaged in moral discernment. These suggestions for reflection, while responding to

specific factors, often have relevance beyond the specific situation discussed.

A. Social and Ecclesial Factors that Shape and Affect Communication

50. Conflicts over moral issues are often affected by social and ecclesial factors (e.g. tradition, culture, interpretation, experience) that contribute to misunderstanding and disagreement. It is neither possible, nor always desirable, to eliminate these factors. Nevertheless, increased awareness of them and how they shape and affect communication can lead to more effective ways of discussing and resolving moral differences that allow participants to recognize the humanity and integrity of the other, while engaging in meaningful dialogue about the substantive points of disagreement.

a. Influence of Historical and Cultural Contexts

51. Moral discernment is a uniquely human activity that is associated with the human capacity to take cognizance of, reflect upon, and act in the world. As people engage in the process of moral discernment they are inevitably influenced by historical, cultural, and other contextual factors. This is also true when they do so as representatives of their churches. The human realities of ethnicity, race, class, gender, disability, and personal experience, for example, shape not only a person's identity but also her or his moral perspective. People's locations in the world shape how they are treated, what they experience, how they learn to think, and even how they live out their Christian faith.

Example 1: When the World Alliance of Reformed Churches debated the "Accra Confession" (2004), although all delegates came from the Reformed tradition, they varied in their support of whether or not they agreed that neoliberal globalization was "sin." Delegates who rejected naming neoliberal globalization as sin were primarily from wealthy,

developed countries in the global North where capitalism and neoliberal globalization have not only generated great amounts of wealth but they also play a strong role in shaping domestic and foreign policy (particularly related to economic aid and poverty relief). However, many delegates from the global South have had a very different experience of neoliberal globalization and share the criticism of neoliberal globalization expressed in the Accra Confession. For many of the delegates from the global South, their experience of neoliberal globalization has been one of neocolonialism and continued exploitation leading to impoverishment. In this situation, people's cultural context and personal experience influenced their assessment of the morality of neoliberal globalization.

52. *Suggestion for reflection: Developing an increased attention to how one's own historical and cultural context and experience affects one's position on controversial issues can increase the understanding of one's own position. Seeking to understand, appreciate, and respect the influence of similar factors on others' positions can increase empathy and deepen recognition of our common humanity.*

b. Differing Understandings of What Is at Stake

53. In some situations, communication fails and tensions arise because different groups or persons understand what is at stake in different ways. In some cases, the discrepancy arises when two or more groups or individuals frame, understand, or label the same situation in radically different ways. Different accounts of what is at stake in a particular situation might reflect different ways in which actors use or are influenced by various sources.

54. In other cases, people engaged in dialogue may use shared terms but hold radically different understandings of the meaning of those terms. Different understandings of the problem might result in people talking

past each other instead of talking with each other. In such situations, the real differences are rooted in preconceived definitions of the terms of the debate.

55. Agreeing to a shared understanding of the problem contributes to the possibility of meaningful dialogue. Sometimes, when a shared understanding of the problem is impossible, the conversation about the nature of the problem can lead to increased clarity about the problem when it helps people gain a more accurate understanding of the position and argument of the other side.

Example 2: Controversies have arisen in traditionally Orthodox territories when evangelical churches have moved in with an aim toward "evangelizing" the local populations after the fall of communism. Many Orthodox, however, understand such evangelical activities as "proselytism." The label of "proselytism" versus "evangelism" signifies the conflicting accounts of what is at stake in this scenario. Evangelical missionaries see people who, in their understanding, have not been taught the gospel and are not practicing a Christian life. Out of concern for their neighbour and from evangelical zeal, they want to respond to God's call in Mt. 28, and do so in a way that reflects their church culture. The Orthodox, in contrast, see a group of Christian outsiders moving into their territory who are seeking to convert members of the Orthodox Church to a foreign form of Christianity, sometimes using immoral methods, and who are introducing ways of thinking and practicing Christianity that are inconsistent with the ecclesial ethos, or church culture, of Orthodoxy. While both the Evangelicals and the Orthodox are acting out of a genuine desire to enhance the spiritual well-being of the people, their sharply different accounts of what the issue is (evangelism versus proselytism), tends to preclude their acknowledgement of this shared concern, and to entrench them in positions that lack the common language necessary for authentic dialogue.

56. *Suggestion for reflection: Carefully reflecting on the terms, definitions, and presuppositions used to frame one's understanding of the problem helps to adequately identify what is "at stake" in a given situation. Engaging in dialogue that seeks to reflect on the same issues from the other's perspective and to search for a common language can help to express what is at stake for the dialogue partners. In this process, identifying shared concerns can provide a foundation for mutually respectful dialogue. In addition, it can be helpful to acknowledge the role that a church's culture or ethos plays in how problems are perceived and in how appropriate responses are developed and assessed*.

c. Emotional Intensity of Moral Issues

57. Experiences and expressions of emotion are an intrinsic aspect of dialogue and debate about moral issues. Emotional knowledge can be an expression of human intuition; it can also be an expression of knowledge that grows out of personal experience. In many situations in which emotional intensity is expressed, it can have the positive effect of creating awareness that there is a moral issue at stake, as well as an awareness of the depth of the problem.

58. Attitudes about emotion are often culturally marked, in such a way that people from different cultural backgrounds may possess different levels of comfort or understanding of the appropriateness of emotional intensity or expression as an aspect of moral discernment. These differing attitudes about emotion can generate cross-cultural misunderstandings and tensions.

59. Church-dividing moral issues are often issues that evoke strong emotional responses, even as those responses are expressed in a wide variety of culturally distinct ways. One factor that many church-dividing issues share is a connection to personal identity. Issues of personal conduct often provoke highly emotional reactions precisely because they are rooted in people's experience, and because they relate both to an understanding of self and to one's understanding of salvation. The

emotional investment associated with identity and salvation can impact the intensity with which people believe in the correctness of their moral beliefs.

60. Sometimes, this emotional intensity can complicate and even obstruct the process of dialogue. At other times, to the extent that emotion underpins the human capacity to develop and express empathy and compassion, it can also play a positive role in building relationships and understanding across lines of difference. When empathy enables movement toward tolerance and the willingness to live with ambiguity in the midst of human brokenness, it can function as an important aspect of moral community building.

Example 3: Debates over slavery, the role of women in the Church, and homosexuality are three issues that touch on and provoke emotions, and that have caused rifts within and between churches. While all churches join together in rejecting slavery, there are wide-ranging debates in the churches regarding the ordination of women and the morality of homosexual behaviour. Some churches regard the ordination of women as a doctrinal question while others see it clearly as a moral issue. Some churches make a distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual practice while other churches regard committed homosexual relationships as morally acceptable. Debates over each of these issues are particularly emotionally charged because they are rooted in deeply personal experiences of human identity, human dignity, and salvation. Each of these debates has involved emotionally charged arguments and testimonies that can make the possibility of constructive dialogue difficult for some and devastating for others. Righteous indignation at the treatment of slaves and slave uprisings, for example, helped to establish that there was a problem in the first place. Similarly, the ability to empathize with those in such situations contributed to finding resolutions. The real challenge faced by churches over discernment on emotionally charged topics underscores both the potential for disagreements to escalate quickly, and the need for Christians to take

seriously the emotional intensity that can attend the process of moral discernment.

61. *Suggestion for reflection: Recognizing and identifying the ways in which moral issues may affect people at a personal level, whether in terms of personal identity or soteriological understandings, can help those engaged in dialogue better understand the emotional quality of a debate or the emotional response of participants. It can be helpful to recognize that those with whom one disagrees are created in the image of God and to seek to talk with them in the spirit of "agape" as witnessed through the life of Christ. In some situations, the emotional quality of an issue can help to identify the problem and evoke empathy.*

d. Cultural Protocol in Debating Moral Concerns

62. Misunderstandings of cultural norms in debating moral issues can lead to breakdown and division when parties around a table come from different cultures. These cultures may be ecclesial or social. The social and the ecclesial dimensions may also overlap, such as when members of a particular church from one part of the world, governed by its own cultural norms, speak to members of the same church from a different part of the world. As a result, attention may be drawn away from the main points of the issue. Such culturally defined misunderstandings can take two forms: those that arise from the style of engagement, and those that arise from the approach to reaching a decision.

63. Many different cultures have different protocols regarding the style with which a debate should be conducted. In some, demonstration of emotions is not only acceptable but is essential if one is to be taken seriously. Displays of anger, standing on one's dignity, and even insults are quite acceptable in some cultures, whilst, in others, such behaviour is deemed irrational, confrontational, and rude. When these two worlds

collide, effective communication is often impossible, ending in dismissals of the other party as unworthy of further engagement.

64. Many different cultures and political communities have different protocols regarding how a decision should be reached, which affects how they engage in moral debates. For some cultures, a decision can only be arrived at by consensus. This means listening carefully to what each party has to say and slowly constructing a position that takes all views into account, such that each feels they can take ownership of the final decision of the group. Where no consensus is reached, no decision is made, and dialogue must continue. For other cultures, a decision is reached once there is majority support for a particular position. The minority is expected to accept this as the will of the group. In still other cultures, the final, decision-making authority is given to a person or group of persons who are deemed to hold a leadership position. The members of the group are expected to follow the leader's decision. The degree of consultation with other members in which the leadership is expected to engage can vary widely. When members of different communities meet – a consensus community and a democratic community, for instance – conflict and division can arise when a decision is arrived at in a manner that is counter-cultural for the other party.

Example 4: Great advances have been made in understanding the origins of humankind, the migrations of human beings all over the globe, and genetic diseases through the use of human genetic material. However, conflicts have arisen regarding how this genetic material may be taken, stored and used for further research. One such conflict has to do with cultural norms regarding decision-making on moral questions. In many democratic cultures, today, the right of the individual to decide about issues that affect their own body and person is widely accepted. The widespread use of "informed consent" in adult biomedical ethics in many such countries exemplifies this. However, in many genetically related communities in these same countries, such decisions are not up

to the individual as they concern "genetic information" that belongs to the group. One's DNA can, in a sense, be seen to constitute part of one's cultural as well as biological heritage. As such, a decision to participate in genetic research must be reached by group consensus or possibly through the definitive decision of the group's leader. Researchers operating out of a culturally insensitive "informed consent" paradigm can unwittingly cause great division and conflict in such communities.

65. *Suggestion for reflection: Recognizing the cultural norms that define one's debating style and approach to group decision-making can improve cross-cultural communication. It can also be helpful to critically reflect on the benefits and shortcomings of one's own style and approach as well as the styles and approaches of dialogue partners. Different styles and approaches may be used by different people in different settings, such as work, home, and church. This means that it is sometimes easier to agree on norms for a particular discussion than it might at first appear. Taking time to discuss these matters openly with dialogue partners can enhance mutual understanding before embarking on discussions about moral issues.*

e. Different Structural Characteristics of Churches

66. Disagreement about moral issues is not inherently church-dividing. In fact, some moral issues allow for a diversity of responses without causing tensions between communities. However, sometimes it is the case that the way that one communion allows for diversity among its churches is in conflict with the way other communions understand the limits of diversity. This discrepancy may reveal ecclesiological differences that relate to authority and church structure. For instance, some communions may allow for a limited diversity, leaving it to (local) communities to find a response while accepting and respecting that other communities might arrive at another conclusion and thus act differently. In other circumstances, some issues will not allow for diversity, because it is held that these issues should not be decided by groups within a

community; instead, a consensus across the whole church is required. These scenarios exist due to different intra and inter-church understandings of who has the responsibility and authority to decide. The range of acceptable divergence over moral issues differs across churches as it is indeed often tied to their ecclesiology.

Example 5: In a dialogue project about "The Church local and universal" between Protestant churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the Old Catholic Church in the Netherlands, the question of ecclesiology and its implications for moral decision-making arose: the discussion focused on the question whether topics such as women's ordination and ministers living in a publicly recognized homosexual partnership require a consensus of the whole church (or synod), or if for example the synod could decide to allow for it while at the same time leaving implementation up to the local congregations. The discussion revealed that the ecclesiology of the Reformed tradition – being more congregational in nature – would allow for the latter, whereas for Roman Catholics such a discussion, because it also involved ministry, would need to be made by the Church universal and would then bind the whole Church. Furthermore, the issue of women's ordination is not considered a moral issue by the Roman Catholic Church, but, rather a doctrinal issue. What appeared first as a mere moral decision-making process, turned out to have deeply ecclesiological aspects, which in turn had a consequence for determining who has the ecclesiological authority to make the decision.

67. *Suggestion for reflection: Recognizing how the ecclesiology of a community or church influences the decision-making process can sometimes help illuminate the potential source of disagreement. In some cases it can be helpful to determine who, with respect to the moral issue at stake, has the ecclesiological authority to make the decision. It may also help to figure out whether the issue is of such a nature that ecclesiological implications are involved.*

f. Power

68. Conflict on moral questions is frequently associated with issues of power. Human persons are embedded in relationships characterized by differing degrees and kinds of power associated with roles, affiliations, and expectations. The result is that persons frequently have to negotiate balances and imbalances of power between persons and groups in an effort to discern the best course of moral behaviour.

69. It is important to distinguish between power and authority. In the Church, faithful moral discernment might become clouded by the assertion of naked human political power, or worse yet, human power interests veiled in the language of divine will, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and so on. This is distinct from a discernment that is enlightened by assent to grace-filled authorities. Christians are seeking the "mind of Christ" and the "will of God" – not seeking to "win" an argument. Identifying the individual and political power interests at stake in a moral issue is an important step in avoiding uncritical acceptance of existing power relations as "ordained by God."

Example 6: In the context of apartheid in South Africa, both theology and morality were strongly tied up with power interests that manifested themselves in unjust structures and sometimes violent rebellion. In 1985, the Kairos Document identified different kinds of power at work in apartheid in South Africa. The first of these was "State Theology," in which Christian sources were used to justify apartheid and maintain the status quo. The apartheid government styled itself as the defender of Christianity and freedom, against the atheism and totalitarianism of communism. Secondly, "Church Theology" describes the practice of some churches, usually governed by whites, to spiritualize Christian belief on the one hand, and to appeal to concepts like non-violence on the other, in order to justify their own inaction against the injustices of apartheid. Finally, the document calls for a "Prophetic Theology" that challenges the abuse of power and of theology by the state, and

explicitly identifies itself with the dormant power of oppressed peoples. Such a theology highlights the power of the people to determine their own destiny and not to accept the illegitimate power of tyranny. Thus, one's theological and moral outlook in apartheid in South Africa was often a product of the power interests with which one identified.

70. *Suggestion for reflection: Analyzing where power is located, how power is being used and who is benefiting from the power in a particular moral situation can help participants think more carefully about some of the social aspects of moral questions. The link between power and a moral position may not always be illegitimate. The power of the people to resist unjust oppression by a minority is a good example. Nevertheless, it is helpful to critically and humbly examine how power should be used and the role it should play in moral discernment.*

g. Stereotypes

71. Stereotypes are qualities assigned to groups of people due to race, nationality, sexual orientation and so on. In most cases, stereotypes are perpetuated by power and status. Stereotypes can be used to generalize people's behaviour leading to discrimination. They carry with them bias, prejudice, and prior assumptions about groups of people that often inhibit the recognition of individual human dignity. They can exaggerate and magnify differences between groups and minimize similarities. When engagement with moral issues is shaped by stereotypes, there is a danger of discrimination and stigmatization. Groups that are socialized in ways that draw on or perpetuate stereotypes may fail to see others' view points, thus failing to come to terms with the experiences of those who are marginalized.

Example 7: HIV and AIDS are often shrouded in stereotypical thinking that leaves churches with judgmental attitudes toward particular groups of people. Global responses to the pandemic are also in some cases driven by false stereotypes that tend to associate the disease with particular groups or contexts. Stereotypical thinking around HIV and AIDS includes: feminization of the pandemic (commonly found in areas where more women than men are infected with the pandemic); associating HIV with homosexuality, drug related behaviour, promiscuity, and poverty; identification of HIV and AIDS as a neo-colonial plot to control fertility in the developing world. Moral dialogue in the churches should be informed by accurate scientific and epidemiological information, not stereotypes. Stereotypes like these can generate a stigmatizing process that undermines dialogue and creates negative attitudes toward others, leading to the possibility of divisions between and within the churches. These assumptions and stereotypes also impacted churches in Africa. Some churches and church members ostracized HIV-positive people as sinful and justly punished by God, thus denying them the right to belong. Other people left their churches because they felt stigmatized and rejected. This rejection and ostracism sometimes resulted in a denial of a moral duty to care for the sick and dying.

72. *Suggestion for reflection: Developing an increased consciousness of the pervasiveness and perniciousness of stereotypes and how they function in moral debates can help to prevent stereotypes from interfering in moral discourse. Working to minimize the influence of stereotypes can help prevent veiling issues of moral significance and can help create an all-embracing Church that reflects God's gracious love.*

h. Attitudes toward Otherness

73. Attitudes toward otherness can be seen in two forms among groups of people; those who are generally open toward otherness and those who often view otherness with suspicion or believe the acceptance of difference will threaten their own identity. Positive or negative views of otherness are influenced by factors such as family upbringing, socio-cultural conditioning, and personal experience. The kind of socio-cultural values one grows up with may shape the way one embraces or excludes otherness. Churches can play a normative role in either perpetuating a negative attitude toward otherness, or helping people to be more accepting and inclusive. In addition, differing attitudes toward otherness can themselves become divisive within churches, with some members seeking a more diverse and inclusive worshipping community and others resisting change and difference.

Example 8: The damaging results of negative attitudes toward otherness are evident in some of the ways in which imperialism and colonialism played out in the churches in Latin America, Asia and Africa. In most African countries, for example, imperialism and colonialism are associated with the introduction of mission churches into the continent. From a moral perspective, colonizers and imperial powers often enforced their cultural attitudes and perspectives on local cultures in ways that disrespected the moral agency and cultural habits and attitudes of local people. In some cases, the introduction of Christianity was viewed as an imposition of Western culture and a rejection of otherness. Blocked by a mutual incapacity to appreciate and embrace difference, dialogue broke down between Africans and Europeans. Some Africans felt that the mission Church did not effectively address their cultural context (language barriers, values, norms, power, customs and so on). Consequently, they left the mission churches to start their own churches known as African Independent Churches (AIC). The problem here was not the Christian faith, but rather the perceived imposition of cultural uniformity on the part of the mission churches that failed to adequately

respect and allow local practices to inform church culture. This ongoing difference between the North and South continues to cause divisions between and within churches where decisions are seen to be made by the North in matters that have significant impact in the South.

74. *Suggestion for reflection: Diversity and otherness, like sameness and continuity, are intrinsic aspects of the created world. Affirming difference and otherness can enhance church community and human flourishing.*

B. Factors Stemming from Different Approaches to Moral Discernment

75. In addition to the social and ecclesial factors that shape and frame our experiences of conflict over moral issues, there are factors intrinsic to the process of moral discernment that also contribute to disagreement, both within and between churches. The study process has revealed five main factors that, while not independent of the factors discussed above, are grounded in differences that are based more directly upon how moral positions are developed and defended.

a. Using Different Sources and Weighing them Differently

76. As described in part II above, a wide range of sources are available to those engaged in the process of moral discernment. When conflicts over moral issues arise, one common cause is that those involved appeal to different sources and attribute different authoritative weight to the sources they are using. While this factor sometimes reflects broad and long-standing differences between churches (e.g., on whether or to what extent the lives and writings of saints are authoritative), it also appears in more subtle ways, even within churches. The result can be a deadlock that escalates into division.

Example 9: Suicide has often been regarded as a voluntary act that directly violates the scriptural commandments "do not kill" and "love your neighbour as yourself." This led to church law and liturgical practices prohibiting a church funeral or burial for persons who committed suicide. However, advances in medicine and mental health fields have led to a more nuanced understanding of depression and its impact on human freedom, calling into question the presumed voluntary character of many suicides. Increased attention has also been given to the experience of the families of those who died through suicide and to their pastoral needs. The inclusion of these "new" sources into the moral debate around suicide, as well as changes to the relative emphasis of their importance, has impacted discernment about what constitutes the "right" pastoral response to suicide. This example illustrates how the openness to knowledge from new or different sources – in this case to findings from natural and social sciences and human experience – has brought about a reconsideration of the moral evaluation of the culpability of suicide, leading to a revision of church law and liturgical practice in many churches.

77. *Suggestion for reflection: Identifying what sources are being appealed to in different moral arguments and seeking to understand the moral argument that is being made can both be helpful strategies for engaging in dialogue. Avoiding accusing others of simply dismissing or disregarding certain authoritative sources can help involved communities recognize that appealing to different sources and weighing them differently can be a reflection of the complexity and richness of Christian ethical reflection. Recognizing that people make moral arguments in different ways is an essential procedural step in creating an atmosphere of open and productive dialogue. It is only when people are able to truly understand the argument that their opponent is making that they will be able to recognize and appreciate where their differences lie.*

b. Interpreting Sources Differently

78. In addition to using different sources, it is also the case that even when people utilize the same sources they often employ them in different ways. The moment the Bible is read, spoken aloud, or translated it enters the hermeneutical realm, the realm of interpretation. Since Scripture does not exist in unmediated forms – it is always read and translated, necessarily interpreted – the question is: who and what is mediating the text? The answer to this question is, of course, different for different churches, communions, and regions of the world because each reading of sacred text is mediated through a variety of sources including the Church Fathers, the *magisterium*, science/reason, and human experience. While the most obvious example of this is the use of Scripture, it is also true with regards to the use of all sources.

Example 10: In discussions on capital punishment among Christians, for example, all value Scripture and recognize it as authoritative in their faith; however, their disagreement over whether or not the death penalty should be endorsed as a properly Christian punishment today for certain egregious crimes stems from *how* each of them read the Bible. For some, capital punishment is justified by appeals to multiple Old Testament texts and to New Testament passages like Romans 13. They argue that these texts, especially those in the New Testament, express timeless truths that Christians should support regardless of shifting cultural attitudes or other factors. For others, capital punishment should be rejected on the basis of Jesus' biblical example of non-violence and because of passages affirming the sanctity of life and dignity of all persons. They see the Bible as authoritative not because it provides timeless prescriptions for moral laws but because it provides theological and moral principles that, in turn, guide moral discernment.

79. *Suggestion for reflection: In examining the sources that Christians and churches use in moral discernment, it is important to examine how Scripture is being used and interpreted as a source of authority. Simply recognizing that different parties do value Scripture, or another common source, as authoritative for the process of moral discernment could help to ease some of the tensions and open up avenues for advancing dialogue.*

c. Conflict between Competing Principles

80. Churches are moved by their commitments to theological, ethical, and social principles about what it means to be Christians or to be the Church in a fallen world. "Protecting and promoting life," "growth in holiness," "solidarity with the poor," "liberating the oppressed," "respecting the local church," "bringing peace to the world," and "spreading the gospel," just to name a few, are principles that Christian communities strive to live out and honour in their responses to moral issues. In some situations, however, two or more deeply held principles may conflict and produce a moral dilemma, a situation in which it is impossible to avoid compromising at least one deeply held principle. Recognizing the moral argument of your opponent can help elucidate the reasons why another person or group holds a different position.

Example 11: Increased life expectancy, advancements in medical technology, and a rise in terminal conditions entailing long suffering have led to often heated debates about questions concerning the end of life. Sometimes couched in the confusing language of "euthanasia," various positions exist regarding the moral legitimacy of ending a person's life. Sometimes in these debates, different positions are taken based on different weighing of the moral principles that are deemed to be most important to respect and further in circumstances where a terminal condition can be foreseen to entail a long period of suffering. For example, some might argue that all active ending of life in such

circumstances is morally bad because it contravenes the principle of the "Sanctity of Life." Those who hold this position would argue that the sanctity of life is best preserved by allowing God to decide when a person's life should end. Others might argue that the principle of "Respect for Autonomy" is the most important principle for Christians to uphold. From this perspective, if a person's free choice concerning her own life – and how best to realize its meaning and purpose – is not upheld, one ultimately denies the humanity of the person and violates God's gracious gift of freedom. In other words, here are differing positions on end-of-life decisions that arise out of an appeal to different principles, sanctity of life, on the one hand, and human freedom, on the other.

81. *Suggestion for reflection: Seeking to identify and discuss the core principles informing each stakeholder in the debate can offer common ground that increases understanding on the one hand, and provides a shared witness to the world, on the other.*

d. Applying the Same Principle Differently

82. In situations of disagreement over moral issues or dilemmas, the discomfort and even anger that people feel toward others can make it difficult for dialogue to occur. Even more distressing is the fact that these differences can make it appear as if different groups of Christians hold fundamentally different and, perhaps, competing moral principles. In some situations, however, groups on different "sides" of an issue may actually share the same fundamental principle but disagree about how to express or achieve it. This disagreement may be influenced by the way in which different groups engage in the process of moral discernment (e.g. the use of different sources, different interpretations of Scripture), by differing historical or cultural perspectives, or even by differing human experience. Identifying what moral principles shape different moral arguments can help groups that disagree find common ground

upon which to begin conversations and recognize the integrity of the other parties' effort to live out their Christian convictions.

Example 12: Abortion is a classic example of a moral issue in which people and groups on different sides of the debate may actually share some common commitment to core principles. Among the many principles that may be invoked in this complicated issue, some people and churches appeal to the principle of "human dignity." However, differing beliefs about when a distinct human life obtains personhood influences people's opinions about the moral status of the embryo/fetus. This, in turn, impacts how they apply the principle of "human dignity" in the situation of the termination of a pregnancy. For instance, people who equate the moment of conception as conferring personhood would apply the principle of human dignity as fully to the embryo/fetus as they do to a baby that is already born. For others, the moment of conception, while beginning a process that may lead to the birth of a baby, does not, in and of itself confer the moral status of "personhood" on the embryo/fetus. In this instance, while the developing embryo/fetus is certainly valued, its moral status is not considered equivalent to that of the pregnant woman and it is only the pregnant woman who is recognized as fully warranting human dignity and the rights and privileges associated with the principle of human dignity.

83. *Suggestion for reflection: One way of searching for common ground within Christian tradition and values is to identify shared values and principles. This can be a first step toward building trust and improving the quality of the dialogue.*

e. Conflict between Different Approaches toward Moral Reasoning

84. Different methods of reasoning about a moral issue can lead to different conclusions, and so to conflicts and division, about what the right thing to do may be. Focusing on the consequences or ends of a particular course of action may yield a different conclusion than

focusing on the rightness or wrongness of particular actions being undertaken to achieve those ends. A consideration of the rightness or wrongness of a person's intentions may yield different conclusions about the moral rightness or wrongness of an action than a consideration of the rightness or wrongness of the action itself. Likewise a combination of an analysis of intentions, ends, means, and character, with or without a differential weighing of these aspects, may lead to a different conclusion and hence to conflict.

Example 13: Many churches, in their role as providers of healthcare, have become embroiled in debates about how to deal with problems associated with drug addiction, particularly with respect to drugs like heroin that are widely held to be illegal. This can lead to painful disputes and division. Many of those within churches who advocate the provision of safe heroin injection centres argue that, though this might be seen to be collaborating in bad acts, such efforts are necessary to prevent many of the fatal consequences of unregulated drug use, like the contraction of HIV and Hepatitis C from soiled needles. Moreover, they argue, these centres bring drug users into contact with people who can help them realize the dangers of drug use and provide them with treatment, instead of condemning them. These advocates are considering the consequences of providing heroin injection centres as the basis for arriving at their judgment. Opponents of heroin injection centres tend to focus on the act being performed. From this perspective drug abuse is always an intrinsically evil act and hence always morally wrong. Complicity in helping other people use drugs is therefore also always morally wrong and cannot be condoned regardless of the intentions of the helpers or potentially good consequences of their actions. Differing approaches to moral reasoning have thus led to different conclusions, and hence conflict in churches, on the moral rightness or wrongness of a course of action to address a moral issue.

85. *Suggestion for reflection: Developing knowledge about different approaches to ethical reasoning can allow for deeper understanding across lines of difference. One might begin by identifying one's own approach to ethical reasoning and understanding clearly what factors play a role in favoring this approach over others. Whichever approach is preferred, it is helpful to try to understand as many of the aspects potentially involved in determining the moral rightness or wrongness of issues or courses of action, including intentions, consequences, circumstances, acts, and character. Respecting the sincerity of another person's approach to moral reasoning can open the way to dialogue.*

IV. CONCLUSION

86. The current study reveals a wide range of social and ethical factors that contribute to divisions within the Church over moral issues. Identification of the various factors, as well as honest acknowledgment of their roles in real-life disagreements, is a necessary first step in moving dialogue in a constructive direction. Moral disagreements grow out of a complex web of causative factors that require patient, careful, and sustained consideration. It may seem, at first, that these factors will inevitably undermine unity, that there is no hope for preventing deep divisions among Christians over claims about “right” and “wrong” human behaviour. To be sure, the social and ethical factors delineated above, as well as others not here developed, are formidable obstacles to ecumenical progress. However, the study has not only revealed obstacles; it has generated insight into common ground that Christians share in processes of moral discernment. The first portion of this conclusion highlights that common ground and calls on Christian churches to seek increased dialogue focused on the common ground that is shared as a foundation for seeking understanding of the other in the

midst of perceived disagreements. The second portion of the conclusion represents the suggestions for reflection from the previous section as guidance for churches engaged in divisive moral debates.

A. Articulating Common Ground for Moral Discernment

87. The ecumenical dialogue generated by this study process confirmed that the churches share many common sources and common commitments. Recognition and affirmation of these commonalities allowed case study participants to identify common ground and shared values upon which they were able to build a conversation. An awareness of these shared factors and attitudes is important for the study of moral discernment in the churches and can help the churches claim common ground that can serve as the foundation for Christian witness and service.

a. Common Sources Provide Common Ground for Moral Discernment:

i. Scripture

88. All churches value the Bible as an essential source of moral authority, even though the use and interpretation of it may be sometimes rather different.

ii. Tradition

89. Similarly, all churches refer in one way or another to tradition when they are confronted with moral discernment and decision-making, though the concept of tradition and the authority attributed to it vary considerably from one confession to another.

iii. Human knowledge

90. Besides these more directly theological or ecclesial sources, all churches appeal to other sources in the analysis of concrete situations demanding moral discernment. All recognize the importance of human

reason and critical thinking, conscience and experience, and the shared wisdom of humanity, as reflected in:

- natural sciences;
- medical sciences;
- human sciences that help us analyze culture, history, and contemporary experience;
- international law and human rights;
- and other disciplines of critical inquiry.

Though the churches draw from these non-ecclesial sources, they may weigh them differently in any given situation.

91. Recognizing that Christians share common sources in the process of moral discernment is a crucial step in helping to understand how different moral positions endeavour to be rooted in Christian faithfulness.

b. The Common Ground that Christians Share Leads to Common Commitments:

92. Sharing one baptism in the Triune God, Christians are committed together to follow Christ and to proclaim and serve the Kingdom of God, as good news to all humankind, offering hope to the desperate and light in the darkness. In the process of discussing the case studies, participants also found that they shared common commitments rooted in their faith. One example was the commitment to caring for the poor and vulnerable that Christians from the global North and the global South shared as they discussed issues of poverty and economics. Likewise, in the discussion about proselytism/evangelism both parties share a commitment to building up the body of Christ in the world and attending to the spiritual health and well-being of the members of the community. The value of identifying the common commitments that different parties share is a productive starting point for genuine dialogue that can lead to understanding.

93. This common ground is a central aspect of the unity that Christians share as followers of Christ. It reflects the "moral community" affirmed in previous Faith and Order studies on ecclesiology and ethics and demonstrates that there is much that Christians share in common, even in the midst of what appear to be significantly different perspectives on questions of morality. Claiming common ground can help the churches respond more faithfully to the command and the prayer of the Lord "that they may all be one... that the world may believe" (John 17:21).

B. Suggestions for those Engaged in Moral Discernment

94. While the history of the WCC Standing Commission on Faith and Order has largely focused on doctrinal and theological issues, the past 30 years has seen increasing attention to the moral dimensions of ecclesiology. With tensions increasing in recent years, within and between churches, over the ecclesial positions of some churches and ecumenical bodies on various moral questions, churches have increasingly asked for guidance on how to deal with existing and potential divisions. Faith and Order designed the Moral Discernment in the Churches study as a response to the significant threat to church unity posed by responses to divisive moral issues.

95. The majority of the participants in the process who responded to the study materials indicated that the case study methodology was a productive way to engage in dialogue about moral differences in ecumenical settings in order to increase awareness and understanding of the problems. The Standing Commission of Faith and Order affirms the value of the case study model and recommends that churches, ecumenical councils, and other interested groups study these cases and discuss them as a way of thinking more critically about the ways we disagree with one another.

96. Affirmation of the value of engaging in structured dialogues about the process of moral discernment is the greatest recommendation developed over the six years of the Moral Discernment in the Churches study. Through the case study process, feedback consistently indicated

that participants valued their increased clarity about the process of moral discernment as well as careful study of the causative factors that contribute to moral disagreements. Through the development of additional study materials, the Faith and Order Commission and the World Council of Churches can help encourage and support churches, persons, and communities to engage in moral discernment processes that are more illuminative and less divisive.

97. As a result of the study process, the Faith and Order Standing Commission has developed a set of suggestions for the churches related to encouraging improved processes of moral discernment and dialogue. They are offered as a starting point for further reflection and testing.

98. Developing an increased attention to how one's own historical and cultural context and experience affects one's position on controversial issues can increase the understanding of one's own position. Seeking to understand, appreciate, and respect the influence of similar factors on others' positions can increase empathy and deepen recognition of our common humanity.

99. Carefully reflecting on the terms, definitions, and presuppositions used to frame one's understanding of the problem helps to adequately identify what is "at stake" in a given situation. Engaging in dialogue that seeks to reflect on the same issues from the other's perspective and searching for a common language can help to express what is at stake for both dialogue partners. In this process, identifying shared concerns can provide a foundation for mutually respectful dialogue. In addition, it can be helpful to acknowledge the role that a church's culture or ethos plays in how problems are perceived and in how appropriate responses are developed and assessed.

100. Recognizing and identifying the ways in which moral issues may affect people at a personal level, whether in terms of personal identity or soteriological understandings, can help those engaged in dialogue better understand the emotional quality of a debate or the emotional response of participants. It can be helpful to recognize that those with whom one

disagrees are created in the image of God and to seek to talk with them in the spirit of "agape" as witnessed through the life of Christ. In some situations, the emotional quality of an issue can help to identify the problem and evoke empathy.

101. Recognizing the cultural norms that define one's debating style and approach to group decision-making can improve cross-cultural communication. It can also be helpful to critically reflect on the benefits and shortcomings of one's own style and approach as well as the styles and approaches of dialogue partners. Different styles and approaches may be used by different people in different settings, such as work, home, and church. This means that it is sometimes easier to agree on norms for a particular discussion than it might at first appear. Taking time to discuss these matters openly with dialogue partners can enhance mutual understanding before embarking on discussions about moral issues.

102. Recognizing how the ecclesiology of a community or church influences the decision making process can sometimes help illuminate the potential source of disagreement. In some cases it can be helpful to determine who, with respect to the moral issue at stake, has the ecclesiological authority to make the decision. It may also help to figure out whether the issue is of such a nature that ecclesiological implications are involved.

103. Analyzing where power is located, how power is being used and who is benefiting from the power in a particular moral situation can help participants think more carefully about some of the social aspects of moral questions. The link between power and a moral position may not always be illegitimate. The power of the people to resist unjust oppression by a minority is a good example. Nevertheless, it is helpful to critically and humbly examine how power should be used and the role it should play in moral discernment.

104. Developing an increased consciousness of the pervasiveness and perniciousness of stereotypes and how they function in moral debates can help to prevent stereotypes from interfering in moral discourse. Working to minimize the influence of stereotypes can help prevent veiling issues of moral significance and can help create an all-embracing Church that reflects God's gracious love.

105. Diversity and otherness, like sameness and continuity, are intrinsic aspects of the created world. Affirming difference and otherness can enhance church community and human flourishing.

106. Identifying what sources are being appealed to in different moral arguments and seeking to understand the moral argument that is being made can both be helpful strategies for engaging in dialogue. Avoiding accusing others of simply dismissing or disregarding certain authoritative sources can help involved communities recognize that appealing to different sources and weighing them differently can be a reflection of the complexity and richness of Christian ethical reflection. Recognizing that people make moral arguments in different ways is an essential procedural step in creating an atmosphere of open and productive dialogue. It is only when people are able to truly *understand* the argument that their opponent is making that they will be able to recognize and appreciate where their differences lie.

107. In examining the sources that Christians and churches use in moral discernment, it is important to examine how Scripture is being used and interpreted as a source of authority. Simply recognizing that different parties do value Scripture, or another common source, as authoritative for the process of moral discernment could help to ease some of the tensions and open up avenues for advancing dialogue.

108. Seeking to identify and discuss the core principles informing each stakeholder in the debate can offer common ground that increases understanding on the one hand, and provides a shared witness to the world, on the other.

109. One way of searching for common ground within Christian tradition and values is to identify shared values and principles. This can be a first step toward building trust and improving the quality of the dialogue.

110. Developing knowledge about different approaches to ethical reasoning can allow for deeper understanding across lines of difference. One might begin by identifying one's own approach to ethical reasoning and understanding clearly what factors play a role in favoring this approach over others. Whichever approach is preferred, it is helpful to try to understand as many of the aspects potentially involved in determining the moral rightness or wrongness of issues or courses of action, including intentions, consequences, circumstances, acts, and character. Respecting the sincerity of another person's approach to moral reasoning can open the way to dialogue.