Response to the Dissenting Opinion on The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices

Prepared by the Executive Committee of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations

The document titled "Dissenting Opinion on Women in Congregational Offices" raises "procedural, historical, and theological" concerns about the CTCR's report on *The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices*. The "Dissenting Opinion" (minority report), which was printed in the December 1994 issue of the *Reporter*, has generated a number of questions and concerns about the Commission's report and the process by which it was adopted and released to the Synod. For this reason, the executive committee has prepared the following response.

A. Procedural Concerns

The minority report states that "the passage of the CTCR 'Service of Women' document occurred only after a remarkable overriding of the Commission's own normal processes." In response to this statement it must be said, first of all, that the process followed by the Commission in adopting its report *The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices* was in complete accordance with the "rules of order" by which all of its meetings are governed and all of its decisions are made. Every decision made leading up to the adoption of this document was made with the full knowledge and consent of the plenary Commission itself. To be sure, not all members of the Commission approved of every decision made or every action taken, but this does not make such decisions or actions questionable or inappropriate.

Under the Commission's policy, the executive committee has the task of making assignments to its three standing committees and may reassign or bring forward to the plenary Commission specific assignments. After two years of discussing revised drafts of this report in the standing committee to which this assignment had been referred, its chairman reported that the committee had reached an impasse on this assignment. It was the pressing nature of the deadline attached to this assignment by the 1992 synodical convention (Res. 3-05), as well as the impasse within the committee, that prompted the plenary Commission to adopt a resolution to discuss the document in plenary.

The minority report's discussion of the vote within the Commission to adopt this document also needs to be supplemented by several significant facts. Fourteen of sixteen voting members of the Commission were present at its November 1994 meeting. Two members were absent for the entire meeting. Two of the fourteen who were present for the review and discussion of the report had to leave before the vote was taken but expressed their support for the document before leaving. The chairman of the Commission, in accordance with the standard procedure of not voting except in the case of a tie, indicated his support for it in the discussion which preceded its adoption. Three of the four advisory members of the Commission—including both seminary presidents—were present for the discussion of the report and supported it. It could also be noted that one of those who was absent, in response to a request, was allowed to place his signature on the dissenting opinion even though he was not present for the discussion or the vote.

It should also be pointed out that after several years of discussion and debate the Commission deliberately decided *not* to adopt guidelines for the handling of minority reports. Although the Commission did not adopt any guidelines, there was consensus on the Commission that it would "take to heart the basic message" of the draft of the guidelines under discussion. Suggesting that the majority bypassed its own guidelines is, therefore, unfair and inaccurate.

In response to comments about the CTCR's "Mission Statement" and the Commission's relationship to the President of the Synod, the executive committee readily acknowledges that one of the Commission's functions as described in the Bylaws is to "assist the President at his request in discharging his constitutional responsibilities" (3.921 a). At the same time, it should also be noted that the Synod has entrusted to the Commission the additional responsibility of "provid[ing] guidance to the Synod in matters of theology and church relations...through special studies and documents to the membership of the Synod" (Bylaws 3.921 b 1). This particular assignment, "To Study and Clarify Services of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices," was given to the CTCR by the Synod itself in convention, with the stipulation that it be done "in consultation with the Council of Presidents" (1989 Res. 3-13A).

The Commission respects the President's office and shares the concerns he expressed to the Commission and in his "President's Newsletter" (November 1994 Reporter) regarding the need to do a careful and thorough job on this report before adopting and releasing it to the Synod. It was with these concerns in mind that the Commission engaged in many hours of discussion before a vote was finally taken to adopt and release this report. Moreover, the executive committee feels strongly that it is important for the Commission to work together with the President of the Synod in providing guidance to the Synod in matters of theology and church relations. But it is critically important to note that the specific request from the President of Synod that this report not be released to the Synod was not made until the week following the Commission's meeting. This presented a dilemma that weighed heavily on the executive committee of the Commission. While it took very seriously the President's request not to release its report until following its February meeting, it was also of the opinion that it did not have the authority to overrule a decision of the plenary Commission. executive committee did point out to the President, however, that the enabling resolution to release the report contained the contingency clause that additional consultation not be requested by the Council of Presidents. At its December 1994 meeting the COP voted without dissent, following prolonged discussion, not to request additional consultation with the CTCR, and it was only at this point that the resolution adopted by the plenary Commission was actually implemented.

The introduction to the minority report seems to indicate that the fundamental issue underlying the concerns expressed in this section is the "opinion that the Commission has acted in undue haste" in adopting this report. While the Commission respects this opinion, it feels that the following facts must also be taken into account:

- 1. This assignment was given to the CTCR by the Synod in 1989 (Res. 3-13A) and has received high priority on the Commission's agenda since that time. This report presents the results of five years of study and discussion within the Commission on this topic.
- 2. The conclusions contained in this report present the application of the basic principles of the CTCR's 1985 report on the question of women serving in congregational offices (see page 46), which was adopted unanimously by the CTCR

following seven years of intense study (cf. 1977 Res. 3-06). This report has been the subject of widespread study and discussion throughout the Synod for nine years, and it has been commended by the Synod in three successive synodical conventions (1986 Res. 3-09; 1989 Res. 3-14; 1992 Res. 3-04).

- 3. The Synod itself in 1992 "urge[d] the CTCR to complete this study for distribution to the members of the Synod one year prior to the 1995 synodical convention" (Res. 3-05). The adoption of this report by the Commission in its November 1994 meeting reflects the belief of the majority of the members of the Commission that further delay in the completion of this report would not be helpful to the Synod.
- 4. The Council of Presidents, both in its September 26 consultation with the Commission and its December 4 determination that no further consultation with the CTCR was necessary on this report, provided implicit and explicit encouragement that this document be shared with the church for study and discussion at this time.

The Commission always strives for unanimity in the adoption of its reports, and on many occasions (as with its 1985 report *Women in the Church* or with its recent report *Spiritual Gifts*) this has been possible. It deeply regrets the fact that such unanimity was not possible in this case. In light of all the factors listed above, however, it is apparent that the majority of the members of the Commission felt that to delay the release of this report would have been even more divisive in the Synod than to share it with the Synod, provided that the Council of Presidents did not feel the need to have further consultation with the CTCR about it.

B. Historical Concerns

In this section those dissenting from the Commission's report express concerns primarily with the appendix to the CTCR's report, describing it as "misleading, if not wrong" at various points. The executive committee, however, feels that this section of the minority report is itself misleading and inaccurate at critical points. Several issues need to be clarified:

- 1. The first "declaration" of 1969 Res. 2-17 states that "those statements of Scripture which direct women to keep silent in the church and which prohibit them to teach and to exercise authority over men, we understand to mean that women ought not to hold the pastoral office or serve in any other capacity involving the distinctive functions of this office." In response to what is said about this statement in the minority report, it is by no means self-evident that references to "the order of creation" and to the phrase "exercise authority over men" later in this resolution are to be read as "additional principles" rather than being read in the light of the initial "declaration" quoted above. It is precisely because of questions such as this that were left unanswered by Res. 2-17 that the Synod in subsequent years has repeatedly asked the CTCR to study and clarify further what the Scriptures teach regarding the role of women in the church (1977 Res. 3-06; 1981 Res. 3-11; 1983 Res. 3-10; 1989 Res. 3-13A; 1992 Res. 3-05).
- 2. The CCM, in offering a suggested paragraph on the "Privileges of Women" in its 1970 opinion, made it clear that it was "restricting itself to the position which the Synod has taken in this matter (*de iure humano* rather than *de iure divino*, by human right rather than divine right) at this point." It went on to say that "it is therefore assumed that the Synod may further define its position in the future, thereby making it necessary perhaps to refine the suggestions being offered herewith." The minority report does not appear to take into account fully the implications of this statement, since it claims that

"the present Report challenges the repeated and historic position of the Synod regarding the service of women in congregational offices such as chairman, vice-chairman and committee chairs." But the Synod's official position "regarding the service of women in congregational offices such as chairman, vice-chairman and committee chairs" is that expressed in the 1970 CCM opinion. The Synod itself, by adopting and repeatedly reaffirming this opinion, recognized that this *de iure humano* position may be "further define[d]" and "refine[d]" in the future on the basis of further study of the Scriptures. This is what the Synod asked the CTCR to do in 1989 Res. 3-13A and 1992 Res. 3-05, and this is what the CTCR has done in this report.

- 3. What the CTCR says in this report has as its theological basis the Commission's 1985 report *Women in the Church*. The Synod was undoubtedly familiar with the conclusions of the 1985 report when it asked the CTCR in 1989 and 1992 to further clarify on the basis of Scripture the 1970 *de iure humano* opinion of the CCM, and neither 1989 Res. 3-13A nor 1992 Res. 3-05 express concern or disagreement with the principles articulated in the CTCR's 1985 report with reference to the question of women serving in congregational offices.
- 4. After acknowledging the CCM statement that "the Synod may further define its position in the future," the minority report raises what appears to be the fundamental question at issue in this section by asking whether "the groundwork has been laid to sustain" the conclusions offered in the CTCR's report. The Commission believes that the theological groundwork [has] been laid in its 1985 report, which has been repeatedly commended by the Synod for study and guidance (1986 Res. 3-09; 1989 Res. 3-14; 1992 Res. 3-04). It would appear, therefore, that the fundamental concerns of the signers of the minority report are not with this report of the CTCR but rather with the CTCR's 1985 report on which it is based, as well as with the resolutions of the Synod commending this report.
- 5. The minority report states that "characteristic of the Report is its refusal to include the order of creation as a guiding concept in its argument." While the CTCR's most recent report does not contain a separate discussion of "the order of creation," this principle as presented in the 1985 report of the CTCR (see, e.g., pages 18-38) is, in fact, the "guiding concept" which informs this entire report and its argumentation regarding women serving in the church. Specific references to the 1985 report's delineation of the order of creation are made throughout this new document. While the Commission respects the right of those dissenting from its 1994 report to disagree with what the 1985 report says about the "order of creation," it is not accurate to say that this principle is not included in this new report.
- 6. The minority report also states that "the actual question of Res. 3-13A, whether such service is allowable when it 'would in effect involve public accountability' for the pastoral office is nowhere discussed in this Report." This statement, too, requires comment and clarification. In the CTCR's five years of work on this assignment, perhaps no topic has been the subject of more attention and discussion than the phrase "public accountability for the function(ing) of the pastoral office." These discussions within the CTCR, as well as the consultation with the COP, revealed the ambiguity of this phrase and the confusion caused by this ambiguity. There was considerable confusion, for example, about the meaning of the term "public accountability" and about who was being spoken of as being "accountable" to whom. The CTCR's report deliberately omits this terminology—not to *avoid* the question at issue here, but (on the contrary) to find language that would clarify and crystallize the question at issue in 1989 Res. 3-13A,

namely this: Who is eligible to serve in congregational offices when such offices require the performance of the distinctive functions of the pastoral office?

C. Theological Concerns

As the minority report rightly states, the "most important" concerns are those which are "theological," i.e., "doctrinal and Scriptural." Those dissenting raise two theological concerns in this section: "The treatment of terms such as 'teaching,' 'exercising authority,' etc.," and "the understanding of the doctrine of the order of creation." It should be noted, first of all, that these are not the specific questions which the Synod asked the CTCR to address in 1989 Res. 3-13A. Second, the questions raised in this section are the very kinds of questions the CTCR discussed over a period of years before adopting, after comprehensive study, its 1985 report *Women in the Church*. In this section of the minority report as well, then, the focus is not so much on the issues under discussion in the Commission's most recent report but on issues involving apparent disagreement with the Commission's 1985 report.

- 1. Paul's use of the term *didaskein* in 1 Tim. 2:12 is carefully discussed in the CTCR's 1985 report (pp. 34-35), with the conclusion that "the apostolic restriction in 1 Timothy 2 pertains to that teaching of God's Word which involves an essential function of the pastoral office." The minority report says that this interpretation "seems too facile for this text," but no alternative interpretation of the text is offered. Several questions need to be asked, such as these: Do those dissenting to the Commission's report believe that Scripture prohibits women from *every* form of teaching or public address? If not, what specific kinds of teaching—beyond the teaching which is an essential function of the pastoral office—are clearly prohibited by this passage?
- 2. The CTCR's 1985 report also discusses the term *authentein* and its context in 1 Timothy 2, concluding that "the authority forbidden to women here is that of the pastoral office" (p. 35). Do the signers of the minority report believe that this passage prohibits women from exercising *any and all* authority over men? If so, what implications does this have, e.g., for questions such as woman suffrage (not only in the church, but also in society)? The questions raised in this section of the minority report have profound implications for the position on the role of women in the church which the Synod has taken since 1969.
- 3. What is said above also applies to questions raised in the minority report regarding "the order of creation." First, it should be stated clearly that neither the Commission's 1985 nor 1994 report limit the application of the order of creation "to the pastoral office." (Scripture's application of the order of creation to the relationship between husbands and wives is discussed repeatedly in previous reports of the Commission, such as its 1985 report *Women in the Church*, its 1981 report *Human Sexuality: A Theological Perspective*, and its 1987 report *Divorce and Remarriage: An Exegetical Study.*) What the Commission *does* say is that in applying the order of creation to worship/church contexts, 1 Cor. 14:33b-35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-15 teach that "women are not to exercise those functions in the local congregation which would involve them in the exercise of authority inherent in the authoritative public teaching office (i.e., the office of pastor)" (*Women in the Church*, p. 38). If those dissenting believe that "more general" applications of the order of creation are mandated by the Scriptures with respect to the service of women in offices brought into being by the church, what are these specific applications and what is their Scriptural foundation?

Answers to these questions have been given by the CTCR in previous reports which have been commended by the Synod at various times and have served as the basis for synodical resolutions. Since the CTCR does not establish the doctrinal position of the Synod, if and when the Commission becomes convinced that such previous reports are in error it must bring such conviction to the attention of the Synod before offering guidance based on new and revised understandings of what the Scriptures teach regarding the questions under discussion.

Conclusion

The minority report concludes by stating that "our fundamental concern . . . is that in an important matter such as this we study seriously and reverently the Word of God as his faithful people." This concern the executive committee wholeheartedly shares. Serious and reverent study on this (and every other) theological issue of importance to the church certainly must continue. For this reason we welcome the recent request of the Atlantic District "to address concerns regarding the priesthood of all believers, the order of creation, and the Greek word authentein as these terms and concepts 'explicate how women function as the church." The executive committee disagrees, however, with the apparent assumption of the minority report that an answer cannot be or should not have been given to the Synod's question to the CTCR in 1989 Res. 3-13A because of certain exegetical questions and ambiguities addressed by the Commission in earlier reports. The Commission is aware of these exegetical problems (such as the possible meanings and usages of the term authentein, which occurs in Scripture only in 1 Tim. 2:12), and it will undoubtedly continue to study and discuss them. It also believes, however, that despite any number of exegetical questions and ambiguities (some of which may never be resolved on this side of heaven), we do have a clear word from God in 1 Tim. 2:12. That clear word is that "women are not to exercise those functions in the local congregation which would involve them in the exercise of authority inherent in the authoritative public teaching office (i.e., the office of pastor)" (Women in the Church, p. 38). During the years of study and discussion within the Commission on its most recent report, no Scriptural evidence was presented which persuaded the majority of the members of the Commission of the need to redo, revise, or reject the exeges is underlying this and other theological conclusions of its previous reports. Nor does the minority report itself provide evidence from Scripture that demonstrates that the conclusions of these reports are in error. At the same time, the executive committee recognizes that the critical examination of previous conclusions of CTCR reports regarding what the Scriptures teach is necessarily an ongoing task. When the Commission becomes convinced through its study of Scripture and the Confessions that "new" or revised positions on certain issues are necessary, then it must proceed in the confidence that such corrections or revisions are gifts from the Holy Spirit and should be brought to the attention of the Synod.

One final point needs to be underscored. In order to remain faithful to the Reformation principle *sola Scriptura*, the church must constantly and meticulously guard against a twofold danger—the danger of teaching as God's truth either *less* or *more* than God's Word actually teaches on any given issue. Where God's Word speaks—and speaks clearly—the church must do the same. The Commission in adopting its 1994 report indicates that it continues to believe that it was faithful to this principle in its 1985 report, the conclusions of which form the basis for *The Service of Women*. However—as

the *Brief Statement* says so well—"those questions in the domain of Christian doctrine may be termed open questions which Scripture answers either not at all or *not clearly*. Since neither an individual nor the church as a whole is permitted to develop or augment the Christian doctrine, but are rather ordered and commanded by God to continue in the doctrine of the apostles, 2 Thess. 2:15; Acts 2:42, *open questions must remain open questions*" (p. 21; emphasis added). The study of God's Word must continue, and where God's Word speaks clearly, the church must clearly speak. But just as importantly, where God's Word does not speak clearly the church has a divine mandate to *refrain* from saying "thus says the Lord."

The executive committee implores the prayers of God's people for His blessings on the efforts of all the members of the Commission as we pledge to work together to provide guidance to the Synod which will promote our common goal of "walking together" in faithfulness to God's will as revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

Adopted by the CTCR executive committee: Feb. 16, 1995