

**Zeitschrift:** Internationale kirchliche Zeitschrift : neue Folge der Revue internationale de théologie

**Band:** 109 (2019)

**Heft:** 1

**Artikel:** The Bonn Agreement (1931) as key to transitivity in Old Catholic Mar Thoma Ecumenical relations

**Autor:** Daniel, Joseph

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-939205>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

**Download PDF:** 17.03.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

---

## The Bonn Agreement (1931) as a key to Transitivity in Old Catholic Mar Thoma Ecumenical Relations

*Joseph Daniel*

The impulse to Christian unity has its roots in Christ's prayer "May they all be one" (John 17:21), Paul's vision of "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:5) and the credal affirmation of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed, that the church is "one, holy, catholic and apostolic". The challenge of widening and deepening ecumenical relations demands new theological approaches to clarify those stages that are helpful in bringing unity between churches. Exploring new approaches for reaching full visible communion between churches step by step "involves churches taking every opportunity to build communion at every level of church's life".<sup>1</sup> How can we explore a relationship of visible unity and communion in the face of confessional differences? This is a crucial question that the churches face in the process of reaching visible unity. Despite denominational differences, the Old Catholic Church and the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church (Mar Thoma Church) have been making step-by-step progress in ecumenical discussions since 2006.<sup>2</sup> It is in this context that the math-

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Avis, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology. The Church Made Whole?* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 59.

<sup>2</sup> The Mar Thoma Church is said to have been founded by St Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, in India. In the fourth century the church adopted the Persian East Syrian liturgy and later also fell under the Persian church's episcopal supervision. In the seventeenth century the church started fresh ecumenical engagements with the Antiochian Church which eventually led to the adoption of the western Syrian liturgy (St James's Liturgy). Following reforms within the church, the church entered a new lease of life in 1889. The Mar Thoma Church has been successful in upholding its ecumenical relations throughout its entire historical development and progress and particularly when the church encountered new challenges in its engagements with the Persian Church (fourth century), the Roman Catholic Church (sixteenth century) and the Antiochian Church (seventeenth century). The church's efforts have had some visible results, namely interchange of ministries with the Malabar Independent Syrian Church since 1816, communion with the Anglican Church in India since 1936, the Church of South India since 1968, and the Church of North India since 1971. Another significant milestone in the history of the Mar Thoma Church's ecumenical relations was the formation of the "Communion of Churches in India" in 2000. Ecumenical discussions for reaching unity between the Mar Thoma Church and the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church in India, which falls under the direct super-

emational concept of transitivity provides an effective approach towards a possible enlargement of existing ecumenical ties between these two churches, which belong to two confessional families. “Transitivity concerns the potential universalisability of ecumenical relationships, especially relationships of communion.”<sup>3</sup>

This paper attempts to address the question of communion between these churches by way of examining how both came into communion with the Anglican Communion and exploring the question of whether the relationship of full communion between the Anglican and the Old Catholic churches has implications for the Mar Thoma Church. This invokes the concept of “transitivity”. This paper also intends to explore the basis and the scope of relations possible between the Old Catholic Church and the Mar Thoma Church in the light of a new fellowship between both churches. It also tries to explore the possibility of further opening up new vistas of common life, ministry, sacraments and mission at least in the continent of Europe as the Mar Thoma Church has parishes there as well as in North America.

### **1. The Bonn Agreement: a tool for reaching deeper unity**

How can we reach deeper expressions of unity between the Mar Thoma Church and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht? The Bonn Agreement of 1931 provides an approach which might support both churches in moving step by step towards deeper and fuller expressions of unity as seen in the high-priestly prayers of Jesus Christ (John 17). The Bonn Agreement is important and relevant because it was the agreement that brought about communion between the Anglican and the Old Catholic churches, and it also served as the basis for the agreement of full communion between the Anglican Church in India and the Mar Thoma Church.

---

vision of the Antiochian patriarch, are progressing. These relationships provide a basis for the Mar Thoma Church to further its relationships with other church traditions. See Joseph Daniel, *Ecumenism in Praxis* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2011), 1–9.

<sup>3</sup> Avis, *Reshaping* (as note 1), 204.

### 1.1 The Bonn Agreement of 1931

The Bonn Agreement offered a new model for church unity.<sup>4</sup> The partners involved – the Anglican and the Old Catholic Churches – noted, “if two churches are in agreement on the essentials of doctrine and church order, even wide divergence in interpretation and practice ought not hold them apart”.<sup>5</sup> This statement’s guiding principle was not “what both churches could do to establish unity” but “how both churches could make their unity more manifest”.<sup>6</sup>

The Bonn Agreement implies that “intercommunion” (now understood to mean full communion) rests on three elements: agreement on the sacraments, corresponding agreement on the ordained ministry, and agreement on “all the essentials of the Christian faith”.<sup>7</sup> It is evident that the Bonn Agreement clears the road for an ecclesial communion which presupposes a common dogmatic faith (all the essentials of Christian faith). But those essentials of Christian faith have never been specified. It opens a space for retaining the individual identities of the partner churches and their way of seeing the doctrinal matters. This view is consonant with the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral (1888), the Anglican formula which names Scrip-

---

<sup>4</sup> The text of the Bonn Agreement:

“1. Each communion recognises the catholicity and independence of the other and maintains its own.

2. Each communion agrees to admit members of the other communion to participate in the sacraments.

3. Intercommunion does not require from either communion the acceptance of all doctrinal opinion, sacramental devotion, or liturgical practice characteristic of the other, but implies that each believes the other to hold all the essentials of the Christian faith.”

Harding Meyer/Lukas Vischer (eds), *Growth in Agreement. Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level* (New York: Paulist Press/Geneva: WCC, 1984), 37.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Rouse/Stephen Neill (eds), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement. Volume I: 1517–1948*, (Geneva: WCC, 31986), 470.

<sup>6</sup> AOCICC, *Belonging together in Europe. A Joint Statement on Aspects of Ecclesiology and Mission*, *IKZ* 102 (2011) 140–158: 142 (no. 2).

<sup>7</sup> On the terminology of “intercommunion” and “full communion” see: J. Robert Wright, ‘Intercommunion and Full Communion. The meanings of these terms for Anglicans and for their relations with Old Catholics’, in: Angela Berlis/Klaus-Dieter Gerth (eds), *Christus Spes. Liturgie und Glaube im ökumenischen Kontext. Festschrift für Bischof Sigisbert Kraft* (Frankfurt: P. Lang, 1994), 335–345. Cf. Urs von Arx, ‘The Historical Background to the Bonn Agreement’, *unpublished paper for the Anglican-Old Catholic Theologians’ Conference in Leeds 2005*, footnote 204.

ture, the Creeds, the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, and the Historic Episcopate as the basis of church unity.<sup>8</sup> It is also in harmony with the ecclesiological principles embedded in the Declaration of the Old Catholic bishops united in the Union of Utrecht (1889), and later the Statute.<sup>9</sup>

### *1.2 The Bonn Agreement: a channel for communion relation between the Mar Thoma Church and the Anglican Church in India*

The Bonn Agreement of 1931 between the Old Catholic and the Anglican Communion opened new vistas for the Mar Thoma Church in terms of determining the level of formal ecumenical agreements necessary for a relationship of communion. This agreement opened up ample space for the oriental Indian church to enter into communion with the Church of England, which belongs to the Western Anglo-Catholic tradition, preserving the different theological and liturgical stances of the two churches.

The relationship between the Mar Thoma Church and the Church of England goes back over two centuries to 1816, when the first group of Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionaries from England officially initiated their “mission of help”, with the intention of helping the Indian church to adjust to contemporary society. That relationship has continued and both churches stayed in cooperation at different levels in their corporate lives. The connection between the Mar Thoma Church and the Church

---

<sup>8</sup> “That, in the opinion of this Conference, the following Articles supply a basis on which approach may be by God’s blessing made towards Home Reunion: (a) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as ‘containing all things necessary to salvation,’ and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith. (b) The Apostles’ Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith. (c) The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself – Baptism and the Supper of the Lord – ministered with unfailing use of Christ’s words of Institution, and of the elements ordained by Him. (d) The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church.” ([http://anglicansonline.org/basics/Chicago\\_Lambeth.html](http://anglicansonline.org/basics/Chicago_Lambeth.html) [accessed 17.10.2018]). See Daniel, *Ecumenism in Praxis* (as note 2), 166–175.

<sup>9</sup> The Utrecht Declaration of 1889 is published as an appendix in Urs von Arx/Maja Weyermann (eds), *Statut der Internationalen Altkatholischen Bischofskonferenz (IBK). Offizielle Ausgabe in fünf Sprachen* (Beiheft zu Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift 91; Bern: Stämpfli, 2001), 40–42.

of England advanced in two stages. In the first (1816–1936), the CMS missionaries aided with and assisted in the Indian church’s mission work in the Travancore-Cochin area; while in the second (1936–1961), the relationship moved to a new level of formal agreements which initially provided for “occasional inter-communion” and later for “full communion”.

In 1932, the Bonn Agreement between the Anglican and the Old Catholic churches was acknowledged by the Church of India, Burma and Ceylon (CIBC).<sup>10</sup> This gave rise to a fresh discussion on “occasional inter-communion” between the Mar Thoma Church and the CIBC. As a result, in 1933 the CIBC’s episcopal synod set up a committee, convened by Bishop E. A. L. Moore (1925–1937),<sup>11</sup> to study the Mar Thoma Church’s position in faith and order questions and to explore the practicability of entering into commencing a relationship of “occasional inter-communion” with the Mar Thoma Church. The metropolitan of the Mar Thoma Church, Titus II (1909–1944), its suffragan metropolitan, Abraham Mar Thoma (1917–1947), and Bishop Moore of the CIBC were all proactive in entering into a new phase of “occasional inter-communion” relationship and to establish a common Eucharistic fellowship.

“[A]fter consideration and investigation, (...) [the CIBC committee] came to the conclusion that there was no bar to inter-communion between the two churches on doctrinal grounds.”<sup>12</sup> The CIBC committee reported to the church’s episcopal synod with their recommendation that “the committee was fully satisfied that there was no solid ground for refusing to recognise the Mar Thoma Orders,” and “that the form of service for ordination and communion used in the Mar Thoma Church was adequate” for entering into an “occasional inter-communion” between both churches.<sup>13</sup> At the general council of the CIBC in 1935, a decision was taken to “appoint a committee to carry on official negotiations” with the Mar Thoma Church, and Bishop Moore was authorised to undertake the required steps to further the process.<sup>14</sup> If an agreement were to be reached, Bishop Moore

---

<sup>10</sup> “Details of Acceptance of the Bonn Agreement by Churches of the Anglican Communion,” in: WEF/File 8, Lambeth Palace Library, 27<sup>th</sup> August 1971.

<sup>11</sup> Bishop E. A. L. Moore was the fourth Anglican bishop of the Diocese Travancore-Cochin from 1925 until 1937.

<sup>12</sup> C. E. Abraham (ed.), *The Mar Thoma Church, and the Church of India, and the Church of South India, Mar Thoma Church* (Tiruvalla: Mar Thoma Church, 1968), 5–6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

was authorised to enter into an agreement on “occasional inter-communion” with the Mar Thoma Church, in consultation with the other CIBC bishops, without referring the matter again in the general council for their mandate. Following this decision, the two churches formed a joint committee under the Mar Thoma Metropolitan and Bishop Moore. The committee unanimously took a decision that, “there was no bar in respect of order, worship and doctrines to the formal establishment of the measure of intercommunion, known as ‘occasional inter-communion’, between the two churches”.<sup>15</sup>

The Metropolitan incorporated this as an item agenda at the Mar Thoma Church’s *samasthalochana sabha* (General Assembly) meetings on 5 and 6 May 1936. Since the Mar Thoma Church was at that time present only in the Travancore, Cochin and Malabar area, the General Assembly resolved to authorise the Metropolitan to implement “occasional inter-communion” with the CIBC’s Diocese of Travancore and Cochin with two additional notes:<sup>16</sup>

1. On occasions when for reasons not involving breaches of rules the members of a church are not able to participate in Holy Communion in their own church, they may be admitted to Holy Communion in the other church and they may partake of the same.
2. Each church may allow its members to partake of Holy Communion on special occasions from the other church, even though there is nothing standing in the way of the members receiving communion from their own church.<sup>17</sup>

The Mar Thoma Church’s resolution also pointed out that the two churches are in agreement on the questions of faith and order. However, it did not offer any specific discussion of these points of agreement between the two churches. The Mar Thoma Church was in favour of the agreement for occasional intercommunion between both churches. Having received the Mar Thoma Church’s favourable decision, Bishop Moore acted according to the authorisation given by him by the CIBC’s general council of 1935 and “solemnly promulgated” the agreement to allow occasional intercommunion between both churches in St Paul’s Cathedral, Calcutta,

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> *Resolution of the Mar Thoma Syrian Samudayalochana sabha*, May, 5, 6, 1936, Tiruvalla.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

on 4 April 1937.<sup>18</sup> The relationship of “occasional inter-communion” between both churches was greeted with enthusiasm in either church.<sup>19</sup>

During the 1950s, Mar Thoma Church members had spread widely in Malaysia, Singapore and Indian cities. This placed a burden on the church leaders to provide adequate pastoral and episcopal oversight for the church’s members in these distant lands, and this in turn resulted in an environment that moved the Mar Thoma Church to take proposals to bolster its ties with the Anglican churches. In response to an initiative by the then Metropolitan Juhanon Mar Thoma, representatives of both Anglican and Mar Thoma churches met at Tiruvalla in Kerala during 18–19 August 1957. The meeting reiterated that (in a close approximation of the Bonn Agreement):

each church recognises the catholicity and independence of the other and maintains its own, and that inter-communion does not require from either church the acceptance of all doctrinal opinions, sacramental devotion or liturgical practice, characteristic of the other, but implies that each believes the other to hold all essentials of the Christian faith.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, this meeting agreed upon nine “rules of comity”<sup>21</sup> and decided to explore the possibilities of a full communion relationship between the churches. Besides the existing “occasional inter-communion” agreements, there was agreement in both churches on the following:

1. Members of the Mar Thoma Church may be granted membership in an Anglican parish by the Anglican bishop, with the permission of the Mar Thoma Metropolitan in places where a Mar Thoma parish does not exist, and vice versa.

---

<sup>18</sup> Abraham (ed.), *The Mar Thoma Church* (as note 12), 7.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Abraham (ed.), *The Mar Thoma Church* (as note 12), 6–7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 7–9. An addendum to the preamble and “rules of comity” approved by the Mar Thoma Church and the CIPBC says: “With reference to the addendum to the Record, the committee, while recognizing that further study of the implications of mutual participation in the consecration of Bishops may still be desirable, resolved to record its considered opinion that in view of the information already before it and the measure of inter-communion now proposed to be recognized analogous to that between the Anglican and Old Catholic Churches, the implementation of such mutual participation in consecration need no longer be delayed.” See ‘Preamble and Rules of Comity, A. (C), an addendum; in Anglican Mar Thoma Conversations August 1957’, in: Abraham (ed.), *The Mar Thoma Church* (as note 12), 4–5.



2. The Mar Thoma Church's members may receive Anglican episcopal supervision in places where the Mar Thoma Church has no parishes and vice versa.
3. A change of membership from one church to another will be permitted only with the consent of the authorities concerned of both the churches.<sup>22</sup>

As can be seen from these points, the Mar Thoma Church was content for its members to receive pastoral care and episcopal supervision from Anglican churches in places where it had no parishes. These provisions are similar to those made by the 1908 Lambeth Conference, resolution 62, which permitted Anglican bishops to provide baptism and Holy Communion to the members of the Eastern Orthodox churches.<sup>23</sup> The 1920 Lambeth Conference made similar provisions for extending baptism and Holy Communion to the members of other Christian communities in certain circumstances, in line with the principles of the Appeal to All Christian People and its associated Resolutions.<sup>24</sup>

However, the real worth of this agreement was the Anglicans' acceptance of the ecclesiological status of the Mar Thoma Church, echoed in its effort to allow Anglican "bishops of provinces or of missionary dioceses of the Anglican communion to practice episcopal supervision over the clergy and laity of the Mar Thoma Church on the invitation of the authorities of the church".<sup>25</sup> The Mar Thoma Church considered this agreement to offer a basis for opening fresh consultations with the churches of the Anglican Communion in other parts of the world. Full communion between the two churches came about after the 1968 Lambeth Conference

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> See <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/127728/1908.pdf> (accessed 23.04.2019).

<sup>24</sup> See <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/127731/1920.pdf> (accessed 23.04.2019).

<sup>25</sup> The Anglican position on the question of validity of the celebrant in the Eucharist and ordination was well defined in the Lambeth Conference in 1958. The Report of the Committee of the Lambeth Conference of 1958 on "church unity and church universal" says that "Anglicans conscientiously hold that the celebrant of the Eucharist should have been ordained by the bishop standing in the historic succession, and generally believe it their duty to bear witness to this principle by receiving Holy communion only from those who have thus been ordained". See *The Lambeth Conference 1958. The Encyclical Letter from Bishops together with Resolutions and Reports* (London: SPCK, 1958), part 2, 2; Oliver S. Tomkins (ed.), *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order. Held at Lund August 15<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup>, 1952* (London: SCM, 1953), 52–53.

which articulated the terms and conditions for communion in its resolution on “Relations with other churches – Reciprocal Acts”.<sup>26</sup> The Mar Thoma Church entered into relationships of full communion with the Anglican churches in Southern Africa, in Hong Kong, and in Ireland in 1975, with the American Episcopal Church in 1980, with the Anglican Church of Canada in 1983 and with the Anglican Church of Australia in 1991.<sup>27</sup>

## **2. Mar Thoma – Anglican Communion relations: a model for applying transitivity**

The Bonn Agreement provides common ground, and has already shown itself to be a preferred approach, for both the Mar Thoma and the Old Catholic churches in their relationships to the Anglican Communion. The common ground for the discussions between the Mar Thoma and the Old Catholics is therefore rooted in the agreement reached between Old Catholics and Anglicans on the questions of ministry, worship, and “all the essentials of the Christian faith” (Bonn Agreement) in the two church traditions.

These triangulated relationships open a space in which the approach of “transitivity” can be applied to ecumenical relations between the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht and the Mar Thoma Church. The Mar Thoma Church is currently growing as a global church, and its quest for ecumenical relations presumes that the Old Catholic Church would find the association worthwhile. From the Mar Thoma Church perspective, the question is whether the Bonn Agreement between the Angli-

---

<sup>26</sup> Lambeth Conference, 1968, Resolution 47, online at [www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1968](http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1968) (accessed 17.10.2018): “The Conference recommends that, where there is agreement between an Anglican Church and some other Church or Churches to seek unity in a way which includes agreement on apostolic faith and order, and where that agreement to seek unity has found expression, whether in a covenant to unite or in some other appropriate form, a Church of the Anglican Communion should be free to allow reciprocal acts of inter-communion under the general direction of the bishop; each province concerned to determine when the negotiations for union in which it is engaged have reached the stage which allows this intercommunion.”

<sup>27</sup> Juhanon Mar Themotheos, ‘Mar Thoma Sabhayum Athinte Prathyekathayum’ [in Malayalam], in: *Malankara Sabha Tharaka* Vol 4, Makaram (Malayalam Era/116), (Feb. 1928), 115–129. P. M. Thomas (ed.), *Mar Thoma Sabha Directory* (Tiruvalla: Publication Board of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, 1999), 136; N. M. Mathew, *Malankara Mar Thoma Sabha Charithram* [in Malayalam], vol. III, (Tiruvalla: Mar Thoma Episcopal Jubilee Institute of Evangelism, 2003), 145–146.

can and the Old Catholic churches in 1931 can be used to bring churches that are already in communion with the Anglican Communion into communion with the Old Catholics also, in order to widen the scope of visible unity step by step.

Both churches are motivated by the imperative of visible unity. However, the past two thousand years of Christian history and the specific contexts of the Old Catholic Church and the Mar Thoma Church have made them unique, with distinctive identities in their own historic contexts: European and Indian, as well as Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian. Both churches have emphasised that deeper relations do not require that one church should become exactly like the other. Indeed, the spirit of the dialogue between the Old Catholic Church and the Mar Thoma Church is to search for deeper levels of unity, including communion, in the face of their confessional differences. They agree that any expression of unity needs to honour the uniqueness of either church. Both churches have entered into communion with Anglicans through agreements that do not allow one church to absorb the other, nor insist that one church should mirror the other exactly. This form of agreement provides space for safeguarding the independence of both churches and the separate distinctive identity of each church. In such a circumstance, to work for the unity of both churches does not impede distinctive credibility, identity and uniqueness.

The next question that we need to address is whether we can take the Bonn Agreement as a basis for unity between the Old Catholic Church and the Mar Thoma Church. This demands an understanding of what transitivity means and its implications at a deeper level.

### **3. Efforts to reach mutual acceptance**

Since 2007, the Old Catholic churches and the Mar Thoma Church have been putting much effort and energy into attempts to bring about mutual acceptance, particularly in the areas of ecclesiology, baptism and Eucharist, as an essential basis for deeper unity. The churches “have engaged in dialogue and exchange in a number of ways” with a view to achieve growth in mutual acceptance.<sup>28</sup> Specific steps have included the shared use of

---

<sup>28</sup> ‘The Santhigiri Statement’, *IKZ* 102 (2012) 315–320: 315 – It began with informal discussions between the Archbishop of Utrecht, Joris Vercammen, and Zacharias Mar Theophilus Suffragan Metropolitan; both were members of the Central Commit-

churches, exchanges of theological students and visits of delegations consisting of bishops and clergy.<sup>29</sup> This included visits by Joris Vercammen, Archbishop of Utrecht, and by the Old Catholic Bishop of Switzerland, Harald Rein, to the Mar Thoma Bible convention at Maramon in Kerala, visits of Mar Thoma bishops to the synods of the Old Catholic churches in Switzerland and in Austria,<sup>30</sup> and three visits of Professor Angela Berlis, Head of the Department of Old Catholic Theology at the University of Bern, to the Maramon convention and to the centres of the Mar Thoma Church in India including its theological formation centres. In addition, the scholarships offered to two doctoral candidates to pursue their doctoral studies at the Department of Old Catholic Theology at the University of Bern by the Bishop of the *Christkatholische Kirche der Schweiz* could be seen as a visible sign for increasing mutual ties between both churches.<sup>31</sup> Thus, a prior process of general rapprochement, considered as the first stage for ecumenical dialogue, has been established between the two churches.<sup>32</sup>

---

tee of the World Council of Churches. The initiative for an official dialogue was taken in 2008, during the visit of Joseph Mar Thoma Metropolitan to Geneva. The first preparatory meeting, held at WCC headquarters in June 2008, was attended by Archbishop Vercammen and Revd Ioan Jebelian, vicar of Lucerne, and Joseph Mar Thoma Metropolitan and Mathews George Chunakara, lay member of the Mar Thoma Church and at that time Asia Secretary of the World Council of Churches. This meeting agreed to work towards establishing more formal and visible relations between the two churches.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 315–316. The *Christkatholische Kirche der Schweiz* has provided its church at Grenchen in Switzerland for the use of the Mar Thoma Congregation in Switzerland.

<sup>30</sup> ‘The Santhigiri Statement’ (as note 28), 316.

<sup>31</sup> Two clergy of the Mar Thoma Church were admitted in the *Departement für Christkatholische Theologie* at the University of Bern as Ph.D. students under the supervision of Angela Berlis. Joseph Daniel completed his doctoral dissertation on “Historic praxis of ecumenism in the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church” in 2013; it was published as: *Ecumenism in Praxis. A Historical Critique of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church* (Frankfurt a.M.: P. Lang, 2014). Sam Koshy is working on the christology of St Ephrem the Syrian and its possible impact on ecumenical dialogues. The Bishop of the *Christkatholische Kirche der Schweiz* provided scholarships to support their research. Joseph Daniel is currently pursuing his habilitation on “Hindu Nationalism and the Politics of Othering: Impact on the Christian community in India” at the University of Bern, alongside his post at the *Mar Thoma Theological Seminary* at Kottayam.

<sup>32</sup> Avis, *Reshaping* (as note 1), 48.

Having attained this rapprochement, the two churches have entered into theological enquiry through formal consultation, and a dialogue commission has been constituted by the Archbishop of Utrecht, Joris Vercammen, as president of the International Old Catholic Bishops' Conference, and Joseph Mar Thoma Metropolitan, the supreme head of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church. This dialogue has focussed on the extent of agreement in faith, sacraments and ecclesiology.

The delegates of both churches met at Santhigiri, at Alwaye in Kerala, India, in November 2011. The consultation discussed a wide range of areas including ecclesiology, sacraments and sacramental theology, covering Baptism, Eucharist, ministry, Christology, and the communion of saints.<sup>33</sup> In the joint Santhigiri Statement the commission proposed a formal dialogue and conscious ecumenical engagement between the churches. The Santhigiri Statement concluded: "We hope to have assisted in paving the way for a formal dialogue between our churches. Certainly, we recommend our churches to pursue such a common ecumenical journey, given the large areas of agreement between our churches."<sup>34</sup> The positive understanding of the Santhigiri consultation affirms a vision of visible unity between the two churches without losing their identities, and calls for a step-by-step understanding between both churches while confirming their distinctive ethos. Such an approach provides ample space for valuing the diversity of both traditions.

The mutual acknowledgement of each other as churches and the theological agreement about the sacraments, sacramental theology, essentials of faith and Christology all provide the foundation for further dialogue. The Santhigiri Statement also observed: "[T]he consultation was able to identify a number of areas that would merit further discussion in a dialogue between the two churches."<sup>35</sup> The consultation suggested deeper study on areas such as Christology, communion of the saints and the commemoration of the departed.

Energised by the first agreed statement of the commission for dialogue between the Old Catholic Church and the Mar Thoma Church at Santhigiri, the commission met for its second consultation in St. Pölten, Austria, in October 2012. This meeting reached an agreed text on the topics of

---

<sup>33</sup> 'The Santhigiri Statement' (as note 28).

<sup>34</sup> 'The Santhigiri Statement' (as note 28), 320.

<sup>35</sup> 'The Santhigiri Statement' (as note 28), 319.

Scripture and tradition, Christology, especially in the context of Mariology, on the question of the commemoration of the departed, and on saints.<sup>36</sup>

The same meeting affirmed its respect for “the particular and historically grown traditions of both churches.”<sup>37</sup> A third theological consultation took place in February 2014 in Munnar in Kerala (India). The mutual acceptance of essential aspects of doctrinal matters in the Santhigiri and the Hippolytus statements, again affirmed in the Munnar statement of 2014,<sup>38</sup> opens a door for a step-by-step process intended to achieve the realization of visible unity between churches. In addition, concerns relating to issues of sexuality and morality, which are increasingly featuring on the ecumenical agenda, surfaced in the dialogue between the Old Catholic church and the Mar Thoma Church. Both churches are aware that on the question of same-sex relationships and same-sex marriage, the Mar Thoma Church has a different view, and exists in a different context, from those of the Old Catholic churches.<sup>39</sup> The Munnar Statement affirmed: “Both Churches use a very careful hermeneutical approach when it comes to discernment in ethical matters.”<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Drawing on the concept of transitivity, the independent communion relationships that the Mar Thoma Church and the Old Catholic churches have had with specific Anglican churches and with the Anglican Communion as a whole, in both cases established in line with the Bonn Agreement, have led the two churches to progress towards their own ecumenical relationship. Delegations of the Mar Thoma and Old Catholic churches have met on several occasions and have acknowledged their shared understanding of scripture and many aspects of tradition even as they acknowledge the differences between their traditions, their theology and their ethos. The two churches are undertaking a shared ecumenical journey. The guiding principles of their relationships with the Anglican Communion do not allow one church to absorb the other, nor do they insist that one church

---

<sup>36</sup> See ‘The Hippolytus statement’, *IKZ* 103 (2013) 324–331.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

<sup>38</sup> See ‘The Munnar Statement’, *IKZ* 105 (2015) 159–166.

<sup>39</sup> Editorial note: The Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht do not currently take a unified approach to these questions.

<sup>40</sup> ‘The Munnar Statement’ (as note 38), 164.

should mirror the other exactly. These agreements thus provide a space for affirming shared theological principles whilst safeguarding the independence of both churches and the separate distinctive identity of each. To work for the unity of the two churches does not impede their distinctive credibility, identity and uniqueness.

*Joseph Daniel (\* 1971 in Seethathodu, India), Dr. theol. He studied Church History in Kottayam and Bern. From 1998 to 2018 he served as chaplain to the Metropolitan, and concurrently as parish priest at Mar Thoma congregations in Bangalore/India, in Singapore, Switzerland, Germany and at Kumbanad/India. From 2009 until 2014 he studied at the Departement für Christkatholische Theologie at the University of Bern, where he obtained his doctorate. In 2018 he was appointed Professor at the Mar Thoma Theological Seminary, and is the Head of the Church History Department in the Federated Faculty for Research in Religion and Culture (FFRRC), Kottayam. In 1993 he received the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund Award, New Delhi, and in 1993 a Gold Medal (First Class) from the Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam.*

*Address: Mar Thoma Theological Seminary, Kottayam, Kerala – 686001, India*

*E-Mail: revjosephdaniel@yahoo.co.in*

### *Zusammenfassung*

Die Suche nach neuen Herangehensweisen für die Herstellung von Gemeinschaft zwischen Kirchen erfordert, dass Kirchen jede Gelegenheit ergreifen, solche Beziehungen im kirchlichen Leben zu fördern. Dieser Beitrag versucht, das ökumenische Prinzip der Transitivität auf die Beziehungen zwischen den altkatholischen Kirchen und der Mar-Thoma-Kirche anzuwenden. Die Bonner Vereinbarung von 1931 bot einen Rahmen für die ökumenische Beziehung zwischen den altkatholischen Kirchen der Utrechter Union und der Anglikanischen Gemeinschaft, aber auch für die Beziehung zwischen der Mar-Thoma-Kirche und der anglikanischen Kirche in Indien. Sie könnte – so das Plädoyer dieses Beitrags – in analoger Weise die Grundlage für die Beziehung zwischen den altkatholischen Kirchen der Utrechter Union und der Mar-Thoma-Kirche bieten.

### *Keywords – Schlüsselwörter*

Bonn Agreement – Transitivity – Mar Thoma Church – Anglican Communion – Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht