

## Church Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

### Introduction

Throughout its history, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) has expressed its agreement in doctrine and practice with other church bodies through formal declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship. This practice has served the Synod well with respect to its church fellowship with other church bodies.<sup>1</sup> This approach has also, however, shown itself to be somewhat problematic in situations where *doctrinal agreement exists* but where a formal declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship may not be appropriate or feasible. Situations such as the following suggest the need for a more nuanced, differentiated approach to expressing a relationship of doctrinal agreement other than a formal declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship:

1. A church body earnestly seeks support, encouragement and theological guidance from the LCMS, even while it is still in the formative stages of developing its own theological and ecclesial identity.
2. An emerging church body (e.g., a group of congregations established or gathered by an LCMS missionary) has a strong and clear confessional commitment (nurtured, perhaps, with the help of the LCMS itself), but it is not yet structured and organized in a way that would allow it to engage in the formal process of seeking to establish “altar and pulpit fellowship.”
3. An established church body sincerely desires a closer relationship with the LCMS because of its appreciation for the theology and practice of the LCMS, but various political, geographical, institutional, and/or ecclesial factors make it difficult (or even impossible) to enter into a formal relationship of “altar and pulpit fellowship” with the LCMS.

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<sup>1</sup> The LCMS’s procedure in establishing formal altar and pulpit fellowship is described in the Commission on Theology and Church Relations’ document “Policy for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod declaring Altar and Pulpit Fellowship with Another Church Body” (April 30, 2003). This document is available online at [www.lcms.org/ctcr](http://www.lcms.org/ctcr).

4. A confessional group or association of congregations (e.g., within what have historically and popularly been called “state churches”) seeks closer ties with the LCMS, but since it has no legal or official independent status as a “church body,” it is not possible under these circumstances for the LCMS to enter into formal and official “altar and pulpit fellowship” with this group.

The President is the chief ecumenical officer of the Synod and represents the Synod in official contacts with all partner/sister churches and with other church bodies. The President’s Office carries out these duties in consultation with the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR).<sup>2</sup> Recognizing the emerging contexts in which we now find ourselves in church relations, on April 26, 2004, President Gerald Kieschnick gave this assignment to the CTCR: “Would it be biblically and confessionally appropriate for the LCMS, in certain circumstances, to seek to establish some kind of formalized relationship with another church body, a group of Christians, or an emerging church body other than a declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship? If so, what would be the basis, nature and parameters of such a relationship?” In responding to this assignment, the CTCR shares “Church Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” with the Office of the President, that its guidance may be utilized in consultation with the CTCR, as he carries out his ecumenical responsibilities.

### **Basic Considerations**

1. The unity of the church *coram deo*<sup>3</sup> (in the eyes of God) is a gift and work of the Holy Spirit because the church itself is the Spirit’s creation. Thus the Small Catechism describes the Spirit as the one who gathers the church and “keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith” (SC II, 6). The Large Catechism describes it as being “called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding. It

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<sup>2</sup> According to the present way of proceeding, the President’s Office includes the Church Relations Cabinet.

<sup>3</sup> The creeds of the church refer to this unity when they speak of “the one holy Christian church,” the “communion of saints.” Theologians often speak of it as the *una sancta*. In each case, these expressions refer to the unity of the church that God alone sees.

- possesses a variety of gifts, and yet is united in love without sect or schism” (LC II, 51).
2. In creating the church, the Holy Spirit works through external means. Thus Augsburg Confession Article 7 describes the true unity of the church as agreement “concerning the pure teaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments.” It appends to the article the Apostle Paul’s description, “One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all...” (AC 7, 2-4). This clarifies *how* the Holy Spirit establishes and maintains the unity of the church: He does so through the word of Christ as it is rightly proclaimed and as it is authentically made visible in the sacraments. These oral and sacramental words create and sustain the faith in Jesus Christ that justifies. Justifying faith ties and binds us together in unity under one head, Jesus Christ.
  3. It is important to emphasize that the gospel and sacraments that bring about this unity are not mere doctrinal or documentary formulations. They constitute the word that is actually preached and the sacraments that are actually administered. They are the very instruments that the Holy Spirit uses to bring people to Jesus Christ. The spoken and administered word and sacrament, which create and unite the church *coram deo*, also create and unite the church *coram mundo* (within the world). The church *coram mundo* is a visible assembly gathered by God around word and sacraments. Therefore we can extract three non-negotiable principles with regard to manifesting the true unity of the church *coram mundo*.
    - a. Church fellowship is always **altar and pulpit fellowship** within the world (*coram mundo*) because the Gospel and the sacraments are the very means by which the unity of the church *coram deo* is given and maintained. Therefore, they are the infallible marks of where the church may be found within the world and wherein the expression of its unity consists *coram mundo*.
    - b. Altar and pulpit fellowship presupposes agreement in **public confession** (the body of public doctrine, “united in teaching and in all the articles of the faith” FC X, 31). Because the unity created by the Spirit is hidden from view to human eyes, we only know that we have heard the same word in common

with one another to the extent that we confess it and test it against the Scriptures. The proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments cannot be separated from the entire body of doctrine any more than the head can be separated from a body and survive. Therefore church fellowship *coram mundo* always flows out of unity in confession.

- c. Confessional agreement is agreement in doctrine *and practice*, since the true unity of the church *coram deo* is not created or maintained apart from the actual proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. Only doctrine that is put into practice is in actuality the *public* doctrine of a church, and only such doctrine and practice can genuinely serve as a standard to determine where there is doctrinal agreement. (This does not ignore the fact that there may be some variety in practices—in the realm of adiaphora and Christian freedom—that are consistent with a doctrinal position. Neither does it deny that circumstances sometimes produce less-than-perfect implementation of doctrine, even as Christians strive to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” Eph. 4:3.)
4. **How** we determine or assess agreement in confession with other church bodies can vary from situation to situation. Given the vastly different situations that are increasingly encountered in today’s ecclesial context, it seems necessary and appropriate to avoid a “one size fits all” approach and instead develop different ways of assessing agreement that are appropriate to the church body or group in question. Such an assessment would take into account factors such as the following:
    - a. Different histories with different assumptions.
      - i. In the United States and Canada there is a history of confessional differences between Lutheran church bodies, whose congregations exist within the same geographical area. In fact, many of them were formed out of those confessional differences. Thus we have a tendency to approach the matter of church fellowship with the assumption that we are *not* in confessional agreement (we assume that such church

bodies disagree with us until proven otherwise). This assumption may lead us to approach fellowship discussions in a way that impels us to go probing into every corner of a church body's life in order to find every theological issue on which we may disagree.

ii. It does not seem appropriate to impose our synod's history or church orders upon Lutheran church bodies in other countries, or to view them through the lenses of the histories of Lutheran churches in North America (e.g., Germans and Norwegians with reference to the Formula of Concord). Where we do not share histories of theological disagreement or controversy (especially with "emerging church bodies"), it may be more appropriate to begin with the assumption that we *are* in confessional agreement with those who have subscribed unconditionally to the entire *Book of Concord* until we are shown otherwise. In cases where an emerging church body does not have vernacular access to the entire *Book of Concord*, a similar assumption of agreement may be in order with those who have subscribed only to the parts of the *Book of Concord* which are available to them. Finally, in cases where a church body has chosen not to subscribe to a confessional writing (such as the Formula of Concord), we should seek to determine whether the reason for non-subscription has more to do with custom or history before simply assuming that it represents substantive, doctrinal disagreement (e.g., churches which were planted by Scandinavian missionaries and which are in agreement with the teachings of the entire *Book of Concord*, without formally subscribing to the entire book).

b. The need for a variety of mechanisms for assessing confessional agreement with "emerging church bodies" or church bodies in their formative stages.

i. In the United States, Lutheran church bodies often developed similar structures in order to take into account the separation of church and

state as well as the need to rely upon the volunteerism of its lay members. Moreover, Lutheran church bodies have developed structures and formulated theological positions over a period of many decades, resulting in parallel commissions and officials to meet with each other when they enter into dialogue. Typically, these entities then take the results back to the respective church bodies for approval by their church-wide assemblies or conventions. In addition, because of their past histories, they may have documents and established theological positions that serve as starting points for dialogue.

- ii. In dealing with younger church bodies outside the United States, many of which are either developing different structures or already have structures that do not parallel our own, a different method of assessing confessional agreement is needed. Three methods in particular come to mind. First, LCMS representatives could visit the congregations and theological institutions (if they exist) in that church body for doctrinal discussions and in order to hear what is being actually preached and taught. This may reveal that confessional agreement exists. Second, documents that our church body has produced and adopted could be shared for study, and we should study any materials they might have to offer, to see whether either church body has any objections or disagreements. Third, the church body could be asked to prepare brief statements of doctrine and descriptions of practice for consideration by the LCMS.
- c. The need for different procedures by which a relationship of altar and pulpit fellowship is “declared” or recognized by the LCMS.
  - i. In the United States a formal declaration of church fellowship by the LCMS in convention has followed formal dialogues and a recommendation by the CTCR for entering into altar and pulpit fellowship. This approach has assumed a history of confessional and

theological differences that had to be resolved. This has also typically been the case in the history of Lutheranism in North America and Western Europe.

- ii. In dealing with emerging or recovering Lutheran churches in other parts of the world, there frequently is little or no history of theological differences or division. In such circumstances, something other than a formal declaration of church fellowship by the Synod in convention may be appropriate, given differences in structure and differing states of theological development. Many of these Lutherans work from the assumption that as Christians who accept the teachings of the *Book of Concord*, they are already in confessional agreement with other Lutheran Christians such as the LCMS. Perhaps the establishment of some kind of “preliminary fellowship agreement” with the LCMS in that place would be appropriate, based upon the fact that no church-dividing doctrine or practices are apparent.

Such an agreement could be reassessed periodically for the purpose of mutual accountability and to review and foster confessional agreement that will continue to manifest itself in the pulpit and at the altar. Ongoing study and discussion would be the means of fostering and furthering the unity that already exists and determining whether and when a more formal fellowship agreement would be possible and appropriate.

- d. The need for more regional or local involvement of congregations, districts, and officials in carrying out the ecumenical responsibility of the church.
  - i. In the United States and Canada, Lutheran congregations are not confined to geographical regions in isolation, but instead overlap in any given region with congregations belonging to other church bodies. In this situation, it is necessary that theological discussions be coordinated by the central church body and declarations of church

fellowship take place at the national level of the church body in order to represent all of the congregations within the church body. It is also most appropriate that the results of those dialogues be brought to the national convention or assembly of that church body for approval or disapproval of church fellowship as this decision will affect all the congregations within the church body.

- ii. When dealing with emerging church bodies in other countries, it may be feasible and helpful to have dialogues take place at the local level as well as nationally in order to assess whether or not we are united in the public confession of the faith. Local dialogues could be accomplished, for example, by regional mission directors (or other Synodical officials) along with a theologian from the church body. They would report the results of their dialogue and decision to enter into altar and pulpit fellowship to the Synod for evaluation and possible ratification.
- iii. With respect to developing relationships with individuals, congregations, groups, or entities from other church bodies, it is important to avoid either the actuality or the appearance of interference in the affairs and relationships of those church bodies. While the Synod seeks to encourage strong confessional theology and practice, it should do so in ecclesially responsible ways, without encouraging internal dissension or purposefully undermining prior relationships with other church bodies or groups. For example, if a confessional group from within a national church invites LCMS representatives to provide theological training or support, it is proper to inform the national church body's appointed leaders of the request and seek a course of action that does not cause offense or ill will while encouraging and supporting the cause of confessionally Lutheran theology and practice.

- e. In connection with the previous section (4.d), we recognize and emphasize the need to keep our partner/sister churches informed about conversations and potential agreements and seek their counsel, even as we ask them to do the same. In some situations, partner/sister churches can play an important role and help to coordinate conversations, especially when they have a geographical, linguistic, or cultural connection and ongoing contact with such emerging churches.
  - f. The LCMS respects the formal relationships and fellowship agreements of its partner/sister churches, noting that they have the right to establish such relationships with other churches. The LCMS will take these agreements into account as it interacts with those churches who have established formal relationships with our partner/sister churches.
  - g. In many cases emerging church bodies strongly desire contact with larger groupings of Lutherans beyond their borders. Involving such churches in the theological conferences of the International Lutheran Council (ILC) on a regular basis, or even allowing some form of associate membership in the ILC (if not full membership), may reap many benefits down the road as these church bodies continue to develop their theological and confessional identity.
  - h. Prior to establishing some form of fellowship agreement or formal declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship, the LCMS could encourage and develop a number of avenues of cooperation including:
    - i. Regular contacts at the church governing level
    - ii. Meetings and joint theological work among professors and clergy
    - iii. Meetings and exchange of students of theology
    - iv. Support of and participation in mission projects
5. Dealing with confessional groups within another church body raises a number of very different and very difficult questions that may or may not be capable of solution. At

the very least, study and discussion needs to take place regarding issues such as the following:

- a. The relationship between public confession and public membership in a church body. This is particularly acute in state churches where there is no history of independently supported congregations as in America. But this also is becoming an issue in the United States where some national church bodies are functioning (at least in practice) somewhat like European state churches and within which groups may establish a distinctive confessional identity that differs from the public position of the national church body. Such groups often choose to remain within their church body in difficult and even oppressive conditions, seeking to be leaven and offering courageous witness to biblical and confessional truth while protesting what they believe to be false doctrine or practice. Although they choose not to leave the structures of the national church body, they still seek fellowship, encouragement and theological dialogue and guidance from like-minded confessional individuals, groups, and church bodies.
- b. This situation creates the possibility of two avenues of relationship. On the one hand, the LCMS has historically dealt with the official church structures of a given church body when assessing confessional agreement and establishing altar and pulpit fellowship. On the other hand, it may have much in common with the confessional groupings within a national church body. Which avenue to pursue in such conflicted circumstances and how to do so with theological and ethical integrity and sound churchmanship will almost certainly be decided on a case-by-case rather than a policy basis, but we should realize that such situations are likely only to increase in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Christians who share a common confession express that confession nowhere more clearly or visibly than when they kneel at the same altar to receive the body and blood of Christ and when they share a common pulpit. The process and protocols leading to a formal declaration of

church fellowship by the Synod in convention have served us well when declaring with established church bodies with whom we have shared something of a common history. As we move into more fluid situations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need additional ways to identify and acknowledge agreement in confession that are appropriate to the history and nature of ecclesial communities that are emerging in various parts of the world but which do not share the same kind of institutional habits and identities. In these ways we seek to manifest our agreement and so confess our unity at the altar and pulpit in a manner that is faithful to our theology of the church.

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Commission on Theology and Church Relations  
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