

POLICY
for
THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD
Declaring
ALTAR AND PULPIT FELLOWSHIP
with
ANOTHER CHURCH BODY*

Article III of the constitution of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod lists as the first objective of the Synod that

- The Synod, under Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, shall—Conserve and promote the unity of the true faith (Eph. 4:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:10), work through its official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies, and provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism (Rom. 16:17), and heresy.

This policy statement describes the procedure which The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod follows in declaring Church Fellowship with another church body.

I. Delineation of Responsibilities

1. The President of the Synod

The President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is “the chief ecumenical officer of the Synod” and is therefore responsible for all church relations matters involving the Synod and other church bodies.

- a) He shall represent the Synod, in consultation with the appropriate Board or Commission, in official contacts with all partner churches by aiding, counseling, and advising them and strengthening the relations with and among them.
- b) He shall develop protocol documents between the Synod and partner church bodies according to which the Synod and its agencies will work together with its partner churches in foreign mission fields, which documents are also to be respected by agencies, auxiliaries, and recognized service organizations.”
- c) He or his representative shall represent the Synod in official contacts with other church bodies.

(Bylaw 3.3.1.1.2 (a)(b)(c))

*An earlier “Policy for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Declaring Altar and Pulpit Fellowship with Another Church Body” was adopted by the CTCR in April 2003 in response to a request from the President of the Synod. This revised policy incorporates subsequent convention action (2010 Res. 3-04A) and also includes policy guidelines for recognizing as a partner church a former mission of the Synod that achieves self-governing status. Citations of the LCMS Constitution and bylaws are from the most recent (2013) Synod *Handbook*.

2. The Commission on Theology and Church Relations

The Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) is “to assist the President of the Synod in matters of church relationships” (Bylaw 3.9.5). The Commission is to “assist the President at his request in discharging his constitutional responsibilities for maintaining doctrinal integrity as he relates to other church bodies” (Bylaw 3.9.5.2.2). The Bylaw further explicates the CTCR’s responsibilities as follows:

- a) It shall address itself to and evaluate existing fellowship relations for the purpose of mutual admonition and encouragement.
- b) When a church body applies for formal recognition of altar and pulpit fellowship with the Synod, such recognition shall be proposed at a convention of the Synod only after the approval of the commission.
- c) When a small, formative, emerging confessional Lutheran church body (identified as such by the President of the Synod as chief ecumenical officer) requests recognition of altar and pulpit fellowship with the Synod, after consultation with the Praesidium and approval by the commission, such recognition may be declared by the President of the Synod subject to the endorsement of the subsequent Synod convention.
- d) When a mission of the Synod applies for formal recognition as a self-governing partner church, such recognition shall be proposed at convention of the Synod by the Board for International Mission with the approval of the commission. (Bylaw 3.9.5.2.2(a)(b)(c)(d))

3. The Synod in Convention

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in convention, acting on the basis of a recommendation of the CTCR, declares altar and pulpit fellowship with another church body.

In cases wherein the President of Synod has declared a recognition of altar and pulpit fellowship with “a small, formative, emerging confessional Lutheran church body” the subsequent Synod convention is asked to endorse the declaration. (Bylaw 3.9.5.2.2(c))

4. Members of the Synod

Members and officers of the Synod will respect this orderly procedure and shall not move ahead of the Synod as a whole by engaging in altar and pulpit fellowship before such has been declared. Moreover, members and officers shall consult with the Office of the President and the Office of International Mission, where necessary, before making contacts with or making overseas trips to church bodies with whom we are not yet in fellowship (see article VI of the Synod’s Constitution; also Bylaws 3.8.3; 6.1.1).

So that these provisions may be carried out with consistency and in faithfulness to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, a relationship of altar and pulpit fellowship between another autonomous church body and the Synod shall be declared in the following manner.

II. Basic Considerations

In considering whether the Synod should declare altar and pulpit fellowship with another church body, the President of the Synod and the CTCR shall take into consideration the following criteria.

1. Altar and pulpit fellowship is a relationship that has as its basis agreement “in doctrine and in all its articles.” (FC SD X 31)

“While the church’s internal unity is perfect and known only to God (Eph. 1:4), the limits of external fellowship are determined by whether the Gospel is preached purely and the sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution. The Gospel and the sacraments are in themselves always pure. In this way they create and preserve the church in her hidden unity throughout the world. Yet, when church bodies make public confession of the Gospel and the sacraments, tragically some obscure or explicitly contradict the teaching of the Gospel and the proper administration of the Sacraments. For this reason the limits or boundaries of the external fellowship are creeds and confessions. Churches in altar and pulpit fellowship share the same confession, including the rejection of errors that contradict this confession. Where churches cannot agree on a common confession, the basis for church fellowship does not exist.” (*Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship*, p. 5)

2. Altar and pulpit fellowship is a relationship which signifies agreement not only in a church body’s formal statements but also agreement in the implementation of the formal confessions of a church body in its actual life and practice.

“*Confessional ecumenism recognizes the importance of practice as the application of doctrine to life.* Proper formulations of the meaning of the Gospel on the basis of the Scriptures, necessary as such formulations are, are no substitute for actually preaching, teaching, and living the Gospel and using the sacraments. Practice is a fair indication of fidelity to the Gospel. For example, it does little good to point to an excellent formulation of the lodge problem in a synodical constitution if in fact that policy is not being followed in the parishes. It means little to point to a fine statement on the inerrancy of Holy Scripture in the *Brief Statement* or the *United Testimony of Faith and Life* if, in fact, that position is no longer consistently followed. We need to remember that the Augsburg Confession (VII) is talking about a Gospel that is actually taught and proclaimed and about sacraments that are actually administered. Why? Because it is through the ‘practice’ of the Gospel, if you will, that the Holy Spirit creates and sustains His church. To be sure, not all items in the area of practice are clearly defined in the Word of God, and this needs to be recognized. But where they are, or where they clearly relate to the Gospel, there can be no ecumenical retreat to the safety of written formulations at the expense of what is actually happening in the church’s parishes as well as its seminaries, colleges, publishing houses, boards and commissions. Herein lies one of the chief reasons why The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod holds doctrinal discussions with other Lutheran groups prior to the establishment of altar and pulpit fellowship.” (Ralph Bohlmann, “Celebration of Concord” in *Theologian’s Convocation Formula for Concord*, 1977, pp. 69-70)

3. Altar and pulpit fellowship is a formal relationship between two autonomous church bodies that are institutionally viable.

In addition to agreement in confession, factors to be taken into account in making a recommendation for altar and pulpit fellowship with another church body include its history, size, self-understanding, and confessional and organizational maturity. That is, the process for declaring church fellowship must be realistic with regard to external circumstances of the two churches. In the case of established church bodies with significant traditions of theology and practice, a more formal process is appropriate. In the case of a small, formative, emerging confessional church body without extensive structures or organizations a simpler process is appropriate.

4. Altar and pulpit fellowship is a relationship which affects all those church bodies with which each of the two newly related church bodies holds church fellowship.

Early on in the process of contemplating the possibility of altar and pulpit fellowship, the churches with which the Synod is already in church fellowship are to be informed of this prospect and their input requested. The President of the Synod and the Commission on Theology and Church Relations will take into account the responses of the Synod's partner churches in reaching its recommendation regarding the possibility of church fellowship with this church body.

III. Procedures

- A. In the case of considering formal recognition of altar and pulpit fellowship with an established church body (in distinction from “a small, formative, emerging” church—see III.B., below), the following procedures are in order:
 1. When relationships between the Synod and another church body have reached the point that church fellowship between them is contemplated, the President of the Synod, following consultation with the CTCR, is responsible for formally initiating this process. He will inform the CTCR of this decision, as well as the Synod itself and, immediately thereafter, the partner churches of the LCMS. The President will invite the partner churches of the Synod to provide input to him and to the CTCR regarding possible altar and pulpit fellowship with this church body.
 2. Working together with the head of the church body with which church fellowship is contemplated, the President shall arrange for formal doctrinal discussions between representatives of the two church bodies. Synod representatives to these discussions shall be appointed by the President of the Synod, preferably including representation from CTCR membership or staff. These representatives shall report regularly to the President on these doctrinal discussions.
 3. At the conclusion of these discussions, a comprehensive written report shall be prepared by the Synod representatives for presentation to the President. The President shall formally forward this report to the CTCR, together with his recommendation regarding church fellowship with this church body.

4. Following its review of this report and the President's recommendation, the CTCR shall either recommend that the Synod declare altar and pulpit fellowship with this church body, or that it decline to do so.
 5. If the CTCR declines to approve altar and pulpit fellowship with this church body, it shall prepare a statement delineating the reasons for this decision, which is to be shared with the President of the Synod. The President shall inform this church body of the CTCR's action. Continued discussion and consideration may follow. If the concerns which caused the Commission to decline to approve altar and pulpit fellowship are not able to be resolved, the President will inform the members of the Synod and the Synod's partner churches of this action of the CTCR.
 6. If the CTCR recommends that the Synod enter into altar and pulpit fellowship with this church body, it shall immediately report this to the President of the Synod. The President shall inform this church, and also all of the Synod's partner churches, of this recommendation. The Commission on Theology and Church Relations shall prepare an overture to this effect for consideration by the next Synod convention. The President's office, in consultation with the head of the church body requesting fellowship, is to coordinate the preparation of a protocol document in the language of each church body to be signed by the heads of the respective churches at the next Synod convention upon adoption of the resolution recommending church fellowship (see Bylaw 3.3.1.1.2 (b)).
- B. When the President receives a request for recognition of fellowship from a confessional Lutheran church body that he identifies as "a small, formative, emerging confessional Lutheran church" (Bylaw 3.9.5.2.2(c)), the following procedures are in order:
1. When fellowship with such a church body is initially requested, the church shall be asked to share any information and/or documentation that identifies its doctrinal convictions (for example, doctrinal statements, its constitution and bylaws, copies of doctrinal materials used in the church, materials for training clergy and laity, and so forth). On the basis of such information and discussions with church leaders, the President of the Synod, assisted by the CTCR at his request, shall determine whether the requesting church is committed to the full authority of the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God and subscribes without reservation to the *Book of Concord* (to the extent that it is available in the primary language of the church).
 2. When relationships between the Synod and the church body have reached the point that church fellowship between them is contemplated, the President of the Synod, following consultation with the CTCR, is responsible for formally initiating this process. He will inform the Praesidium and the CTCR, as well as the Synod itself and, immediately thereafter, the partner churches of the LCMS, inviting their input.
 3. Working together with the head of the church body with which church fellowship is contemplated, the President of the Synod shall arrange for visitation of the church and doctrinal discussions between representatives of the two church bodies. Synod representatives to these discussions shall be appointed by the President of the Synod,

- one of which shall preferably be a member of the CTCR (inclusive of staff). The head of the church body or his representative shall also be welcome (and assisted, as necessary) to visit Synod offices, congregations, and institutions.
4. After such visitation(s) and doctrinal discussions, the Synod representatives shall provide a comprehensive written report, including relevant doctrinal materials (cf. #1 above), to the President of the Synod and to the CTCR. After consideration of this comprehensive report, the CTCR shall formally forward to the President its recommendation regarding church fellowship with this church body.
 5. If the CTCR declines to approve the request for altar and pulpit fellowship, it shall prepare a statement delineating the reasons for this decision, which is to be shared with the President of the Synod and the Praesidium. Continued discussion and consideration may follow. If the concerns which caused the Commission to decline to approve altar and pulpit fellowship are not able to be resolved, the President will inform the church body requesting fellowship of this decision, as well as members of the Synod, and the Synod's partner churches.
 6. If the Commission recommends the declaration of fellowship with this church, the President, after consultation with the Praesidium, shall either declare recognition of fellowship or decline to do so. If the President declines to declare recognition of fellowship, continued discussion and consideration may follow. If the concerns which caused the President to decline to approve altar and pulpit fellowship are not able to be resolved, the President will inform the church body requesting fellowship of this decision, as well as members of the Synod, and the Synod's partner or partner churches. If the President declares recognition of fellowship, he shall inform the church requesting fellowship, the members of the Synod, and also all of the Synod's partner churches of this action.
 7. Subsequent to the recognition of fellowship and prior to the next Synod convention, the CTCR shall prepare an overture to the Synod convention requesting endorsement by the Synod of the President's declaration of fellowship. The President's office, in consultation with head of the church body requesting fellowship, is to coordinate the preparation of a protocol document in the language of each church body to be signed by the heads of the respective churches at the next Synod Convention (see Bylaw 3.3.1.1.2 (b)).
- C. When a mission of the Synod applies for formal recognition as a self-governing partner church, (Bylaw 3.9.5.2.2(d)), the following procedures are in order:
1. When an LCMS mission applies for self-governing partner church recognition, the Office of International Mission (OIM) shall inform the Office of the President and the Executive Director of the CTCR of its recommendation that such status be recognized. Information and/or documentation that identifies the mission's doctrinal convictions (for example, doctrinal statements, its constitution and bylaws, copies of doctrinal materials used in the church, materials for training clergy and laity, and so forth) shall be shared with the CTCR.

2. If upon review of this material the CTCR approves the recommendation of the OIM, it shall prepare an overture to this effect for consideration by the Synod at the next Synod convention. If the CTCR declines to approve the request for partner church status, it shall prepare a statement delineating the reasons for this decision, which is to be shared with the President of the Synod and Office of International Mission. Continued discussion and consideration shall follow.
3. After CTCR approval of the application, the President's office, in consultation with the head of the newly self-governing church body, is to coordinate the preparation of a protocol document in the language of each church body to be signed by the heads of the respective churches at the next Synod convention (see Bylaw 3.3.1.1.2 (b)).

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Commission on Theology and Church Relations
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod