Principles for Cooperation in Externals with Theological Integrity (2010 Res. 3-03)

Introduction

This document responds to an assignment given to the CTCR by the Synod at its 2010 convention. 2010 Res. 3-03 commends and liberally quotes from a March 2010 document titled "Theological Implications of the 2009 ELCA Decisions" ("Theological Implications"), prepared by a task force appointed by the President of Synod. 2010 Res. 3-03 resolves, "That, in keeping with the basic principles set forth in the task force statement, cooperation in externals with other churches, including the ELCA, continue with theological integrity."[1]

Res. 3-03 also requires the development of "more in-depth theological criteria for assessing cooperative endeavors, determining what would necessitate termination of such cooperative efforts" and assigns to the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) that responsibility, "in consultation with the Praesidium and other entities and individuals as needed."[2] The Praesidium, working with the CTCR, is then given the task to "assess the current state of cooperation in externals" and to issue "a full report of criteria for ongoing assessment of the same by July 13, 2011."[3]

Such principles are of pressing concern specifically to Recognized Service Organizations that are engaged in such cooperative work, both in terms of their internal working relationships and of their accountability to the LCMS. While this document sets forth general principles, the urgency in responding according to the timetable of the process set forth in Res 3-03 has specific reference to such relationships.

Background[4]

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) recognizes some 125 or more Recognized Service Organizations (RSO) which involve Synod, its districts, or congregations in some form of "service" or mercy ministry, including such things as nursing homes and senior care, adoption agencies, housing for low-income seniors, food banks, international relief, immigration and refugee services, and so forth. In addition, the Synod is involved in six different "cooperative agencies," including Lutheran Disaster Response, Lutheran Educational Conference of North America, Lutheran Film Associates, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, Lutheran Services in America, and Lutheran World Relief.[5] Not only these cooperative agencies, but also many RSO's involve cooperation with other church bodies or entities outside the Synod. The majority of these endeavors involve cooperation on some level between the LCMS and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The issue of "cooperation in externals" with the ELCA has come to a head because of the sexuality decisions made by the ELCA at its 2009

---

[1] Res. 3-03, second resolved. (The LCMS, *Convention Proceedings 2010*, 115).
[2] Ibid., 116 (fourth resolved).
[3] Ibid. (fifth resolved).
[4] The Appendix provides additional background information regarding cooperation in externals.
[5] Please note that our primary focus herein is on the work of cooperative agencies and Recognized Service Organizations, and not on singular, one-time responses to a particular issue or crisis in which the Synod or one of its entities may issue a joint statement or participate in a widespread immediate relief effort.

Assembly, which give stark evidence of the deep theological divisions between the LCMS and the ELCA.

Before we consider the matter of principles for cooperation in externals with theological integrity, it is important to clarify that an RSO does not necessarily involve cooperation between the Synod (or one of its entities) and another church or church body. An RSO is an organization, recognized by the Synod, which

> while independent of the Synod, fosters the mission and ministry of the church, engages in program activity that is in harmony with the programs of the boards of the Synod, and respects and does not act contrary to the doctrine and practice of the Synod.[6]

In other words, an RSO is devoted to a purpose which the Synod can endorse and support because its activities are in harmony and consistent with Synod's doctrine and practice. Note that the definition of an RSO allows for it to be a cooperative agency. An RSO may also be wholly owned, managed, and staffed by LCMS people and involve no cooperative arrangement with another church body.

It should be stated that such "wholly LCMS" RSO's are ideal in many ways. First, in the all-important question of mission, such RSO's can fully be involved in and supportive of Gospel outreach in addition to whatever particular service focus they may have. Second, they enable Synod's entire theological understanding to serve as undergirding for the work they are doing. Third, they will not require the careful "balancing" or negotiating process that a cooperative RSO does when it comes to making decisions about management and leadership, setting policies, choosing staff, and so forth.

However, most of Synod's RSO's *are* cooperative in nature. They have been endorsed by the Synod because of the conviction that the work they do is pleasing to God and meets genuine human needs that we could not otherwise as effectively address. Yet, questions and concerns have risen as to if or whether Synod involvement in such endeavors may also involve us in work with the ELCA that would compromise our doctrine. As noted above, the immediate cause for this concern is action taken by the ELCA when it met in Churchwide Assembly in August, 2009. Among its decisions it resolved to recognize "publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships" as morally acceptable and removed any denominational restriction of the eligibility for ordination of individuals in such relationships.[7]

The ELCA decisions regarding human sexuality have clearly provided a tipping point, leading people to question any joint work with the ELCA. A legitimate concern is expressed over activities that might confuse the LCMS with the ELCA. In addition, the validity of the concept of "cooperation in externals" is also open to question by many. A question arises: Can we remain faithful in our confession before the world when we cooperate with another church body that has openly repudiated critical aspects of that confession?

---

[6] Bylaw 6.2.1, *2007 Handbook: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod,* p. 200.
[7] *Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies,* the ELCA, page 5, available online at http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality/Report-and-Recommendation.aspx. The *Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies* was adopted by the Churchwide Assembly.

In "Theological Implications," the Synod has again reaffirmed a longstanding and important distinction between cooperation in externals and communion in sacred things.[8] Rather than viewing cooperative work with other churches as a first step toward altar and pulpit fellowship or as necessitating full doctrinal agreement, the Synod seeks to maintain a clear distinction between the two concepts so that the cooperation in externals does not imply communion in sacred things in any way. *It has also acknowledged two critical principles with regard to cooperation in externals: (1) that it is often appropriate to engage in cooperative work with another church body or group of Christians, and (2) that such cooperative work may not be done at the expense of doctrinal integrity.*

The title of Resolution 3-03 and the quoted resolve indicate the importance of clear distinctions. Any cooperative work with others must be done "with theological integrity." The purpose of a sharp, clear distinction between cooperation in externals and communion in sacred things is to prevent any cooperative relationships from compromising the purity of the Gospel or undermining the church's proper work of preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments of Christ. However, it is sometimes difficult or even impossible to draw the line sharply between "externals" and "sacred things." One obvious example is a senior care facility which has a chaplain on staff.

Basic Principles

The "basic principles" referred to in 2010 Res. 3-03 are important to recall as the starting point for the CTCR's task. The Convention affirmed them and also charged the CTCR to work on further, more "in-depth theological criteria for assessing cooperative endeavors."[9] "Theological Implications" includes a quotation from *Theology of Fellowship,* adopted by the Synod in 1967. It may be helpful to examine more closely that quotation as summarizing the most important "basic principle" in this matter.

> Our Synod should clearly recognize that, in cases of necessary work on the local, national, or international level, where the faith and confession of the church are not compromised, and where it appears essential that the churches of various denominations should cooperate or at least not work at cross purposes, our churches ought to cooperate willingly to the extent that the Word of God and conscience will allow.[10]

Note that *Theology of Fellowship* refers to "necessary work" and to cooperation that "appears essential." The term "necessary" brings to mind Article VI of the Augsburg Confession (AC): "Our churches also teach that this faith is bound to bring forth good fruits and that it is *necessary* to do the good works commanded by God."[11] This reminds us that the kind of "externals" in view are not somehow unimportant or optional even though they do not involve proclaiming the Gospel and administering Christ's sacraments. That would amount to some form of Gospel

---

[8] The Latin phrases *cooperatio in externis* and *communio in sacris* are often used.
[9] The case of military chaplaincy is particularly thorny. It is separate from this question because it involves *communio in sacris* by definition. Moreover, it involves governmental policies and procedures and involved endorsement procedures. It therefore requires its own, discrete analysis in cooperation with personnel from ministry to armed forces.
[10] CTCR, *Theology of Fellowship* (1965), 28. In the online version of the report at www.lcms.org/ctcr, the page number is 43.
[11]Tappert, Theodore G. *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 31.

reductionism. Christians and the "household of faith" are obligated to show mercy and to care for others, even where needs are purely "external" or physical (Rom 12:20; Gal 6:10). Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions also remind us that such works are motivated by faith, and do not "merit justification before God."[12] Yet, they are commanded and necessary nonetheless.[13] Mercy and love, as defined by the eternal Law of God and made clear in the Decalogue, are the life of faith at work in the world.

This emphasis on "necessary" work indicates that we are not referring to matters of *adiaphora.* Our church cooperates with other churches and other organizations in such *adiaphora* as purchasing agreements, insurance companies, investment firms, and so forth. Such agreements— to the extent that they are purely "indifferent matters"—are not at issue. In addition, it should be clear that there is no controversy regarding cooperation in externals with a church with whom we are also in altar/pulpit fellowship.

That which God commands is "necessary." The ways that works of mercy are promoted and organized, however, will vary according to circumstances. Showing mercy to those in need is not optional, it is commanded. "For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land'" (Deut 15:11). What is commanded is both necessary and essential to the work of the church.

The church will always preach and teach the Gospel. It will always encourage a life of good works according to one's individual vocation.[14] But the church should also organize its efforts in this goal of obedience to God's commands for the sake of efficiency and effectiveness. So the early church organized care for widows and orphans (Acts 6:1ff.) and offerings were collected for the care of the poor in Jerusalem during a time of catastrophe (1 Cor 16:1ff., Gal 2:10). In the case of Acts 6, it is noteworthy that while priority is clearly given to the ministry of prayer and the Word of God (vv. 2, 4), the care of widows and orphans is not something that can be ignored. In commenting on Acts 6, Chrysostom notes that both care for the needy and proclamation of the Word of God are necessary, but the latter ought always to be the higher priority: "the needful must give precedence to the *more* needful."[15]

That leads to another aspect of cooperative work, namely, that it is *work that is done better cooperatively* than it would be if it were done separately. Or, in other words, that working cooperatively prevents working at "cross-purposes." This is a reminder that in many circumstances it is "essential," at the very least, to communicate effectively with other churches regarding works of mercy to prevent confusion and to allow more efficiency. For example, in the case of a natural catastrophe, it would be counter-productive for all the different aid organizations to cluster in one location when there are needs in other areas that are unmet.

---

[12] Ibid.
[13] E.g., AAC IV 122ff. (KW 140-149) and the scriptural citations within. See also FC SD VI and its scriptural citations (KW 587-591). Cooperative work is in the realm of the *bene esse,* not the *esse,* of the church.
[14] On the importance of this understanding in Luther, see George W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love: An Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther's Social Ethics* (New York: The American Press, 1954).
[15] Emphasis added. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament V Acts,* Francis Martin, ed., (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 70.

Therefore cooperative effort is largely pragmatic in nature, allowing greater efficiencies and economies of scale.

Such concerns, however, require the proviso that cooperative efforts in Christian care can be considered only "where the faith and confession of the church are not compromised."[16] Cooperative work can be done only "to the extent that the Word of God and conscience will allow." The church's efforts in care for those in need may not cloud or compromise the church's faith, or go against the Word of God and conscience. *This proviso is determinative.* Cooperative efforts are always toward goals, and only the Word of God and the Christian conscience can determine those goals. In individual life this is the case—the Christian person can cooperate with his neighbor in many things, but not in sin, not in denial of the Gospel, not in anything that is contrary to God's Word or a conscience shaped by the Holy Scriptures. That is all the more the case for a Christian church existing in an era of extreme moral confusion where an unrestricted tolerance is frequently suggested as the highest (and only) good (or, conversely, when the Gospel is undermined by moralism). Christian understanding of a necessary good that must be done is based on God's revelation, both in the eternal law written on the human heart (Rom 2:15) and, more specifically, in the unerring truth of God's Word. Nothing other than the truth of God may determine the legitimacy of a cooperative endeavor. Any endeavor that questions or compromises His truth is forbidden to the Church.[17]

In summary, Synod has endorsed the concept of cooperation in externals, by which we mean the possibility of working with Christians with whom we are not in church fellowship. Cooperation in externals requires a common goal or an agreed purpose which is consistent and consonant with the objectives, doctrine and practice of the Synod. No external cooperative work may in any way compromise or imply a disagreement with Synod's teaching and practice (and therefore may not contradict Holy Scripture or the scripturally-formed Christian conscience).

Further Theological Criteria

In addition to this central principle of cooperation with theological integrity, "Theological Implications" also considers the development of further principles, especially with respect to the ELCA:

> We cannot dictate the exact direction(s) various cooperative relationships will take in the future, primarily because the nature of agreements between ELCA and LCMS congregations and entities varies on a case-by-case basis. Frank and serious discussion on this issue needs to continue on various levels so that convictions and beliefs are not compromised and that worthy projects, activities, and relationships between our church and others may continue wherever possible. We urge LCMS participants in such cases to make decisions about whether to continue involvement on the basis of the principles we have discussed. We also suggest the following questions for consideration in making these decisions:

---

[16] *Theology of Fellowship,* 28, online 43.
[17] "Theological Implications" cites a specific example where theological integrity requires a cooperative endeavor to end in the case of an agency that adopts a policy of supporting the adoption of children by homosexual couples. See "Placing Adopted Children into Homosexual Contexts" (2006) at http://www.lcms.org/pages/?NavID=10096.

1. Is the purpose of the joint work fully consistent with the positions, policies and objectives of the Synod?
2. Do cooperative efforts imply doctrinal unity with the ELCA or endorsement of ELCA positions on same-sex relationships or other matters of disagreement with the LCMS?
3. Does the joint agency or organization distinguish itself as an entity from the churches that support it?
4. Are all the policies and programs of the organization consonant with the doctrinal position of the LCMS?
5. Do the individuals who lead the organization openly support and encourage efforts, positions, or policies which compromise the theological stance of the Synod?

We urge LCMS participants to answer such questions as these and to make decisions about whether to continue involvement on the basis of the principles we have discussed.

Case-by-case
Two parts of this section of "Theological Implications" are important. First, while the operative principle of cooperation only with theological integrity is absolutely clear, the great variety of human care organizations and efforts necessitates a case-by-case approach in evaluating them. There is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to the different organizations that Synod recognizes currently in the general sphere of mercy ministries. Some involve no inter-church cooperation and are solely staffed, administered, and governed by LCMS personnel. Others may have few or even no LCMS personnel in any form of leadership or policy-making. Some involve significant LCMS involvement and resources, others very little. Some organizations carefully and cautiously design their policies and programs in order to prevent any doctrinal compromise. Others may be administered with little care or concern for theology. There is great variety in the purposes and goals of RSO's, in how they are funded, governed, and staffed. The fact is that no two RSO's are identical. Individual Districts of the LCMS will, of necessity, need to be an integral part to decisions that are made regarding the RSO's with which they relate.

Five factors
Second, "Theological Implications" offers five questions for use in a principled, case-by-case approach to cooperative efforts. The questions deal with (1) the purpose or goal of a cooperative effort; (2) possible false implications of doctrinal unity and agreement between the ELCA and LCMS; (3) clear demarcation of the RSO as an entity independent from its supporting churches; (4) consistency of RSO policies with LCMS teaching; (5) possible confusion between the beliefs and stances of organizational leaders and the organization itself.

Additional Clarification

These additional principles may be further clarified as examples of where the church might consider cooperative work and also where it must cease such work.

First, the all-important question for any organized effort involving the church is whether the intended *purpose or goal* is God-pleasing. As obvious as this is, it must still be asserted. The godly necessity of providing Christian counseling to help married couples resolve conflict in a God-pleasing way is clear. Just as clear, however, is the fact that a Christian church must never

engage in efforts to provide counseling that encourages un-scriptural divorce. Yet, why do we say these are both "clear"? Such a value judgment can be made only on the basis of the authority of Scripture and orthodox theology. The following are further reflections in this regard:

- The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament—are the final authority for all church teaching, including the determination of what is and is not a "good work."
- This does not indicate a "Biblicist" approach, however. Scripture provides a normative role in the question of good works, but it also points beyond itself in an important way toward a "ministerial use" of conscience and human reason in considering moral questions. The Lutheran Confessions and orthodox Lutheran tradition will also provide necessary guidance.
- Christian theology has consistently accepted the teaching variously referred to as "natural law" or, as Luther also describes it, "one law which runs through all ages."[18] Romans 1 and 2 affirm that a certain knowledge of the truth is ours "by nature," written on the human heart. But Paul also notes that in a fallen world moral judgments are always potentially fallible and so we cannot dispense with the normative standards of Scripture.
- Theological assumptions underlying an organizational goal are also relevant. For example, an organization might engage in a laudable "social ministry" because it holds that such ministry—not the proclamation of the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ—is the *primary* ministry of the church. A cooperative endeavor in that instance risks the integrity of the Gospel itself since a "Social Gospel" has been substituted for the genuine Gospel of forgiveness, life, and salvation by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Gal 1:6-9).

Second, cooperative efforts with another church ought to be engaged in with a clear understanding that agreement in the purpose of the particular organization *does not imply agreement in all areas of doctrine and practice*. When two churches cooperate in feeding the hungry, for example, it is appropriate to understand that both are motivated by a common understanding that care for the needy is in keeping with God's will—this is agreement in a teaching of God's Law. But some may assume that the two churches are also in agreement about others issues when that is not the case. With respect to avoiding false implications of unity, consideration should be given to various organizational matters, such as:

- It is important—for the sake of truth—that in cooperative efforts there be a clear understanding between the sponsoring churches in the formation of principles and policies for the organization.
- The organization must be responsive to the concerns and beliefs of the LCMS (and any other cooperating entity), and, as such, ought clearly to articulate and distinguish between the areas of agreement which enable cooperation and acknowledge the reality of disagreements between cooperating entities which also exist.
- This does not discount the fact that we may also be able to affirm additional areas of theological concord (e.g., two Lutheran bodies who can affirm that the work they are

---

[18] See Luther's *Galatians* (1519), AE 27:355 where he says: "Therefore there is one law which runs through all ages, is known to all men, is written in the hearts of all people, and leaves no one from beginning to end with an excuse, although for the Jews ceremonies were added and the other nations had their own laws, which were not binding upon the whole world, but only this one, which the Holy Spirit dictates unceasingly in the hearts of all." See also AE 40:96-97. Luther is referring to natural Law (see also *Large Catechism* II:96-99, KW 440).

engaged in is based on the motivating principal of faith in Christ, active in love rather than a theology of merit; agreement in confessional subscription; mutual creedal agreement).

- Organizational events or ceremonies must not involve public worship and neither the LCMS nor the ELCA (or any other church with which we might be cooperating apart from a relationship of altar and pulpit fellowship) ought to imply that the joint effort fully represents its confession of faith in all articles.

Third, the corollary to the previous stipulation is that a cooperatively supported RSO ought to have a *distinct identity* from either the LCMS or the ELCA (or other church/church body). The *Handbook* describes RSO's as "independent of the Synod." They must also be independent of the ELCA. While both church bodies are free to support the ministry of the RSO, both are also free to withdraw support, so the ministry is "owned" by neither. This, of course, also means that an RSO must have a clear theological rationale and purpose that "fosters the mission and ministry of the church."[19] This suggests such considerations as the following:

- Leadership of the organization in question ought to have a clear understanding that its rationale and programmatic decisions will be direct factors in LCMS endorsement and involvement.
- It is preferable that such an organization not be portrayed as an arm or entity of the LCMS, ELCA, or other churches, but as a distinct organization with clearly focused goals and purposes.
- The Synod will evaluate whether those distinctive goals and purposes are in harmony with our theology.
- It is possible that in some cases an organization may no longer have any clear identity or purpose.
- It is also possible that in an effort to maintain a distinct identity, an organization loses its identity as a specifically Christian (and Lutheran) entity. For example, just as the YMCA is no longer a "Christian association" in any recognizable way, so also a "Lutheran social service agency" always runs the risk of losing any "Lutheran" element to its identity, and becoming just one more "social service organization."

Fourth, since we are considering organizations with very direct, practical purposes—specific "good works"—it is necessary that the *implementation* of the organization's goals and the steps it takes toward those goals be examined. Both goals and implementation must be consistent with Lutheran theology. The activities, policies, and practices of organizations must be evaluated. For example:

- An organization may have evolved over time and no longer directly addresses the need that led to its creation and to LCMS support.
- A board of directors may have little or no representation from the Synod and may be unaware of or unsupportive of LCMS beliefs.

---

[19] 6.2.1, *Handbook,* 200.

- Organizations may adopt operational principles that are alien or contrary to Scripture and the Confessions (for example, a relief organization policy that forbids volunteers from sharing the Gospel or praying with those who are being served).
- Effective stewardship of financial resources is a valid theological issue.
- The policies and practices of an organization must not be diffused by unstated goals or objectives (for example, an agency organized to help the poor devotes itself to partisan political advocacy).
- The lack of a policy may indicate an unwillingness to address a necessary matter of Christian truth. With regard to homosexual adoptions, for example, the lack of a policy may be a tacit allowance for such adoptions.
- Endorsement questions for institutional chaplaincies may be addressed under this heading of implementation. The ELCA's current theological course presents serious theological challenges to any continued cooperation in endorsement procedures.

Fifth, the *personnel* who actually manage and lead cooperative efforts are a critical factor. Both the public conduct and public positions taken by leaders and staff of organizations are significant to the question of integrity. Personnel issues include (but are not limited to) such concerns as follow:

- If an organization is staffed by someone whose lifestyle is scandalous or openly and unrepentantly sinful, the message of God's Word is inevitably compromised.
- A leader's public identification with and support of ecclesial, social, or political groups which hold positions contrary to the Christian faith compromises any work, no matter how valid it may be otherwise.
- Institutional chaplaincy staffing decisions must be assessed theologically, with regard to matters of the chaplain's life-style decisions, theology, and ministry practices. (The LCMS cannot support heterodox ministry, lend tacit approval to women's ordination or other unscriptural practices, or support chaplaincy services by those engaged in an immoral lifestyle.)
- Over time, leaders and/or staff of organizations may become unsupportive of or hostile to Synod positions even though the ostensible purpose of the organization has not changed.
- A management board for an RSO may become conflicted because of differing beliefs on the part of its members.
- The question may arise as to whether an RSO ought to be endorsed by the Synod if the LCMS has little or no influence regarding either board leadership or staffing.
- In all these instances, because of the public nature of leadership, the result will be a compromise of the Synod's beliefs and teachings.

Conclusion

There can and should be a measure of cooperation between the LCMS and other Christians, Lutheran or otherwise, so long as there is no compromise of the teachings of Holy Scripture as explicated in the Confessions. This basic principle requires that the cooperative effort is not an act of fellowship in the Word and Sacraments (unionism). It assumes that the cooperative effort is a godly work— something done in keeping with the eternal or "natural law" of God, written on the human heart and clarified in Holy Scripture and the scripturally-informed conscience. It is

a necessary work which God commands and also a work which is most effectively done in cooperation with others. Therefore, cooperative work with individuals or entities in the ECLA is not necessarily precluded so long as it meets the criteria given above.

This document has responded to 2010 Res. 3-03 with respect to cooperative work in RSOs and other organizations. In such cases, we hope that these guidelines will be helpful for determining where cooperative work can continue with doctrinal integrity and where, for the sake of that integrity, it must cease. However, the markedly different theological courses of our respective church bodies (LCMS and ELCA) mean that cooperation on the national level is a different matter. The ELCA's departure from historic Christian and Confessional Lutheran standards makes it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for the LCMS to cooperate *directly* with the ELCA national office in united efforts with doctrinal integrity.[20]

In the end, decisions about where the Synod may and may not engage in such cooperative work will involve a Spirit-guided, careful, case-by-case look at each of the shared endeavors according to these scriptural principles.

Approved by the CTCR "for sharing with the Praesidium"
December 17, 2010

---

[20] For example, any continued cooperation with the ELCA in institutional chaplaincy endorsements and similar matters seems significantly problematic.

APPENDIX

Additional Background to 2010 Res. 3-03

The matter of cooperative relationships is extremely broad. All of life involves Christians in countless cooperative relationships. Our Lord prays for Christian distinctiveness, but not that we be taken "out of the world" (John 17:15). St. Paul reminds us of the impossibility of having no association with the people "of this world" (1 Cor 5:9-10). The Confessions condemn the notion of forbidding Christian involvement in public and private relationships and institutions (AC XVI). Theodore E. Schmauk noted that "Wherever there is common ground, there is possibility of cooperation."[21]

A caveat was added by Schmauk: "But no cooperation is possible whose practical or ultimate effect is to slight or ignore even the least central and most insignificant outpost of Lutheran principle."[22] Although Christians must relate to every manner of person in common life, St. Paul warned that we ought not associate with those who claim to hold the Christian faith but live in flagrant violation of it (1 Cor 5:11). And while Jesus did not pray for His disciples to be taken out of the world, He did pray for them to be kept safe "from the evil one" (John 17:15), and warns that His kingdom not be confused with this world (John 18:36).

Two principles are present in the cooperative relationships of individual Christians. First, the Christian necessarily cooperates with others in his vocations and in the assorted relationships that occur in daily life. The Christian cooperates in the workplace, in commerce, and in her neighborhood with people who are members of her congregation and with many more who are not. Second, such cooperation occurs only on the basis of "common ground"—shared purposes and understandings. Cooperation ends when it is incompatible with Christian faith and life—when it involves infidelity to the Word of God and biblical standards of life—when it is contrary to Christ's call to faith active in love.

It is one thing to speak of individual Christians cooperating with others, but it is another thing to consider how churches or a church body can or cannot cooperate with other believers or churches or church bodies. The following pages summarize official LCMS action regarding the principle of cooperation in externals (*cooperatio in externis*) in recent years.

Background to Cooperation in Externals with Integrity

Meeting in convention in 1967 the Missouri Synod adopted the document *Theology of Fellowship* (CTCR, 1965). Included in its guidelines it says:

> Our Synod should clearly recognize that, in cases of necessary work on the local, national, or international level, where the faith and confession of the church are not compromised, and where it appears essential that the churches of various denominations

---

[21] Theodore E. Schmauk and C. Theodore Benze, *The Confessional Principle and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church as Embodying the Evangelical Confession of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1911), 900.

[22] Ibid.

should cooperate or at least not work at cross purposes, our churches ought to cooperate willingly to the extent that the Word of God and conscience will allow.[23]

Although it is not referred to by name, the concept of "cooperation in externals" (*cooperatio in externis*) is central to this assertion. [24]

A 1971 resolution of the Synod referred to "cooperative activity" with churches with which the Synod was not in fellowship.[25] A similar perspective from 1974 is evident in *A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism with Application for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*.

> It remains a basic principle for the Synod that the unity *in* the church which we seek is not an external unification imposed from without by the adoption of common polities and by organizational affiliation or by united endeavors in worthy causes, but the unity in the church which results from *confessional* unanimity, that is, genuine concord or agreement in *doctrine*. In relation to other church bodies and agencies the Synod will gladly cooperate in externals, that is, participate in projects which do not involve joint worship or the spiritual ministry of the church. In line with this principle the Synod will continually examine the propriety of present affiliations and will carefully weigh proposals to enter new alliances.[26]

The 1991 document, *Inter-Christian Relationships: An Instrument for Study,* considered both the prior usage of the distinction between *communio in sacris* and *cooperatio in externis* and also some potential confusion that results from the term "external."

> The central role of the means of grace in our understanding of inter-Christian relationships explains the reasons why we distinguish between "communion or

---

[23] *Theology of Fellowship,* 28. In the online version of the report at www.lcms.org/ctcr, the page number is 43.

[24] The Wisconsin Synod's severing of altar and pulpit fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1961, and the consequent demise of the Synodical Conference, were in significant measure the result of Wisconsin's discomfort over Missouri's distinction between the two concepts: "cooperation in externals" (*cooperatio in externis*) and "communion in sacred things" (*communio in sacris*).[24] In the judgment of the Wisconsin Synod, such Missouri Synod decisions as construction and operation of service centers for World War II military personnel with the National Lutheran Council and cooperative charitable organizations with Lutherans from outside the Synodical Conference were unionistic in nature. Even though the Wisconsin Synod acknowledged that these particular efforts involved unambiguous restrictions against joint preaching, teaching, or worship, Wisconsin saw them as having the "inevitable" consequence of unionism. "First, cooperation with 'safeguard'; then, the call for complete consolidation, thus bringing the movement to its inevitable unionistic climax."[24] From Wisconsin's perspective, "cooperation in externals" is simply a slippery slope toward indiscriminate union without doctrinal agreement. See the essay by the Wisconsin Synod Conference of Presidents 1953-54, "Cooperation in Externals," in *Essays on Church Fellowship,* Curtis A. Jahn, ed. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996), 379-386.

[25] 1971 Resolution 3-26: "Resolved, That The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod restate its desire to initiate and work toward fellowship with those Lutheran churches with whom it is not in altar and pulpit fellowship, and continue to work toward a greater degree of unity with those with whom it is in altar and pulpit fellowship, and that the activity proceed as follows: 1) Multilevel discussion of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions with those Lutheran churches with whom we are not in fellowship in order to seek agreement in doctrine and practice leading to a declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship. These discussions may serve to provide guidelines for additional cooperative activity;" quoted in CTCR *The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship* (1981), footnote 70, on 37. In the online version at www.lcms.org/ctcr the page number is 44.

[26] CTCR, *A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism with Application for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (*1974), 11.

fellowship in sacred things" (*communio in sacris*) and "cooperation in externals" (*cooperatio in externis*). The former term pertains to the highest and deepest kind of communion or fellowship, namely, the joint use of the means of grace, while the latter refers to matters that are not directly related to the proclamation of the Word and administration of the sacraments, i.e., *external* to the use of the means of grace. As useful as this distinction is in principle (because it is made on the basis of the means of grace), it is nevertheless subject to considerable confusion because of the term *externals*. That a given activity is *external* to the use of the means of grace does not mean we are to regard such an activity as necessarily optional or to be excluded from the church's calling. For instance, cooperation in caring for refugees may not involve the joint use of Word and sacraments, but this certainly in no way diminishes the importance of such common work as a fitting response to the Lord's command to love our neighbor. Additionally, we must recognize that not all Christian activities fit neatly into one or the other category. With that understanding, however, measuring proposed activities in terms of their relationship to the means of grace remains central to a confessional Lutheran approach to questions of inter-Christian relationships.[27]

Once again, in 1995, in its consideration of the relationship of church and state, the Commission provided some historical perspective on the idea of "cooperation in externals." It also noted concerns about potential confusion due to the terminology.

> The gradual agreement on social welfare in the mid-20th century among the leadership of American Lutheran churches led to frequent contacts and cooperation among Lutheran church bodies. A major factor in this cooperation was the problem of interface with the new governmental welfare agencies that arose in the 1930s. In Chicago, on Nov. 17, 1936, new ground was broken in inter-Lutheran cooperation when the Lutheran Church Charities Committee was formed, representing six synods, including the Missouri Synod. The technical term used in the Missouri Synod for such a joint effort is "cooperation in externals." Yet those supporting the emerging view of social ministry were quick to point out that "the welfare ministry itself was by no means an external matter to the Christian faith and the life of the church; it was an essential sign of the presence of divine grace and the necessary fruit that grew from the root of faith."

> After the mergers of 1960 and 1962, which had created the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) respectively, a new organization of Lutheran cooperation to replace the National Lutheran Council became operational in 1967. This time the Missouri Synod, already cooperating with the National Lutheran Council in Lutheran World Relief, Lutheran Service Commission, and Lutheran Immigration Service, was a member. The new agency was called the Lutheran Council in the United States of America (LCUSA) and was chartered with two main purposes: theological discussion and cooperation in specified areas of Christian service. All participating bodies were required to take part in the theological discussion, but each could choose whether or not to participate in other areas of activity. One of those areas of cooperative work was the Office of Government Affairs in Washington, D.C.[28]

---

[27] CTCR, *Inter-Christian Relationships: An Instrument for Study* (2000), 16-17.
[28] CTCR, *Render Unto Caesar… and Unto God: A Lutheran View of Church and State* (1995), 50.

Later the same document states:

> Similarly, a wide variety of programs and resources have been developed within the Synod (and in cooperation with other Lutheran churches) addressing the problems of poverty, human suffering, settlement of immigrants and refugees, and "war and peace" issues. Such programs and resources allow members of the Synod to focus intentionally on these issues on the basis of Scriptural principles, while leaving necessary room for individual Christians to form their own opinions about the wisdom of specific governmental policies and to make decisions about personal involvement in ecclesial and/or social efforts and activities in these areas.[29]

In 1999 the CTCR published the report *Faith Active in Love: Human Care in the Church's Life.* Once again the principle of cooperation in externals with theological integrity was articulated. Under the heading, "The Need for Flexibility," the document states:

> History shows great variety in the way the church organizes for Christian care, a variety that depends in part on the social circumstances in which the church is working. Those gathered together to bring God's Word to both believers and unbelievers will participate together also in works of mutual care and love toward those outside the church. In restoring our relationship to God, God's Word frees us for energetic Christian care. Much Christian care is lived out in the believers' daily work, but some forms of care are more effectively carried out as Christians work together with other Christians. Working together seems especially necessary when distortion or corruption in the established orders of creation make it difficult for Christians to act individually to provide human care.
>
> Christians can also organize to work together with Christians in other traditions and with non-Christians in caring institutions of society. To be sure, Christians most happily and comfortably cooperate with those who share their confession. But just as individual Christians cooperate in and with the social structures where God has placed them, so Christians organized in specific social structures can also cooperate in and with other social and governmental structures for the care of neighbors in need. Again, churches are likely to cooperate especially in the voluntary and special social structures that spring up in response to needs not met by currently established structures in society. Such cooperation with others, either as individuals or in various social structures, need not compromise the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Cooperative endeavors of this kind, when they do not compromise the proclamation of God's Word, can be simply the living out of love that springs from a living faith. However, when other individuals or communities advocate policies and programs that are contrary to the guidance given in the Scriptures, great care should be taken by Christians not to cooperate in ways that compromise the proclamation of God's Word.[30]

---

[29] Ibid., 81.

[30] *Faith Active in Love* (February 1999), 27. The report is available in print and also online at http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/faith.pdf. *Faith Active in Love* reminds us that such principles of care for those in need and the priority of Gospel proclamation and purity of confession are both necessary aspects of

It is evident that a consistent understanding is at work regarding both cooperation with others—from cooperating with groups or structures in society to cooperating with other churches—in caring for people in need. Wherever such cooperative work enables us to respond effectively toward those in need, it is considered. Such cooperative endeavor, however, is always restricted by the proviso that it may not compromise the truth of God's Word. As a consequence of this understanding the LCMS has engaged in a variety of cooperative relationships with other church bodies on international, national, and local levels. However, the proviso that such relationships not compromise God's truth requires that the LCMS carefully examine its cooperative endeavors with a church body that has clearly departed from that truth.

---

the church's life. It also points out that the church's care for those in need tends to follow one of two "contrasting lines of thought." The first line of thought emphasizes the need for a more organized, corporate, and cooperative dimension to the church's care for those in need. The second emphasizes that such care should primarily take place individual efforts, as Christians are active in their vocations. Rather than opposing these dimensions, *Faith Active in Love* indicates how both are needed. (See 12-26; *Render Unto Caesar* raises a similar concern.)