

**II. A Summary of The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship**

In the New Testament the word for fellowship (Greek *koinonia*) means a joint participation in a common thing and is used in connection with the Gospel, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the one faith, and the Lord's body and blood. There is one holy Christian church, whose members everywhere participate together in these blessings as they believe in Christ for salvation. They are bound to Christ by faith, and through Him, with all other believers in this internal and invisible fellowship. No one can look into the heart of another to see if faith exists. In the proper sense, the church is made up of all true believers in Christ. In them the Lord has created and sustains faith through the Gospel and the Sacraments and through these means of grace He bestows the blessings of salvation. The means of grace are "the marks of the church" (Art. VII and VIII of the AC and of the Apology) around which He gathers an external or outward assembly.

Church fellowship in the outward assembly is based on the confessions of faith made by churches to which people belong (again, we cannot look into their hearts). The LCMS is prevented from practicing church fellowship with other church bodies whose confessions or other official positions seriously distort the Christian proclamation. They do not share with the Synod the same biblical understanding of the Gospel, and thus we do not share a common confession with them. Therefore the LCMS and its congregations do not join with them in proclaiming the Gospel or in administering and sharing the Sacraments. Under these circumstances the LCMS properly declines to be in "altar and pulpit" fellowship with these churches.

Basic to the LCMS practice of church fellowship is faithfulness to biblical teaching and thus agreement in doctrine. Paul wrote, "Take heed to yourself and to your teaching [Greek *didaskalia*]; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim. 4:16 RSV). While the Scriptures show that the same biblical message is proclaimed in a wondrous variety of ways, the apostle exhorts Christians to say in essence the same thing concerning the Lord and His Word. Since people are saved through the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:1-2) and freed by the truth of God's Word (John 8:31-32), the church must teach what Christ teaches (Matt. 28:20).

False doctrine distorts the Gospel and so endangers unity with Christ. Therefore Jesus warns His church against false teachers (Matt. 7:15 ff.), i.e., those who do not profess the apostolic teaching (2 John 9-10; see Gal. 1:8). So also Paul says, "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them" (Rom. 16:17; our translation). Christians are to avoid those who cause divisions and offenses by falsifying and misrepresenting apostolic teaching. Such people are really the ones responsible for divisions and offenses, not the faithful followers of apostolic teaching. Because they present themselves as teachers of the Gospel, they can be more dangerous to faith than those who do not claim to be part of the church. The alternative to following Christ's sound words (1 Tim. 6:3-4) is to fall into incorrect teachings which threaten faith itself (see 2 Tim. 2:17 ff.). Distinguishing the Good Shepherd's voice from other voices spells the difference between life and death for believers (John 10:1-9).

Typical of a few responses to *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship* was the caricature that the LCMS teaches that only our members can be saved. On the contrary, we hold, as Lutherans always have, that all who believe in Christ as Savior are saved and are joined by an invisible bond of fellowship that spans space and time. This is affirmed above. The Lutheran position on church fellowship holds that internal unity is expressed in external church fellowship by faithfulness to the Scriptures' teaching. A church consistently proclaiming unscriptural teachings is still a Christian church to the extent that elements of the true Gospel are

**Appendix R3-01A**

**The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship  
A Report on Synodical Discussions**

**I. The Assignment of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod  
(LCMS) 1998 Convention:  
A Synodwide Study of Church Fellowship**

By a substantial majority, delegates to the 1998 LCMS convention noted "that a growing problem exists among some of our pastors and congregations regarding the understanding, application, and practice of our Synod's fellowship principles." Some laypeople and church workers "do not always have a clear and positive understanding of the basis and purpose of our Synod's fellowship posture." These conditions are "in part due to a lack of understanding of why we are who we are and why we do what we do as Missouri Synod Lutherans" (Res. 3-03B).

To address this important issue, the LCMS asked its President and Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) to prepare a Synodwide study of the confessional nature of our church body and its fellowship principles and practices. In a separate resolution titled "To Endeavor to Keep the Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace" (Res. 3-10C), the LCMS affirmed its historic position on joint worship. To examine biblical and confessional teaching regarding fellowship, the resolution called for the following steps:

1. That all the District conventions in 2000 make use of the biblical and confessional study on church fellowship.
2. That during the six months after the conventions each District President promote and provide for the use of this study by pastors' conferences, teachers' conferences, lay/clergy conferences, and congregations.
3. That the 2001 LCMS convention devote special attention to the topic of church fellowship, including joint worship, Communion fellowship, and pastoral oversight concerning the Lord's Supper. This would require scheduling significant time at the convention for prayer, study, and discussion.

In February 2000 the LCMS President and CTCR prepared and sent *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship* to all District convention delegates. (The full text is included in Appendix II at the end of the *Convention Workbook*.) This booklet contained a 24-page essay with detailed footnotes, a five-page condensation of the document, six questions for discussion, and five case studies. To provide feedback a Discussion Reporting Instrument was included. All District conventions discussed the document. About 4,300 response forms from convention delegates and other attendees were returned for evaluation. Of this number, roughly 1,900 were submitted by pastors, 2,100 by laypersons and 200 by commissioned ministers. About 100 respondents did not identify their status. The President, the CTCR, and their staffs tabulated the returns and summarized the written comments, which are reflected in this response.

there. (For this reason Lutherans do not proselytize active members of these churches.) The presence of the Gospel in these churches, however, does not negate their false and misleading proclamation. Practicing church fellowship with them would compromise our proclamation of the Gospel. Their false teachings sadly separate us at the altar and in the pulpit from well-meaning Christians in these churches.

We do not presume to pass judgment on whether or not individual false teachers have saving faith. Nevertheless, their false teachings exclude them from external fellowship with churches that hold to the apostolic teachings of the New Testament. First-century apostolic churches would hardly have communed with those who persistently distorted the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:6-9).

The Lutheran Confessions hold that all doctrine must be derived from the Scriptures. These Confessions understand Christian doctrine not in a minimal sense, i.e., a bare message of forgiveness, but as the entire Christian faith summarized in the articles of faith. The Formula of Concord summarizes the Lutheran basis for church fellowship:

Churches will not condemn each other because of a difference in ceremonies, when in Christian liberty one uses fewer or more of them, as long as they are otherwise agreed in doctrine and all its articles and are also agreed concerning the right use of the holy sacraments. (SD X 31).

Thus the Book of Concord comprises the Lutheran church's solemn and official confession of the pure Gospel and Christ's Sacraments under the norm of the Holy Scriptures and provides the basis for church fellowship.

The LCMS from its beginning has been committed to avoiding unionism, that is, practicing church fellowship together with those with whom we were not united in doctrine. One of the conditions of membership in the LCMS was and remains the following:

Renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description, such as:

- a. Serving congregations of mixed confession, as such, by ministers of the church;
- b. Taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession;
- c. Participating in heterodox tract and missionary activities.

(Constitution of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Art. VI 2)

### III. Summary of Responses

District convention delegates submitted a variety of responses. While the majority approved of *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship*, others detailed specific problems. Style was a problem for some. They found the document's vocabulary and arguments difficult to understand and wanted practical problems addressed in a more popular style. The document's technical, often lengthy endnotes gave some the impression that our main concern is maintaining LCMS traditions. Others faulted the document for not being more detailed in biblical and confessional argumentation. These opposite reactions may be due to a misunderstanding of the document's nature and purpose. The President and CTCR were aware that some might find it unnecessarily complex and that others might prefer a more scholarly document. Actually, both concerns were in view. An abridged version was written to introduce the main document whose text was made as straightforward as possible. Detailed argumentation and documentation were placed into the endnotes.

Many responded to the document's content. A majority affirmed the LCMS position on church fellowship that it set forth. They found it scriptural and confessional and wanted the LCMS to maintain its historic position. Some also wanted the LCMS leaders to hold accountable members who have openly violated the synodical position. These respondents lamented that pastors and congregations who hold to Lutheran practice are sometimes accused of being deficient in Christian love and labeled legalistic. A related

concern was the difficulty of explaining in an appealing way why we are who we are and why we do what we do.

Some objected to the document's methods of interpreting the Scriptures and Confessions. A typical question was "Are the centuries-old texts of the Scriptures and Confessions directly applicable to our modern denominational situation?" To others the document appeared to begin with predetermined conclusions which were then supported by proof-texts without adequate argumentation. Some claimed that scriptural warnings against false prophets were actually directed against non-Christians, not erring Christians. This way of citing the Bible, they maintain, gives members of other denominations the impression that we do not even regard them as Christians.

Others went further and disagreed with LCMS church fellowship practices which they said were narrower than the Confessions intended or allowed. Some specifically mentioned Communion, while others asked how much agreement is necessary for churches to be in fellowship. Some claimed that our fellowship practice is an obstacle in bringing the Gospel to others. While generally accepting the Synod's position, some feel that pastors should be free to decide in emergency situations whether or not to participate in any joint worship without being branded as dissenters. They oppose indiscriminate fellowship practices, but they do not want to be seen as separatistic in suggesting that members of other churches are not Christians. Important for them is that the LCMS continue to study its fellowship principles and acquire more information about its doctrinal differences with other churches.

## IV. General Comments on the Responses

### A. The Current Cultural Context

In our discussions of church fellowship we must take into account how our culture affects our patterns of thinking. Contemporary attitudes toward the nature and role of truth differ from those of a generation or two ago. This has enormous implications for our common commitment to church fellowship principles and practices. To illustrate some of the contemporary challenges to truth claims, consider the following response: "Theologians really need to experience what is happening throughout the Synod. I personally don't feel my Lutheran faith is threatened by fellowship with other churches. In fact it is strengthened." This response reflects three elements of our culture.

First, deeply rooted in American culture is that each person places incredible confidence in himself/herself. In modern jargon, "I know as much as and am as capable as anyone else." Individualism causes people to be locked into private virtual realities defined by their own opinions, preferences, and experiences. When someone says that he/she does not "feel" the Lutheran faith is threatened by church fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians, he/she may be making his/her personal opinion and not the faith of the Lutheran church the basis for what is true. In that case religious teachings are regarded as no more than individual opinions. Notice that the response quoted above uses individualistic language: "I personally don't feel my Lutheran faith is threatened."

When each person determines what is true for him/her, seeking to find agreement on common meanings and ideas is futile. In this climate many construct an eclectic spirituality for themselves by taking elements from widely differing and even opposing systems of belief and philosophy. Notice that the response quoted above speaks of faith being "strengthened" by fellowship with "other churches," presumably churches with differing systems of belief. This prevalent syncretism is our culture's second challenge. LCMS pastors know that some of their members tolerate views that are diametrically opposed to central biblical teachings. Often heard is "It's all a matter of individual interpretation." The unionism and syncretism which is disavowed in the LCMS constitution is now the majority opinion in some circles of our society.

Related to the second factor is the third: distinctions between people and even between ideas and teachings no longer matter. A noted professor pointed out that first-year college students enrolling at the university already had a relative view of truth. All views have equal claims to the truth. The only absolute is that there are no absolutes. This kind of thinking reflects the religious views of a majority of people today in our culture. People recognize that churches differ from one another but are reluctant to say that one church is right and another wrong. Notice that the response quoted above speaks of "other churches" without making any judgment about whether they are orthodox or heterodox.

In this environment the LCMS view on church fellowship often seems to be out of touch with reality, even among its own membership.

#### B. Current Doctrinal Differences among Churches

Continuing doctrinal and theological differences among churches are another obstacle in understanding the LCMS doctrine of church fellowship. Historic doctrinal differences among Lutheran, Reformed, and Roman Catholic churches remain and tragically go to the very heart of the Gospel that creates and preserves church unity. For example, most Protestant denominations deny that the Bible teaches that God creates and sustains saving faith through Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Thus these churches wrongly teach that Baptism is a human response symbolizing a decision to commit one's life to Christ. They also deny that the bread and wine of Holy Communion are actually Christ's body and blood and in effect deny the clear intent of his words "This is My body." A confusion of Law and Gospel is still another manifestation of doctrinal differences among churches, showing up in the false belief that people can earn their way to heaven.

For some churches these and other differences no longer prevent them from establishing fellowship alliances with one another. Formal ecumenical agreements between a majority of Lutheran churches and other churches have seriously undermined the Reformation principle that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone for the sake of Christ alone. Without this crucial truth, the Gospel cannot be purely and rightly preached and taught. Many churches see no need to resolve their conflicting beliefs before declaring church fellowship with each other because they hold that the Scriptures themselves contain conflicting teachings. In this modern ecumenical climate, it is not surprising that many in the LCMS begin to question its fellowship principles. Even more serious problems in these churches lie behind the documents establishing ecumenical alliances. It is common for theologians in "mainline" churches not to accept the Scriptures as the Word of God without contradictions. Many deny miracles, the virgin birth, the incarnation, and the resurrection and ascension of our Lord. Some even hold that the historical Jesus never knew Himself to be God, Messiah, or Savior.

#### V. Response to Specific Concerns

Some respondents said that the document did not really address the hard questions. They want guidance on how pastors and congregations should respond to requests to participate in services of other churches, baccalaureates, community services, and other gatherings. These concerns are reflected in these questions: Is there a distinction between ordinary and extraordinary worship situations? Does every joint participation in leading public worship with clergy of church bodies not in church fellowship with us violate biblical and confessional principles? According to our principles of pulpit and altar fellowship, what is meant by "a public worship service"? These concerns require answers.

#### A. Commitment to the LCMS Position

From the beginning, the LCMS has solemnly and corporately confessed in its Constitution the biblical truth about church fellowship. Because of this, LCMS pastors and congregations agree as a condition of membership in the Synod not to take part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of those of mixed confession (Constitution Art. VI 2).

But what is meant by a public worship service? According to the historic LCMS understanding, a worship service is any occasion in which the Word of God is preached and prayer is made to Him by a fully authorized church worship leader.<sup>1</sup> Thus worship services include not only regular Sunday services or other set times of worship (e.g., festival services, Lenten and Advent services), but also those in which worship takes place (e.g., weddings, funerals). Leading such services with those not in church fellowship with the LCMS violates the Synod's biblical and confessional commitments.

The promise not to participate in worship services with those not in church fellowship with the LCMS applies particularly to pastors, who are the official representatives of both their congregations and the LCMS. Their solemn commitment to the scriptural and confessional position of the LCMS must be their guide and will supersede personal feelings or preferences. Trust among LCMS pastors, congregations, and leaders allows everyone to carry out their commitment to fellowship practices to which they have mutually agreed. This trust is undermined when these commitments, as they are set forth in the official documents of the LCMS, are openly violated. Public knowledge of such violations strains relationships and makes reasoned discourse of real issues difficult. This in turn hinders pastors from exercising discretion in unclear situations.

#### B. Cases of Discretion

Not every occasion where worship takes place is necessarily a manifestation of church fellowship. There are situations where discretion is appropriate. Some laity raised concerns about attending Baptisms, confirmations, weddings, funerals, etc., of family and friends in churches not in church fellowship with the LCMS. Attendance at such services is generally a matter of personal judgment and individual conscience. On such occasions LCMS members will want to refrain from receiving Holy Communion and participating in rites of other churches that compromise their confession of faith. Doubtful situations may produce emotional distress and may require pastoral counsel.

Pastors, teachers, and other officially recognized church workers are often asked to participate in activities outside of their own and other LCMS congregations. Some of these are civic events. Offering prayers, speaking, and reading Scripture at events sponsored by governments, public schools, and volunteer organizations would be a problem if the organization in charge restricted a Christian witness. For instance, if an invitation requires a pastor to pray to God without mentioning Jesus, he cannot in good conscience accept. Without such a restriction, a Lutheran pastor may for valid and good reason participate in civic affairs such as an inauguration, a graduation, or a right-to-life activity. These occasions may provide opportunity to witness to the Gospel. Pastors may have honest differences of opinion about whether or to what extent it is appropriate or helpful to participate in these or similar civic events. In these cases charity must prevail.

There are also "once in a lifetime" situations. It is virtually impossible to anticipate all such situations or to establish rules in advance. Specific answers cannot be given to cover every type of situation pastors and congregations face. These situations can be evaluated only on a case-by-case basis and may evoke different responses from different pastors who may be equally committed to LCMS fellowship principles. The LCMS has always recognized this.

However, the response to one situation should not establish a precedent for future ones. Where pastors regularly consult each

other and are convinced of one another's integrity, they are freer to use their discretion where such prior consultation is impossible. We do not want to fall into the trap of case-law rigidity by setting down rules for every conceivable situation. At the same time, the exception should not become the rule, lest the truth of the Gospel be compromised.

A pastor may face situations in the community where no other pastoral care is available, and he may be asked to minister to those outside his congregation. Before doing this, ideally he would consult with other LCMS pastors, especially the Circuit Counselor, District President or Vice Presidents. But often these cases do not allow for consultation of any kind and on-the-spot decisions have to be made. In these and other situations nearly every pastor may question even his own decision and wish he had taken another course of action. We do not have the option of changing the past but must be content with believing that we made the best possible decision under the circumstances.

#### A Concluding Word on the Responses

The numerous responses to *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship* show the importance of church fellowship for LCMS members. A word of thanks to all participants, especially to those who made extensive handwritten comments! The desire of some for a more detailed examination of scriptural and confessional passages cited in the document in support of the LCMS position is a positive sign. Obviously LCMS members want the Synod's fellowship principles and practices to be firmly grounded on their biblical and confessional foundations. Encouraging continued study does not mean that the LCMS has no position on fellowship. Quite to the contrary! One reason for establishing the LCMS, as is evidenced in its Constitution, was to be faithful to Scripture's teaching on church fellowship. Many times since its formation in 1847, the LCMS has reaffirmed this. But this does not imply that nothing remains to be said on the topic. The goal of *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship* is not to suggest that the LCMS follow tradition blindly, but to set forth and apply scriptural and confessional doctrine in the light of current challenges. A pure understanding of the doctrine of church fellowship will strengthen our witness to Christ and His Gospel. For the sake of our unity in the pure doctrine of Christ, we ask God to bless our church as we continue to study this issue.

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#### Note

- 1 In a 1973 opinion titled "What Is a Service?" (with which the CTCR concurred) the Synod's Commission on Worship responded in part as follows to the question, "Is a *wedding* ceremony a 'service' in the same sense as, for instance, Sunday morning worship?"

Any occasion on which a public worship of God occurs—that is, in which the Word of God and prayer are used by a regularly designated worship leader of the church—is understood to be a "service." This would therefore include not only those occasions regularly designated as worship services (e.g., the ordinary Sunday morning worship noted in the question above) but also occasions—such as weddings, funerals, dedications, baccalaureates, etc.—which may have an ad hoc assembly different from the regular congregational worship assembly.

It should be noted, moreover, that there are other types of "service" than just the "public" occasions for worship. Thus when the congregation's (or its delegated representative's—e.g., mission board, association of congregations, etc.) officially designated worship leader (chaplain, pastor, etc.) carries out his regularly appointed ministerial functions (private Communion, etc.) in which the Word of God and prayer (also at times exposition of the Word and/or singing of hymns) form the major portion of such function, this also is rightly understood to be a congregational "service," albeit only a private or a semiprivate one.

The use of the Word of God and prayer as an entity in itself (as a corporate worship of God) constitutes a "service." This is not to be confused with a similar use of the Word and prayer as an integral part of a broader program (e.g., the opening or closing devotion of a meeting).