

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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# Editorial ✠

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## “WHAT’S YOUR PREDICTION?”

Comments on the ALC-LCMS-SELC Fellowship Issue

Before the balloting took place at the national Republican and Democratic party conventions last August, all who watched the proceedings saw roving reporters continually buttonholing delegates, party bigwigs, and candidates, checking on rumors, inquiring about developments, asking for opinions, and frequently winding up with “What’s your prediction?” The national election and the days immediately preceding it will no doubt bring many a repetition of that question.

In other contexts we have been subjected to the same inquiry. One of the larger issues confronting The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod and the Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches at this time is the fellowship question with The American Lutheran Church. In recent months the present writer has had the opportunity to appear before quite a few gatherings — pastoral conferences, laymen’s rallies, congregational Bible classes and societies, meeting of church executives, professors conferences, and 10 District conventions where this matter was discussed thoroughly. Quite regularly we were asked — several times by journalists — “What’s your prediction?” We don’t believe that any of the answers we gave became matters of record. When our colleagues of the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY staff, however, asked us for some comments on the issue from our point of vantage, we readily agreed to state our views for what they may be found to be worth. We hope that they may contribute something of value to the discussion.

### I

As a basis for our answer we wish first to summarize our observations of the situation as it is, made in connection with the meetings mentioned above and in other contexts.

It is widespread present practice on the congregational level in LCMS to accept into membership people coming from congregations affiliated with other Lutheran bodies and to do so without much formality beyond a brief interview, an announcement in the Sunday bulletin or in a service, and perhaps a public reception. It is commonly agreed that in most cases such people as take the initiative in joining one of our churches turn out to be good members, become quite active, and gravitate toward positions of leadership. The overwhelming majority of members of other Lutheran churches are recognized as “good Lutherans.” When the relatives and friends of members come to visit them, even though these people are affiliated with Lutheran bodies not in fellowship with LCMS, they are quite regularly accepted as guests at the Communion tables of our congregations.

On a number of occasions we have found statements like the following in the Sunday bulletins of Missouri Synod churches:

Holy Communion will be celebrated this Sunday in both the 8:15 and the 10:45 service.

Visiting Lutherans are invited to commune with the congregation but are asked to put the name and address of their home parish on the back of the registration card.

As for pulpit fellowship, instances where ALC and LCMS pastors have officiated jointly in regular congregational worship are rare. But there is an increasing number of affairs, variously called "observances," "festivals," or similar names, where there is joint praise, prayer, and proclamation. Furthermore, there is more intervisitation of services by entire congregations or groups within them. And there is a growing practice to ask pastors and professors of the one body to serve congregations of the other body during pastoral illnesses, vacations, or vacancies. It all amounts to this, that more and more thousands of LCMS members are hearing ALC preachers, and more and more LCMS clergymen are serving ALC people on occasion.

In recent years there has also been a steady, significant, and accelerating growth in the areas and the intensity of cooperation between departments, divisions, boards, agencies, and conferences of the bodies participating in the Lutheran Council in the U. S. A. Part of it is on the national level, to some extent already antedating the formation of the council, but mostly originating through its divisions and offices.

In addition, there is a spontaneous and rapidly growing movement on the local level. About a year ago no fewer than 45 inter-Lutheran associations were well known to district and national leaders, most of them having been organized within the previous 2 years. They fall into four large groupings: pastors associations, general councils, mission planning councils, and welfare councils or agencies. They are scattered over 25 states and the District of Columbia.

Besides, at the time when the tabulation was made, there were 36 other inter-Lutheran associations, about which less was known. Granting that some of these groups may not be too active, we are nevertheless safe in saying that there are by this time at least 70 such councils, associations, and agencies carrying out their programs in 30 states and the national capital.

Very significant in this trend is the recent announcement of a "joint pre-service missionary training program that will serve the mission boards of the country's three major Lutheran church bodies."<sup>1</sup> Another striking example is the complete unification of social ministry in a pan-Lutheran structure in the state of Minnesota.<sup>2</sup> One recent news release mentions two items of unification of endeavor: the all-Lutheran deaconess conference, and the forthcoming "organization of a new national Lutheran student movement" that would seek to incorporate members of the Lutheran Student Association of America (ALC and LCA) as well as of International Gamma Delta (LCMS).<sup>3</sup>

While, as indicated, these activities involve also the respective LCA representatives and therefore do not have an immediate bearing on the pulpit and altar fellowship we are discussing here, the point we wish to make is that in all these scores of ventures increasing opportunities are found for thousands of ALC, SELC, and LCMS people to get to know each other and to work together. That should affect their attitude toward the fellowship question.

<sup>1</sup> *News Bureau* 68—75, Lutheran Council in the U. S. A., 315 Park Ave. S., New York, N. Y. 10010, Aug. 13, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> *Lutheran Witness Reporter*, June 16, 1968, p. 3; also *Lutheran Witness*, Minnesota South District Edition, August 1968, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *News Bureau*, Lutheran Council in the U. S. A., Aug. 26, 1968, pp. 1 and 6.

Furthermore, overtures are being made to small ALC or LCMS congregations that for economic or other reasons have difficulty in maintaining themselves to join neighboring churches of the other body. Some such affiliations are in an advanced stage of consummation; a few have already been effected.

The broad program of contact and consultation between pastors and laymen on the local level, called for by the fellowship resolution (3-23) of the New York convention of LCMS, is just beginning to get under way and to pick up momentum. Reports show that in cases misgivings and anticipated disagreements have been confirmed, and in a few instances totally unexpected difficulties have arisen. But in many cases, especially where a sufficient number of meetings have been held to overcome initial feelings of strangeness, uncertainty, awkwardness, or tension and to develop genuine understanding, congeniality, and a wholesome fraternal spirit, doubts have been dispelled and good progress made toward seeing the consensus mentioned in the New York convention resolution and toward viewing differences and problems in the proper light for concerted efforts at finding solutions.

While we have heard no one oppose the very idea itself of pulpit and altar fellowship between the three bodies, and apparently there is universal agreement that it is a desirable goal, there are, as is well known, those who are firmly convinced that the time is not ripe and the proper conditions are not present for the full implementation of that fellowship. Although comparatively not really large in number and with relatively very few laymen involved, this group is quite vocal and very energetic, and evidently speaks out of genuine conviction. It is interesting, however, to note that some of the leaders of this movement favor and actually practice selective altar fellowship with ALC people, contending that it is better to make a few "justifiable" exceptions to the policy than to allow the privilege of intercommunion to all.

There is another group of people—and it is fairly large, although not in any way organized—who are in favor of and hope for a declaration of fellowship but, in view of the spirited opposition, do not think "it's worth the battle" at this time. They hope that the question will eventually answer itself and that, as in the case of some other questions in the past, a recognition of the actual practice (as indicated in the previous points) will eventually bring about a proper redefinition of the principle.

A third identifiable group in LCMS is composed of those who are convinced that the decision in favor of pulpit and altar fellowship is long overdue and that we ought not still be spending so much time and energy in discussing the question.

There are also those who recognize as valid the approach of the commissioners of LCMS, ALC, and SELC who drew up the three essays and the "Joint Statement and Declaration"<sup>4</sup> and endorse the conclusions reached as to doctrinal consensus. They agree fully with the recommendation of the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations to the New York convention, especially in the matter of "promoting the widest possible mutual recognition of the doctrinal consensus and its implications for church fellowship."<sup>5</sup> They also take seriously the directives of the convention resolution, "that the

<sup>4</sup> The titles of the essays are "What Commitment to the 'Sola Gratia' of the Lutheran Confessions Involves"; "The Lutheran Confessions and 'Sola Scriptura'"; and "The Doctrine of the Church in the Lutheran Confessions." *1967 Convention Workbook*, LCMS (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), pp. 405—422.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47, column 2, No. 12.

Synod proceed to take the necessary steps toward full realization of altar and pulpit fellowship with The American Lutheran Church" and "that the Synod urge all its representatives and officials to work earnestly and sincerely toward a unified evangelical position and practice in areas of church life where disturbing diversities still exist."<sup>6</sup> They hope to convince the majority of the hitherto "uncommitted" that—in view of all the experiences of the past by way of conversations, documents, and very close approaches to the actual declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship, and in view of the present degree of cooperation and other forms of fraternal relationship—it will amount to an evident rejection of the guidance of God the Holy Spirit to hold back the hand of fellowship now and risk an alienation and a deterioration of relationships with ALC, such as took place in the Synodical Conference beginning about 40 years ago. Of course, the group that opposes the declaration of fellowship also hopes to convince the uncommitted.

Private conversations with a sampling involving hundreds of lay people, pastors, and teachers have convinced us that if at this time a plebiscite by secret ballot involving all the communicant members of Missouri Synod congregations were held on the question of altar and pulpit fellowship with ALC, a large majority would vote in favor of the declaration and its implementation.

## II

That being the case, are we ready to predict action by the Denver convention favoring the proposition? No, not without qualification, since, just as is frequently true in the area of politics, there are some factors that make it difficult to discern trends clearly and others that can within a few months alter and even reverse developing trends. Some of these factors are—

—*The degree to which the so-called roadblocks to fellowship will be examined, analyzed, and adequately dealt with.*

Chief among these roadblocks are doctrinal questions (inspiration, authority, and inerrancy of the Sacred Scriptures; issues out of the past held to be unresolved). Much will depend on the extent to which these will have been studied in depth and genuine efforts made to understand the nature of what has been said in controverted quotations from addresses, articles, or books, the full context in which it was done, and the view against which it was directed. Basic to the entire discussion on this point is the question whether what was said actually violates the Lutheran confessional commitment, in which case it must be dealt with responsibly. Much will also depend on the willingness to explain, modify, revise, and reformulate, where really necessary, statements that are improperly or at least not happily phrased or that overshoot or undershoot the mark.

Furthermore, it will make a great difference whether or not quick generalizations and easy negative associations are allowed to stand. For instance, it is unfortunately quite common that an author is accused of denying the full inspiration of the Sacred Scriptures, when he has merely offered a partially or totally new interpretation of a certain Bible passage but has in no way indicated that he does not accept it as being in every word the Word of God.

Finally, much will hinge on the extent to which people regard the use of specific words as decisive or can see full equivalence in synonymous expressions. We are think-

<sup>6</sup> 1967 *Convention Proceedings*, LCMS (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), p. 103, column 1, par. 2 and 3.

ing, for instance, of the charge that synergism was not dealt with in the essay on the *Sola Gratia*. It does contain such statements as these: "It is grace all the way. . . . Salvation is by grace, by grace alone without any contribution of man. . . . The reign of grace is an absolute monarchy. The church risks its very existence if it compromises the grace of God in any way. . . . The grace of God is called into question when the Christian interpreter (scholar, expositor, preacher, catechete) seeks to master the Word of grace instead of letting the Word master him. . . . The grace of God is therefore called into question when faith, or its fruits, is thought of as supplementing or contributing to, the free grace of God who justifies the ungodly."<sup>7</sup> If people can see that these mutually agreed-upon statements completely demolish every trace of synergism, the charge must fall. The same is true with regard to many other accusations of inadequacy in recent documents.

Another roadblock has been found in the area of church relations (fellowship or anticipated fellowship with other bodies such as LCA, and membership in federations and councils). To the degree that men after serious study come to agree with the relevant section in the "Joint Statement and Declaration" ("Diversity, such as participation or nonparticipation in certain interchurch agencies and enterprises, may exist without disrupting fellowship among our churches, provided that such participation or nonparticipation does not constitute a denial or contradiction of the Gospel"),<sup>8</sup> this obstacle will be dismantled.

A third roadblock relates to questions of practice, especially in the ministry to members of certain fraternal organizations. If this is viewed in the light of the fact that both ALC and LCMS have strong, officially adopted statements voicing opposition "to lodges or societies of an unchristian or anti-Christian character"<sup>9</sup> and stating that "the Church of Christ and its congregations can have no fellowship with them,"<sup>10</sup> a way out of the dilemma posed by the differing approaches to the question can be found.

Reduced to simple terms, the difference lies herein that most LCMS congregations refuse to admit men and women as long as they are affiliated with a lodge, while it is accepted practice in ALC to receive some such people into membership with a view towards convincing them to demit the lodge. It must be admitted that neither method or procedure has been fully successful. While LCMS congregations probably have a somewhat lower ratio of lodge members in their midst, it is undoubtedly also true that they have alienated more people and have let them remain out of the reach of the church and its ministrations. On the other hand, while ALC pastors and members have undoubtedly persuaded more people to leave the lodge, the congregations of this body probably will show a larger proportion of cases where no adequate follow-through has been effected and where lodge membership has continued without much challenge. If now the conviction can grow on both sides that here is a problem that will be solved best by a common approach, and if joint sincere and strenuous efforts will be devoted to finding an answer that is both evangelical and uncompromising, not only will this

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<sup>7</sup> 1967 *Convention Workbook*, LCMS, pp. 406, 407, 408, 409.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 422.

<sup>9</sup> Bylaws of the LCMS constitution, Section 14.7.

<sup>10</sup> Minneapolis Theses, Article V.

difficulty in the way of fellowship be removed, but both churches will live up better to their stated principles.

By the way, the best way to remove also the other roadblocks, especially those relating to doctrinal questions, will without a doubt be found in interchurch study and action. Here, too, the additional blessings coming to each church will be very significant.

*—the extent to which people, rank and file as well as leaders, will learn to question and examine carefully the value judgments implied by the use of labels in characterizing men as to the soundness of their doctrinal position.*

Take, for instance, the undefined terms *liberal* and *conservative* as applied frequently to people involved in the present discussion. It is possible, of course, to use the terms (as is done with regard to political figures, educators, economists, and others) to indicate a person's general orientation and inclination. Then, however, they should be used in a merely descriptive and not a pejorative or a meliorative sense. Great leaders of the church in the past (Jesus Himself, St. Paul the apostle, Martin Luther, to mention only three of the most outstanding) must be classed as "liberal" (free, open-minded, not narrow or bigoted) in their reinterpretation of much that was traditional, in their innovations in the formulation of their teachings, and in their practice. At the same time they were "conservative" in preserving and advocating what was good in the heritage from the past. Many leaders in ALC, LCMS, and SELC are seeking to follow their example today. Although open-minded with regard to new solutions for contemporary problems, they are earnestly working to conserve the true character of the church and its commitment to the Gospel.

Since there is such a host of questions to which the churches and their leaders must address themselves and since this must be done under a great variety of conditions and circumstances, it will not do, for better or for worse, simply to classify a person as "conservative" or "liberal" and to approve or reject his words and actions on that basis. There are kinds of liberalism as well as aspects of conservatism that are not good and do not benefit the church. Therefore these terms need to be defined carefully and their applicability substantiated accurately and fairly in order to provide a basis for sound judgment in determining the outcome of the fellowship issue. The same is true of such terms as *false doctrine*, *unionism*, and others. Whether they, as frequently associated with men or projects under discussion, will be accepted uncritically or will be examined closely—and where improperly used will be disbelieved and written off—will make quite a difference in the fellowship decision.

*—the measure in which people understand what entering upon pulpit and altar fellowship really means and what it does not mean.*

Manifestly it does not mean forming an organic union or joining church bodies, even though this may ultimately prove to be a desirable goal and although some congregations are already finding this to be the proper course of action (cf. p. 644). People will have caught the essential point if they realize that pulpit and altar fellowship with another church body means a readiness and willingness to minister to members of the other group and, in reciprocity, to accept their ministry. This does not mean that any and every member of a congregation of one body must, upon application, be accepted as a member by a congregation of the other. The necessity of ministering is there, but what happens after that is a matter of pastoral care and depends on the outcome of this min-

istration. Similarly no congregation of one body will be forced to accept as pastor or teacher a member of the other. The readiness to render and accept ministry in special situations and emergencies must be present, but the nature and duration of any type of formal pastoral or teaching relationship will be determined by the free choice of the people involved.

The transfer of theological students or professors from seminaries of one body to those of the other will on the one hand offer a desirable option in some cases, but on the other hand each church will maintain its standards for admission to its student bodies, teaching ranks, and clergy. Common policies and procedures will need to be worked out cooperatively in this area as in others.

— *the extent to which confidence is placed in a referendum vote by all member congregations after the Denver convention, as furnishing the answer to the question.*

There is apparently much to recommend this step. It is argued that it is truly democratic, that the decision can be made by congregations without the pressure of time at conventions, that, to say the least, "it can't do any harm."

To the extent, however, that the members of the Synod are aware of the fact that the New York convention resolution provides for and urges a comprehensive opinion survey *before* the Denver convention,<sup>11</sup> they will see the superfluity of asking for anything of a similar nature *afterwards*. Each congregation can and should study the question thoroughly and, wherever possible, get into good conversation with its ALC counterparts. The same is true of pastors, teachers, and other leaders. The results are to be reported to the District presidents. Therefore this is definitely similar to a referendum.

But there is no constitutional provision for settling the question by a referendum. In fact, the opposite is the case. The Bylaws clearly state (Section 1.21): "Only a delegate convention of the Synod shall authorize affiliation or association of the Synod with other church bodies, synods, or federations, and the discontinuance of such affiliation or association." The final decision must be made in delegate convention, as was done with previous fellowship decisions. Referring the matter to the congregations after the Denver convention would mean a loss of time with the resultant risk of deterioration in the relationship between the church bodies and the fostering of divisiveness within many congregations due to the pressures exerted pro and con. There is also the danger of coming to greater divergency in practice, since congregations that have individually decided favorably on pulpit and altar fellowship will be inclined to begin practicing it and will find reasons for doing so. To the extent to which these concerns are accepted as valid, a decision for a vote by congregations *after* Denver will lose its attractiveness.

— *the nature of the recommendation that the president of the Synod will, in conjunction with the Council of Presidents, make to the Denver convention.*

Of course, very much hangs on this factor, because the recommendation will carry very much weight. It can be assumed, we are sure, that the president and his colleagues

<sup>11</sup> "Resolved, That the Synod direct its officials to make arrangements for promoting the widest possible mutual recognition of the doctrinal consensus and its implications for church fellowship among *the entire membership of the Synod* by making it a primary part of the agenda for conferences and for the 1968 District conventions and by arranging meetings between District Presidents, theological faculties, pastors, teachers, *and congregations* of the church bodies involved" (italics ours). *1967 Convention Proceedings*, LCMS, p. 103.

in the council will, after pooling the results of their studies, experiences, and observations, recommend what they conscientiously are convinced will serve the welfare of the whole church of Jesus Christ and, under that, ALC and SELC as well as LCMS. Furthermore, to borrow a term from the political party conventions, the president of the Synod will do all in his power to insure an "open" convention for the decision of the fellowship question.

— *the action of ALC at its Omaha convention.*

This will be history by the time what we are writing now gets into print. The recommendation to declare fellowship with LCMS and SELC on the basis of the agreements reached by the representatives of the three groups will, as it appears now, undoubtedly be accepted, as will also the recommendation to declare fellowship with LCA. If there are, however, any unexpected or unusual features about either of these actions there will probably be commensurable reactions in LCMS circles.

— *the degree to which some factors that do not lie in the realm of the intellect but in the areas of faith, emotion, or the will, and are therefore not readily documentable or demonstrable, will exert influence on the decision of the delegates.*

Some of these factors are —

1. the conviction that the implementation of the fellowship given by God to all His children through faith in Christ is not something that Christians can treat with indifference but is something that our Lord really wants, and the further conviction that He wants us to let nothing undone to remove the obstacles to the exercise of fellowship in accordance with His will.
2. the feeling that it is not only possible but necessary to settle *all* points of difference, even those involving only individual expressions of opinion or deviation in practice, before declaring pulpit and altar fellowship. This is a manifestation of perfectionism, as is ultimately also the feeling that, as some have said, we ought to "clean our own house first."
3. the attitude of resistance to change, which is innate in many people and ingrown into many organizations, and which sees much inconvenience developing from the new relationship.
4. the lasting reaction to earlier unhappy experiences with members of the other group. There are men among us who have had unfortunate encounters with ALC people. As a result, the possibility will exist that personality factors may enter, or may already have entered, into the tone of their expressed viewpoints and positions, even though they are honestly not aware of it. This factor will be minimized if men in all three churches involved in the present fellowship discussion will make doubly sure to discount emotional biases and to lean over backwards to be objective in presentations, argumentation, and judgment.
5. the will to trust the other party. In every major joint human venture, after everything has been discussed, reduced to writing, attested, signed, and sealed, a leap of faith must be made. In the venture under discussion here, very much will depend on whether the majority of the LCMS delegates say in their hearts, "The people of ALC

are our nearest cousins, but we really don't trust them," or whether they say, "Although they are not perfect, neither are we; we are sure that they will, with us, seek and follow God's guidance."

### III

With all these variables and with all the possibilities of swings, shifts, and bandwagon psychology developing in the next few months, isn't it foolhardy to attempt to "predict" anything? But if the word is taken in the sense of an endeavor to put the present situation, trends, and possibilities into clear focus and then to further understanding so that intelligent thinking, speaking, and action is facilitated, the attempt does not appear to be presumptuous.

Having been confronted with the question, we are willing to put down our answer as to what LCMS, judged on the basis of our years of acquaintance with it and our evaluation of the present situation, is likely to do. Barring some startling, totally unforeseen, new development we venture to say that:

1. At its convention in Denver in July 1969, LCMS will not vote to decline outright the implementation of pulpit and altar fellowship with ALC.
2. It will be confronted with strong efforts to delay the declaration of this fellowship for 2 years, possibly only 1 year, and to request submission of the question to the congregations of the Synod for a vote pro or con.
3. It will cast a majority vote favorably for a declaration of fellowship if the large number of middle-of-the-road delegates understand that with this declaration LCMS is not committing itself to a soft stance toward falsehood in doctrine, to loss of autonomy in other church relations, to a *laissez-faire* lodge practice, or to the difficulties involved in organic union.
4. If the fellowship declaration is postponed, the movement towards fellowship, as described on pages 644—646 will nevertheless continue to grow. Especially will the type of selective fellowship now being practiced by some of the opponents to a declaration of pulpit and altar fellowship, as well as by some of its proponents, increase. Greater efforts will, however, be put forth meanwhile in working for the ultimate defeat of an official declaration of fellowship.
5. The trend toward declaring pulpit and altar fellowship will not be reversed, and ultimately the goal will be achieved.
6. The longer the delay, however, the more protracted will the agony be, the more substantial the waste of time, energy, and money.

That's the picture as we see it. Since it is God, however, who alone knows what will happen and who as the omnipotent Ruler of heaven and earth guides all things for the welfare of His church, we recognize the need, especially during the next few months, for prayer for the unity of His people. We invite all to join frequently in such petitions as these:

O God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Saviour, the Prince of Peace; Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions. Take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatsoever else may hinder us from godly

union and concord: that as there is but one Body and one Spirit, and one hope of our calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so we may be all of one heart and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Robert N. Rodenmayer, *The Pastor's Prayerbook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 196.