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Toward an Assessment of *Called to Common Mission*

Brian Lesemann and Erik Rottmann

August 1999 occasioned the first half of a two-part approval process that culminated decades of ecumenical dialogue between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Episcopal Church in the USA (ECUSA). At its Churchwide Assembly, the ELCA adopted¹ *Called to Common Mission* in the manner prescribed:

The Episcopal Church agrees that in its General Convention, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America agrees that in its Churchwide Assembly, there shall be one vote to accept or reject, as a matter of verbal content as well as in principle, the full set of agreements to follow. If they are adopted by both churches, each church agrees to make those legislative, canonical, constitutional, and liturgical changes that are needed and appropriate for the full communion between the churches.

The Episcopal Church did the same in July 2000, the two church bodies marking the occasion with an exchange of chalices.² This joint subscription to *Called to Common Mission* (CCM) marks the achievement of "full communion (*communio in sacris/altar and pulpit fellowship*),"³ defined as "a relation between distinct churches in which each recognizes the other as a catholic and apostolic church holding the Christian faith."

CCM is one of several ecumenical measures recently taken by the ELCA. Others include A *Formula of Agreement* with three Reformed churches,⁴ *Following Our Shepherd* with the Moravian Church in America,

¹A sixty-six percent vote was needed. CCM received sixty-nine percent, 716 votes to 317. "A Lutheran-Episcopal Pact," *Christian Century* 116 (August 25-September 1, 1999) 797.

²Episcopal News Service [online] [cited July 20, 2000]. Available from: <<http://www.ecusa.anglican.org/ens/GC2000-069.html>>.

³Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, *Called to Common Mission* [online] [August 19, 1999] available from <<http://www.elca.org/ea/proposal/text.html>>.

⁴These are the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ.

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and (as a member of the Lutheran World Federation) *Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification* with the Roman Catholic Church. Among these, CCM and its international stepsister, the *Porvoo Declaration* with its accompanying *Common Statement*, are perhaps the most palatable for those Lutherans who claim unconditional subscription not only to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and the Small Catechism (the Lutheran witnesses named by CCM), but also to the entire Book of Concord of 1580. Still, the proposal is not without language, or lack thereof, that such Lutherans would find both insufficient and inappropriately compromising.

CCM is the first revision of the recent *Concordat of Agreement* (1991), the proposal for full communion that resulted from the third round of Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogues (LED). The *Concordat* was submitted to its sponsoring church bodies, but narrowly vetoed by the ELCA in 1997 over objections concerning the historic episcopate.⁵ CCM is the attempt to satisfy those objections without stepping on Episcopalian claims to apostolic succession.

The Essentials of the One Catholic and Apostolic Faith

The major concern of the document is the doctrine and practice of the ministry, which are treated separately with special regard toward apostolic succession and the historic episcopate. The bulk of introductory theological content in CCM is summarized in the first of two paragraphs under the heading, "Agreement in the Doctrine of the Faith." The assertions made in these paragraphs are very concisely written, covering a huge body of theology with relatively few words. This reflects not only many years of dialogue, but also the resultant degree of assumed theological commonality that by now is a foregone conclusion. Clearly, CCM does not wish to rehash the old issues of previous dialogues, but

⁵[C. Richard Peterson, "Lutheran, Episcopilians, and the Priesthood of All Believers," *Lutheran Forum* 32 (Summer, 1998): 22.] "... the *Concordat of Agreement* for full communion . . . failed the required two-thirds majority by only six votes. One reason given by opponents was the repeated assertion that the *Concordat* was inconsistent with the Lutheran concept of the priesthood of all believers, and thus a deterrent to a strong laity. The episcopate was often described as a fundamentally flawed form of hierarchy which inevitably leads to a distorted polity inappropriate to the Christian Church, rather than an ancient church tradition which had severe pre-reformation abuses."

intends instead to speak directly to the concerns raised in response to the *Concordat*.

Here the two church bodies "recognize in each other the essentials of the one catholic and apostolic faith." These "essentials," while not listed, are "witnessed in the unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Small Catechism and The Book of Common Prayer of 1979 (including 'Ordination Rites' and 'An Outline of the Faith')." The documents of previous dialogues, including *Implications of the Gospel, Toward Full Communion* and *Concordat of Agreement*, are listed as further summaries of the essentials of the faith.

But what exactly is meant by "the essentials of the one catholic and apostolic faith"? The answer to this will involve a brief overview of the history of the Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogues. It will be shown that agreement on what are the essentials of the faith in the modern ecumenical sense entails not so much the precise articulation of theological *loci*, but the search for a new, generic language that is inclusive of both positions.

The purpose of LED I (1969-1972) was to test the waters and determine what barriers might stand between the two traditions. The central question was this: "Are we able mutually to affirm the presence of the gospel and apostolicity in our respective communions sufficiently to agree that the renewal of the church is more likely to come in communion with one another than out of communion with one another?"⁶ The Lutherans were reminded that the matter of sufficiency is a concept originating with their confession. Augsburg Confession VII was cited: "It is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in the conformity with the pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word."⁷ In other words, agreement on the Gospel (narrowly defined) does not necessitate agreement in all other articles. "We do not pretend to have examined every area of the faith and practice of the other communion, but we do know each other sufficiently to know that the gospel is being proclaimed, shared, and believed in the congregations of each Communion."⁸

⁶*Lutheran – Episcopal Dialogue: A Progress Report* (Cincinnati: Forward Publications, 1972), 31.

⁷*Lutheran – Episcopal Dialogue*, 11.

⁸*Lutheran – Episcopal Dialogue*, 32.

The delegates to LED I soon realized that their intended objective would be easily met and exceeded "because of the great degree of unity of which we have become aware." While these were not described as "essentials," areas of common doctrine included: 1) recognition that the Canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments occupy a position of authority and primacy (though both claim to have been influenced by the historical-critical approach); 2) agreement that eucharistic practice is to be found more in the "shape" of eucharistic liturgies than in fixed texts; 3) affirmation of the mystery of new birth in Christ by water and the Spirit, along with the necessity of instruction in the faith; and 4) apostolicity belongs to the reality of the one holy catholic church, though apostolicity is "manifested in various ways in all areas of the church's life, and is guarded especially by common confession and through that function of the church designated as *episcope* (oversight)."⁹ These similarities, along with the perceived urgency for unity "in the face of massive cultural upheaval," led to the further realization that complete union was both imperative and unavoidable.

In LED II (1976-1980) the theme of sufficiency more fully developed. AC VII was understood to validate inter-communion despite "areas of unexplored pluralism," and the language of "essentials" was introduced:

To some Lutherans it may seem strange that limited agreement on controverted dogmatic loci should be thought adequate for some degree of ecclesial relationship Confessional peculiarities are not blended but reconciled as legitimate pluralism. In such a pattern joint statements would represent an essential core of dogmatic agreement within a wider pluralism.¹⁰

While a clear indication of what the essentials of the faith are is not given, LED II defined the word "essential" to mean "a pattern of joint statements." Such issues as justification, apostolicity, the eucharist, and the authority of Scripture were addressed, but not because these were initially recognized as the "essential core." Rather, these discussion topics were chosen because they were points of divergence. The resulting joint statements made concerning these *loci* established them as the "essential core," and they were constructed in such a way as to identify common denominators between the two groups. "They [the respective statements]

⁹*Lutheran - Episcopal Dialogue*, 21.

¹⁰*Lutheran - Episcopal Dialogue II: Report and Recommendations* (Cincinnati: Forward Publications, 1981), 19-20.

do not say all that the participants (particularly one side) would want to say about the doctrinal *locus* in question. But they would include certain fundamental affirmations.”¹¹

In *Implications of the Gospel*, the Final Report of LED III (1983-1988), a noticeable change of language occurs. Entirely new words and phrases emerge, such as “the eschatological grounding of the Gospel,” “the breaking in of the end-time reign of God,” or “the authenticity of the church’s gospel.”¹² In addition to a new vocabulary, distinction is drawn between the descriptive and prescriptive functions of doctrinal formulations: “*Doctrine* means all teaching that is authentically Christian. Doctrinal formulations can function either descriptively (‘This is what Christians, in fact, teach’) or prescriptively (‘This is what Christians ought to teach’).”¹³ Unity is to be found in words that are not distinctive to one theological tradition or the other, expressed in descriptive formulations. Prescription causes dissension. “Prescriptive doctrine has been experienced as oppressive, obscurantist, stagnating, inhibiting. It has been the occasion for purges, trials, executions, and wars.”¹⁴

Toward Full Communion, the history book of the LED through 1991, addresses “theological consensus on the Gospel,” holding that there is in fact, only one essential for ecumenical agreement: the gospel.¹⁵ This not only echoes the entire history of the Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogues, but it also neatly reflects the doctrinal consensus of the international

¹¹ *Lutheran - Episcopal Dialogue II*, 19.

¹² *Lutheran - Episcopal Dialogue III: Implications of the Gospel* (Cincinnati: Forward Publications, 1988), 16, 34, 53.

¹³ *Lutheran - Episcopal Dialogue III*, 52. An example of a descriptive statement would be, “The ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament is a gift of God and therefore a divine institution.” A prescriptive, “divisive” statement would be as follows: Women, by virtue of their gender, are not eligible for the office of the holy ministry.

¹⁴ *Lutheran - Episcopal Dialogue III*, 52. The resultant effect of this “realization” is that the ELCA apologizes for all the trouble the Lutherans have caused over the ages by their adherence to good teaching and sound doctrine. “It means, finally, that together church and ‘synagogue’ witness to humanity’s flawed and broken capacity to be the bearer of the messianic vision and that we view our present ecclesiastical existence with appropriate modesty, humility, and repentance. Recognition of the brokenness with which church and synagogue bear witness to the dawning and vision of the messianic age places limitations upon the claims which the church can make about the continuity and fullness of its institutions.” *Lutheran - Episcopal Dialogue III*, 37.

¹⁵ “*Toward Full Communion*” and “*Concordat of Agreement*”: *Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue, Series III*, edited by William A Norgren and William G. Rusch (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991), 24.

Lutheran-Anglican *Niagara Report* (1989). Endorsed by both *Toward Full Communion* and CCM, the *Niagara Report* likewise reduces the gospel (narrowly defined) to be the one and only essential, exclusive of other articles: "The Christian faith is that God has made peace through Jesus 'by the blood of his cross' (Colossians 1:20) so establishing the one valid center for the unity of the whole human family."¹⁶

One unique contribution *Toward Full Communion* makes is summarized in this observation concerning existence of a New Testament canon:

The very existence of a *canon* of the New Testament, with its exclusions as well as its inclusions, testifies to the church's need for and commitment to a standard for orthodoxy in distinction from and in rejection of heresy. The inclusion of four different Gospels in the canon of the New Testament, as well as the inclusion of occasional writings by various authors, testifies to the fact that consensus on the gospel does not require uniformity of expression.¹⁷

Thus it is held that the various books of the New Testament are not fully unified in their theologies. Their common link is "peace through Jesus," the various implications of which work themselves out in different ways (recall the "essential core of dogmatic agreement within a wider pluralism" of LED II) that may or may not be compatible in all aspects.

This overview of the Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogues notes the methodology of modern ecumenical discussion: unity is first assumed and then a basis for it is sought. Dialogue hopes to express that which may be held in common, not to facilitate the reconciliation of actual differences. The common denominator in all of the dialogues is a narrow gospel, one that insists, "considerable freedom should be allowed within the church in matters which are not an explicit part of the Gospel."¹⁸ "The essentials of the one catholic and apostolic faith" are not those things that must be held in common ("prescriptive" doctrinal formulations) but

¹⁶Anglican-Lutheran International Continuation Committee, *The Niagara Report: Report of the Anglican-Lutheran Consultation on Episcopate, Niagara Falls, September 1987* (London: Church House Publishing, 1988), 37.

¹⁷ELCA, *Called to Common Mission* [online].

¹⁸LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Gospel and Scripture: The Interrelationship of the Material and Formal Principals in Lutheran Theology* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 4. The report immediately goes on to state, "This view is sometimes criticized as 'minimalistic' or 'Gospel reductionism.'"

rather those things that can be expressed in a way that is mutually palatable ("descriptive" doctrinal formulations).

Accordingly, inter-communion takes place with the intent of "renewing" the church. The church is said to have been renewed when the essentials of the Christian faith are finally identified. Church unity and divergent theology co-exist because "consensus on the gospel does not require uniformity of expression."

This methodology overlooks the precision of Formula of Concord X, which states: "as long as they are otherwise agreed in doctrine and in all its articles and are also agreed concerning the right use of the holy sacraments."¹⁹ Nor does it reflect Luther's approach to the task of composing the "essentials" of the faith in the *Smalcald Articles*:

I was therefore instructed to draft and assemble articles of our faith to serve as a basis for possible deliberations and to indicate, on the one hand, what and in how far we were willing and able to yield to the papists and, on the other hand, what we intended to hold fast to and persevere in.²⁰

Luther's articles include not only the inviolable "sublime articles of divine majesty" and those "which pertain to the office and work of Jesus Christ, or our redemption,"²¹ but also "matters which we may discuss with learned and sensible men."²² That which is essential faith, however, is confessed at the onset of ecumenical discussion, rather than allowed to float to the surface over the course of time.

The Devolution of Doctrinal Authority

With the evolution of a generic and inclusive theological language to which both parties can give their assent, the Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue

¹⁹The *Book of Concord*, edited by Theodore Tappert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1959), 616, 6. This criticism has also been made of the Porvoo document. See the Missouri Synod's recent "*The Porvoo Statement and Declaration*" in *Confessional Lutheran Perspective* (Saint Louis: Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1999), 11. This document, authored by the Department of Systematic Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, was previously published in the *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 61 (January/April 1997): 35-52.

²⁰Tappert, 288, 1.

²¹Tappert, 291, Introduction to Part I.

²²Tappert, 292, Introduction to Part II.

also maps the devolution of doctrinal authority. LED I provided the following summary and comparison:²³

The characteristic confessional basis of Lutherans embraces

1. The Canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments,
2. The symbols of the Lutheran Church:
 - a. The Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds
 - b. The Augsburg Confession and the Apology of the same
 - c. The Smalkald Articles
 - d. The Large and Small Catechisms
 - e. The Formula of Concord

There are varying degrees of official adherence to these symbolic documents.

The documents to which Anglicans, although less confessionally oriented than Lutherans, characteristically appeal include

1. The Canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments,
2. The testimony of the Fathers and the definitions of the Councils of the early Church
3. The Apostle's, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds; (note that while the Athanasian Creed has never been made formally authoritative for the Episcopal Church in the United States of America, there is no doubt that its Trinitarian affirmations are part of the faith of the Church),
4. *The Book of Common Prayer*
5. The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (the ambiguous authority of the Articles was reviewed by Lambeth 1968; while not judged a complete confessional statement, the Articles have been retained by most provinces as an important historical document which most significantly bears clear witness to the primacy of Scripture and the centrality of the Gospel), and
6. For contemporary guidance in matters of faith, morals, and order, the Resolutions of successive Lambeth Conferences which, while not legally binding, have significant moral weight.

Yet even in LED I, authoritative documents were held in suspicion. Not only did both traditions acknowledge the importance of the historical-critical approach to the New Testament, but the report also expressed

²³*Progress Report*, 15-16.

distrust for “inherited documents,” finding them insufficient to answer the question of unity.

The appeal to authority is significantly reduced in later Dialogues, finally being minimal in CCM. The confessional documents invoked are “the unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Small Catechism and The Book of Common Prayer of 1979 (including ‘Ordination Rites’ and ‘An Outline of the Faith’).”²⁴ Noticeably absent are those documents that make “prescriptive” statements concerning the Christian faith, including the Athanasian Creed’s “whosoever shall be saved,” the “I do not know how I can change or concede any of them” of the Smalcald Articles, and the rejections and condemnations of the Formula of Concord. Such a reduction of authority was a necessary step on the part of the Lutherans, precisely because of these exclusionary formulations. Similar compromise was not needed from the Episcopalians, because their historic documents already allowed for a great variance in theology.²⁵

²⁴Both the Apology and the Tractate are cited in CCM, but not as a basis for its theology. Rather, they are simply used as evidence of the recognition that “a distinction between episcopal and pastoral ministries within the one office of Word and Sacrament is neither commanded nor forbidden by divine law.” The reader is tempted to conclude that citations from distinctive confessional documents are important to CCM only insofar as they reflect the presupposed goals of ecumenical dialogue.

²⁵This fueled Hermann Sasse’s lament over the Lutheran Church. “Sasse to Bachmann (1955),” translated by Ronald Feuerhahn, *Lutheran Quarterly* 13, (Summer 1999): 214: “It is lamentable how today in world Lutheranism the doctrinal substance perishes. We follow the Anglicans and the Reformed. These churches indeed have no more mission vigor because they have, at least in our continent, no more doctrine. I see that at the university. The Anglicans have ‘claims,’ but nothing else. The difference between the Evangelicals and the Anglo-catholics [two groups within the Anglican Church] is dogmatically insurmountable, which is bridged only through the alleged apostolic succession, which the Evangelicals do not believe.” Sasse then footnotes these comments with the observation that unity for the Anglicans is not even achieved through the liturgy, as commonly assumed, because the Anglo-catholics use the Roman missal in English rather than the *The Book of Common Prayer*. Compare the following comments by Anglican Canon Charles Smyth of Westminster: [Quoted in *Confessional Lutheran Perspective*, 12] “You can afford variety in the pulpit so long as you have uniformity at the altar . . . the Church of England embraces many shades of theological opinion, but desiderates liturgical uniformity.”

The Language of Authenticity

CCM incorporates the concept of "authentic" identification in its doctrinal assumptions as part of its new theological language. Citing the Lutheran-Anglican consensus reached by the *Niagara Report*, CCM endorses its statement concerning the Trinity: "That is, we believe that Jesus of Nazareth is true God and true Man, and that God is authentically identified as Father, Son and Holy Spirit."²⁶

This concept of the authenticity arises out of the modern notion that certain *loci* such as the Trinity are as much products of the early church as they are the witness of the New Testament. The Braaten-Jenson *Christian Dogmatics*, for example, asserts that

The trinitarian name did not fall from heaven. It was made by believers for the God with whom we have found ourselves involved... 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' came together also simply as a name for the one therein apprehended, and apparently did so before all analysis of its suitability.²⁷

Since Trinitarian theology is the product of the Christian community, rather than the authoritative word "from heaven," there is no dogmatic necessity for insisting that it be the only valid expression of who God is. This is the inconsistency of *Christian Dogmatics*, which maintains that, even though "Christianity has every reason to eliminate" expressions of male sexism, "Trinitarian Father-language cannot, however, be one such."²⁸ Again,

From time to time, various concerns lead to proposed replacements of the trinitarian name, for example, "In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier" or "In the name of God the Ground and God the Logos and God the Spirit." All such parodies disrupt the faith's self-identity at the level of its primal and least-reflected historicity.²⁹

Even though CCM still maintains traditional Trinitarian terminology, the introduction of the concept of authenticity marks a move toward the

²⁶The *Niagara Report* (37) also recognizes that both the Lutherans and the Anglicans celebrate "authentic sacraments."

²⁷Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, editors, *Christian Dogmatics*, volume 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 93.

²⁸*Christian Dogmatics*, 1:93-94.

²⁹*Christian Dogmatics*, 1:96.

further feminization of theology in these church bodies (already evidenced by the mutually held practice of women's ordination). There was a time when a genuine Swiss Army knife was every Boy Scout's prized possession. Now that the market has been flooded with so many imitations, the real thing appears overpriced and of comparatively little value. A knife is a knife. In the same way, describing God as "authentically identified" in Trinitarian terms allows for the introduction of other, equally usable designations, even if they lack the distinction of antiquity or scriptural support. This is precisely the goal of theological feminism, which hopes to achieve "a thoroughgoing revision of traditional Christian doctrines and symbols."³⁰ God is God, whether described in traditional, authentic terms or in some new way such as Letty Russell's programmatic "Creator, Liberator, Comforter."³¹ Such a renaming of the Trinity may in fact be on the horizon for both of these church bodies, despite much protest to the contrary.

The Lord's Supper

CCM likewise cites the *Niagara Report* concerning the Lord's Supper: "We believe that the Body and Blood of Christ are truly present, distributed, and received under the forms of bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. We also believe that the grace of divine forgiveness offered in the sacrament is received with the thankful offering of ourselves for God's service."³² This extremely general wording effectively negates the

³⁰ Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson, *20th Century Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 231.

³¹ [Letty Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 102-103]: "In the light of the necessity of making clear that the Tradition is for *all* and not for just one half of humanity, it is perhaps wise to revise our language in speaking of God. For instance, it is possible to speak of God the Creator without using male pronouns, as an indication that God transcends all biological and cultural distinctions of sex. This sometimes makes a sentence more difficult, but it allows our language of God to be heard more clearly by *both* men and women. In the same way we can emphasize the role of Christ the Liberator and Redeemer as one that represents God's freedom to be present with all humanity (*Emmanuel*). In order to make clear the fact that the metaphors for the Godhead include those which are both masculine and feminine, it is perhaps also helpful at this moment in history to speak of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter and Reconciler, with a feminine pronoun."

³²This is the same position held by the *Porvoo Statement and Declaration*, which likewise cites the *Niagara Report*. The present critique concerning the matter of sacramental presence echoes the same already expressed in *Confessional Perspective*, 16-

traditional Lutheran teaching concerning impious reception (*manducatio indignorum*), which is clearly expressed in the Smalcald Articles: Of the Sacrament of the Altar we hold that bread and wine in the Supper are the true body and blood of Christ, and are given and received not only by the godly, but also by wicked [boesen, *impiis*] Christians.³³

Agreement in Ministry

Recall that all of the foregoing is introductory material in CCM, holding the rank of assumed theology and bygone debate. The real matter of disagreement that led up to CCM was the question of episcopacy and with it, apostolic succession. In light of what has already been discussed, the remainder of CCM may appear to be the proverbial rearrangement of deckchairs on a sinking ship. To the contrary, the matters of episcopacy and apostolic succession are valuable discussions, instructive even for those who are unwilling to compromise the prescriptive elements of their confession in the forgone areas. The outward form of the church—whether it be episcopal or congregational in structure, whether its bishops serve for a set term or for life, whether its pastors are ordained by bishops or by fellow clergy—these things may all be regarded as adiaphora, to be determined and mutually agreed upon in whatever way the church sees fit.

The *Concordat of Agreement* raised concerns long before it was defeated in the ELCA's Churchwide Assembly in 1997. Seminary professor Paul Berge, who served as a member of the LED, described the *Concordat* as "bad horse trading. In terms of church structure and theology, Lutherans will become Episcopalian, and Episcopalian will remain Episcopalian."³⁴ Leonard Klein, former editor of *Lutheran Forum*, described as "unequal" the essential acceptance of Anglican orders by the Lutherans, on the one hand, and the failure overtly to ask the Anglicans

20.

³³Tappert, 311, 1. Compare Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, VII, citing Luther (575, 33): "I reckon them all as belonging together (that is, as Sacramentarians and enthusiasts), for that is what they are who will not believe that the Lord's bread in the Supper is his true, natural body, which the godless or Judas receive orally as well as St. Peter and all the saints. Whoever, I say, will not believe this, will please let me alone and expect no fellowship from me. This is final."

³⁴Douglas LeBlanc, "Back to the Drawing Board for Ecumenism?" *Christianity Today* 41 (April 7, 1997): 55.

to affirm the Augsburg Confession as a catholic teaching on the other.³⁵ Despite assurances that the Lutherans were not obliged to the Episcopalian threefold structure for ministry, it was hard for opponents to swallow the November 1996 revision of the *Concordat*, which declared, "We agree that the threefold ministry of bishops, presbyters, and deacons in historic succession will be the future pattern of the one ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament."³⁶

CCM takes into careful consideration objections such as these and reflects a willingness to make the changes necessary to achieve its eventual goal. Where the *Concordat* stipulated that each body invite "on an invariable basis at least three bishops of the other church" to all ordinations or installations of their respective bishops, CCM changes "invariability" to "regularity" and contents itself with "one or more bishops."³⁷ Rather than claiming the threefold model of ministry as its future pattern for both churches, CCM allows that "the ordination of deacons, deaconesses, or diaconal ministers" by the ELCA not be required. The *Concordat's* language concerning the ordination of ELCA bishops "for life service" is dropped. Further, it is clearly stated, "the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is free to maintain that this same episcopate . . . is nonetheless not necessary for the relationship of full communion."³⁸

One cannot help but be impressed with the *Concordat* and CCM. A truly laudable effort to concede as much as possible is evident. The Episcopalian make the surprising pledge "to begin the process for enacting a temporary suspension, in this case only, of the 17th century restriction" insisting that all bishops, priests, and deacons be ordained by the laying on of hands by bishops.³⁹ After the revision, the Lutherans still allow for the requirement that bishops be present at all ordinations, giving up their former freedom of allowing the bishops to delegate the

³⁵ Leonard Klein, "The Concordat—Not Now," *Lutheran Forum* 25 (May 1991): 7.

³⁶ "Concordat of Agreement," *Lutheran-Episcopal, Lutheran-Reformed, and Lutheran-Roman Catholic Ecumenical Proposals* (Chicago: ELCA, 1996), 9-10.

³⁷ "Concordat of Agreement," 9.

³⁸ It is noted that the "Concordat" (10) also allowed for termination of the position: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America agrees that all its bishops will be understood as ordained, like other pastors, for life service of the gospel in the pastoral ministry of the historic episcopate, even though tenure in the office of the churchwide bishop and synodical bishops may be terminated by retirement, resignation, or conclusion of term however constitutionally ordered."

³⁹ "Concordat of Agreement," 10.

task. Further, the recognition of deacons in the Episcopal Church as "fully authentic ministers in their respective orders" perhaps marks at least a step toward a future Lutheran acceptance of the threefold model of ministry.

Evaluation

Full communion between the two churches began as soon as the Episcopal Church adopted CCM, even though a few details still need to be worked out. The document declares,

For both churches, the relationship of full communion begins when both churches adopt this *Concordat*. For the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the characteristics of the goal of full communion defined in its 1991 policy statement, *Ecumenism: The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* will be realized at this time. For the Episcopal Church, full communion, although begun at the same time, will not be fully realized until both churches determine that in the context of a common life and mission there is a shared ministry of bishops in the historic episcopate. For both churches, life in full communion entails more than legislative decisions and shared ministries. The people of both churches have to receive and share this relationship as they grow together in full communion.⁴⁰

What, in the end, can be said about the value of *Called to Common Mission* and the fellowship relationship it represents? As indicated above, there are serious theological flaws assumed by the agreement that have prevented the Missouri Synod from being a signatory, though its representatives had been full participants in all three Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogues (see Appendix). But these flaws do not render the document entirely unusable by Missouri. For a church accused of a "one-dimensional approach to ecumenism," *Called to Common Mission* gives pause to consider exactly what may be compromised in the name of unity.⁴¹ The declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship with the Lutheran Church of Ingria at its 1998 convention (despite its membership in the Lutheran World Federation) already indicates a certain Missourian willingness along these lines. The question of what may be tolerated, however, is different from the question of what may be compromised.

⁴⁰ELCA, *Called to Common Mission* [online].

⁴¹Larry Vogel, "The 1998 LC-MS Convention," *Lutheran Forum* 32 (Fall 1998): 15.

Could Missouri ever adopt, for example, an episcopal hierarchy in order to accommodate another church body – other things being equal?

Missourian objections aside, it is noteworthy how much the ELCA and the Episcopal churches have in common. Both have embraced the higher-critical approach to biblical interpretation. Both have accommodated further liberalizing trends such as women's ordination and both have addressed, in varying degrees, the toleration or even promotion of homosexuality. Both have clergy in positions all across the theological spectrum, from the most conservative to the most liberal. It is no secret that both the ELCA and the Episcopal Church (like the Missouri Synod and every other church body in the world) suffer from internal difficulties. While there may be any number of agreements and disagreements as to what exactly are the problems, Leonard Klein (among others) observed, "Both parties to this *Concordat* are in serious trouble as to the catholic faith itself. Each church body needs a serious dose of reconfessionalization."⁴² Will this realization of full communion come as an antidote to these difficulties, or will it only delay "honest confrontation with the cancer within"?⁴³ Only time will tell.

Appendix: Statement of Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod Participants⁴⁴

Representatives of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod have been full participants in all three rounds of the Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue. The LCMS representatives to these discussions have welcomed with appreciation this opportunity to engage in inter-confessional dialogue with brothers and sisters in Christ. The Synod's participation in such discussions reflects its longstanding commitment to the biblical mandate that Christians seek to manifest externally the unity already given to them in the body of Christ and to do so on the basis of agreement in the confession of the gospel "In all its articles" (FC SD X, 31).

The Representatives of the LCMS have recognized that due to agreements reached among the other representatives of the dialogue, and in particular, the Lutheran/Episcopal Interim sharing of the Eucharist

⁴²Klein, "Concordat—Not Now," 7.

⁴³Klein, "Concordat—Not Now," 7.

⁴⁴This statement is published, among other places, in "*Toward Full Communion*" and "*Concordat of Agreement*," 115-116.

Agreement adopted by the non-LCMS participant churches in 1982, the aim of the third round of dialogue has shifted to focus on the achieving of full communion (altar and pulpit fellowship) between the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In response to a specific invitation, the LCMS has continued to send representatives as full participants in LED III, even while it has not been a part of the 1982 Agreement, nor the efforts to reach full communion. Although Missouri Synod participation has been limited by these circumstances the LCMS representatives wish to express their gratitude to all the members of the dialogue for welcoming LCMS participation in this phase of dialogue. The LCMS participants remain committed to the value of the discussions themselves as vehicles to achieve greater understanding of and agreement in "the truth as it is taught in the Scriptures and confessed in the Lutheran symbols" ("Guidelines for Participation in Ecumenical Dialogs," prepared by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1975).

We, The LCMS representatives of LED III, ask our gracious God to bless the efforts of our friends and colleagues on the dialogue to achieve a common witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We express our best wishes to all present and past members of the dialogue and thank God for the friendships we have come to enjoy and the commonalties we share. And, we look forward to future opportunities to address together differences in doctrine and practice which continue to divide the church.

The Rev. Carl Bornmann
The Rev. Dr. Norman E. Nagel
The Rev. Jerald C. Joersz