


 IN FOCUS:  
ECUMENISM

# A TIME FOR UNITY?

*1997 will bring critical ecumenical proposals that, if adopted, will reshape the ELCA's next century*

BY CHARLES AUSTIN

**T**he fragmentation of the Christian church has troubled believers for many years. Christians have long agreed that competing denominations and doctrines confuse unbelievers and slow the spread of the gospel.

Long dialogues among the churches and cooperation on various levels have produced better feelings among some Christians, yet official divisions and structures remain.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America along with members of the Episcopal Church and three denominations of the Reformed tradition are—for the first time in this country—considering concrete steps that could unify their ministries. These proposals would permit the sharing of congregations and clergy and mandate that future planning for mission be

done together (see boxes page 11).

In addition, Lutheran church bodies around the world—including the ELCA—and the Roman Catholic Church will be asked to lift some of the “mutual condemnations” issued following the furor of the 16th century Reformation. On the central issue of justification by grace through faith, the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches would affirm a common statement on the main content of this formerly divisive doctrine. This action would not, however, involve “altar and pulpit fellowship” or make the sharing of clergy possible.

Whether these are the right steps to take and whether they can be practically implemented are much discussed in ELCA circles, as plans to declare “full communion” with the Episcopal and Reformed denominations make their way to the 1997 ELCA Church-

wide Assembly in Philadelphia.

“The proposals are intended to move us beyond the divisions of the past,” says Guy S. Edmiston Jr., bishop of the ELCA Lower Susquehanna Synod. Also chair of the Lutheran-Reformed Coordinating Committee, he adds that “a major priority is to lift up mission thrusts that can be enhanced by ecumenical cooperation.”

## Full communion

Ecumenical activists say the churches would not give up key elements of denominational teaching and polity. But the proposals for full communion would require that all view their “denominationalism” in new ways.

Full communion, not to be confused with church merger, includes:

- A common confessing of the Christian faith and mutual lifting of any condemnations;

**MISSION OF THE**

**ATONEMENT**, Beaverton, Ore., an ELCA-Roman Catholic congregation symbolizes the growing unity among Christian groups long divided by diverse doctrines and practices. Father Matt Tumulty (left) serves the congregation with Laurie Larson Caesar, an ELCA pastor. Tumulty participated in the Sept. 15 service during which Caesar was installed as pastor (see page 15).

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DAN POWERS





PHOTO SHIRAZI

**EUROPEAN ECUMENISM** parallels but is running ahead of current ELCA proposals. On Sept. 1, George Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury, signs the Porvoo Declaration at a worship service in Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim, Norway. In the Porvoo accord, the Lutheran churches in the Nordic and Baltic countries and the Anglican churches of Great Britain and Ireland affirm the baptism, eucharist and ministry of one another's churches, including the apostolic succession of bishops. They also regard one another's members as members of their own church and welcome ordained bishops, pastors and deacons to minister in one another's churches. Ten of 12 churches involved with the document have signed it. Lutheran church bodies in Denmark and Latvia have yet to do so.

- Mutual recognition of baptism and sharing of the Lord's Supper, allowing for joint eucharistic celebrations and for members to commune at one another's churches;
- Exchangeability of clergy, allowing clergy from one denomination to serve a congregation of the other;
- A means for common decision-making on critical issues related to Christian faith and life.

Episcopalians have been reluctant to recognize the ministry of anyone not ordained by a bishop who stands in "apostolic succession." But if they declare full communion with the ELCA, Episcopalians will agree that Lutherans have preserved ties to the apostolic period even though Lutherans have not insisted that all clergy be ordained by bishops. In the future, however, the proposals mandate that only bishops may ordain new clergy.

Lutherans have clung to their historic 16th century "confessions" as clear and valid explanations of Christian doctrine and have said that they are in communion with anyone who accepts those confessions. This has separated Lutherans from the spiritual heirs of John Calvin and others, as

have differences in understanding the presence of Christ in communion.

But if the proposals for fellowship with the Reformed churches are approved, ELCA Lutherans will say that they recognize three Reformed churches—the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ—as "churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered according to the word of God." The ELCA and the Reformed Churches would withdraw earlier condemnations of one another's theology and practice "as inappropriate for the life and faith of our churches today."

### Identity loss?

Edmiston says he knows that some insist the proposal to declare full communion with the Reformed churches "undermines" the ELCA's confessional identity. But Daniel Martensen, head of the ELCA Department for Ecumenical Affairs, says that "the governance procedures, discipline and doctrine of each church involved in the proposals are carefully maintained." Churches would continue to have their

own standards for clergy, synods and congregations. Clergy serving in a denomination other than their own would be subject to the host denomination's standards.

If approved, it would take time to work out agreements on how to implement joint planning for outreach and global mission. But approval of "intercommunion" would involve more immediate action.

Lutherans and Episcopalians have been sharing "eucharistic hospitality" since 1982, without saying that they are in "full communion" with each other. Lutheran and Reformed congregations in some parts of the country have been sharing clergy, church buildings—and the Lord's Supper—for many years, but the practice has never been regularized in ELCA polity. If approved, the ecumenical proposals make official sharing of communion possible immediately.

### Toward a common witness

The exchange of clergy is one of the most complex aspects of the proposal. "It is important that we agree to share clergy in the fullest sense of the word," says Eric Gritsch, professor emeritus

at the Lutheran Seminary at Gettysburg [Pa.] and a longtime participant in the ecumenical dialogues leading to the proposals.

That means, Gritsch says, that Lutherans do not have to insist on "Lutheranizing" clergy of the other church bodies if they are to preach in Lutheran pulpits and preside at Lutheran altars. Leaders in ecumenical dialogues say that those who insist on "protecting" the specifically "Lutheran" nature of clergy and congregations risk placing Lutheran teaching above the prior and broader mandate of church unity for the sake of the gospel.

Others argue that Lutheran distinctiveness still serves a purpose as a witness to the concerns of the Reformation. Edmiston says ELCA members should read the documents and supporting material "very carefully and be in conversation with people from the

three Reformed churches. Sometimes we polarize ourselves before even talking to the other parties."

Richard Jeske, pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Saratoga, Calif., the co-chair of the Lutheran-Episcopal Joint Coordinating Committee, says he wants people to consider how "a common witness enhances the mission of the church. We have to consider: What would refusing to have closer fellowship do to the mission of the church?"

### Procedures for adoption

Procedures for adopting the proposals require clear, commonly agreed-upon actions. All church bodies must approve all the proposals, or the agreements fail.

If one of the Reformed church denominations rejects the plan, the other two churches cannot go ahead with the agreements. And the documents are structured so that the ELCA must vote on the Reformed proposals as a package. It can't approve full communion

with the Presbyterians or with the Reformed Church in America while not adopting it with the UCC, an action suggested by some who doubt the strength of the UCC's adherence to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Episcopalians, on the other hand, meet in a dual legislative session—with a House of Bishops and a House of Deputies; both have to approve.

When the ELCA meets in assembly in Philadelphia Aug. 14-20, 1997, it will not be able to modify the proposals already approved by the other church bodies. If the others reject the plans, the ELCA will not have to take action. But if the plans are approved by the other partners, the ELCA will cast the "make-or-break" vote.

The ecumenical proposals facing the ELCA are the most concrete actions that have grown from long theological dialogues. Jeske of the Lutheran-Episcopal committee says that as the time for decision draws near, he wants people to consider not only their personal preferences or long-standing prejudices but to ask, "What is good for the church?" **W**

## ELCA—Episcopal proposal

**Name:** *Concordat of Agreement*

**Calls for the churches to:**

- "Recognize in each other the essentials of the one, catholic and apostolic faith."
- Change their governing documents so that full communion is established.
- Have a joint commission work out details in planning for mission, common decision-making and ordination.
- Participate in the common consecration of all future bishops.
- Temporarily suspend a restriction of the Episcopal Church that limits the pastoral office to those ordained by bishops in the line of "apostolic succession," thus allowing ELCA pastors to serve Episcopal congregations and Episcopal priests to serve Lutheran congregations.
- Not insist that Episcopal ordinands subscribe to the Lutheran church's *Augsburg Confession*.
- Revise the ELCA constitution so that all bishops, including those no longer active, would be regular members of the Conference of Bishops; their role will be determined later.
- Make provisions in the ELCA constitution and liturgies so that only bishops would ordain clergy.

## ELCA—Reformed proposal

**Name:** *A Common Calling*—involves the ELCA and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ.

**Calls the churches to:**

- Recognize one another as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered according to God's word.
- Withdraw any historic condemnations of one another.
- Continue to recognize one another's baptism and to encourage the sharing of the Lord's Supper. Lutheran and Reformed churches believe that Christ is present in the Lord's Supper, but some differences exist in understanding *how* Christ is present.
- Recognize one another's various ministries and make provision for the exchange of ordained ministers.
- Establish appropriate channels of consultation and decision-making.
- Commit themselves to ongoing theological dialogue for the sake of further clarification.

## ELCA—Roman Catholic proposal

**Name:** *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*

**Calls the churches to:**

- Agree that "our entire hope of justification and salvation rests on Jesus Christ and on the gospel whereby the good news of God's merciful action in Christ is made known; we do not place our ultimate trust in anything other than God's promise and saving work in Christ."
- Affirm that historic condemnations that appear in confessional and other official documents regarding justification do not apply to each other today.
- Affirm a joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic statement on the main content of the doctrine of justification. This would establish a common teaching as a foundation from which both churches could address further issues.