

ELCA-UMC full communion agreement 2010.

In 2010, after thirty three years of careful, searching and comprehensive dialogue, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and the United Methodist Church in the US signed a full communion agreement¹. This was preceded by earlier agreements, starting with the mutual acknowledgement of each other's baptisms in 1981,, followed by a dialogue on the role of bishops in both churches, which accepted that no particular form of oversight is of the essence of the Church, followed in 2004 by an interim agreement on eucharistic sharing.

The ELCA has been particularly prominent in forging full communions with other partners, first, in 1997 with three partners from the reformed tradition, the Presbyterian Church of USA, the Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ. In 1999, full communion was agreed with both episcopalians and Moravians.

The ELCA ecumenical website informs us that the 2010 agreement with United Methodism was the first full communion agreement with a church numerically larger than ELCA. The ELCA gives a series of points by which it can judge whether a full communion agreement with a Christian church of another tradition is feasible. For them full communion must include confessing the essentials of Christian faith, mutual recognition of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, mutual recognition of ministry, common commitment to evangelism, witness and service, establishing means of common decision making on issues of faith and life and mutual lifting of any mutual condemnations from the past.

The agreed document, *Confessing our Faith Together* states very clearly that the two churches recognise each others' ordinations and ministries, though in one case through equivalence of diaconal ministries where there is a difference of terminology².

The agreement gives an unusually large amount of detailed advice to the two churches as to how to put the agreement into practical widespread effect. It commends three key documents from the two traditions that relate to baptism and the eucharist and are thus guides for joint worship or for situations in which a minister of one church may be leading worship in the other. These are 'The Use of the Means of Grace' (ELCA, 1997) and *By Water and the Spirit* (UMC 1996 and 2004) and *This Holy Mystery* (2004).

Central to the full communion agreement and impressively thorough in setting forth a comprehensive statement on the richness of the anticipated harvest in terms of unity in diversity and mutually learning and receptive ecumenism is the statement *Confessing our Faith Together*. It begins by citing a relevant classical statement from each tradition.

¹ I specify in the US because the United Methodist Church is a global church with many local conferences in a large number of other countries, which are not per se involved in this agreement even though in some cases, Norway is an example there are roughly equivalent agreements on pulpit and altar fellowship

² Thus both UM deacons, so called and ordained are seen as equivalent to rostered lay ministers amongst the ELCA. It is to be noted neither church see bishops as constituting a totally separate order-they are elders (UM terminology) and pastors (ELCA), the later in accordance with the Lutheran stress that there is but one ministry of word and sacrament.

From the Lutheran Form of Concord it cites the early father, Irenaeus to the effect that 'disunity in fasting is not to disrupt unity in faith, adding the codicil 'no church should condemn another because the one has fewer or more external ceremonies not commended by God than the other has'.

From the Methodist tradition, it cites John Wesley's sermon on the Catholic Spirit, in which Wesley draws a clear distinction between those absolutely non-negotiable core truths of the faith which all Christians must accept and other beliefs and practices which do not strike as the root of faith in the triune God and upon which Christians may legitimately differ whilst still extending the right hand of fellowship those who do profess them. To an extent, this relates to the traditional Lutheran concept of adiaphora, things indifferent (not used in this text)³.

Paras 6 to 9 outline what the partners consider central to the accord in terms of the call and mission of the Church. First comes the mission imperative- 'the present challenges and opportunities for the mission of Christianity demand higher more serious levels of co-operation amongst the churches'. Above all, , the full communion agreement 'demonstrates the unity given us in Christ through the gospel and the sacraments'. In other words, it responds to the call of Christ. 'Together, our churches can raise their voices to proclaim God's word of mercy and work for those things that make for peace in this world'.

Great stress is laid on the faith that the distinct theological perspectives of the two churches, growing out of their different historical contexts, can be mutually enriching. It is stressed that both churches began as reforming movements. A key contribution of ELCA is seen as the threefold stress on justification by grace through faith and the distinction between law and gospel. The UMC's contribution is seen as the dual stress on the work of the Spirit in renewing the Christian life and the need to translate faith into action.

Finally in this introductory statement, mutual responsibility and accountability are stressed. All congregations must take the agreement seriously. In other words, the agreement must be lived out down to the most local level. It must be taken seriously and appropriately acted on in ever congregation. Reception must take place. One may add that this is a counsel to be observed wherever churches agree to full communion or covenanted relationships; the English Anglican-Methodist Covenant particularly needs to hear this counsel if it is to lead on to closer and full communion.

The rest of the document gives considerable attention to key issues. First the practical implications of the common trinitarian faith are stressed. 'To confess the Trinity is to ground all expressions of unity in the character of the Creator. Since we are made in God's image, we find fullness of life in relationships of love and service'.

³ I say to an extent since Wesley did prefer certain secondary opinions to others.

Next come the listing of key doctrinal sources in both churches. For Lutherans, they are the three classic creeds plus the Augsburg Confession, 'a true witness to the gospel'. In the UMC, they are the 25 articles, confession of faith of the Evangelical United brethren and certain of Wesley's writings⁴.

The two key doctrinal stresses of Lutherans and Methodists are respectively, the stress on salvation by grace through faith and sanctification. They are now stated in ways that both traditions can affirm, first as it were from the Lutheran starting point, then from the Methodist emphasis on holiness.

'In justification, God forgives sin, liberates us from its enslaving power, moves us to lives of faith, made effective through love and imparts new life in Christ'.

'We agree that sanctification is the gracious work of God's Holy Spirit'. Within that overarching statement are to be found both Lutheran and Wesleyan codicils. The Lutheran one is that in one sense holiness is complete in justification, the Methodist one is that it involves ongoing progress in faith and love, a continuous work of the Spirit in daily renewal⁵.

Both churches are fully agreed that the heart of the Gospel is 'God's unconditional mercy'⁶.

Section B, *Unity in Diversity* shows how differing Lutheran and Methodist emphases can be reconciled to the benefit of both. The Lutherans are introduced the Methodist stress on prevenient grace whereby the Holy Spirit prepares us to receive God's grace. It stresses the 'divine love which surrounds all humanity and precedes any conscious impulses'. ELCA explains the traditional Lutheran stress on man as 'simul justus et peccator'. However, it also adds the statement that the Christian people 'having confidence in the grace of God....do diligently good in their calling'⁷.

In para 30, UMC offers ELCA 'a dynamic vision of redeemed human experience as 'faith working by love, leading to holiness of life. ELCA offers a vision of Christian life as defined by baptism as well as God's decisive action for us in the work of Christ', adding that the regenerate life is 'not simply freedom from accusation of the law but as led by the Holy Spirit and engrafted in Christ, conformed to the will of God in a free and joyful spirit'⁸.

⁴ The creeds are the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds. The Evangelical United Brethren were a German pietistic community that developed in a very similar way to Methodism, adopting much of its ethos and methods. They united with the Methodist Episcopal Church under the title United Methodist Church.

⁵ Paras 20,21.

⁶ Para 23.

⁷ citing

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