

# The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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## I. Sources

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) seeks in its faith and life "to manifest the unity given to the people of God by living together in the love of Christ and by joining with other Christians in prayer and action to express and preserve the unity which the Spirit gives" (ELCA Constitution 4.02.f.). What follows first surveys authoritative sources as a basis for the ecumenism of "joining with other Christians," then sketches a history of Lutheran ecumenical experience to suggest continuity with predecessor churches.

### A. Scriptural, Confessional and Constitutional Foundations

For its participation in the ecumenical movement, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is dependent on its understanding of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions as set forth in its constitution.

#### Scriptural Witnesses

The Church draws upon the rich, diverse language of Scripture for its understanding of ecumenism. One major theme is the unity of all peoples. The announcement of unity begins with the narrative of one God creating and ruling the whole universe and all peoples (Genesis 1-11). The building of the tower of Babel led to the fragmentation of humankind. In response God's promise to Abraham that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3) stressed the gracious will of God for all people. God intended Israel to carry out his will. The servant sings: "the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him...he says, 'It is a too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the end of the earth'" (Isaiah 49:5-6; cf., Isaiah 42:6). Therefore, Israel's psalmists and prophets call the whole earth and all nations to unite in worshiping, praising, and proclaiming the God of glory, righteousness, salvation, and blessing (Psalms 96-100, Isaiah 45:22-23, 55:1-5, 60:1-3).

The unity of God is the starting point and the ending point of significant New Testament passages, which speak about the unity of the church. In Ephesians 4, Paul's list "One Lord, one faith, one baptism" (v.5) culminates in a doxological celebration of the "one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" (v. 6; cf., Philippians 2:10-11). The purpose of ministry in all its variety (vv. 11-12) is to bring the church to unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God (v. 13). It is, therefore, a ministry, which must attend to issues of truth (vv. 14-15a), for growing in the unity in Christ (vv. 15b-16).

The prayer of Jesus for his disciples in John 17, on the eve of his death on the cross, clearly links with truth and mission. "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (v. 17) leads into "as you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (v. 18). Then Jesus prays "that they all may be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you" (v. 21a). The unity of the disciples depends on unity with God, as Jesus says to the father, "that they may also be in us." And unity has its goal in mission "that the world may know that you have sent me" (v. 21b). As understood in Christ's prayer, unity is given to the church, not for the sake of the church, but that the church might give itself in mission to the world for the sake of the Gospel. The church realizes its unity in its actions, not simply via theological discussion.

Other references in John show that the disciples, one with Christ and one with each other, are branches on the vine [Christ], which are to "bear much fruit" (15:5). There shall be "one flock" (10:16), when Jesus brings the "other sheep," because there is "one shepherd" who died "to gather into one" the scattered children of God (11:50-52). Paul speaks of the church as "one body in Christ" (Romans 12:5) or "the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27) to stress the variety of gifts present in the members of the church for the good of all. Colossians 1:18 and Ephesians 1:22-23 stress the lordship of Jesus over the church, his body. Thus the church gets its unity from the "one Lord" (Ephesians 4:5) under whom it lives. When the writings in the New Testament are compared, a variety of expressions of unity and structures emerges. There is no single pattern of ministry or structure. The New Testament reminds us, too, that disputes and divisions were to be found in the earliest period of the church's existence (e.g., Acts 6:1, 15:1-29; Galatians 2:1-16; 1 Corinthians 1:10-17, 3:1-4). Indeed on several occasions divisive teachings and false teachers were condemned (e.g., Romans 16:17; Philippians 3:2-20; 1 John 2:18-20, 4:1-4; 2 John; Jude).

Those who disrupt the unity of the church are held to be culpable as wrong-doers (Galatians 2:11-20), who are "not acting consistently with the truth of the Gospel" (v.14; cf., 2:5), need to return to the truth of the Gospel and faith in Christ as the essentials for Christian fellowship. The Gospel raises truth-claims that demand true and faithful

proclamation and action that corresponds to the Gospel. Thus, only in the Gospel can genuine unity be achieved. The Scriptures use other significant language to describe the church. Paul speaks of "community" (or "partnership," "sharing," "fellowship") with the Philippians in the proclamation of the Gospel (Philippians 1:5, 7; 4:14, 15). The community in the Gospel, created by the Gospel, impelled the Philippians to support Paul financially as he preached the Gospel. "Sharing" ("fellowship") in the blood and the body of Christ produced the one body (1 Corinthians 10:16-17), while not recognizing the Lord's body in the church causes divisions (1 Corinthians 11:17-33). Paul's concluding benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:13 makes clear that community of the Holy Spirit is based on grace in Christ Jesus and the love of God.

Christians believe that Jesus both announced and brought the kingdom of God (Mark 1:13-14). Yet they pray "Your (the Father's) kingdom come" in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:10; Luke 11:2). The New Testament constantly moves between the gift given with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the reality that the church at any given time looks to the return of Jesus for the achievement of justice, unity of the people of God, and the full and perfect realization of communion with God. This hope compels the church to strive to manifest this unity and communion in the here and now.

The Scriptures present a realistic picture of both the human proclivity toward disunity and the unity that is possible through oneness in Christ. The Bible tells us what God wills, and warns us of the ever present threats to a mutually accepting Christian fellowship. Then, as now, it is necessary to pray "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with Jesus Christ, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:5-6) and to be reminded, "welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Romans 15:7).

### **Lutheran Confessions**

The concern for the unity of the church articulated in Scripture enjoyed considerable prominence in the first centuries of the history of the church. It was expressed in the Apostles' Creed and especially in the Nicene Constantinopolitan Creed of A.D. 381. These ecumenical symbols, along with the Athanasian Creed, were included in the Book of Concord in 1580. Their inclusion, as well as the first articles of the Augsburg Confession, shows the desire of the Lutheran Reformers to identify with the biblical and patristic tradition.

The Lutheran Confessions were the products of an effort at evangelical reform, which, contrary to its intention, resulted in divisions within the Western church. As evangelical writings, they stress justification by grace through faith alone as the criterion for judging all church doctrine and life. As catholic writings, they assert that the Gospel is essential to the church for being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Their evangelical and catholic aspects are complementary, not contradictory. When a particular misinterpretation of the catholic tradition conflicts with the Gospel, the classic Lutheran confessional choice was and remains for the Gospel. They are concerned for the oneness of Christ's church under the Gospel, the preservation of the true catholic heritage, and the renewal of the church as a whole. That the Confessions have such concerns can be seen from the following:

1. They always point to Scripture, with its stress on teaching the truth of the Gospel—which they see as the only sufficient basis for Christian unity—as normative. Because of this evangelical stress they also point to Scripture's confession of one Lord and one church as basic for understanding Christian unity.
2. They begin with the ancient ecumenical creeds—Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian—as "the three chief symbols." Lutherans always have a common basis with those who share these creeds and the Bible.
3. They draw upon the theological reflection of the early church leaders in East and West, and thus share a resource with those who also know and honor the theologians of the patristic era.
4. While many of the Lutheran Confessions were hammered out in the struggles of the sixteenth century and dwell on the differences with the Roman Catholics, the Reformed, the Anabaptists, and even some Lutherans, they also contained, whether specifically noted or not, many points of basic agreement with such groups.
5. The primary Lutheran confessional document, the Augsburg Confession of 1530, claims to be a fully catholic as well as an evangelical expression of Christian faith. Part I, which lists the chief articles of faith, states that the Confession is grounded clearly in Scripture and does not depart from the universal Christian [that is, catholic] church. The confessors at Augsburg asked only for freedom to preach and worship in accordance with the Gospel. They were willing, upon recognition of the legitimacy of these reforms, to remain in fellowship with those who did not share every theological formulation or reforming practice [Augsburg Confession, Preface, Article XV, Article XXVIII and Conclusion]. It is in this historical context that Article VII is to be understood: "for the true unity of the church it is enough (*satis est*) to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments." The confessors allowed for diversity of opinion and discussion of many other matters (see Smalcald Articles, Part III, introduction).

The historical situation is now different. Today the western church is divided into hundreds of denominations; moreover, in the nineteenth century the urgency of missionary proclamation underscored the scandal of a divided church. Such developments challenge the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to strive toward fuller expressions of unity with as many denominations as possible.

Lutherans may differ in evaluating the difference between the sixteenth century and the present. Some Lutherans in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America hold that unity was already broken when the confessors presented the Augsburg Confession in 1530; others hold that the confessors were attempting to maintain a unity that still existed. But all agree that the "satis est" of Augsburg Confession VII established an ecumenical principle as valid today as it was in 1530. Augsburg Confession VII continues to be ecumenically liberating because of its claim that the truth of the Gospel is the catholic faith and is sufficient for the true unity of the church.

In today's denominationalism the satis est provides an ecumenical resource and basis to move to growing levels of fellowship [i.e., communion] among divided churches. Article VII remains fundamental for Lutheran ecumenical activity; its primary meaning is that only those things that convey salvation, justification by grace through faith, are allowed to be signs and constitutive elements of the church. Yet, for all its cohesiveness and precision, Article VII does not present a complete doctrine of the church. It is not in the first instance an expression of a falsely understood ecumenical openness and freedom from church order, customs, and usages in the church. What it says is essential for understanding the unity of the church, but does not exhaust what must be said. The primary meaning of Article VII is that only those things that convey salvation, justification by grace through faith, are allowed to be signs and constitutive elements of the church. It is also necessary to recognize the evangelical and ecclesiological implications of the missionary situation of the global church in our time, which did not exist in the 16th century.

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession continues to be ecumenically freeing because of its insistence that agreement in the Gospel suffices for Christian unity. As Lutherans seek to enter into fellowship without insisting on doctrinal or ecclesiastical uniformity, they place an ecumenical emphasis on common formulation and expression of theological consensus on the Gospel. There is room for recognizing, living and experiencing fellowship within the context of seeking together larger theological agreement, of constantly searching critically for the theological truth of the Gospel to be proclaimed together in the present critical time of our world.

6. Other Lutheran confessional documents, though differing in nature and purpose from each other, are consistent with the Augsburg Confession on church unity. For example:
  - a. The Small Catechism teaches in a simple form the evangelical and catholic faith, so that this faith may be known by all the people of God.
  - b. The Formula of Concord of 1577 reflects, in detail, inner Lutheran theological debate and disagreement, and suggests, in spite of its emphasis on rejection and condemnation of errors and contrary doctrine, the possibility of resolving and reconciling differences "under the guidance of the Word of God."

Rooted in this biblical and confessional understanding as stated in its Confession of Faith (ELCA Constitution, Chapter 2), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America identifies itself with this vision of a greater wholeness of Christ's people.

Chapter 4 of the constitution, "Statement of Purpose," declares that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is committed both to Lutheran unity and to Christian unity (4.03.d. and 4.03.f.). The understanding of ecumenism in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America embraces more than Lutheran denominations. This church rejoices in the movement toward agreement in the Gospel with other churches of differing historical and theological heritages. The degree of openness on the part of others and our own confessional commitment have a bearing upon the developing relations and growth in unity with "all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours" (1 Corinthians 1:2).

## **B. Ecumenical Heritage**

The twentieth century has brought continuous, active, and official involvement of churches, including predecessors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, in the quest to overcome Christian division and, by God's Spirit, to express the visible unity of Christ's people. The ecumenical movement needs to be seen as the stirring of Christians under the Spirit's prompting to disclose to those around them God's call for the church to be one. This movement is, therefore, much more than conferences and meetings of councils of churches, although such events serve as landmarks for the ecumenical movement.

Prior to World War II, Lutherans from the churches of northern Europe and some from North America were present at World Missionary Conferences, a major impetus to the modern ecumenical movement, as well as Faith and Order Conferences and Life and Work Conferences. It is true that American Lutherans were initially hesitant and cautious, with some remaining more guarded, because of their concern for confessional truth, while others with the same concern for confessional truth were becoming more open to ecumenical participation. The conferences eventually became part of a more continuous and unified organization, the World Council of Churches.

### **Council of Churches**

By 1948, North American Lutherans took a prominent place in the formation of the World Council of Churches and successfully insisted that the representation from churches be determined in a major way according to confessional families. Within a decade, almost all of the antecedents to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America held membership in the council. At that time Lutherans made up the largest confessional group in the council. The council has given significant attention to issues of Christian unity, mission, and service.

In varying degrees the uniting churches and their members have participated in state and local councils of churches, and in the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Such involvement brought greater understanding of the opportunities and challenges of ecumenical activity.

### **Ecumenical Dialogues**

By 1950, many North American Lutherans were fully committed to ecumenical partnership around the world and in this country. In the next decade, they were involved actively in the development of ecumenical dialogues. After 1965, these dialogues received new stimulus from the entry of the Roman Catholic Church into the ecumenical movement, an event marked and ratified by the Second Vatican Council. Other dialogues were continued or initiated with Reformed and Presbyterians, Episcopalians, United Methodists, Orthodox, Baptists, and conservative evangelicals. Participation in the dialogues by the predecessor bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was unified through the National Lutheran Council, later the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., and the Lutheran World Federation. Lutheran unity and Christian unity were progressing together.

By 1982, when official approval was given for a commission to plan the union that produced the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, ecumenical developments were expanding rapidly

### **Lutheran World Federation**

The membership and active role of the uniting churches in the Lutheran World Federation produced new ecumenical perceptions. At the assembly in 1984, the member churches of the federation declared themselves to be in altar and pulpit fellowship. The churches of the federation declared themselves to be a communion of churches. This declaration may have profound effects on the nature of the federation itself and on the churches' understandings of their relationships to one another and to nonmember churches. The 1984 assembly also adopted the following understanding of unity, which is compatible with the vision set forth in the accompanying document statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:

The true unity of the church, which is the unity of the body of Christ and participates in the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is given in and through proclamation of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. This unity is expressed as a communion in the common and at the same time, multiform confession of one and the same apostolic faith. It is a communion in Holy Baptism and in the eucharistic meal, a communion in which the ministries exercised are recognized by all as expressions of the ministry instituted by Christ in his church. It is a communion where diversities contribute to fullness and are no longer barriers to unity. It is a committed fellowship, able to make common decisions and to act in common.

The diversity present in this communion rises out of the differing cultural and ethnic contexts in which the one church of Christ lives out its mission and out of the number of church traditions in which the apostolic faith has been maintained, transmitted, and lived throughout the centuries. In recognizing these diversities as expressions of the one apostolic faith and the one catholic church, traditions are changed, antagonisms overcome, and mutual condemnations lifted. The diversities are reconciled and transformed into a legitimate and indispensable multiformity within the one body of Christ.

This communion lives out its unity in confessing the one apostolic faith. It assembles in worship and in intercession for all people. It is active in common witness to Jesus Christ; in advocacy for the weak, poor, and oppressed; and in striving for peace, justice, and freedom. It is ordered in all its components in conciliar structures and actions. It is in

need of constant renewal and is at the same time, a foretaste of that communion, which the Lord will at the end of time bring about in his kingdom.

American Lutherans were encouraged by the ecumenical participation in the celebration of the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in 1980 and the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther in 1983.

### **Positions of the Uniting Churches**

In 1978, The American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America approved "A Statement on Communion Practices." Section II, Recommendations for Practice, adopted by both churches in convention, included a subsection on intercommunion. This sub-section provided guidance for eucharistic sharing in Lutheran settings and ecumenical gatherings.

At its eleventh biennial convention in 1982, the Lutheran Church in America approved as its official position the document, "Ecumenism: A Lutheran Commitment." This statement became a charter for a deliberate program of ecumenical study and activity. Three years later, the Church Council of The American Lutheran Church approved a similar document for the church entitled, "Ecumenical Perspective and Guidelines." Thus, two of the uniting churches had recent and strong statements expressing their rationale for ecumenical involvement.

In 1982, all three predecessor churches entered into the "Lutheran-Episcopal Agreement" with the Episcopal Church in the United States. After years of bilateral dialogues, these churches were able to enter into a new level of fellowship that provided for mutual recognition of churches, joint prayer and study, joint commitment to evangelism and mission, interim sharing of the Eucharist, future dialogue, and a commitment to work for full communion. In 1988, this agreement entered into the life of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

When the third series of Lutheran-Reformed dialogues reported to the churches in 1984, its recommendations confronted the uniting churches with critical questions. Acceptance of this dialogue report, An Invitation to Action, was uneven. All three uniting churches did recognize the Reformed Church in America and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as churches in which the Gospel is preached, and committed themselves to joint projects and at least limited common worship. The Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches and The American Lutheran Church in 1986 entered into a new relationship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Reformed Church in America. The Lutheran Church in America in 1986 took action in conformity with, but not exceeding, a "Statement on Common Practices" of 1987. With the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the relationships established in 1986 ended. The commitments to fuller relationships with the Reformed Church in America and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), made in 1986 by the three uniting churches, were left as a challenge to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

All these events indicate that official reception of the results from dialogues has become a major concern as reports from the dialogues ask the sponsoring churches to take specific actions. Such requests highlight the need for the churches to take seriously the reception of the work of the dialogues into their life and faith.

### **During the Formation of the ELCA**

Between 1982 and the constituting of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the three bishops of the uniting churches, and other leaders, formed relationships with major church leaders throughout the world. These associations had antecedents in earlier years, but the deliberateness and intensity of the contacts in the 1980s formed new levels of trust, commitment to the unity of the church, and potential for new ecumenical advances. In 1983, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches transmitted to the churches for their response and reception the document, Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry. Two of the churches forming the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America made official responses to this text of convergences. Responses from churches around the world have demonstrated an overwhelming interest in what has become a major ecumenical process that will continue.

The years prior to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America represent a period of rich ecumenical growth that was given to the merged church as it began its life.

## **II. A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment: A Policy Statement of the ELCA**

### **A. The Basis: A Confessional Church that is Evangelical, Catholic and Ecumenical**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is a confessional church, as Chapter 2 of its constitution ("The

Confession of Faith") makes clear. Its confessions teach that community in Christ, proclaimed in the Gospel and the sacraments, is the basis for unity in the Church. The Augsburg Confession, Article VII, stresses this when it says that "For the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments."

The unity of the church, as it is proclaimed in the Scriptures, is a gift and goal of God in Christ Jesus. Ecumenism is the joyous experience of the unity of Christ's people and the serious task of expressing that unity visibly and structurally to advance the proclamation of the Gospel for the blessing of humankind. Through participation in ecumenical activity, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America seeks to be open in faith to the work of the Spirit, so as to manifest more fully oneness in Christ.

In relation to other churches, because of its confession, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, understands itself and engages in God's mission as a church that is evangelical, that is catholic, and that is ecumenical. Its confessional character is not opposed to its ecumenical commitment, but necessitates it as a consequence of the Gospel.

Such a description is intended to aid this church in its ecumenical self-understanding. It is not to be seen as a replacement of the traditional marks of the Church as "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic" to which this church is committed by its confessional subscription. Nor is it a list of characteristics required of other churches, prior to this church entering into ecumenical relations with them.

To be evangelical means to be committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Romans 1:16; Mark 1:1). The Church is created by the Gospel. The Gospel is more than human recollection of, or our confession about, what God has done in the past, in Israel, and uniquely in Jesus of Nazareth (2 Corinthians 5:19a). It is proclamation with the power of God's deed in Christ and in his resurrection (2 Corinthians 5:19b-21), an event that opens to us the future of God's eternal love, who through the crucified and risen Christ justifies us, reconciles us, and makes us new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17-18). This Gospel is unconditional in that it announces the sure and certain promise of God who in Christ justifies the ungodly by grace through faith apart from works, and without partiality intends this for all people. This Gospel is eschatological, as it announces the destruction of the last enemy, death, when Christ hands over the kingdom to God, the Father, and when God will be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:24-28). This announcement provides a vision to the Church that informs and guides its ecumenical activity.

To be catholic means to be committed to the fullness of the apostolic faith and its credal, doctrinal articulation for the entire world (Romans 10:8b-15,18b; Mark 13:10; Matthew 28:19-20). This word, "catholic," declares that the Church is a community, rooted in the Christ event, that extends through all places and time. It acknowledges that God has gathered a people, and continues to do so, into a community made holy in the Gospel, which it receives and proclaims. This community, a people under Christ, shares the catholic faith in the Triune God, honors and relies upon the Holy Scriptures as authoritative source and norm of the Church's proclamation, receives Holy Baptism and celebrates the Lord's Supper, includes an ordained ministry, and professes one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

To be ecumenical means to be committed to the oneness to which God calls the world in the saving gift of Jesus Christ. It also means to recognize the brokenness of the Church in history and the call of God, especially in this century, to heal this disunity of Christ's people. By the Holy Spirit, God enlivens the Church to this ministry. In striving to be ecumenical, this church:

1. seeks to manifest the unity that God wills for the Church in a future that is open to God's guidance;
2. seeks to understand and value its past, its history, and its traditions in all their varied richness as gracious gifts of God, which are incomplete themselves as it finally moves toward unity in Christ;
3. contributes and learns, not by attempting to repristinate the past, but by moving toward the manifestation of unity in Christ and thus toward other Christians;
4. commits itself to share with others in the worship of the Triune God, to the task of proclaiming the Gospel to all, and to share with others in lifting up its voice and its hands to promote justice, relieve misery, and reconcile the estranged in a suffering world;
5. calls upon its members to repent of ways in which they have contributed to disunity among Christ's people by omission and commission;
6. urges each of its members to pray, both within their own church and with members of other churches, for the unity of the Church to be concerned with new attitudes, to be ready to sacrifice nonessentials, and to take action, including the reception, where possible, of ecumenical agreements, all for the unity of the Church;

7. recognizes that the burden of proof rests with the resistance to unity in spite of agreement in the Gospel;
- and 8. seeks to express oneness in Christ in diverse models of unity, consistent with the Gospel and mission of the Church.

## **B. The Stance of the ELCA**

The Confession of Faith of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (Constitution, Chapter 2), may be described as evangelical, catholic, and ecumenical. The Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is confessed, with special reference to the redeeming work of the Second Person. The canonical Scriptures are accepted as the inspired Word of God and the norm for the Church's proclamation and life. The three ecumenical creeds are accepted as true declarations of the faith. The Augsburg Confession is accepted as a true witness to the Gospel and as a basis for unity, while the other Lutheran Confessions are accepted as valid interpretations of the faith. The language in this chapter deliberately reflects an ancient, catholic, and ecumenical ordering of authorities. The particularly Lutheran writings are regarded as true witnesses and valid interpretations of earlier statements that possess higher authority. The chapter closes with a confession of the Gospel as the power of God to create and sustain the Church's mission. Thus the Gospel, "Christ alone," is the key to understanding Scripture, creeds, and confessions.

These evangelical, catholic, and ecumenical characteristics of this church's confession of faith find further expression in those chapters of the constitution that deal with "Nature of the Church" (Chapter 3), "Statement of Purpose" (Chapter 4), and "Principles of Organization" (Chapter 5).

This church is bold to reach out in several directions simultaneously to all those with whom it may find agreement in the Gospel. It gives priority to no Christian denomination or group. Therefore, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, as a member of the worldwide Lutheran communion, does not commit itself only to pan-Lutheranism, or to pan-Protestantism, or to Roman Catholic rapprochement, or to developing relationships with the Orthodox.

Even more boldly, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America takes its Lutheran theological heritage so seriously that it believes God's word of justification excludes the patterns of ecclesiastical self-justification, which have resulted from the polemical heritage of the sixteenth century. The first word, which the Church speaks ecumenically, may well be a word of self-criticism, a word against itself, because we are called to be seekers of a truth that is larger than all of us and that condemns our parochialism, imperialism, and self-preoccupation. If it can speak such a word of self-criticism, the Church will be free to reject a triumphalist and magisterial understanding of itself and cultivate instead an understanding of itself as a community of mission and witness that seeks to be serviceable to the in-breaking of the reign of God. In this way the ecumenical vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will not be dominated by attention to our past theological controversies and divisions. It will focus rather on present and future theological reflection and missiological action.

## **C. Forms of Ecumenism**

Ecumenism must permeate, inform, and vitalize every aspect of this church's faith and life, because it is bound to the Gospel and mission in our world. It demonstrates the necessity for the Church to be interdependent and inclusive. The interdependence among the entities within this church and the inclusiveness practiced by this church in the midst of divisions in society are significant manifestations of the unity of the Church. Therefore, this church is committed to the participation of women and men in its ordained ministry and organizational structures. This should be evident to those within the Church as well as those outside as the Church pursues its mission. An extremely close relationship exists between the unity of the Church and its mission (John 17:20-23).

From its evangelical, catholic, and ecumenical stance, with an obviously close relationship with mission, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is free to seek such forms of structure, ministry, and common action as will provide true witness to Christian faith and effective expression to God's love in Christ. Such ecumenism will characterize this church in all manifestations of its life. As congregations and synods take initiative in ecumenical activities, the whole church may learn from them. At the same time as this whole church provides policy guidance to congregations, it becomes the channel through which each congregation may minister worldwide in the whole household of faith.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America engages in local, regional, national, and world councils of churches and other ecumenical agencies. In these relationships the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is guided by the evangelical and the representative principles.

The evangelical principle means that official membership will be established only with such ecumenical organizations as are composed exclusively of churches, which confess Jesus Christ as divine Lord and Savior.

The representative principle means that in ecumenical organizations the official representatives of churches should never be seated on a parity with individuals who represent only themselves or who represent organizations which are less than churches.

Exceptions to the practice of these principles, because of local conditions, may be made by a synod in consultation with the Office for Ecumenical Affairs of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is an active participant in bilateral and multilateral dialogues, which it does not view as competitive, but as mutually re-enforcing means for ecumenical advance. At the same time it seeks other means, such as joint efforts at mission, religious instruction, and use of the mass media to grow in understanding and agreement with other churches.

These efforts, including joint study, prayer, and worship, must be found in the various organizational expressions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and other churches. All these activities need to be encouraged and to inform each other. Local ecumenism, with its synodical and regional forms, provides a rich area of progress and challenge for the unity of the Church. It has much to teach and much to learn from the national and international ecumenical movement. The primary experience of ecumenism for most Christians is through their congregations, local gatherings of believers that relate to other local gatherings of other traditions, which share the same Lord, the same Baptism, the same mission.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is part of a larger Lutheran community. It lives in altar and pulpit fellowship with the other member churches in a communion expressed in the Lutheran World Federation. While its ecumenical action must be its own, it has responsibility to those churches with which it enjoys close relations to inform them of its ecumenical actions and to consider their comments and responses.

Ecumenism has as its focus and goal clarity of understanding among Christians and a greater realization of unity among Christ's people. As such it is closely related to the mission of the Gospel to all the world. It should not be confused with the important but distinct responsibility for the Church to enter into conversations and reach greater understanding with people of other faiths. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America does engage, in a variety of ways, in this inter-faith work and needs in the future a separate, official statement to describe its commitments and aspirations in this area. When that statement is prepared, special attention must be given to the distinctiveness of Judaism.

#### **D. Goal and Stages of Relationships**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is an active participant in the ecumenical movement, because of its desire for Christian unity. It seeks full communion as its goal, i.e., the fullest or most complete actualization of unity possible before the parousia with all those churches that confess the Triune God. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, both as a church and as a member of the wider communion of churches in the Lutheran World Federation, seeks to reach this goal, in order to express the unity of the Church and to carry out better the mission of the Church in proclamation and action.

Full communion, a gift from God, is founded on faith in Jesus Christ. It is a commitment to truth in love and a witness to God's liberation and reconciliation. Full communion is visible and sacramental. It includes all that Lutherans have meant by "pulpit and altar fellowship," but goes beyond that historical formulation because of the obligatory mission given by the Gospel. Full communion is obviously a goal toward which divided churches, under God's Spirit, are striving, but which has not been reached. It points to the complete communion and unity of all Christians that will come with the arrival of the Kingdom of God at the parousia of Christ, the Lord. It is also a goal in need of continuing definition. It is rooted in agreement on essentials and allows diversity in nonessentials.

In most cases, however, the churches will not be able to move directly from their disunity to a full expression of their God-given unity, but can expect to experience a movement from disunity to unity that may include one or more of the following stages of relationships.

1. Ecumenical Cooperation. Here the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America enters into ecumenical relations with church bodies, councils of churches, or other ecumenical agencies based on the evangelical and representative principles. Since these principles relate specifically to ecclesiastical or ecumenical groups, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America must state its principles for relationships with people of other faiths (e.g., interfaith dialogues, cooperative, caritative efforts or advocacy, etc.) in a separate document.
2. Bilateral and Multilateral Dialogues. Here the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America enters into dialogues, with varying mandates, with those who agree with the evangelical and representative principles, confess the

Triune God, and share a commitment to "ecumenical conversion." This conversion or repentance includes openness to new possibilities under the guidance of God's Spirit.

3. Preliminary Recognition. Here the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America can be involved on a church-to-church basis in eucharistic sharing and cooperation, without exchangeability of ministers.
  - a. One stage requires 1., and 2., above, plus partial, mutual recognition of church and sacraments with partial agreement in doctrine.
  - b. A second stage requires 1., 2., 3.a., partial and mutual recognition of ordained ministers and of churches, fuller agreement in doctrine, commitments to work for full communion, and preliminary agreement on lifting of any mutual condemnations. This might find expression in what Lutherans have often understood as pulpit and altar fellowship.
4. Full Communion. At this stage the goal of the involvement of this church in the ecumenical movement is fully attained. Here the question of the shape and form of full communion needs to be addressed and answered practically in terms of what will best further the mission of the Church in individual cases, consistent with the Lutheran understanding of the basis of the unity of the Church in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession.

For the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the characteristics of full communion are theological and missiological implications of the Gospel that allow variety and flexibility. These characteristics stress that the Church act ecumenically for the sake of the world, not for itself alone. They will include at least the following, some of which exist at earlier stages:

1. a common confessing of the Christian faith;
2. a mutual recognition of Baptism and a sharing of the Lord's Supper, allowing for joint worship and an exchangeability of members;
3. a mutual recognition and availability of ordained ministers to the service of all members of churches in full communion, subject only but always to the disciplinary regulations of the other churches;
4. a common commitment to evangelism, witness, and service;
5. a means of common decision making on critical common issues of faith and life;
6. a mutual lifting of any condemnations that exist between churches.

We hold this definition and description of full communion to be consistent with Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, which says, "for the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments." Agreement in the Gospel can be reached and stated without adopting Lutheran confessional formulations as such. It allows for flexible, situation-oriented decisions about order and decision making structures. It does not demand organic union, though it does not rule it out. This definition is also in agreement with the understanding of unity adopted by the Seventh Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in 1984, "The Unity We Seek" (quoted under the Lutheran World Federation section of this statement).

### **Conclusion**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America seeks to be faithful to its scriptural and confessional foundations. As a confessional church that is evangelical, catholic, and ecumenical, this church will pursue the goal of full communion and will rejoice in all movement toward that goal.

<sup>1</sup> The text of "A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment," adopted by the second Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, begins on page 21 of this publication. That text is preceded in this edition by an introductory section (Part I: Sources), which originally was presented in "Ecumenism: The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," adopted as a "working document" by the first Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on August 25, 1989, in Chicago, Illinois. The introductory section of that document subsequently was revised for submission to the second Churchwide Assembly on August 31, 1991, was: "To adopt, as amended, 'A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment: A Policy Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America' as the policy of this church." In favor—919; opposed—67; abstaining—4.

<sup>2</sup> The actual text of the document adopted by the second Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on August 31, 1991, as "A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment: A Policy Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America" begins here.