

“With Confidence in God's Future”

This series of essays, suitable as bulletin inserts or newsletter articles, examines the solid roots of the ELCA, the foundation of this church's ecumenical endeavors and the confidence of God's promises reflected through our life and work together as a church.



“With Confidence in God's Future”

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA: ON OUR JOURNEY TOGETHER INTO THE FUTURE

As members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we are on a journey together, discovering anew the relevance of God's Word for this world's problems.

In this journey we are mindful of our solid roots in Scripture, the tradition of the whole Church and the Lutheran Reformation.

We in the ELCA venture with confidence into God's tomorrow. We do so just as Abraham and Sarah did by faith in the days of old. This confidence -- reflecting both heritage and hope -- allows for thoughtful discussion of how to address current issues in the light of God's Word. It provides the context for the ongoing life and work of ELCA congregations, synods and churchwide ministries.

“As the largest Lutheran church body in North America, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America brings together a rich variety of Lutheran traditions,” the Rev. H. George Anderson observed. He spoke from his perspective as a church historian who served as a seminary professor and president, college president, and then presiding bishop from 1995 to 2001. This variety within the life of the ELCA is a healthy thing, he said. “We have learned how to listen to one another and, in turn, to share our own particular heritage.”

The primary purpose of this lively discussion, Dr. Anderson said, “is to be more faithful to the Bible ‘as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm’ of our preaching, faith, and life,” as the ELCA constitution requires.

In addition, he emphasized, “We believe that we are being true to the spirit of Martin Luther. He urged the church of his own day to re-examine its teachings in the light of the central message about Jesus Christ. We welcome other Christian bodies to share in that conversation in the continuing reformation of Christ's Church.”

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CALLED AND SENT TO BEAR WITNESS

We are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America united in a common purpose.

As we declare in our church's constitution, we understand that, as people of God empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are “called and sent to bear witness to God's creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world.”

We realize, therefore, that our church is not a casual association of diverse interests. We are united by the Gospel and summoned to strategic work together.

To participate in the mission that God has given us, we declare that our congregations, synods and churchwide ministries are to:

1. Proclaim God's saving Gospel of justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith alone
2. Carry out Christ's Great Commission by reaching out to all people to bring them to faith
3. Worship God through Word and Sacrament and through lives of prayer, praise, thanksgiving, witness and service
4. Nurture members in the Word of God for growth in faith, hope and love, so that our daily life is understood as the primary arena of our Christian calling
5. Serve in response to God's love to meet human needs
6. Manifest the unity that God has given

This six-point statement of purpose is huge in scope. In this third millennium of the Christian era, the statement of purpose points us to the crucial tasks that we have as disciples of Jesus.

We know that we do not fulfill this commitment alone. We join together with the other members of our congregations and with our sisters and brothers in Christ throughout the whole Church. In so doing, we give thanks to God for the mission set before us. We also pray for the strength, wisdom, compassion, trust, hope and generosity that we need to be faithful disciples.

In the Lord's Prayer we plead “Your will be done, on earth as in heaven.” As Martin Luther wrote in the Small Catechism, “God's good and gracious will comes about without prayer, but we ask ... that it may also come about in and among us.”

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FOUNDATION OF SCRIPTURE GUIDES ELCA DECISIONS

What does the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America believe about the Bible? We as members of the ELCA confess the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. With the whole Church, we in the ELCA also confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe, as Scripture faithfully teaches.

As stated in the ELCA constitution on the basis of Scripture, “Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death and resurrection God fashions a new creation.”

The members of the ELCA also understand that the “proclamation of God's message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ,” as the ELCA's constitution declares.

“The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them, God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.”

In testimony to this understanding as grounded in Scripture, the ELCA “accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.”

Likewise, “the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds as true declarations of the faith of this church” are confessed. Further, the Unaltered Augsburg Confession of 1530 is embraced “as a true witness to the Gospel, acknowledging as one with it in faith and doctrine all churches that likewise accept the teachings of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession.”

In addition, the ELCA “accepts the other confessional writings in the Book of Concord, (including the Small and Large Catechisms of Martin Luther) ..., as further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church.”

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“IT IS ENOUGH” FOR CONTINUING CONVERSATION

“For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.” So we declare with all Lutherans throughout the world. We do so in Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession.

The Augsburg Confession, first issued on June 25, 1530, is the basic statement of the Lutheran Reformation. Soon to be five centuries old, it remains as contemporary as the morning newspaper. It continues to shape our church's life and witness.

We affirm in the ELCA constitution our unity with all churches that accept with us the teachings of the Augsburg Confession. That makes us part of a huge family of churches that encircle the globe with some 67 million members.

Given that brief and crucial definition of unity (“it is enough to agree ...”), we further confess that the church is established by God as “the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly” (Article 7).

We also realize that the church is not some spiritual illusion or ideal concept, devoid of flesh-and-blood reality. We were made a part of the church in our Baptism. Further, we have been gathered together in congregations. We share together in our church's work through synods and churchwide ministries.

Such structure and order also are noted in the Augsburg Confession. Examples of this can be found in various articles of the Augsburg Confession, including Articles 14 (letters of call to pastors), 15 (systems for peace and good order in the church), and 28 (role of bishops).

Even the name of our church (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) points to our central purpose, the spreading of the Gospel (“Evangelical”). We are children of the Reformation of the 16th century with a distinctive heritage (“Lutheran”). We are summoned to serve in a particular context (“America”).

We recognize that we are not alone. We seek to serve with others who confess and proclaim the Gospel with us (“it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel”).

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AGREEMENT IN THE GOSPEL: OUR FOUNDATION FOR ECUMENISM

Full communion was affirmed by the 1997 Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. That churchly relationship was embraced with three Reformed churches, namely, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Reformed Church in America, and United Church of Christ.

Two years later, similar full-communion agreements were established by the 1999 Churchwide Assembly with The Episcopal Church and the Moravian Church.

As a result, 1997 and 1999 will long be remembered as important times in the history of Lutherans in North America. Decisions to establish relationships of full communion reflected the ELCA's awareness of its role and responsibility as a church body within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church throughout the ages.

Agreement in the Gospel is the foundation for this mutual recognition and common commitment to evangelism, witness and service. That recognition emerged from three decades of formal theological dialogue.

Reception of the results of ecumenical dialogue led to the signing by representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.” That historic step took place in Augsburg, Germany, on October 31, 1999. That document previously had been embraced by the ELCA's 1997 Churchwide Assembly.

Those decisions underscore our shared commitments in the faithful teaching of the Gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. They also acknowledge the distinctive heritage of the respective church bodies.

The members of the ELCA, through these decisions, demonstrated what it means to be committed to faithful witness to the Gospel and hearty embrace of the historic confessions of the Lutheran church.

Neither the full-communion agreements nor the Lutheran-Roman Catholic declaration on justification changed the nature and purposes of our life in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Together in the nearly 10,500 ELCA congregations, 65 synods, and a variety of churchwide ministries, we seek to be faithful in the mission that God has given us in our time.

The agreements on full communion, however, do open in an orderly way some opportunities for joint mission work in areas of special need. Further, we can seek a deeper understanding of our shared commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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DIFFERENT FACETS OF THE SAME PRECIOUS GEM

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's entry into official relationships of full communion was a significant step. But that step is not revolutionary in character. After all, in the midst of those church-to-church agreements, ELCA members remain Lutherans, those in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) remain Presbyterians, and members of the Reformed Church in America and United Church of Christ remain part of their own churches. The same is true for members of The Episcopal Church and the Moravian Church. So what has changed?

Approval of A Formula of Agreement (ELCA-Reformed), Called to Common Mission (ELCA-Episcopal), and Following Our Shepherd (ELCA-Moravian) -- as the official documents are known -- opened new chapters in the relationships of these churches. The agreements affirm that no "church-dividing differences" preclude the declaration of full communion. These churches see themselves as living parts of the Church catholic. They confess the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, affirm the doctrine of justification by faith as fundamental, embrace the authority of Scripture in the life of the Church, and give thanks for the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper.

Don't differences still remain between these churches? Yes. They certainly do, even in regard to the Lord's Supper. An apt metaphor to help us understand and appreciate those differences may be a precious gem. The one gem has different facets. Each facet may sparkle in bright light. The gem may be even prism-like in radiating brilliant color.

The facets of the truth of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, for example, are seen in A Formula of Agreement as complementing one another. They are not viewed as in conflict.

The text in the Lutheran-Reformed agreement acknowledges that "the Reformation heritage in the matter of the Lord's Supper draws from the same roots ... [for] the same goal to call the people of God to the table at which Christ himself is present to give himself for us under the word of forgiveness ... and promise."

The participating churches have agreed, through their governing assemblies, to journey together in joint work, in witness to the Gospel where appropriate or necessary. Further, they are committed to continuing conversation and cooperation in the years ahead.

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“MUTUAL AFFIRMATION AND ADMONITION” SOUNDS SERIOUS

The relationship of full communion established in 1997 between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and three Reformed church bodies in the United States commits these churches to ongoing “mutual affirmation and admonition.” That sounds serious. It is.

Continuing reflection on the faith and work of the churches is required. While differences remain, the commitment to “mutual affirmation and admonition” is grounded in our unity in Christ.

When the ELCA, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Reformed Church in America and United Church of Christ adopted A Formula of Agreement, these churches entered a new era. They formally recognized each other as churches in which the Gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments are administered according to the Word of God.

We as Lutherans, and our counterparts in the three Reformed churches, declared through our church assemblies that entering into full communion:

- did not compromise our own confessional heritage or churchly character,
- affirmed the valid nature of each partner church body,
- established an avenue for forthright discussion of differences, and
- opened a way to seek together mutual growth in witness and service to the glory of God.

We admit together in A Formula of Agreement that the “condemnations” -- hurtled against one another in the 16th century Reformation -- “were an attempt to preserve and protect the Word of God.” But the contemporary situation is different from that time a half millennium ago. With Lutherans and Reformed folk in Germany, we understand that the condemnations do not apply to the present practices of the participating churches.

Long-standing agreements also are embraced. For instance, neither Lutheran nor Reformed churches profess to explain how Christ is present and received in the Lord's Supper. Both traditions, however, affirm that Christ himself is the host at the table and that Christ is fully present and received in the Lord's Supper.

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WITNESS TO POWER OF GOD FOR UNITY IN MISSION

With the 4.7 million members of the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, you and I confess and proclaim the Gospel, “recorded in the Holy Scriptures and confessed in the ecumenical creeds and Lutheran confessional writings, as the power of God to create and sustain the Church for God's mission in the world.” We make that declaration in the constitutions of our congregations and our synods, as well as the constitution of our whole church.

But we are not alone. The ELCA stands with most Lutheran churches throughout the world in recognizing our unity as members of the global Lutheran communion. Through our membership in the Lutheran World Federation, the communion of 140 Lutheran church bodies around the world, we in the ELCA are partners with 67 million Lutherans in faithful witness to the Gospel.

Within the whole Church and particularly within the Lutheran communion of churches bound together by the Augsburg Confession, we as ELCA members understand the importance of mutual respect.

We know that the Eighth Commandment, “You shall not bear false witness,” applies both to how to treat one another and how we relate to other churches. As Martin Luther explained in the Small Catechism, “We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.”

Our church leaders, acting on our behalf, express concern in regard to false description of ELCA decisions, positions, and standards. They do not engage, however, in caricatures of the actions of other church bodies or spread falsehoods about other churches.

We comprehend the simple and straightforward meaning of the Eighth Commandment. Together we seek to express thoughtfully our unity in faith and commitment to untiring service to the glory of God.

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