

Responding to Opportunities for “Interim Eucharistic Sharing” *between The United Methodist Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*

Our two churches come to this agreement by different routes. For both bodies, “interim eucharistic sharing” with one another will have similarities with other ecumenical relationships but will present also its own uniqueness and promise. It will be important for leaders at all levels to help congregations and members to understand the invitations given to them in this relationship.

For the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), approval from the Churchwide Assembly will be required. Lutherans are guided by the 1991 policy statement “Ecumenism: The Vision of the ELCA.” This document provides for steps of “preliminary recognition” toward the goal of “full communion,” which would include not only sacramental sharing but also the full mutual recognition and exchangeability of ordained ministers. Still, there will be some areas of unexplored practice in this new relationship, since the ELCA as a church body has not entered into an agreement for “interim eucharistic sharing.”

United Methodists may find that the language of this proposed agreement is initially unfamiliar. They do not use the ELCA distinction between “interim eucharistic sharing” and “full communion” and so may wonder what new is offered here. For The United Methodist Church (UMC), then, the action of the Council of Bishops will be to invite its members to claim with new intentionality the possibilities of common celebration with Lutherans already open to them. As its name suggests, “interim” eucharistic sharing is undertaken in hope that the new relationships it helps to create and develop will deepen into lasting communion that proclaims more fully the unity of Christ’s Church.

Even apart from this interim agreement, members of both our churches have been invited to participate fully in the other’s celebration of Holy Communion. During this time, we urge congregations and judicatory bodies to extend to the members of the other tradition a special welcome to their worship. This might take the form, for example, of a designated Sunday when members of a neighboring congregation could be invited to a service at which there would be an announcement of the interim eucharistic sharing agreement, the use of hymnody from the other tradition, or the inclusion of members of the other tradition to read Scripture or offer prayer. Perhaps adult education could focus on common study of one another’s teaching and practice around the Eucharist, using such resources as the ELCA *The Use of the Means of Grace* and the newly-adopted United Methodist *This Holy Mystery*. Another appropriate action would be a common service

of Baptism, in which the baptism of both United Methodist and Lutheran candidates would proclaim clearly our agreement that we are baptized not into our denominations but into Christ’s body, the Church.

These particular welcomes are to be distinguished from a distinctive possibility made possible by this interim agreement—services of eucharistic sharing. As in other ecumenical contexts of common celebration, these services require careful planning and are to be undertaken with the guidance and approval of the respective bishops in each area. While significant worship resources such as hymnody can well be drawn from both traditions, it is important not simply to blend elements from the *Lutheran Book of Worship* and the *United Methodist Book of Worship* into some artificial third order. It is recommended that when the service is held in a United Methodist setting, the order of worship is drawn from the *Book of Worship* and a United Methodist minister presides while a Lutheran pastor preaches. In a Lutheran setting, these assignments would be reversed. “Concelebration”—saying together or parceling out the Words of Institution by ministers from both traditions—is not appropriate, although ministers of both churches should share in distributing the elements.

When United Methodists and Lutherans share in the Eucharist, either in a local congregation of either church or in a common celebration, they have the opportunity to learn from and respect each other’s traditions. We encourage teaching to prepare the members of both our churches to know what to expect in the practice of the other’s communities. At two points, prior awareness of the other’s history and practice will be especially helpful.

The invitation:

Neither the ELCA nor the UMC practice “closed communion;” both churches recognize that at the table of Christ it is Christ who welcomes us. Congregations of both churches extend a broad invitation to receive the Eucharist, wanting both to invite frequent and confident participation among their own members and to embrace other Christians worshipping with them. In both communities, baptism normally precedes reception of Holy Communion. The common expectation is that an unbaptized person drawn to participate in the Eucharist will be encouraged toward baptism; both churches further believe that the sacrament is not dishonored if it is received by an unbaptized person.

Lutherans, with their trust in Christ’s presence in the sacrament, can honor the Wesleyan confidence in

its role as a “converting ordinance”—understanding that historically in Methodist traditions this role was first and primarily the conversion of the baptized. United Methodists, on the other hand, can appreciate the strong Lutheran expectation of baptism.

The wine:

United Methodists, while speaking of the “bread and wine” of the meal, use unfermented juice of the grape. While this practice does not today always reflect a complete abstinence from all forms of alcoholic beverages, it preserves the Wesleyan commitment to be as open as possible to all who might come to the table, including those for whom alcohol might provide a danger or temptation. While many Lutheran congregations also provide grape juice or

unfermented wine as an alternative, Lutherans have more emphasized the historical and ecumenical continuities which wine provides, as well as the richness and multivalences of its symbolic associations. Defense of each tradition has in the past included some disparagement of the other, but these practices are certainly not church-dividing nor even fully incompatible.

We invite planners of common celebrations to provide for both alcoholic wine and grape juice. For celebrations according to one tradition, it is important to help worshipers to know what to expect so that they can respond to the welcome they receive with honor to the practice they find. In particular, United Methodists who do not wish to receive alcoholic wine can be confident that they are fully participating in the Eucharist if they receive only the bread.