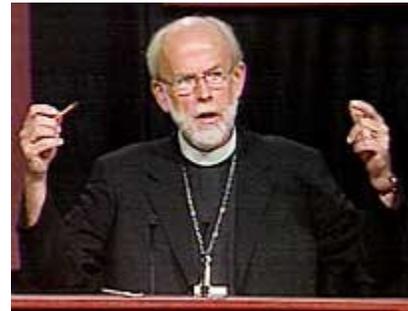


An Ecumenical Agenda Taking Us to 2013: The Tasks before Us

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Mark S. Hanson, Presiding Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

I really am glad to be here. If you hear nothing else before you eat or leave, hear my profound words of gratitude - and I think I speak on behalf of my colleagues who are heads of communion - for your leadership in the various expressions of the church in which you lead, and work, and serve. In one sense, the folks gathered in this room reflect what I think Our Savior longed for and prayed for - that we might all be one. And you have heard that prayer. It is your fervent prayer. It is reflected in your strong leadership, your visionary leadership, and for that I give thanks. And I would ask you to express your gratitude to one another, before you leave, by clapping for the efforts of the Spirit working through this assembly in bringing unity to Christ's Church - can you thank yourselves?



So I am going to tell you what I am going to try to do in 45 minutes. I am going to try to set some foundation for how a Lutheran, ecumenist, presiding bishop approaches this task. Then I am going to begin to look ahead at the ecumenical landscape and where it seems to be emerging, changing. I am going to point out eight facets or factors that need to be addressed and have been in this week before I get to the more predictable facets of the landscape, like bilaterals and reception, conciliar ecumenism, interfaith relationships, and the development of new leadership; and then I am going to conclude. And, if we can't do that all in 45 minutes, you can call our office and on the website we'll somehow put the part of the address you didn't hear.

Being asked to look ahead reminds me of one of our seminary professors whom I asked to predict the future of the ecumenical movement. He looked me straight in the eye and said, "Well, I am neither a prophet, nor a prophet's son, and I certainly work for a non-profit organization..." So what I am about to engage in certainly comes under the realm of speculation, but I know that there are enough signals on the ever-changing horizon of the ecumenical landscape that I think I can look at those accomplishments and have some confidence about what I am going to say. One of the primary responsibilities of the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is the call to serve on behalf of 5.1 million Lutheran Christians as its chief ecumenical officer. And I take that part of my calling very seriously and very joyfully and enter it with a great deal of advent expectant hope.

Before looking ahead, permit a brief primer on how a Lutheran - at least this Lutheran - approaches the ecumenical task. As I keep reminding my colleagues within the ELCA, Lutheranism is first and foremost a theological movement within the one holy catholic and apostolic Church, and is grounded in its 16th century context. Luther's angst over the existential question, "What is my posture coram Deo?" was one indication of the emphasis on the salvation of the individual. Thus, from the Lutheran Reformers the good news contained in the doctrine of justification by grace through faith emerged as the primary expression of the Gospel of Jesus Christ - indeed, Luther termed it the doctrine by which the church stands or falls. That liberating Gospel of God's freely given love in Jesus Christ is made available whenever and wherever the people of God gather around the Word proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered. In order for the faithful to receive this saving message, the Lutheran Reformers taught, Christ instituted the Church and the ordained ministry as servants of the Gospel. For Luther, everything, apart from the right proclamation of the Word and administration of the sacraments, was negotiable, giving Lutheranism a certain kind of "ecclesiological flexibility" in ordering the Church's ministry and in relating to other Christians.

Precisely these theological commitments serve as the foundation for the ELCA's 1991 statement on its ecumenical work, [Ecumenism: The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#). This document states clearly that the ELCA, a confessional church, is evangelical, is catholic, and is ecumenical. The statement declares, "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. (Section II C)" The document commits the ELCA to reach out in several directions in order to work for the unity of Christ's people. It states clearly that the ELCA 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. (Section II D)" In essence, the ELCA has declared that we will enter into bilateral conversation with any denomination seeking to work toward the establishment of a relationship of full communion. We are profoundly grateful for our current full communion relationships with five other denominations.

With that theological hermeneutic and with the ELCA statement on ecumenism in mind, it is possible for Lutheran Christians to make a number of practical theological assertions. First, it allows us the opportunity to decide how best to order our lives together for the sake of mission and ministry in the time and place in which we find ourselves. So it was possible for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to decide to enter the historic succession of bishops in order to establish a relationship of full communion with The Episcopal Church. At the same time, however, because Lutherans are not committed to the necessity of the historic succession of bishops as the only form of exercising the ministry of oversight, it is possible for the ELCA to be in a relationship of full communion with three members of the Reformed family of churches who do not have bishops exercising episcopé. However, for Lutherans, in both cases, the premise for establishing full communion rests on agreement on the essential doctrines of the Christian faith in order to safeguard the right preaching of the Word and celebration of the sacraments.

A second set of premises related to the sacraments rests in the following assertions. First, the sacrament of Holy Baptism, administered in the name of the Triune God with God's Word of promise, water, and the Holy Spirit, incorporates members of the human family into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and makes them members of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Second, as members of that one church, all the baptized, whatever age or tradition, are welcome to receive the Eucharist at a Lutheran altar. For finally it is at the table of the Lord that the faithful are forgiven, nourished in the faith, and united in Christ with all others who bear Christ's name and who are Christ's Body in and for the sake of the world. Thus, the sacrament of the altar is not simply a sign of our oneness in the faith, but rather - as the means of God's grace - it is also a source of our unity in Christ for the sake of our common Christian witness in the world.

Clearly those Lutheran presumptions are a challenge to much of Christian tradition, especially as it has been articulated by Pope John Paul II in his most recent encyclical letter, *Ecclesia De Eucharistia*. Yet, I make these assertions not only based on my Lutheran theological commitments but upon my personal experience. I remain convinced that the opportunity to share the Eucharist with my Episcopal brothers and sisters through the arrangement of interim eucharistic sharing quickened the pace which led to establishing a relationship of full communion only 19 years later. As you know, in the history of the Church, 19 years is but the batting of the eye.

As we look to the future of the ecumenical landscape, we do so with tri-focal lenses. In my case the first lens is the tradition - scripture, the Confessions, theology, the liturgy, and the statement on ecumenism; the second lens is our current ecumenical context; and the third lens is the future. We receive the future as God's gift, trusting that the Holy Spirit continues to work in us and through us to manifest the unity we have in Christ for the sake of God's mission in the world. Before looking at the more defined facets of the ecumenical landscape such as bilaterals, reception, and the conciliar movement, I would like to share an admittedly subjective naming of other factors, forces, and questions which may have significant impact on the future of ecumenism.

Laity:

To what extent will laity be patient with the sometimes tedious, yet important, work of theological conversations necessary in order to manifest greater unity in the Body of Christ? Can "grass roots ecumenism," or what Walter Cardinal Kasper calls "spiritual ecumenism," be affirmed and even encouraged? Will laity who pray together, study scripture in ecumenical gatherings, and work on community service projects be patient with the pace of church bodies moving toward Eucharistic sharing and the interchangeability of clergy and members? Has interest in interfaith questions and relationships taken priority for laity over a strong commitment to Christian unity? Are we witnessing a turning inward, as laity become more preoccupied with what nourishes and sustains personal faith in anxious and troubled times?

Language:

How can the phrase "full communion" be understood in its nuanced, ecumenical meaning, when it tends to imply for many eucharistic hospitality and sharing? Will Christians increasingly find unity with others on the basis of the language of personal piety and even political persuasion, more than unity based upon agreement in doctrine? Does commonality of personal faith language create deeper bonds of unity than more formal church-to-church full communion agreements? Have we been clear about the meaning of reconciled diversity, differentiated consensus, and convergence in our ecumenical work?

Issues of Justice, Peace, and Personal Morality:

To what extent is the ecumenical landscape being redefined by the creation of movements and organizations around issues of justice and/or personal morality, rather than the joining of church bodies in councils of churches and/or full communion relationships? In other words, is agreement on significant theological categories becoming less of a priority than agreement on what constitutes a just way to peace in the world? Will local, national, or global councils of churches make faith-and-order work less of a priority as they call members to work for justice and peace? Will the voices of religious leaders speaking on public policy issues - often contrary to the prevailing positions held by members - impact their ability to lead efforts to achieve greater unity in the church?

Secularism, the Privatization of Faith, and Tolerance:

In the current issue of *Atlantic*, Jonathan Rauch argues that "apathism" is the most significant description of American religious life. Others would argue we remain a deeply spiritual people, yet increasingly not wanting to be denominationally identified. Tolerance seems to be the highest virtue when living with diversity in an increasingly pluralistic context. Yet tolerance always seems to imply an imbalance in power relationships. My being tolerant seems to communicate that I will endure/suffer your right to believe and practice as you do. As one professor of Jewish studies asked, "How can we move from tolerance to mystery, to perceiving God in the other, to trusting God is always revealing something more?" If any or all of this is correct, what does it mean for an ecumenism that is neither based upon eclecticism or relativism, but a critical pluralism? As we look at the place in society and in faith communities of those who are in their 20s, what hypothesis - if not conclusion - might we draw about the future of the ecumenical movement? If it is true they are more interested in making an impact through serving others than preoccupied with the future of religious institutions, and if they long to experience God more than understand God, how will those priorities shape our ecumenical work and the involvement of those in the emerging generation?

Sexuality:

How will we respond to those who argue that sexuality - more specifically the place of persons who are gay or lesbian in ministry - is the church-defining, church-dividing, church-uniting question of our day? How will each church body address these questions, as well as the place of women in ministry, in a manner that is attentive to the ecumenical and global implication of their conversations and decisions? Is it possible to look upon our conversations regarding human sexuality as the church taking back from the culture a gift God gives to every human being in creation? Can we acknowledge that few of us were prepared in our family of origins to have such conversations? What understanding of the authority of scripture and which biblical hermeneutical principles will inform our discourse and decisions?

Finances, Mission:

As church bodies experience financial challenges and seek greater clarity regarding the mission to which God calls us and the Holy Spirit gifts us, who will speak in a clear voice for a continued commitment to ecumenism? Will the desire to find "successful" models for parish ministry move us away from the challenging but important work of ecumenical dialogue, and into coalitions of congregations whose allegiance to methodologies of ministry is greater than to historical traditional theological categories and liturgical practice? More specifically, what will be the place of fast-growing, large membership congregations on the emerging ecumenical landscape?

Baptism:

Can we do more serious work on the meaning of baptism and its unfolding foundation for Christian witness and service in the world? Admittedly, this would be more problematic in some ecumenical conversations than others. Yet talking about mission in God's world in the context of the vocation of the baptized and even contemplating ecumenical baptismal remembrances, if not joint services of baptism, might give renewed energy to our ecumenical work.

Local Ecumenism:

How do we not diminish the significance of local ecumenical endeavors? I believe every congregation should be encouraged, if not expected, to be involved in concrete ways of expressing our unity, experiencing our unity, and exploring our unity. We in national and regional leadership should applaud such actions and not convey that somehow they are a lesser form of ecumenism.

Now let us turn to the central facets of the ecumenical landscape.

The Tasks before Us: Bilateral Dialogue

I trust that bilateral dialogues will remain a significant part of the ecumenical landscape. In [*Ecclesia De Eucharistia*](#), Pope John Paul has set before us all the task of engaging with renewed vigor in bilateral dialogues in order to address the two major vexing issues that separate us: the doctrine of ministry and the place of the Petrine ministry in the life of the whole church. Without minimizing the significant issues the encyclical raises, I trust it is possible for us to receive *Ecclesia De Eucharistia* with a sense of hopeful expectation. The threads of a commitment to the unity of Christ's whole Church and of eucharistic hospitality at the appropriate time are woven throughout this encyclical letter. In that sense it is a clarion call to all the churches to address in the appropriate theological forums the matters of apostolic succession; the relationship of the ministries of bishops, presbyters, and deacons; and the role and authority of the Bishop of Rome. These are not simple matters easily to be resolved, and they lie at the heart of the discussion between all the Christian traditions - but they are issues that should be constructively addressed in parishes, among ecumenical gatherings of clergy and interested laity, and by the officially appointed dialogue committees on the regional and international levels. The process of receiving the work of the dialogues must begin before the dialogues are completed, so that the results of the dialogue can be received joyfully and be understood fully in our parishes and judicatories. I remain hopeful that the U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue presently working under the theme "The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries" will be able to break some new ground in these matters.

As I communicated to Cardinal Kasper in his April 2002 visit and again on my recent journey to the Vatican, it is my hope that Lutherans and Roman Catholics can work toward a joint celebration in 2017 - the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. It would be wonderful if such an occasion could acknowledge the gifts of the Reformation, but also become a time for eucharistic hospitality being extended to our two church bodies. Is it possible for the differentiated consensus that enabled Lutherans and Roman Catholics to sign the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification also to guide us in our ongoing work on ministry and ecclesiology?

There are other bilateral dialogues that cry out for resumption or initiation. I'm thinking in particular of conversations with the historic Black churches who, even though they are firmly committed to the process and timetable of Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC), need to be ecumenical partners with all of us if we are going to begin to speak of the unity of God's people as they are represented in the diverse population of this country. These relationships also need to address the sins of racism and classism if we are indeed going to be witnesses to the Gospel imperatives of justice and peace for all people. One hopeful sign is a conversation planned for fall 2003 on how the methodologies of church-based organizing can be applied to cooperative efforts to end poverty. This dialogue will involve an equal number of leaders from historic African American churches and from church bodies with European-American roots.

The Tasks before Us: Implementation of Full Communion

For those within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, one of the greatest joys has been watching the unfolding of new opportunities for proclaiming the Gospel as relationships of full communion begin to be implemented. I cannot begin to describe for you in this brief address the breadth and depth of the impact these relationships are beginning to have. Cooperative ministries are springing up all around the country, in some cases making it possible for two faith communities to be served by one pastor because that ministry can be shared between the two denominations. As word spreads, it is as though permission has been given for people to find new and exciting ways to be in mission and engage in that mission together. As church leaders tried to envision the various ways in which these relationships would be implemented, no one began to grasp the variety and the creativity with which they are being lived out. When I asked a staff member to explore within our churchwide organization the impact of our full communion agreements, we were delightfully surprised and thankful for his 21-page report! What the future holds remains hidden in the mind of God, but they are, I firmly believe, the fruit of the Risen Christ's Spirit working among us.

There continues to be debate within some ELCA circles regarding the historic episcopate. I look forward to forthcoming conversations among members of the Lutheran World Federation on the study document [The Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church](#).(PDF) I believe it is important to have continued lively theological discussion within our communions, even as we tend to our ecumenical tasks.

So now we look forward to the very real possibility that full communion relationships will begin to "cross-fertilize" themselves, if you will. I'm speaking principally, of course, about the proposal, already approved by the Northern and Southern Provinces of the Moravian Church and coming to The Episcopal Church's General Convention in July, to establish interim eucharistic sharing between those two church bodies, looking to the possibility in the future of establishing a relationship of full communion between them. In the same way, the ELCA is considering the possibility of beginning a formal dialogue with The Christian Church (Disciples in Christ), at least in part because one of our full communion partners, the United Church of Christ, enjoys a relationship of full communion with the Disciples. Will

there be other such relationships? I pray so - and sooner rather than later. I hope it will be possible for Lutherans and Methodists to enter into such a relationship as they have in Norway; Methodists and Anglicans are working hard at the possibility as well. And, of course, if God wills, the multifaceted relationships of full communion represented by the participants in Churches Uniting in Christ may dramatically alter the ecumenical landscape of North America. In this time of reception, it is my hope that we will develop catechetical and devotional guides based upon our agreements. Such a suggestion was first made by Cardinal Kasper as he reflected upon the reception of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by our churches.

The Tasks before Us: The Future of the Conciliar Movement

But, of course, a description of the ecumenical landscape would not be complete without reference of the conciliar movement, both nationally and globally. The proposal to create Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. (CCT) and thus expand the space of ecumenical conversation is a remarkably exciting possibility. To bring many traditions that have historically distanced themselves from ecumenical conversation - such as evangelicals, pentecostals, and some in the Baptist tradition - is fraught with possibility. We also must work and pray that CCT will be able to engage in the serious theological reflection that will be necessary if the future of the ecumenical movement is to be assured. It will also be hard work. The wider the table, the more challenging it becomes to achieve consensus not only on the essentials of the Christian faith, but about social issues as well. Yet I firmly believe that Christians from all traditions have much to learn from one another, that separated from one another we deny ourselves the possibility of seeing the fullness of the one Church of Jesus Christ, and that much in our various traditions will complement - complete - our spiritual journey rather than contradict it.

For all those reasons, and because we all require a forum for working together to promote God's gifts of peace and justice, we need to commit ourselves to the health and vitality of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. (NCCC), along with Church World Service. We cannot assume, at least in the near future, that Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. will be able to provide for the kinds of advocacy and service to the poor and suffering that are accomplished by the NCC and Church World Service. Responsible accountability is a "must" if these enterprises will be vehicles to promote the mission of the churches.

Similar kinds of comments can be made about cooperation on the global level. I hope that a swift and successful establishment of Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. can help spur the attempt to establish the so-called Global Forum. Conceived as an international expansion of the ecumenical space that CCT represents in North America, the Global Forum is a hopeful sign that the work of the World Council of Churches (WCC) can be expanded through this alternative place for theological conversation. I am concerned about the costs of creating and sustaining these various conciliar bodies at a time of economic regression. But we must find a way forward if we are truly to enhance our ecumenical commitments. This is especially true at a time when the churches in the South are expanding at such a rapid pace. As Philip Jenkins has reminded us in *The New Christianity*¹, the ecumenical landscape is rapidly changing as the continual growth of Christianity in the South occurs. That change will present us with numerous challenges and opportunities, which the Spirit of God is inviting us to embrace.

Then there is the future of the confessional conciliar movements. Ironically, at a time when Lutherans are embracing the concept of a communion of churches, at least some would argue that global Anglicanism, for example, is moving from an identity as a communion more to the avenue of becoming a federation of regional churches. Some also argue that a strong commitment to confessional conciliarism will diminish the interdenominational work of the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches. I believe that nothing could be further from the truth. Developing a strong identity for a global faith tradition not only allows that tradition to enjoy the way it is inculturated in numerous settings around the globe, but it enhances the voice of that communion in relation to others. Global confessional communions that can learn to speak with one voice, albeit in a blended harmony, will begin to enjoy the strong identity Roman Catholics possess as members of one Church.

The Tasks before Us: Interfaith Relationships

In world becoming increasingly diverse, and in light of the events of September 11, 2001, you know as well as I that interfaith relationships will become one of the most important aspects of our work in the decade ahead. Most, if not all, of the traditions represented in this room enjoy an increasingly serious relationship with our Jewish sisters and brothers. I am delighted to report that a day of dialogue this past Tuesday (May 12, 2003) between members of the Reform Jewish community and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was rich in its depth, candid in truthfulness, fulfilling in deepening mutual understanding, and extremely hopeful. I believe the ELCA's 1994 Declaration to the Jewish Community, Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations, and our recent resource entitled Talking Points: Topics in Christian-Jewish Relations contributed to the significance of the day.

Many have begun the work of relating more deeply to Muslims and to other faith traditions. I am grateful to know that an interfaith desk, staffed by a person with direct access to the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, is guaranteed for the immediate future. That person will provide an important service to all of us and to our interfaith partners if our work can be coordinated and thereby enhanced. The risk we run is that this important dimension of our reflection and conversation will replace the energy we presently devote to our ecumenical relationships, which would be catastrophic. We must be committed to interfaith dialogue that neither avoids the volatility of global, regional, and local conflicts nor seeks to minimize the deeply held faith convictions of the participants. At the same time, it is worth pondering the possibility of what Krister Stendahl calls "holy envy," i.e., being open to the possibility that God is involved in the faith of another in ways I cannot even imagine, without diminishing my devotion to Christ.

A participant in our Jewish-Lutheran day of dialogue asked a question applicable to many interfaith conversations: "How can one be a religious person faithful to the tradition in a world in which those religious traditions are increasingly seen in the form of radical fundamentalism?" He then asked an even more provoking question, "How do we remember for the future, so that we move from shame and guilt to responsibility and mutual accountability?" It seems in our interfaith work we may be better beginning with first article conversations. What of our various traditions do we bring to a shared calling as co-creators and stewards of one creation? As we live out our shared vocations, we can begin to explore our differences.

The Tasks before Us: Leadership Development

Last, but by no means least, is the daunting challenge of identifying and equipping those who will succeed us as the ecumenists of the next generation. It is incumbent on every person in this room to seek out and foster our future leaders. Introduce those whom you serve to the exciting results of this present ecumenical age in your preaching and teaching. Encourage young people to think about church vocations, either lay or ordained. Urge judicatory officials to take seriously their appropriately defined roles as ecumenical leaders in the community. Be an advocate for sponsoring ecumenical worship services and joint projects that foster justice in the community. This kind of "ecumenism for life" is a powerful way of saying to the world, "See how they love one another." In every way that you can imagine, keep the ecumenical agenda at the forefront of people's thinking, praying, and acting, so the future will be as bright as has been the immediate past.

Conclusion

You know, and I know, that this address only begins to scratch the surface of the tasks God places before us in our shared ecumenical work. These are heady days, and the future looks bright as well. Of course, we trust ultimately that this work is guided by the Spirit of the Living Christ and represents his will for his Church. I can only affirm with a loud voice the urgings of Cardinal Kasper that we immediately begin to inculcate in all the members of our churches a commitment to a "spiritual ecumenism," an ecumenism grounded in prayer for one another and for the unity of Christ's Church. If personal relationships are what make progress possible in the ecumenical movement, it is prayer that gives this work its power. My prayer today is for you and the work you are called to do for the sake of the whole Body of Christ. May the Risen Christ confirm in you your love for the Church, for all its people, and especially for its Lord and Savior, the Risen Jesus.

¹ Jenkins, Philip. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.