



Report of the Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations Section

Statement of Purpose

The governing description of the Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations (ER) section of the Office of the Presiding Bishop appears in continuing resolution 15.11.B05., printed in Section X of this volume.

Report of Work 2008–2009

One of the five strategic directions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is “to deepen and extend our global, ecumenical, and interfaith relationships for the sake of God’s mission” in the world. The Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations section is charged with upholding this priority by cooperating, discerning, envisioning, and implementing the present and future course of ecumenical and inter-religious relations in the ELCA.

“The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is an active participant in the ecumenical movement, because of its desire for Christian unity.”¹ Full-communication agreements with other church bodies have made Christian unity a closer reality. Continued dialogues with other Christians have deepened understanding and cooperation. In the past few years, inter-religious consultations have added an important dimension to this church’s work and ministry. The future will require attention to longstanding and emerging ecumenical and interfaith models.

Throughout its history, the ELCA has been described as a “bridge” church seeking to build connections with other Christian churches and deeper understanding with inter-religious communities. The foundation for bridge-building is reflected in the statement “Ecumenism: The Vision of the ELCA,” adopted by the 1991 Churchwide Assembly, and this church’s continued commitment to assess its relationships with other Christians and other faith communities.

In February 2008 an important ELCA ecumenical consultation was held. Acting as the ELCA chief ecumenical officer, Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson joined a variety of Lutheran academics, bishops, pastors, lay leaders, and staff in making an assessment of what the ELCA has accomplished, and offered advice on future ecumenical and interfaith directions. The consultation provided guidance for the development of a revised strategic plan, direction for reception and implementation of full-communication agreements and for coordinating committees, and rationale for making decisions about participation in ecumenical councils.

In its strategic plan, the Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations section will make every effort to ensure that ecumenical and inter-religious commitments are furthering the mission and ministry of the ELCA and the whole body of Christ. This includes interpreting and communicating ecumenical advancements through the lenses of grass-roots ecumenism and broad reception. Emphasis will be placed on meeting common cooperative needs with ecumenical and inter-religious partners locally, nationally, and globally.

Reception of Full-Communion Agreements

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has full-communication agreements with five church bodies. In 1997, the “Formula of Agreement” was adopted by the Churchwide Assembly, establishing full communion between the ELCA and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ. Two additional full-communication agreements were approved by the assembly in 1999: “Called to Common Mission” with The Episcopal Church and “Following Our Shepherd to Full Communion” with certain provinces of the Moravian Church in America.

Full-communication coordinating committees for each of the agreements have met regularly to look at common ministries that are being accomplished, to discuss concerns, and to review possibilities for effective implementation of mission opportunities. As the tenth anniversaries of the various full-communication agreements are marked, coordinating committees have reviewed what has been accomplished and have made plans for a more complete reception of the agreements.

During 2008, Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations conducted a survey of synods, churchwide staff, and partners in ecumenical ministry. The survey was entitled “Why It Matters.” The results revealed many areas where full-communication agreements are making a difference. Among areas of cooperation are the interchangeability of ministers, new mission starts, cooperative and shared congregational ministries, global mission training, camping, disaster response, theological training and conversation, youth leadership training and events, stewardship efforts, campus ministries, world hunger projects, chaplaincy, public policy and justice and advocacy support, and other examples of national and regional ministries. Local, shared congregational ministry ranged from joint education and worship to service and outreach ministries.

¹“Ecumenism: The Vision of the ELCA,” 13.

Voting members of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly will have an opportunity to vote on full communion with The United Methodist Church. In April 2008 delegates to the General Conference of The United Methodist Church approved this full-communion agreement with the ELCA, "Confessing Our Faith Together," the first such agreement by that church, by a margin of over 98 percent. The World Methodist Council also affirmed the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" agreement between the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation.

Bilateral Dialogues, Discourses, and Cooperation

Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue

The 11th Round of the U.S. Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue continues under the theme, "The Hope of Eternal Life." Issues identified by the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" are being considered, including purgatory, indulgences, and prayers for the dead. A common statement will be developed in 2009. In addition to the dialogue, an ELCA–Roman Catholic *ad hoc* Committee on the Eucharist will begin formal meetings in 2009. This promising committee will undertake a deeper study of the Holy Eucharist, looking toward a future joint statement. On October 1, 2009, a tenth-anniversary celebration of the signing of the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" will be held in Chicago, Ill., sponsored by the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Lutheran–Orthodox Dialogue

The U.S. Lutheran–Orthodox dialogue completed its third round. The international dialogue completed a Common Statement on the Eucharist entitled "The Mystery of the Church: The Holy Eucharist in the Life of the Church," which was distributed to all member churches of the Lutheran World Federation and Orthodox churches. The next area to be addressed will be ministry.

Lutheran–Mennonite Dialogue

Following the ELCA Church Council's action to approve the "Declaration to the Mennonite Church in the U.S.A.," which apologized for Lutheran contributions to the sixteenth-century persecution of Anabaptists, the Mennonite Church responded with a letter of deep appreciation, stating: "We are deeply moved by this expression. . . . We pray that God will use this gesture to release Lutherans and Mennonites from the past that may have bound us in ways we did not even know." In February 2008 a special meeting was held in Elkhart, Ind., under the theme "Roll the Stone Away and Unbind Him," focused on the raising of Lazarus. Presentations and discussions continued to build on understanding that had been developed in "Right Remembering in Anabaptist–Lutheran Relations." While significant theological differences exist, new relationships have developed, cooperation has deepened, and commitment to dialogue has been affirmed.

African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church Discourse

Representatives of the ELCA and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church came together for a fourth discourse meeting in 2008. The meeting focused on how race shapes the identity of the two churches in the North American context. This is a groundbreaking bilateral conversation between an historic Black church and a predominantly White church in North America. Both churches agreed to develop a common mission statement on the topic and to arrange for task forces to bring both congregations and church leaders together.

Relationship with The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod

Representatives of the ELCA and The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) met in Chicago for two days in November 2008. On the first day, the Lutheran Discussion Panel received and discussed papers from each church body on the current approach to "Gospel outreach in light of post-modern, pluralistic, and relativistic culture." Presentations were made by the Rev. Robert M. Roegner, executive director, LCMS World Mission, and by the Rev. Stephen P. Bouman, executive director, Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission for the ELCA. The Committee on Lutheran Cooperation met the second day to receive and review reports from the two churches' shared ministries: Lutheran World Relief, Lutheran Services in America, and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. A special presentation was given by the Rev. Kevin A. Massey, director for Lutheran Disaster Response. The Rev. Rebecca S. Larson, executive director of the Church in Society unit, presented an update on meetings between the two churches on ways to address concerns and a process for cooperation in Lutheran disaster response.

Two ELCA–LCMS meetings were scheduled for March and September 2009.

Conciliar Relations

Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations is responsible for the administration of this church's relationship to the conciliar agencies of which it is a member.

Lutheran World Federation

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America actively participates and leads in the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson serves in the important role of LWF president. In 2008, the LWF Council met in Tanzania, with an emphasis on climate change and global hunger. The theme "Melting Snow on Mount Kilimanjaro: A Witness of a Suffering Creation" was highlighted in presentations and council actions. The LWF will hold its eleventh assembly in July 2010 in Stuttgart, Germany, with the theme "Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread." Preparation is being made by the 15 ELCA delegates, council members, and staff.

World Council of Churches

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is undergoing major transitions in organization and leadership. The ELCA has been an active participant in the work of the WCC. Vice President Carlos E. Peña and Ms. Kathryn M. Lohre are members of the WCC Central Committee. In December 2008 the United States WCC Conference held a major meeting in Washington, D.C., with ELCA presenters and participation.

National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

Dr. Michael Kinnamon has renewed leadership of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. (NCCC). His theological and administrative skills and his attention to relationships have brought encouragement for this council of churches. Ecumenical and Inter-Religious staff members continue to serve on the NCCC Governing Board, Interfaith Commission, Faith and Order Commission, and related areas. The November 2008 annual meeting showed increased attendance and greater support for the direction of the NCCC.

Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A.

Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. (CCT) was formed as an expanded ecumenical association. Members of the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox churches, Pentecostal and Evangelical churches, and mainline Protestant churches make up the membership of CCT. Domestic poverty, sharing faith stories, and building relationships form the current focus of the association. The Rev. Claire S. Burkat, bishop of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, serves on the CCT Steering Committee on behalf of the ELCA. Annual meetings have been held in the Washington, D.C., area.

Churches Uniting In Christ

Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) was organized to seek unity among denominations. It is a successor of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU). The ELCA is a partner in mission and dialogue of CUIC and not a member church. The ELCA's participation primarily has been related to the work of the anti-racism task force. In 2008, a decision was made to evaluate the feasibility of the continuation of CUIC or options for a renewed approach. Decisions will be made in 2009 about the future of the organization.

Lutheran Ecumenical Representative Network

The Lutheran Ecumenical Representative Network (LERN) is composed of representatives from each of the synods of this church. This active network provides support for ecumenical and inter-religious ministry within the synods, at the National Workshop on Christian Unity, and in communication with the ELCA ecumenical and inter-religious relations staff and ministry.

Resources

"Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Life" is the Web-based newsletter that is shared among this church's membership and with ecumenical partners. It offers an entryway into the life of everyday ecumenical and interfaith activity in the ELCA and the world. A free subscription to this bimonthly newsletter is available on the Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations homepage at www.elca.org. Other helpful materials are available through the "Resource" link on the ER homepage, including new resources "Your Guide to Ecumenical Life" and "Your Guide to Inter-Religious Life," which are available for free download.

Inter-Religious Relations

Mr. Michael R. Trice, director for ecumenical formation and inter-religious relations, is the ER staff person primarily responsible for inter-religious work.

A transformative inter-religious document entitled *Nostra Aetate* (1965) was approved at Vatican II, the Roman Catholic council. This document paved the way for both Roman Catholic and Protestant re-imagining of relationships with faiths external to the Christian tradition. The next three decades witnessed a marked increase of inter-religious activity, particularly between the Christian and Jewish communities.

Offices for ecumenical relations in Protestant denominations in the U.S. established assorted *ad hoc* panels for dialogue with the Jewish community. These dialogues were guarded in scope, with Jews normally not engaging in theological discourse with Christians due to the anti-Judaic polemics that have been so much part of the Christian heritage over the past two millennia. These Christian-Jewish tables were established on the relative periphery of the primary work of the quest for Christian unity. As a consequence, inter-religious activity was perceived as a second-order discourse that had provisional but not central status to the life of the Church. The former ELCA Department for Ecumenical Affairs took seriously this new inter-religious dimension of its work and established a Consultative Panel for Christian-Jewish Relations. The Consultative Panel continued the work of the Lutheran World Federation, and the latter's 1984 challenge that Lutherans around the world address the scourge of Luther's anti-Judaic writings. At the ELCA's 1994 Churchwide Assembly, through the leadership of the Consultative Panel for Christian-Jewish Relations, the ELCA publicly repudiated Luther's anti-Judaic writings and thereby established a new era of Lutheran-Jewish relations in the United States.

After 2001, numerous Protestant denominations in the United States began to take more seriously their relationships with the emerging Muslim communities in North America. At the same time, local settings witnessed a rise in dialogue and engagement with adherents of religions external to the Abrahamic faiths. Denominational offices began to make inter-religious relations a central aspect of their work. In 2005, the ELCA changed the name of the Department for

Ecumenical Affairs to the Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations Section in order to reflect this change. In 2006, a Consultative Panel for Lutheran–Muslim Relations was established. Inter-religious relations became a central feature alongside ecumenical relations in the work of the ELCA.

In 2006 a primary resource on Lutheran–Jewish–Muslim relations was created, “Windows for Understanding: Jewish, Muslim, Lutheran Relations.” Today, staff members co-lead efforts on the National Council of Churches Interfaith Commission, and two national dialogues have been established: the National Muslim–Christian Initiative and the Jewish–Christian Dialogue Table, which are led by staff from the ELCA and other churches. The ELCA is currently constructing a primary resource for Lutheran–Muslim relations entitled “Talking Points,” which itself follows “Talking Points for Jewish–Lutheran Relations,” compiled after 1994. Both resources are for use in congregations with a goal of enhancing relationships with Jewish and Muslim partners in local contexts. Likewise, a course of study in Geneva, Switzerland, will begin in Fall 2009 in which assistants to bishops will participate in a formation event on global ecumenical and inter-religious trends. Emphasis will be placed on how synods enable congregations to strengthen and nurture their inter-religious activity (from local public policy to inter-religious dialogue).

Numerous inter-religious resources were published between 1994 and 2007. Each of these reflects a growing awareness of how Lutherans operate as theological and moral agents in relation to inter-religious partners in the United States and around the world. The Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations section has taken a leadership role in inter-religious activities, from the U.S. Religions for Peace to the formation of emerging clergy in ecumenical and inter-religious relationships through a January course of study on these topics that began in 2004 and continues today.

“Ecumenism: The Vision of the ELCA” and attendant models have been formative for both Lutherans and ecumenical partners in the past 17 years. A proposal for a second “declaration” is now being constructed. If the Churchwide Assembly were to consider affirming a “Declaration for Inter-Religious Relations” in 2011, it would provide the theological groundwork, commensurate principles, and contemporary models for the ELCA to emerge publicly in the coming decades with a commitment to interfaith relations.

Donald J. McCoid, *executive*