



Report of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations

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25 YEARS TOGETHER IN CHRIST

Statement of Purpose

“The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is an active participant in the ecumenical movement, because of its desire for Christian unity.”¹ Full communion 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 the ELCA’s work and ministry. The future will require attention to longstanding and emerging ecumenical and inter-religious trends and 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 people of other faith communities.

Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations of the Office of the Presiding Bishop makes 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 grassroots ecumenism and broad reception. Emphasis is 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 communion agreements with six church bodies. The 1997 Churchwide Assembly adopted the “Formula of Agreement,” establishing full communion between the ELCA and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Reformed Church in America, and United Church of Christ. Two additional full communion agreements were approved by the 1999 Churchwide Assembly: “Called to Common Mission” with The Episcopal Church and “Following Our Shepherd to Full Communion” with certain provinces of the Moravian Church in America. In 2009, the ELCA entered into the full communion agreement, “Confessing Our Faith Together,” with The United Methodist Church.

Full communion coordinating committees for each of the agreements have met regularly to look at common ministries that are being shared, to address concerns, and to review possibilities for effective implementation of mission opportunities. Three-year strategic plans have been established by each of the coordinating committees.

In the past two years, the fruits of full communion have continued to grow. The ELCA has realized a broadened full communion reception through: shared national staffing in international advocacy, planning, and concrete developments with other churches for mission and ministry; increased military and federal chaplaincy training; shared congregational and pastoral ministries in many locations; addressing together how Scripture informs moral discernment; reviewing ecumenically how the churches can support congregational renewal; providing North American tables for sharing and witness; and addressing concerns and issues in relationships.

The leadership of churchwide staff and synodical staff continues to provide the foundation for advancing what this church is able to do in ministry with its full communion partners.

Bilateral Dialogues, Discourses, and Cooperation

Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue

Round XI of the U.S. Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue was completed, and “The Hope of Eternal Life” was published as a result. Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson, the Rev. Jessica R. Crist, bishop of the Montana Synod and chair of the Conference of Bishops, the Rev. Robert D. Hofstad, bishop of the Southwestern Washington Synod, and the Rev. Donald J. McCoid presented copies of the book to the Council for Promoting Christian Unity when they visited at the Vatican in 2012. Round XII began in the fall of 2011. The topic is “Ministries of Teaching: Sources, Shapes, and Essential Contents.” The dialogue is addressing the Bible as authoritative source in both churches’ teaching ministry and the essential creedal and ethical contents transmitted by both churches’ teaching ministries.

One of the most significant developments in the ELCA's ecumenical life with the Roman Catholic Church is the acceptance of a proposal to prepare a Declaration on the Way (to unity). Harvesting the statements and documents of nearly 50 years of dialogue, the goal is to put them in the form of a declaration for mutual affirmation by the ELCA and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). This work will be shared with The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Vatican for consideration as a declaration. With the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation approaching, the U.S. work will be completed prior to 2017. In addition to two co-chairs, three scholars appointed by the USCCB and three scholars appointed by the ELCA are serving on this special committee, with staff providing assistance.

Lutheran–Orthodox Dialogue

The Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission, an international dialogue, is addressing the topic of ministry. Initial papers have addressed biblical understandings of ministry in both the Old Testament and New Testament. Patristic foundations, theological sharing, and the development of ministry through the centuries in both traditions will be considered, as well as areas of differences in practice and understanding.

Lutheran–Mennonite Dialogue

In April 2012, ELCA staff and invited guests attended a Lutheran-Mennonite Day of Conversation in Elkhart, Indiana. The purpose of the day was to commemorate several years of Lutheran-Mennonite dialogue. Events included an ecumenical tree dedication with representatives from both churches, dialogue on continued relations, and engagement. The day concluded with a lecture, "Grace and Gratitude: Reconciliation among Mennonites and Lutherans," by Dr. Kathryn L. Johnson, former assistant general secretary for ecumenical affairs of the LWF. Area dialogues in the United States have assisted with the growing relationship between the two churches.

African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church Discourse

A historic ELCA-African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church Summit took place in Salisbury, North Carolina, in October 2011. The Summit was held at Hood Seminary to celebrate relationships, explore common mission, and to present a "Mission Statement." It was the culmination of a dialogue between neighbors—the North Carolina Synod and the AME Zion Church seminary offices. The dialogue presents an innovative model for ecumenism that begins at the grass roots and grows to the national level. Senior Bishop George W.C. Walker Sr. of the AME Zion Church addressed the 2011 Churchwide Assembly, and Presiding Bishop Hanson addressed the AME Zion Church General Conference in 2012.

Relationships with U.S. Lutheran Churches

Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod

Leaders from the ELCA and Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) met as the Committee on Lutheran Cooperation in Chicago in February 2012 to discuss church-to-church cooperation and to share denominational updates. LCMS leaders indicated that their church had ended its participation in cooperative work with ELCA churchwide staff, including areas of support and training of military and federal chaplaincy, response to HIV and AIDS, and national coordination of recovery after a disaster. At the time, there was an agreement to continue communication and information sharing. Subsequently the LCMS has indicated that there would not be continued meetings nor an agreed upon charter for communication and sharing.

North American Lutheran Church

The 2011 Churchwide Assembly voted to extend an invitation to the North American Lutheran Church (NALC) to have a dialogue about relationships and communication to "...strive for a mutual relationship, where possible, for both the ELCA and the NALC." Leaders from the ELCA and NALC met February 6–7, 2012, in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Conciliar Relations

Lutheran World Federation

The ELCA actively participates in and provides leadership to The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), a communion of 143 churches in 79 countries with more than 70 million members. The Rev. Martin Junge is serving as the general secretary of the LWF, and the Rev. Munib A. Younan, bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, is serving as president.

After its recent restructuring, a new strategic plan is guiding the work of the LWF. The LWF Council met in Bogotá, Colombia, in 2012, addressing several pressing global issues and visiting in the local area. The council also met in Geneva, Switzerland, in June 2013. The ELCA provides significant support through the LWF. LWF ministries of care touch people each day throughout the world, especially in places where there are refugees and human need.

World Council of Churches

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is a fellowship of 349 churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to Scripture and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Rev. Olav Fykse Tveit, a Lutheran from Norway, is serving as the general secretary. Under the theme “God of Life, lead us to justice and peace,” the WCC will hold its 10th Assembly in Busan, Korea, October 30–November 8, 2013. ELCA Vice President Carlos E. Peña and Ms. Kathryn M. Lohre are members of the WCC Central Committee.

National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA

The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC) is a communion of 37 member churches in the United States, representing over 45 million Christians. Ms. Lohre serves as the president of the NCC—the first Lutheran and the youngest woman to hold this position. The NCC is completing an 18-month transition to re-envision and restructure itself in ways that are responsible to its legacy and responsive to the rapidly changing ecclesial and ecumenical context in the United States. Four foci will drive the future work of the Council: theological study and dialogue (including issues of Faith and Order); interfaith relations and dialogue; joint action and advocacy for justice and peace; and education, formation, and leadership development. In November 2013, the governing board will adopt new bylaws, at which time the heads of communion will begin to serve as the governing board for an interim period of two years.

Christian Churches Together

Christian Churches Together (CCT) was formed as an expanded ecumenical association in 2006. Members of the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox churches, Pentecostal and Evangelical churches, Historic Black churches, and mainline Protestant churches make up the membership of CCT. The Rev. Claire S. Burkat, bishop of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, serves on the CCT Steering Committee on behalf of the ELCA.

CCT met January 29–February 1, 2013, in Austin, Texas, on the issue of immigration. Opportunities to hear from DREAMers and immigrant workers were parts of the conference. A statement was released calling on the churches and elected leaders to act on immigration reform.

On April 15, 2013, CCT convened a special gathering of church leaders in Birmingham, Alabama, at which the churches offered a formal response to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” 50 years later. The response was signed by heads of churches and Christian organizations and presented to the Rev. Bernice A. King in a ceremonial action.

Churches Uniting in Christ

Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) was organized to seek unity among churches and racial justice. It is a successor of the Consultation on Church Union. The ELCA is a Partner in Mission and Dialogue of CUIC and not a member church. The ELCA’s participation has been related primarily to the work of the anti-racism task force. CUIC’s coordinating committee met January 24–25, 2013, in Louisville, Kentucky, to begin developing a shared narrative of the history of CUIC as a means to gain mutual understanding around issues of race and ministry.

Inter-Religious Relations

Discover Islam DVDs and Study Guide

In late 2011, complimentary copies of a 6-disk DVD series titled *Discover Islam*—produced by Discover Islam USA and endorsed by the Islamic Society of North America—were mailed to ELCA synod offices, seminaries, and members of the Lutheran Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Representatives Network. Authored by Ms. Carol Schersten LaHurd, a study guide was produced by the ELCA Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Muslim Relations and A Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. The study guide is available for free download at www.ELCA.org/ecumenical. In exchange for feedback, complimentary DVD sets can be ordered at www.discoverislam.com/ELCA.

Sikh Temple Shootings in Oak Creek, Wisconsin

In response to the shootings at the Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, on August 5, 2012, Presiding Bishop Hanson wrote a letter of sympathy and concern to the World Sikh Council–America Region. In this letter, he extended an invitation for dialogue to our Sikh neighbors. Additionally, the ELCA submitted written testimony in a “Statement for the Record” that was read aloud at the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on hate crimes and domestic extremism on September 19, 2012. The hearing, chaired by Senator Dick Durbin (D-III.), was spurred by the Sikh Temple shootings. Presiding Bishop Hanson and Ms. Lohre co-authored an op-ed commending the hearings, published in the *Washington Post*.

Letter to U.S. Congress

Presiding Bishop Hanson was one of 15 signatories to a letter to Congress which challenged unconditional U.S. military aid to Israel, sent October 5, 2012. The letter created significant tensions with Jewish partners, agencies, and communities, resulting in the suspension of two national dialogue roundtables sponsored by the NCC, as well as difficulties in local relations in various places. Presiding Bishop Hanson has provided ecumenical leadership, engaging with national Jewish partners to tend to relationships, to dialogue about the content of the letter, and to restart the dialogues.

Consultative Panels for Lutheran-Jewish and Lutheran-Muslim Relations

The ELCA Consultative Panels on Lutheran-Muslim and Lutheran-Jewish Relations met separately and together in October 2012. Together the panels developed an idea for an interfaith case studies project, with the ultimate goal of publishing a volume for congregational use, along with a theological framework for the praxis of inter-religious relations. The project, launched in 2013, will seek to identify the challenges and opportunities of inter-religious engagement, as well as theological and practical questions and concerns being raised throughout this church. Cases will include the wide spectrum of inter-religious relations and will be solicited from a variety of ministry contexts, including congregations, campus ministries, community-based ministries, and chaplaincies.

Lutheran Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Representatives Network

The Lutheran Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Representatives Network 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 (NWCU), and in communication with the ELCA Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations staff.

The executive board meets monthly by conference call to hear updates on national and international ecumenical and inter-religious relations, to share updates from throughout the synods, and to plan communications throughout the ELCA. The executive board members share information and encourage participation in ecumenical and inter-religious events, especially the NWCU.

Resources

“Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Life” or “E-Life” is the email-based newsletter that is shared among this church’s membership and with ecumenical partners. It offers an entry point into ecumenical and inter-religious activity in the ELCA and in the world. A free subscription to this monthly newsletter, as well as other helpful information, materials, and resources are available on the Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations website at www.ELCA.org/ecumenical.

Remembrance

On July 4, 2012, the Rev. Randall R. Lee, former director for ecumenical and inter-religious relations, passed away. We mourn with people throughout the ecumenical movement the loss of a great colleague, friend, and mentor.

The Rev. Donald J. McCoid, *executive for ecumenical and inter-religious relations*

Ms. Kathryn M. Lohre, *director for ecumenical and inter-religious relations*

Endnote

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