



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

What does "Full Communion" mean for Lutheran worship?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

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In 1997, 1999 and 2009, the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America approved important ecumenical agreements. These agreements established a relationship called "full communion" between the ELCA and other Christian denominations. As stated by the [ELCA on its website](#):

Full communion is when two churches develop a relationship based on a common confessing of the Christian faith and a mutual recognition of baptism and sharing of the Lord's Supper.

This does not mean that two churches merge; rather, in reaching agreements, churches also respect differences. These denominations likewise jointly worship, may exchange clergy, and also share a commitment to evangelism, witness and service in the world.

The ELCA's became full communion partners with the following denominations as follows:

- In 1997, the ELCA became a full communion partner with: the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ.
- In 1999, the ELCA became a full communion partner with: the Moravian Church in America and the Episcopal Church.
- In 2009, the ELCA became a full communion partner with: the United Methodist Church.

In its policy statement [The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#) which was adopted by the Churchwide Assembly in 1991, the ELCA described "full communion" this way:

For the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the characteristics of full communion are theological and missiological implications of the Gospel that allow variety and flexibility. These characteristics stress that the church act ecumenically

for the sake of the world, not for itself alone. They will include at least the following, some of which exist at earlier stages:

1. a common confession of the Christian faith;
2. a mutual recognition of Baptism and a sharing of the Lord's Supper, allowing for joint worship and an exchangeability of members;
3. a mutual recognition and availability of ordained ministers to the service of all members of church in full communion, subject only but always to the disciplinary regulation of the other churches;
4. a common commitment to evangelism, witness, and service;
5. a means of common decision making on critical common issues of faith and life;
6. a mutual lifting of any condemnations that exist between churches.

For worship, this new relationship of "full communion" means that although the participating churches remain individual denominations (they are not merged into one church body), they welcome individuals who are members of the other churches participating in this new relationship to worship as if they were members of that church and encourage them to receive the sacraments in their celebrations. It also means that in this new relationship, the clergy of the participating churches may be invited to serve in the other churches (according to the disciplinary regulation of the church in which they are invited to serve).

The guidelines provided for the churches counsel:

Among the best ways to express the relationship of full communion is for congregations to share the form of worship they use by inviting the participation of congregations of the other church bodies to worship with them on a regular basis.

The long process of church-to-church conversation and dialogue that preceded the approval of these agreements has revealed a large body of worship practices, texts, and music that are held in common by the participating church bodies. Full communion means valuing what is held in common as well as coming to appreciate what is distinctive about the worship of the congregations of these churches and their members.

Does full communion mean that Lutherans will have to worship exactly as Presbyterians, Reformed, United Church of Christ, Moravian, Episcopal or United Methodist churches do? No. All the agreements as adopted make that clear. The agreements cite article 7 of the Augsburg Confession: "For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments."








What will happen in the future? Who can say? Full communion commits the churches involved to consult seriously with one another on matters important to their life and mission. Worship falls into that category. As we live together in full communion, we may find ways in which to share more in common. We may also find ways in which to appreciate, value, and share our distinctiveness as Lutherans and the contribution it may make to our full communion partners.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ↻ [How do we worship and pray with other Christians and Non-Christians?](#)

To find out more about the ELCA's full-communion partners:

-  [ELCA website](#)
-  [Presbyterian Church \(U.S.A.\)](#)
-  [The Reformed Church in America](#)
-  [The United Church of Christ](#)
-  [The Moravian Church in America](#)
-  [The Episcopal Church](#)
-  [The United Methodist Church](#)

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