



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Worship Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

What is the relationship between the ELCA and the Roman Catholic Church?

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.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

The ELCA is committed to Christian unity. As stated in its constitution, the ELCA seeks to “manifest the unity given to the people of God by living together in the love of Christ and by joining with other Christians in prayer and action to express and preserve the unity which the Spirit gives” (ELCA Constitution 4.02.f).

What follows below is a summary of formal, bilateral conversations and documents that describe our relationship as two church bodies. Yet on a more informal level, the relationship between Catholics and the ELCA can often be seen in our worship. We share the essential pattern of worship and much liturgical renewal in the last decades has included partnership between Lutheran and Roman Catholics. Both ancient and contemporary hymnody binds us as Christians. Consider that *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* includes nine hymns by Roman Catholic sister Delores Dufner, OSB and that *Gather*, a hymnal used in many Roman Catholic assemblies, includes Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress.” (*Gather*, third edition, #526)

We know that Lutheran/Catholic (and Protestant/Catholic) divisions still cause disagreements and suspicion around the world. Some Lutherans are known to shy away from worship practices that appear “too catholic;” Others yearn for even stronger ties, lamenting how far Lutherans have strayed from the mass. In the midst of long-held divisions, the formal dialogues encourage a commitment to our already oneness in Christ and the unity we yet seek.

Bilateral Dialogue

The Lutheran-Catholic dialogue has been in ongoing discussions since 1965. The ELCA website offers links to documents that highlight key points from these sets of discussions.

The [Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue](#) has been in ongoing discussions since 1965. Each “round,” or set of discussions, covers a specific topic important for the life and vitality of both communions. Recent rounds have had focused discussions on “[The Church as Koinonia of Salvation](#),” “[The Hope for Eternal](#)

Life,” and Ministries of Teaching: Sources, Shapes and Essential Contents (for discerning the truth coming to us in God’s Word and communicating this truth in normative teaching for today). In order to harvest the fruits of our dialogue, a Declaration on the Way (to unity) will highlight essential areas of agreement as a foundation for unity.

In 1999, the ecumenical partnership between members of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church led to the [Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification \(JDDJ\)](#). This document intended to show that both the Lutheran and Roman Catholic Church could articulate a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ, the issue that was at the heart of the Protestant Reformation.

From the JDDJ:

It does not cover all that either church teaches about justification; it does encompass a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations (Preamble, 5)

Opposing interpretations and applications of the biblical message of justification were in the sixteenth century a principal cause of the division of the Western church and led as well to doctrinal condemnations. A common understanding of justification is therefore fundamental and indispensable to overcoming that division. By appropriating insights of recent biblical studies and drawing on modern investigations of the history of theology and dogma, the post-Vatican II ecumenical dialogue has led to a notable convergence concerning justification, with the result that this Joint Declaration is able to formulate a consensus on basic truths concerning the doctrine of justification. In light of this consensus, the corresponding doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to today’s partner. (JDDJ, 1:13)

The most recent document to come from these bilateral conversations, *The Hope of Eternal Life*, offers this summary of our ecumenical relationship:

We are united as Christians by our baptism into Christ. We are taught by Scripture and tradition and share a common life in Christ. We affirm as Lutherans and Catholics in the dialogue process a commitment to the goal of full communion, even as we recognize that further agreements are necessary before full, sacramental communion can be restored. Matters for such consideration include the nature of the church, the ordering of ministry, patterns for the formulation of authoritative teaching, and the anthropological and ecclesial contexts for making judgments about human sexuality and other concerns. (The Hope of Eternal Life: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialog XI, Preface)

RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions:

- ↪ How do we worship and pray with other Christians and Non-Christians?
- ↪ What does Full Communion mean for Lutheran worship?

Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:

- 📄 [The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#)
- 📄 [ELCA:Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations](#). This unit's website includes pages on current ELCA ecumenical and inter-religious dialogues, including many resources with study materials and historic documents.
- 📄 "The Church as Koinonia of Salvation"
- 📄 "The Hope for Eternal Life"

Other Resources

- 📄 [Documents Produced By The Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue In The United States from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#)
- 📄 [Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification \(JDDJ\)](#)

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