



The Lutheran World Federation's Commitments on the Ecumenical Way to Ecclesial Communion



THE
LUTHERAN
WORLD
FEDERATION

A Communion
of Churches

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling” (Eph 4:4)

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Preface

Martin Junge

“To be Lutheran is to be ecumenical.” This conviction is at the core of this LWF Ecumenical Commitments document. The quest for unity has been one of the central pillars of the LWF since its foundation, and the LWF has been engaged actively in bilateral ecumenical dialogues for more than 50 years. When preparing and commemorating the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, ecumenical accountability was one of our key principles.

More recently we have grown to understand the complementarity of theological dialogues and our witness with ecumenical partners through diaconal service and advocacy, as well as through common prayer and spiritual life. In all facets of our ecumenical work, we are called to become more attentive to the ecumenical questions and challenges of our local communities and the needs of their members. Their questions are our guide, rooting our theological discussions in the experiences of our church members, and enabling them to better respond to their baptismal calling.

With this in mind, we carried out a survey of member churches’ ecumenical relations. Its results informed the work of the advisory group in developing this LWF Ecumenical Commitments document.

These Ecumenical Commitments restate and emphasize the LWF’s engagement with Christian unity. At its core are “six commitments”: Each of these six commitments includes a strong self-commitment to ecumenism as well as suggestions for practical application.

This LWF Ecumenical Commitments document seeks to:

- Encourage and give specific guidelines and proposals for more vibrant interactions between local ecumenical realities, and global ecumenical processes and cooperation;
- Express the diversity of the LWF’s ecumenical undertakings, bringing theological dialogues, diaconal witness, advocacy, and shared spiritual life into closer interaction.

Taking up the information and feedback from the survey of member churches, this text was prepared by an advisory group representing all seven regions of the LWF: Bishop Susan Johnson (Canada) as chairperson, Dr Klára Tarr Cselovszky (Hungary), Dr Minna Hietamäki (Finland), Rev. Kenneth Kross (Suriname), Prof. Dr Faustin Mahali (Tanzania), Oberkirchenrat Dr Oliver Schuegraf (Germany), and Prof. Dr Nicholas Tai (Hong Kong). Prof. Dr Jennifer Wasmuth joined the group as consultant from the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg, France. The advisory group started its work at its meeting in Wittenberg, Germany in October 2017, and developed the document over the following months. I would like to express my gratitude to all the members of the advisory group for their work.

I commend this document for reception and study, and pray for new impetus to live out Jesus' prayer that we "may all be one" (John 17:21).

Introduction

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) has borne witness to the ecumenical quest for over 70 years. The LWF offers this document so as to highlight and strengthen this commitment, and to make its ecumenical principles clear to its members in a spirit of accountability to its ecumenical partners. The first part of the document offers some theological reflections about ecumenism, and then looks more specifically at the ecumenical relations of the LWF and the Lutheran understanding of ecumenism. The second part is the core of the document and contains the six commitments that the LWF will strive for. Each commitment starts with some observations and challenges, the commitments are then set out, and ideas for practical application are suggested.

Part I:

The one Body of Christ as Communion

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling”— with this reference to the Letter to the Ephesians 4:4-6, article 7 of the Augsburg Confession (AC) grounds its definition of the church biblically:

Likewise, they teach that one holy church will remain forever. The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere. As Paul says [Eph. 4:5-6]: One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all¹.

The definition in the Augsburg Confession describes the church as the “assembly of saints” and defines it more closely still by assigning certain visible practices to it, namely the public proclamation of the gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments. In terms of its visibility, in “On the Councils and the Church,” Luther also notes seven marks of the church by which “holy Christian people” may be recognized. In addition to the word of God and the two sacraments of baptism and the last supper, these marks include confession, ministry, public worship, and bearing one’s cross.² However, the Lutheran reformers were clear that agreement on proclamation of the gospel and proper administration of the sacraments are seen as the necessary and sufficient condition for the unity of the church. The one body of Christ gains visible expression and Christians

¹ “The Augsburg Confession [1530],” in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds.), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 43.

² Martin Luther, “On the Councils and the Church [1539],” in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 41 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 156.

follow the one hope in their calling through proper teaching of the gospel and correct celebration of the sacraments.³

In short, communion comes into existence through hearing the word and receiving the sacraments. The word and the sacraments are God's promise that bring us into the one body of Christ. Sharing in the body of Christ breaks down cultural, ethnic, and gender barriers, to name just a few. At the same time, the word is preached in each particular place and the bread and wine of the sacrament are shared around a particular table. As a consequence, Lutheran churches have over time grown into being a rich and diverse communion of churches that seek inspiration from God's Word in their own context.⁴ The LWF is a communion of churches.⁵ The communion we share is a gift that has already been given to us but it is also a task (see 1 Cor 12:4-26). We are committed to growing in communion and to nurturing that communion.⁶

This close and indissoluble link in our confessional statements between the understanding of the church and the call to its unity also explains why Lutherans have come to the conviction that: "To be Lutheran is to be ecumenical."⁷ Strengthening our communion within the Lutheran family is not in contradiction with our commitment to deepen the fellowship of all Christians from whatever background. Our communion is polycentric, making it at times difficult to experience fellowship; nevertheless, there is only one communion. Because the LWF communion considers itself an expression of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, it is committed to work for the unity of the body of Christ.⁸ It seeks "ecclesial communion"

³ *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion. A Study Document* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2015), 19f.

⁴ *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 22.

⁵ Art. III.1 of the *Constitution of the Lutheran World Federation* (as adopted by the LWF Eighth Assembly, Curitiba, Brazil, 1990, including amendments adopted by the LWF Ninth Assembly, Hong Kong, China 1997 and by the LWF Eleventh Assembly, Stuttgart, Germany, 2010, and by the LWF Twelfth Assembly, Windhoek, Namibia, 2017) at www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2018/documents/lwf_constitution_en.pdf

⁶ "Communion is a gift before it is a task. In hearing the gospel of God's grace, in receiving baptism and daily living out our baptismal identity, and in joining together in Holy Communion, we are drawn into communion with God and with one another. The life of the communion is nourished first by worship. Communion is lived out joyfully in the common proclamation of the gospel, in prayer and singing, and in sharing the sacraments and recognizing ministries.", *LWF Strategy 2012-2017. The LWF Communion – With Passion for the Church and for the World* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2011), 8f.

⁷ Cf. op.cit. (note 6), 8.

⁸ Carl H. Mau (ed.), *Budapest 1984. "In Christ – Hope for the Word." Official Proceedings of the Seventh Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation*, LWF Report No. 19/20 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1985), 176. Cf. also op. cit. (note 3), , 9f.

between the churches—a term which is here understood in a very broad sense. It describes the relationship between churches when they have come to the understanding that the unity of the body of Christ is a reality between them. This term is not intended to define the ways or means by which ecclesial communion is reached, the preconditions necessary, or the precise characteristics of such an ecclesial communion. These latter questions are often still controversial between churches.

As expressed both at the time of its foundation⁹ and also in its present constitution, the LWF “is resolved to serve Christian unity throughout the world.”¹⁰ It is because of this conviction that the LWF has sought to be a longstanding and reliable ecumenical partner.

From the 1960s onwards, bilateral dialogues have been one of the main forms of the LWF’s ecumenical engagement. Bilateral dialogues are a form of ecumenical encounter where two partners from different church backgrounds come together to discuss doctrinal questions or other issues of ecumenical importance. Usually these discussions seek future ecclesial communion.

To foster this commitment to bilateral dialogues, the Institute for Ecumenical Research was founded in 1965 and has from the outset supported all the dialogues of which the LWF has been part.

Despite this focus on bilateral dialogues, the LWF has also been part of the multilateral ecumenical approach and has collaborated with the World Council of Churches (WCC). Bilateral dialogues and multilateral ecumenical approaches are not to be seen as mutually exclusive but are both parts of the one ecumenical movement. Ecumenical theological dialogues and other forms of ecumenism such as ecumenical prayers, joint *diakonia*, advocacy, or education are to be understood as complementary forms of ecumenism. In conclusion, ecumenism is not simply a choice, it is our mission to witness together with and in Christ. Unity is a gift we receive from God through the Holy Spirit (see Eph 4:4-6; 1 Pet 3:8). In this way, the LWF seeks to bear witness to the Christian calling to be the one body of Christ, and to the one hope that brings all Christians together.

⁹ “To foster Lutheran participation in ecumenical movements” is from the outset one of the LWF’s constitutional goals, cf. Art. III.1 of the Constitution of the LWF (as adopted by the LWF First Assembly, Lund, Sweden, 1947), see Jens Holger Schjorring, Prasanna Kumari, Norman A. Hjelm (eds.), *From Federation to Communion. The History of the Lutheran World Federation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 527.

¹⁰ Art. III.2 of the *Constitution of the Lutheran World Federation* (as adopted by the LWF Eighth Assembly, Curitiba, Brazil, 1990, including amendments adopted by the LWF Ninth Assembly, Hong Kong, China 1997 and by the LWF Eleventh Assembly, Stuttgart, Germany, 2010, and by the LWF Twelfth Assembly, Windhoek, Namibia, 2017).

Ecumenical Relations

Lutheran churches are active participants in the ecumenical movement at global, regional, and local levels. The reciprocity of local, regional, and global dialogues and the interplay between the different levels have been mutually enriching. This aims to build on the work and the experiences of local churches and their local realities, but also to give voice to the common commitments of the whole Lutheran communion.

Global

On the global level, the LWF has engaged in various bilateral dialogues and conversations with other confessional families. These have included dialogues and conversations with the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the World Methodist Council, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Baptist World Alliance, the Mennonite World Conference, the Seventh-day Adventists and the Pentecostals. The official international dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church began immediately after the close of the Second Vatican Council in 1967. The most significant theological result so far has been the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ) which was signed at Augsburg in 1999 by the LWF and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church. The JDDJ states that Lutherans and Catholics share a basic understanding of the doctrine of justification and that the mutual doctrinal condemnations of the 16th century relating to this no longer apply. Lutherans and Catholics have continued in a spirit of reconciliation following on from the JDDJ. The study document *From Conflict to Communion* (2013) paved the way for the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation at Lund Cathedral and Malmö Arena on 31 October 2016 which was jointly presided by Pope Francis and the general secretary and president of the LWF. The prayer service at Lund Cathedral raised our common journey to a new spiritual level.

Bilateral dialogue with the Anglican Communion started in 1970 and focused on the question of episcopal ministry and later on the diaconate as an ecumenical opportunity. The newly formed Anglican Lutheran International Coordinating Committee (ALICC) aims to place more emphasis on practical cooperation between Lutherans and Anglicans. Thus, it explored the common understanding of *diakonia*, and began a new approach to dialogue by publishing the joint reflections *Liberated by God's Grace: Anglican-Lutheran Reflections* (2017) that have been written by Anglicans and Lutherans from around the world. In a special service at Westmin-

ster Abbey on 31 October 2017, the Anglican Communion affirmed the substance of the JDDJ.

In 1968, an ad hoc Lutheran-Reformed Evaluating Committee stated that Lutheran-Reformed dialogue should be encouraged and coordinated by the LWF and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). This led to the international Lutheran-Reformed dialogue. Its most recent report *Communion: On Being the Church* (2014) aims to raise international awareness of some of the ecumenical success stories from regional and local levels. In July 2017, the LWF signed the *Wittenberg Witness* with the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), affirming the common call to continued renewal and cooperation, and committing themselves “to explore new forms of life together that will more fully express the communion we already have in Christ.”¹¹

The international dialogue between the LWF and the World Methodist Council (WMC) started in 1979. Between 1979 and 1984, representatives of the LWF and the WMC met to draft the statement *The Church, Community of Grace* (1984). The WMC signed an affirmation of the JDDJ in 2006. Lutherans rejoice in the developments that have led the WMC and the WCRC to join in the JDDJ in 2006 and 2017 and the Anglican Communion to affirm its substance in 2017. Hence, Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, Reformed, and Anglicans now share a common understanding of the doctrine of justification.

The international Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission has met continuously since the early 1980s. During its first decades it dealt with normative theological principles, including the issue of salvation, and since 2000 with fundamental ecclesiological questions. Lutheran and Orthodox churches need to learn more about our respective histories to get a better understanding of each other. The Commission managed to create common ground on various topics and agreed on a number of common statements, even in relation to controversial issues like ordained ministry. The common statements on *Salvation: Grace, Justification and Synergy* (1998) and *Baptism and Chrismation as Sacraments of Initiation into the Church* (2004) can be considered the most significant.

The Lutheran-Mennonite reconciliation process received its first impulse from the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in 1980. This led to a process of working through the painful legacy of persecution of the Anabaptists in the 16th century, and, in 2009, Lutherans and Mennonites jointly wrote a description of their common history. This report resulted

¹¹ *Wittenberg Witness. A Common Statement of The World Communion of Reformed Churches and The Lutheran World Federation*, 5 July 2017, point 6, at www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/gc2017-wittenbergwitness.pdf

in what is called the “Mennonite Action” or the “Action on the Legacy of Lutheran Persecution of ‘Anabaptists’”: the LWF’s repentance before God and the Mennonites at the LWF’s Eleventh Assembly at Stuttgart in 2010. The Mennonites accepted the LWF’s request for forgiveness, and Lutherans pledged to reinterpret their confessional documents in the light of this new understanding. The commitments made by the Assembly were followed up by the LWF Task Force on the “Mennonite Action” which published its report in 2016.¹²

The first ever trilateral dialogue between Catholics, Lutherans, and Mennonites started in 2012, following on from their mutual bilateral dialogues. This five-year discussion focused on questions surrounding the theology and practice of baptism in the respective communions and concluded with the report *Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church* (2018).

The most recent bilateral dialogue of the LWF is the dialogue with the Pentecostals, which began in 2016 and includes representatives of various classical Pentecostal churches. Its theme is Christian identity in light of Luke 4:18f. The two partners seek better mutual understanding, particularly at community level, appreciation of each other’s theological and spiritual traditions, and finding ways for joint witness locally and internationally.

Of the multilateral ecumenical bodies, the cooperation between the LWF and the WCC has been vital for both Christian bodies for decades. Recently the emphasis of this cooperation has been on the field of advocacy. The convergence documents produced by the Faith and Order Commission, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982) and *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013), continue to serve as important source material for the bilateral dialogues. In cooperation with the meeting of the Conference of Secretaries of the Christian World Communions, the Faith and Order secretariat has promoted wider analysis of various bilateral dialogues within the framework of the Forum on Bilateral Dialogues. Since the formation of the Global Christian Forum (GCF) at the beginning of the millennium, the LWF has contributed to the life of GCF both through having a representative in the GCF committee as well as through participation in its global gatherings.

Regional and Local

An essential part of the task of living in the LWF communion is also to be attentive to local realities and needs. At the same time, each member

¹² Cf. *Healing Memories. Implications of the Reconciliation between Lutherans and Mennonites* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016).

church is accountable both for its local reality and for the global communion. Thus, the global ecumenical dialogues are closely intertwined with many regional and local encounters between Lutherans and their ecumenical partners. For example, many local dialogues between Lutherans and Catholics undertook preliminary theological work that gave important input to the JDDJ. In some countries, such as Finland, for example, there have been longstanding encounters with the Eastern Orthodox Churches. On the other hand, global study documents can open discussions on theological and practical issues at the local level. The reconciliation with Mennonites during the LWF Eleventh Assembly led in Germany, for example, to a renewed interest among Lutherans to undertake work on historic cases of persecution of Anabaptists.

Another example is the support that LWF gave for the regional theological dialogues between Lutheran and Reformed churches already in the 1950s, which then led in Europe and North America to pulpit and altar fellowships. The international dialogue between Lutherans and Anglicans planted seeds in local dialogues that bore fruit in regional full communions between the two traditions. To mention just some of the many significant local and regional agreements: the *Leuenberg Agreement* (1973), declaring church fellowship between more than 90 churches of the Reformation in Europe; the *Porvoo Common Statement* (1992), establishing full communion between Anglican and Lutheran churches in Great Britain and Ireland, the Nordic region, Iberia and the Baltic countries; *Called to Common Mission* (1999/2000) and the *Waterloo Declaration* (2001), bringing Lutherans and Anglicans in the United States and Canada into full communion; as well as the *Amman Declaration* (2006), resulting in full mutual recognition of Lutheran and Reformed churches in the Middle East and North Africa. Other ecumenical statements include the *Reuilly Common Statement* (2001) between British and Irish Anglican churches and French Lutheran and Reformed churches, the *Common Ground* report (2001) of Anglicans and Lutherans in Australia, or the *Report of The All Africa Anglican-Lutheran Commission* (2001). We acknowledge that there are also many examples of important ecumenical relations in the Global South, but they rarely result in written agreements. This variety of how ecumenical relationships are expressed shows the diversity of regional and local ecumenical relations of LWF member churches.

Joint Witness and Service

In the past the main emphasis of LWF's ecumenical work has been on doctrinal questions. In recent years, however, the LWF's ecumenical

relations have been deepened by a growing involvement in spiritual and pastoral ecumenism. The LWF also strives to give more concrete expressions of this growing communion through joint diaconal work. Thus, the LWF is increasingly joining forces with ecumenical partners in common mission, diaconal projects, and advocacy work on the international, regional and local level.

Through ACT Alliance, the LWF cooperates with member churches of the WCC in development cooperation and humanitarian aid. Bilateral cooperation in the humanitarian field has also grown stronger with Mennonites and Catholics, among others. Following the “Mennonite Action” at the LWF Eleventh Assembly, the Mennonite Central Committee pledged a considerable contribution in 2011 to the LWF’s work in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, particularly supporting education and capacity building projects. On 31 October 2016, a Declaration of Intent was signed by the LWF and Caritas Internationalis in a joint event in Malmö, directly after the Common Prayer in Lund, expressing that the growing communion in faith and in joint witness and service are interconnected and nurture one another, for the sake of the church and the world.¹³

Together with ecumenical partners, the LWF and its member churches pursue their commitment to holistic mission and humanitarian service.¹⁴ There are good former and current examples of ecumenical advocacy initiatives, such as the abolition of apartheid in South Africa especially in the 1970s and 1980s, or the peace process in Colombia. In Colombia, the LWF has been working in increasingly close cooperation with the Catholic Church. The particular focus in the work has been lifting up the voices and hopes of local people and communities affected by the violence during 50 years of civil war. International and local ecumenical efforts exist to eradicate pandemic diseases such as HIV/AIDS, to counteract human and environmental disasters such as climate change, and to promote gender justice, human rights, and sustainable development. Joint efforts to promote peace, justice, and reconciliation are essential parts of the LWF’s ecumenical commitment.

¹³ “*Together in Hope*”. *Declaration of Intent between Caritas Internationalis and The Lutheran World Federation – World Service* at www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/declaration_of_intent_caritas_internationalis_and_lwf_en.pdf

¹⁴ Cf. *Mission in Context. Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment. An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Mission* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation), 2004 at www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DMD-Mission-in-Context-EN-low.pdf and *Diakonia in Context. Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment. An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Diakonia* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation), 2009 at www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DMD-Diakonia-EN-low.pdf

Lutheran Understanding of Ecumenism

Unity in Reconciled Diversity

With Christianity worldwide, Lutherans confess the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. At the same time, they recognize that the one body of Christ is manifested in a plurality of churches. Such plurality was already witnessed to in Holy Scripture, which offers spectrum range of different approaches to theological reflections on the experience of God in Jesus Christ. This insight has led the LWF to understand the ecumenical goal of ecclesial communion not as uniformity, but as unity in reconciled diversity. This model was approved at the LWF Assembly in Dar es Salaam (1977), and it describes unity in reconciled diversity as:

a way to unity which does not automatically entail the surrender of confessional traditions and confessional identities. This way to unity is a way of living encounter, spiritual experience together, theological dialogue and mutual correction, a way on which the distinctiveness of each partner is not lost sight of but rings out, is transformed and renewed, and in this way becomes visible and palpable to the other partners as a legitimate form of Christian existence and of the one Christian faith. There is no glossing over the differences. Nor are the differences simply preserved and maintained unaltered. On the contrary, they lose their divisive character and are reconciled to each other.¹⁵

The precondition for such unity in reconciled diversity is that all churches refer back to the one truth of the gospel which precedes faith and gives rise to it. Unity is therefore based on the common participation of the churches in this truth of the gospel. As stated earlier, for ecclesial communion the two necessary criteria are those which also constitute the church in general: word and sacraments (CA VII). Since both are given by God, the ecclesial communion is also God's doing and can never be brought about by the churches themselves. The churches are called to be that communion.

¹⁵ Arne Sovik (ed.), *In Christ – A New Community. The Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, June 13-25, 1977* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1977), 174.

“Differentiated consensus”

Different confessional traditions can exist within a unity of reconciled diversity provided that the churches agree that their differences are legitimate expressions of the one and the same gospel. This is what therefore needs to be clarified theologically before ecclesial communion can be declared. The method traditionally applied by the Lutheran churches to find this common understanding of the gospel is the search for a consensus via theological dialogue.

The Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg describes this method thus:

Ecumenical research studying conflicted doctrines can only succeed if it reaches a common understanding of consensus that demonstrates agreement and allows for differences. Ecumenical theology should therefore highlight the places where agreement is indispensable, where differences are legitimate, and how these two can coexist.¹⁶

Such a consensus thus distinguishes between the content of basic truths, where a full agreement between the two churches is necessary, and the expressions of this content, where differences may remain. When such a consensus has been achieved, the remaining differences can be acknowledged as legitimate in their diversity. Such differences can even be understood as enriching. This method is usually referred to as “differentiated consensus.”¹⁷

The search for such a consensus includes reflections about the models of ecclesial communion of each partner, how they differ and how they relate to each other. In general, Lutherans hold that when theological dialogue can demonstrate that agreement on the teaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments¹⁸ has been established, then churches need to recognize this by declaring and establishing ecclesial communion in word and sacrament with one another.

¹⁶ Institute for Ecumenical Research, *Lutheran Identity* (Strasbourg: Institute for Ecumenical Research, 2017), § 93 at www.strasbourg-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/LutheranIdentity-ENG_fin.pdf

¹⁷ Lately such a consensus has also been called “differentiating consensus” to more clearly express the dynamic aspects of the method.

¹⁸ The Latin version of the *Confessio Augustana* speaks of “consentire de doctrina Evangelii et administratione Sacramentorum” (CA VII), in Philip Schaff (ed.), *The Creeds of Christendom. Vol. III The Evangelical Protestant Creeds with Translations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977), 12.

Reception

The process by which ecumenical agreements become part of the shared life in communion is generally called “reception.” Reception creates a qualitatively new reality.

The more formal sense of reception describes the process by which ecumenical dialogues and agreements become accepted officially in the churches that incorporate the results of the dialogues into their life and, where appropriate, also into their church order. However, the term reception can also be understood in a wider spiritual and theological sense. In this sense, the whole body of Christ may be seen as the fellowship of those who receive.

Even if used in the more formal and narrow way, it is important to note that reception is not merely a technical procedure and is not only about agreement and consent. The Strasbourg Institute points out:

The formal act of church authorities declaring ecclesial communion with another church cannot be based solely on the conclusions of the theological dialogues; rather, local ecumenical experiences are crucial for the decisions that the church leadership takes and for future ecumenical dialogues. [...] Ecumenical reception exceeds mere information or approval of the conclusions of the dialogues. By reception, theological consensus creates a new quality of relationship between traditions that have divided or at least have become alienated in spite of being committed to the same gospel. For the most authentic possible reception, ecumenical education and communication are necessary.¹⁹

There is a connection between formal reception and its wider theological and spiritual understanding. If both do not go hand in hand, reception runs the danger of becoming a narrow and technical process. This understanding of reception also has consequences for our understanding of ecumenism: ecumenism should not narrowly focus only on one aspect of ecumenical engagement, the official dialogues, which allow an active role for only a narrow group of persons, or ecumenical experts. Against this narrow interpretation of ecumenism, the search for Christian unity is not only a task for groups of experts but for all members of the communion. The ongoing discernment of ecumenical dialogues in various ways within the communion is one way that we can sense the Holy Spirit at work. We believe that strengthening Christian community through ecumenical processes is a gift of the Spirit and our response to the call of God.

Reception always needs to be understood as a “two-way street”: the global receives from the local, and the local from the global. In addition to

¹⁹ Institute for Ecumenical Research, *Lutheran Identity*, op. cit. (note 16), § 109.

a renewed emphasis on the need for the global reception of the results of local processes and experiences of dialogue, cross-regional reception is becoming more important in a polycentric communion, as there are issues that have already been dealt with in certain regions of the communion, so churches in other regions can receive from the work already undertaken.

Reception is also a constant and continuing process. Even churches which already enjoy ecclesial communion with one another are constantly called upon by God to make existing communion more visible, to strive for closer cooperation, stronger witness, and, wherever possible, to carry out their mission together. Churches which are not (yet) able to state a commonly accepted understanding of the Gospel can cooperate on as many levels as possible and continue to pursue their dialogues. According to the so called “Lund principle”, which goes back to the World Conference on Faith and Order in Lund (1952), which affirms that churches are called to act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately.²⁰

Processes of reception are affected by a variety of local realities. In many places Christians from different traditions live and work side by side. They attend the same schools and are sometimes members of the same family. Personal experiences strongly influence attitudes toward Christians from other traditions. Sometimes this can lead to generalizations and even stigmatization, if negative personal ecumenical experiences are understood to be representative of the other community or tradition as a whole. At the same time personal encounters are essential elements of official ecumenical dialogues. Dialogue is not only a technical means of dealing with controversial theological issues, but is, first and foremost, a living encounter. Those involved in ecumenical conversation need space to open up to the other, to listen to each other and to share experiences. They need space for conversation that goes beyond doctrinal issues. Only attitudes of trust and love make it possible to reach beyond divisive differences to agreement that exists in legitimate diversity. For this reason, shared spiritual life, prayer, studying the Bible together, and giving liturgical form to agreements that have been reached, are essential parts of deeper reception, as happened with the Mennonite Action in Stuttgart (2010) and the Lund Commemoration (2016).

²⁰ “Should not our Churches ask themselves whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately.” “A Word to the Churches,” in *Report of the Third World Conference on Faith and Order, Faith and Order Commission Papers* No. 15, (London: SCM Press, 1952), 6; reprinted in *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Kinamon (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2016), 422.

Part II: The LWF's Ecumenical Commitments

Commitment 1: Ecumenism – Variety of Forms, Locally and Globally

In speaking of the church, Lutheran tradition has emphasized both the necessity for unity and the freedom of various ecclesial cultures and traditions. We adhere to the conviction expressed in article VII of the Augsburg Confession that the foundation of the church is in the true preaching of the Word of God and the proper administration of the sacraments. We also recognize that the global imperative to preach the word continues to drive local churches to reach out from one local context to another, to the ends of the earth. The fulfilment of the apostolic commission compels local Lutheran churches to participate in God's mission together with other Christians.²¹

The Lutheran tradition is itself characterized by unity in reconciled diversity. Within our own tradition there is need actively to seek and live out the reconciliation of diverse traditions, context, and convictions within the unity that has been given to us in Christ. New perspectives and approaches to communicating the Christian message in words and deeds also require addressing issues arising from colonialism, violation of human rights, gender injustice, and mistakes made in pursuing mission. In the course of mission, entire cultures have been denounced. Some forms of the contextualization of the gospel have resulted in ethnocentrism and tended towards a monoculture. As a global and polycentric communion, Lutherans need to embrace positive contextualization that critically acknowledges and respects cultures and contexts.

In ecumenical dialogues, Lutheran churches have committed themselves to visible forms of ecclesial communion or unity. This commitment does not mean seeking complete uniformity in all aspects of church life. Diversity should not become an obstacle to recognizing the unity we al-

²¹ This commitment has been explicated e.g. in dialogue with the Catholics, see: The Fifth Ecumenical Imperative, in *From Conflict to Communion. Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* (Leipzig/Paderborn: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt/Bonifatius, 2013), § 243.

ready share, it is imperative that our starting point is always what unites us and not what divides us. Even if at times it is the differences that are more easily seen and experienced.²²

In pursuing unity, we recognize that unity exists in reconciled diversity. The Lutheran Communion is challenged to discern more clearly the limits of legitimate diversity, both within the Lutheran tradition and in ecumenical relations. Member churches emphasize different issues, such as the role of ministry, especially episcopal ministry. Views also vary on the theological understanding of the human person, especially on questions of gender and human sexuality, and how they relate to the unity of the church.

The shared pursuit for Christian unity may take diverse forms in different contexts. Even if we can and should learn from each other, we acknowledge that we are a polycentric communion, and that different processes take place within our communion. Thus, ecumenical approaches that work in one context might not be appropriate in another. In some contexts, it might seem that bilateral dialogues are the most prudent way to advance Christian unity. In others, it might be joint theological education or joint diaconal response to the needs of the world that best strengthen the Christian communion.

There is not only one path toward recognizing Christ's presence in churches and Christian communities. Some characteristics are shared by various ecumenical approaches.

Ecumenism is anchored in truthfulness. This means seeking accuracy in our understanding of our ecumenical partners and readiness to be corrected when we fail. It also means being truthful to our own tradition and identity while recognizing the potential to change and grow.²³

Ecumenism is costly. It requires active sensitivity to various issues that are of importance for the well-being of the global Christian community. Active discernment is not only exercised by criticizing the views and practices of others but also by being attentive to one's own perceptions and practices. While being anchored in truthfulness and active discernment, our ecumenical engagement should also be inspired by the spirit of receptive ecumenism, where each tradition takes responsibility for its own potential for learning from others and is willing to facilitate the learning of others as requested.

Ecumenical relations are advanced when attitudes of respect and acceptance become tangible acts of hospitality. Hospitality is not only about exceptional individual acts of welcome but the ongoing practice of strengthening Christian community.

²² Cf. the First Ecumenical Imperative, in *op. cit.* (note 21), § 239. Cf. also the other Five Ecumenical Imperatives, in *op. cit.* (note 21), § 238-245.

²³ Cf. *op. cit.* (note 21), § 240

We commit ourselves

- to strengthen the LWF communion as well as to grow closer in communion with our ecumenical partners;
- to bring the unity of Christ's body into expression in all ways possible;
- to accountability in ecumenical endeavors by seeking to understand contextual ecumenical realities and to explaining our own ecumenical commitments to those we work with ecumenically;
- to deepen the ecumenical awareness of pastors and other theologians and to advance ecumenical praxis by including ecumenism in theological and ministerial training.

In practice this could mean

- that the LWF Communion Office promotes a stronger linkage of ecumenical dialogue, diakonia and advocacy;
- that the LWF Communion Office in cooperation with LWF member churches supports local ecumenical initiatives and facilitates information sharing between local contexts through an LWF network of ecumenical officers;
- that LWF member churches promote the strengthening of regional and national ecumenical bodies.

Commitment 2: To Use Clear Terminology

The history of ecumenism includes a great deal of hermeneutical deliberations, methodological considerations, formulations of objectives and goals, and bilateral documents. This has led to a wide variety of ecumenical terminology about achieving ecclesial communion. Some theological and ecclesial traditions may prefer certain concepts over others. Some dialogues have become accustomed to particular terminology, while various concepts of unity have also been discussed in multilateral ecumenical contexts. For instance, a variety of concepts, such as “full communion,” “visible unity,” “unity in reconciled diversity,” or “pulpit and altar fellowship” are used to refer to the unity of the church. Some of these terms have their origin in a specific denominational tradition (such as “unity in reconciled diversity” in the Lutheran tradition) or specific bilateral dialogue, but are today used by other churches and dialogues in one form or another.

While it is reasonable that each ecclesial tradition and ecumenical dialogue develop and use terms that fit their specific needs, the consequent diversity in language may also become an obstacle for ecumenical advancement. To be an accountable ecumenical partner means also to be able to communicate clearly in and across different contexts. It is important that the LWF can give account of precisely what it understands and intends to convey with its ecumenical concepts and vocabulary.

We commit ourselves

- to be attentive to the issue of different terminologies in our ecumenical encounters;
- to clarify our ecumenical language together with our ecumenical partners.

In practice this could mean

- encouraging the Institute for Ecumenical Research in cooperation with other academic institutions in member churches to undertake study projects that revisit the work that has been done in this area and reflect afresh on the key terms that Lutherans use in ecumenical dialogues;
- that dialogues at regional and local levels clarify their use of concepts relating to the unity of the church;
- that the coherence of the vocabulary used in the LWF’s international dialogues be ensured.

Commitment 3: Bilateral Dialogues – Continuation and Renewal

Some of the most extensive ecumenical agreements at international, regional and national level have been achieved through bilateral dialogues, and the LWF has a longstanding commitment to these dialogues. At a global level, bilateral dialogues have enabled the LWF to study in depth what ecclesial communion as “unity in reconciled diversity” means in relation to different ecclesial traditions. Different bilateral dialogues have led to different kinds of outcomes. Focusing on ecumenical encounters with one partner at a time has both advantages and challenges. The advantages include the possibility of deepening understanding on those issues that are specific to that particular relationship. Individual bilateral dialogues have been able to develop theological solutions that have advanced the relationship between the two participating churches or ecclesial traditions. However, bilateral dialogues also include challenges. Churches may be involved in several processes of dialogue at the same time, which consume significant resources. Because each dialogue is specific to the two participating churches, bilateral agreements are not directly transferrable from one context to another, and the applicability of agreements needs to be discerned separately in different contexts. An examination of Anglican-Lutheran relations, for instance, shows that successful regional or national agreements are not automatically compatible with each other. The ecumenical endeavors between the two communions regionally in North America, Northern Europe, or Germany, for example, are distinctly different.

As our ecumenical experience grows so does our capacity to develop the practical ways in which bilateral dialogues are undertaken, and to develop a better understanding of the role of bilateral dialogues within the wider spectrum of ecumenical endeavor. We also recognize that bilateral dialogues have used a methodology from the Global North that in many ways has excluded full participation from the Global South. We should therefore always be open to reflect, advance, and adjust our ecumenical methods and practices.

Some of the main issues to be addressed in the planning of future dialogues touch upon issues of reception and representation. These should be taken into account already at the preparatory phase of a dialogue by addressing questions of how the eventual proceedings of the dialogue are to be disseminated, and the kind of discernment that is requested from the partners in dialogue. There are also questions about the representativity of dialogue commissions with respect to the theological and regional diversity of the LWF, and to what extent the methods used in the dialogue

allow for the presence of theological diversity within, and not only between, ecclesial traditions. It may be beneficial to investigate new forms of bilateral encounters, in particular with those dialogue partners with whom LWF already has a longstanding relationship. This could mean that bilateral dialogues try harder to include the participation of youth, lay, or other voices that might not traditionally be heard around the table of dialogue.

We commit ourselves

- to continue bilateral dialogues with the existing ecumenical partners, and, together with member churches, actively to build resources that safeguard the capacity to enter into new dialogues when needed;
- to look for new ways of organizing and conducting bilateral dialogues, including ways that allow for fuller use of other methodologies, reflecting all aspects of the communion, and to ensure their fuller reception;
- to strengthen and value diversity among representatives of dialogue commissions;
- to deepen the understanding of ecumenism through theological education.

In practice this could mean

- that member churches create opportunities for local participation in ecumenical events such as prayer groups, seminars, and meetings;
- that member churches arrange new opportunities for ecumenical encounters that allow a wide spectrum of people to participate;
- that member churches promote opportunities for ecumenical education locally and regionally, recognizing that ecumenical education is also a concern of the Ecumenical Institute in Strasbourg which could be used in this effort.

Commitment 4: Enhancing Reception

Ecumenism encompasses a wide range of activities and not everyone can participate in everything. This is why it is important to consider the practical ways the churches may receive the experiences and achievements of individuals or smaller groups that have specialized in one or another aspect of ecumenism. The word “reception” can also be used to describe the process by which local experiences become part of understanding at the global level, or by which local experiences become known in other localities. Even when considering only the official global dialogues, it is important to recognize that they are rooted in local experiences, nurtured by the life of local churches and live on in the life of Christians in various parts of the world, even after the official dialogue has been concluded.

In today's world, the flow of information is fast and no longer dependent on hierarchical structures. Reception increasingly takes place directly between local communities and global initiatives. It is no longer conceivable that the main method of reception is that of decisions being made and communicated by the church leadership. The ease and speed of communication make it possible for larger communities to be part of ecumenical processes already in the preparatory phase. Reception begins even before official dialogues start; it takes place during the dialogue as well as after the dialogue has concluded. New ways of continuing participation in the reception process need to be developed. These new ways need to foster active participation and nurture experiences of encounter.

Inter-church relations are complex, because they include not only personal contacts with other Christians but the complexity of the coming together of organizations that have established themselves in accordance with local customs, ethnicity, nationality, and various legal frameworks both secular and ecclesial. These non-doctrinal factors also influence the dynamics of each dialogue.

In order to facilitate reception, it is imperative to have opportunities to learn and to understand ecumenical processes. The goal of reception should not be primarily to acquire deep understanding of ecumenical dialogues but to foster attitudes and praxis that advance Christian unity in different contexts.

We commit ourselves

- to include the reception process as an integral dimension of any official dialogue from the very beginning;

- to share ideas and experiences of reception with other member churches in the communion and with dialogue partners;
- to evaluate the methods, preparation, and implementation of each dialogue that has concluded;
- to be aware that reception might take a long time and to be open to the gift that reception often happens in unplanned ways.

In practice this could mean

- that the Communion Office is intentional in considering all activities – including ecumenical dialogues, diakonia and humanitarian cooperation – by looking at whether a history of relationships in another field exists, upon which the new activity could build;
- that the Communion Office offers practical support for regional and local reception processes, according to the respective contexts;
- that the Communion Office together with the dialogue commissions and member churches create new and accessible ways of making known the theological and practical results of dialogues (executive summaries, simplified reports, congregational-friendly resources, video blogs,);
- that member churches commit themselves to share information about their ecumenical activities with the Communion Office;
- that the Communion Office, member churches and National Councils of Churches strengthen the liturgical reception of ecumenical agreements and consider how ecumenical actions could support the reception of dialogues.
- that the Institute for Ecumenical Research continue its long-standing efforts of enhancing reception through seminars, presentations and publications.

Commitment 5: Pastoral Ecumenism

Theological dialogues are time-consuming processes. This is sometimes experienced in a painful way by those facing the lack of sharing in communion in their daily lives or close relationships. In particular, there is a pressing desire to be able to share Holy Communion. Spouses and families with mixed denominational affiliations long to break bread and share the cup together, and thus fully participate in each other's Christian lives. Dialogue processes need to bear in mind the pain experienced by these people and their communities.

Various bilateral ecumenical documents have already touched upon these questions. The Joint Statement on the occasion of the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation (2016) stresses the significance of responding to concrete ecumenical needs, and of pastoral ecumenism: "We acknowledge our joint pastoral responsibility to respond to the spiritual thirst and hunger of our people to be one in Christ". Joint efforts need to be made to clarify the relationship between doctrine and concrete situations that require creative application of ecumenical commitments. Those exercising authority in the church have the responsibility to create opportunities for ecumenical advancement. The Lund statement stresses: "We experience the pain of those who share their whole lives, but cannot share God's redeeming presence at the eucharistic table. We acknowledge our joint pastoral responsibility to respond to the spiritual thirst and hunger of our people to be one in Christ. We long for this wound in the Body of Christ to be healed. This is the goal of our ecumenical endeavors, which we wish to advance, also by renewing our commitment to theological dialogue."²⁴

Ecumenical dialogues should be sensitive to the life and witness of those living in ecumenically challenging situations, including ecumenical families. The pastoral challenges and burdens of local churches and communities seldom make it onto the agenda of ecumenical dialogues. If ecumenical encounters are to be meaningful, then actual needs faced by Christians in their everyday contexts need to be heard and taken into consideration. Theological issues cannot be discussed detached from their practical implications. The latest report of the Lutheran-Reformed Joint Commission *Communion: On Being the Church* (published in 2014) tried to do justice to this by describing the contextual situations that the

²⁴ Joint Statement on the occasion of the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation, Lund, 31 October 2016, at www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/joint_commemoration_joint_statement_final_en.pdf

commission encountered during their meetings.²⁵ By bringing together theological questions and practical pastoral contexts we can truly become not only arbiters but also facilitators of grace, responding to the spiritual thirst and hunger of our people.

The richness and diversity of accompaniment and care that exists in local contexts in all parts of the world has also to be reflected and maintained ecumenically. The LWF is grateful for this faithful Christian commitment and wishes to lift up such good practices and mediate them to its member churches for contextual consumption.

Taking seriously the variety of contexts in which ecumenical agreements are lived out, as well as the concrete needs that push us forward in theological dialogues will help to bridge the gap between theology and “lived life”.

We commit ourselves

- to listen to the pastoral challenges and burdens of local churches and their members and continue supporting them in finding theological and practical solutions;
- to promote greater accountability to pastoral needs of individual Christians living, for example, in inter-confessional families or ecumenical communities at all levels of ecumenical dialogues (global, regional, and local);
- to value and promote good practices of ecumenical pastoral engagement in the churches.

In practice this could mean

- that proposals for practical, pastoral applications of the results of dialogues be included already in the dialogue documents;
- that the Communion Office and member churches provide material for parishes and their local ecumenical partners that show the significance and the practical implications of the results of dialogue (such as Bible studies and/or devotional resources);

²⁵ *Communion: On Being the Church, Report of the Lutheran-Reformed Joint Commission*, (Lutheran World Federation – World Communion of Reformed Churches, Geneva, 2014) www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTPW%20Reformed-Lutherans%202014_0.pdf

- that member churches and their ecumenical partners jointly prepare material for theological education and ecumenical formation and develop recommendations for pastoral cooperation at the parish or congregational level.

Commitment 6: Ecumenical Spirituality

Worship, prayer, and other forms of spirituality are integral parts of the life of Christian communities. Spiritual praxis is both communal and individual. Spirituality brings individuals together in shared liturgy and is an area where individuals enter into personal relationship with God.

Ecumenical encounters have for decades mutually enriched confessional spiritualities. There are examples of globally significant ecumenical dialogues that have been accompanied by a call for joint worship service, the document on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Faith and Order Commission, 1982) was accompanied by the *Lima liturgy*. The report of the Lutheran–Mennonite International Study Commission, “Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ,” led to the Lutheran-Mennonite reconciliation action at the LWF Eleventh Assembly in Stuttgart (2010), where the service of repentance played an important role in the process. The Lutheran-Catholic document “From Conflict to Communion” led to the Common Prayer which was used in the Joint Ecumenical Commemoration in Lund (2016) and in various other places where Lutherans and Catholics gathered together with their ecumenical partners to commemorate the Reformation anniversary.

For decades, the Taizé movement has gathered young people in ecumenical prayer, both in Taizé and around the world. The wealth of ecumenical singing would be inconceivable without the music and songs of Taizé. Participation in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the Women’s World Day of Prayer or more recently in the WCC’s Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace have also deeply enriched confessional spiritualities. In many contemporary settings, Christians have been drawn to contemplative spirituality that has traditionally been associated with the religious calling most prominent in Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Charismatic spirituality, often associated with the Pentecostal movement, brings together Christians from different confessional backgrounds. Spiritual traditions in Lutheran churches have developed in interaction with their ecumenical surroundings. Much more can be done intentionally to encourage local communities to worship together, for example through ecumenical services recalling one’s own baptism.

We commit ourselves

- to deepen our common spiritual and liturgical life together with our ecumenical partners;
- to facilitate spiritual reception of ecumenical processes.

In practice this could mean

- that the Communion Office and member churches together with their ecumenical partners promote the deepening of ecumenical spiritual life, for instance by translating the results of ecumenical dialogues into liturgical forms, by producing liturgical material and by arranging ecumenical prayers on a regular basis;
- that the LWF Communion and its member churches actively engage in joint ecumenical prayers, worship services, and other forms of spiritual life with their ecumenical partners;
- that the Communion Office offers space for sharing good practices of ecumenical spiritual initiatives and activities among member churches; this can be done through the LWF network of ecumenical officers.

To be Lutheran is to be ecumenical

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FEDERATION

A Communion
of Churches