

## **Vision and Strategy for How the Central/Southern Illinois Synod (ELCA) Can Develop a Deeper Cooperative Ministry With Its Ecumenical Partners**

The following report fulfills the first resolved of Resolution 03.2014, adopted by the 2014 Assembly of the Central/Southern Illinois Synod: “RESOLVED that the Bishop of the Central/Southern Illinois Synod as the Synod’s Chief Ecumenical Officer, appoint an Ecumenical Committee and Chairperson to oversee development of an expansive vision and strategy for how the synod as a whole can develop a deeper cooperative ministry with its ecumenical partners to possibly include joint convocations, assemblies, committees, and the like, and report on this strategy to the Synod Council in 2015 and the Synod Assembly by 2016”.

### **Vision**

Ecumenical impetus flows out of the New Testament witness to the unity of God’s people. Here are a few examples of that witness:

- Jesus speaks of there being “one flock” (John 10) of the one good shepherd;
- Even those who plot against Jesus unwittingly anticipate that Jesus will die “to gather into one the dispersed children of God” (John 11);
- The prayer of Jesus for his disciples (John 17) includes that “they may all be one”;
- We who are many are the one body of Christ (Romans 12);
- Ephesians 4 summarizes the God-given unity we share with “one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all”.

The Central/Southern Illinois Synod (C/SIS) approaches ecumenical relations as a matter to be explored from the synod’s context within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the broader Lutheran Communion, and the Church catholic, not by the synod in isolation from our connections with the wider church.

The ELCA is a member church of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), as were the ELCA’s predecessor church bodies. In 1984, the member churches of the LWF “declared themselves to be in altar and pulpit fellowship”; correspondingly, member churches of the LWF also “declared themselves to be a communion of churches.” The 1984 LWF Assembly then adopted a statement on unity that has implications for the full communion relationships that have developed with other traditions. This statement states:

The true unity of the church, which is the unity of the body of Christ and participates in the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is given in and through proclamation of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. This unity is expressed as a communion in the common and at the same time, multiform confession of one and the same apostolic faith. It is a communion in Holy Baptism and in the Eucharistic meal, a communion in which the ministries exercised are recognized by all as expressions of the ministry instituted by Christ in his church. It is a communion where diversities contribute to fullness and are no longer barriers to unity. It is a committed fellowship, able to make common decisions and to act in common.

The diversity present in this communion rises out of the differing cultural and ethnic contexts in which the one church of Christ lives out its mission and out of the number of church traditions in which the apostolic faith has been maintained, transmitted, and lived throughout the centuries. In recognizing these diversities as expressions of the one

apostolic faith and the one catholic church, traditions are changed, antagonisms overcome, and mutual condemnations lifted. The diversities are reconciled and transformed into a legitimate and indispensable multiformity within the one body of Christ.

This communion lives out its unity in confessing the one apostolic faith. It assembles in worship and in intercession for all people. It is active in common witness to Jesus Christ; in advocacy for the weak, poor, and oppressed; and in striving for peace, justice, and freedom. It is ordered in all its components in conciliar structures and actions. It is in need of constant renewal and is at the same time, a foretaste of that communion, which the Lord will at the end of time bring about in his kingdom.

You can see the consistency between the vision for altar and pulpit fellowship expressed in the LWF statement and the ecumenical approach of the ELCA. The statement, "Ecumenism: The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America" (ELCA Vision Statement), prepared for the 1991 ELCA Assembly, directs synodical vision and strategy for cooperative ministry with ecumenical partners today. Before drawing on direct quotations from the ELCA Vision Statement, let us take an overview look at the theological rationale of our ELCA for ecumenical initiative. What follows is a brief summary of the contribution of the Lutheran Confessions to our discussion of ecumenism, put forward by the Rev. Marcus Lohrmann, bishop of the Northwest Ohio Synod:

The Lutheran Confessions were the products of an effort at evangelical reform, which, contrary to its intention, resulted in divisions within the Western church. As evangelical writings, they stress justification by grace through faith alone as the criterion for judging all church doctrine and life. As catholic writings, they assert that the Gospel is essential to the church for being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Their evangelical and catholic aspects are complementary, not contradictory. When a particular misinterpretation of the catholic tradition conflicts with the Gospel, the classic Lutheran confessional choice was and remains for the Gospel. They are concerned for the oneness of Christ's church under the Gospel, the preservation of the true catholic heritage, and the renewal of the church as a whole. That the Confessions have such concerns can be seen from the following:

1. They always point to Scripture, with its stress on teaching the truth of the Gospel—which they see as the only sufficient basis for Christian unity—as normative. Because of this evangelical stress they also point to Scripture's confession of one Lord and one church as basic for understanding Christian unity.
2. They begin with the ancient ecumenical creeds—Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian—as "the three chief symbols." Lutherans always have a common basis with those who share these creeds and the Bible.
3. They draw upon the theological reflection of the early church leaders in East and West, and thus share a resource with those who also know and honor the theologians of the patristic era.
4. While many of the Lutheran Confessions were hammered out in the struggles of the sixteenth century and dwell on the differences with the Roman Catholics, the Reformed, the Anabaptists, and even some Lutherans, they also contained, whether specifically noted or not, many points of basic agreement with such groups.
5. The primary Lutheran confessional document, the Augsburg Confession of 1530, claims to be a fully catholic as well as an evangelical expression of Christian faith. Part I, which lists the chief articles of faith, states that the Confession is grounded clearly in Scripture and does not depart from the universal Christian [that is, catholic] church. The confessors at Augsburg asked only for freedom to preach and worship in accordance

with the Gospel. They were willing, upon recognition of the legitimacy of these reforms, to remain in fellowship with those who did not share every theological formulation or reforming practice [Augsburg Confession, Preface, Article XV, Article XXVIII and Conclusion]. It is in this historical context that Article VII is to be understood: "for the true unity of the church it is enough (*satis est*) to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments." The confessors allowed for diversity of opinion and discussion of many other matters (see Smalcald Articles, Part III, introduction).

The ELCA Vision Statement itself puts forward the following regarding our ecumenical goal of full communion with fellow churches in the Body of Christ:

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is an active participant in the ecumenical movement, because of its desire for Christian unity. It seeks full communion as its goal, i.e., the fullest or most complete actualization of unity possible before the parousia with all those churches that confess the Triune God. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, both as a church and as a member of the wider communion of churches in the Lutheran World Federation, seeks to reach this goal, in order to express the unity of the Church and to carry out better the mission of the Church in proclamation and action.

The ELCA Vision Statement offers this explanation of "full communion":

Full communion, a gift from God, is founded on faith in Jesus Christ. It is a commitment to truth in love and a witness to God's liberation and reconciliation. Full communion is visible and sacramental. It includes all that Lutherans have meant by "pulpit and altar fellowship," but goes beyond that historical formulation because of the obligatory mission given by the Gospel. Full communion is obviously a goal toward which divided churches, under God's Spirit, are striving, but which has not been reached. It points to the complete communion and unity of all Christians that will come with the arrival of the Kingdom of God at the parousia of Christ, the Lord. It is also a goal in need of continuing definition. It is rooted in agreement on essentials and allows diversity in nonessentials. In most cases, however, the churches will not be able to move directly from their disunity to a full expression of their God-given unity, but can expect to experience a movement from disunity to unity that may include one or more of the following stages of relationships.

1. Ecumenical Cooperation ...
2. Bilateral and Multilateral Dialogues ...
3. Preliminary Recognition. Here the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America can be involved on a church-to-church basis in Eucharistic sharing and cooperation, without exchangeability of ministers. ...
4. Full Communion. At this stage the goal of the involvement of this church in the ecumenical movement is fully attained. Here the question of the shape and form of full communion needs to be addressed and answered practically in terms of what will best further the mission of the Church in individual cases, consistent with the Lutheran understanding of the basis of the unity of the Church in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession.

The point made in the fourth stage (Full Communion) regarding "what will best further the mission of the Church in individual cases" connects directly to the strategy to be presented later in this report.

The ELCA Vision Statement then comments further on full communion relationships:

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 confessing 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 churches in full communion, subject only but always to the disciplinary regulations 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.

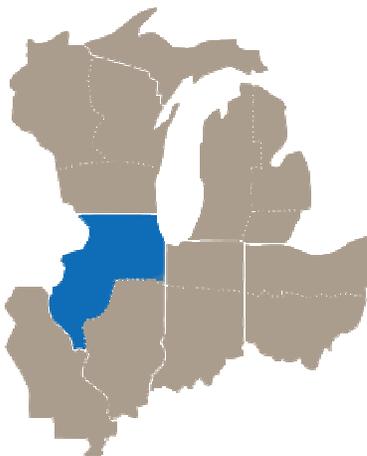
The ELCA entered into full communion relationships with the Reformed Church in America, The Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Church of Christ in 1997, the Episcopal Church and the Moravian Church in 1999, and the United Methodist Church in 2009.

Again quoting the ELCA Vision Statement, driving all of the formal, denominational ecumenical dialog and agreements of the ELCA is the comprehensive conviction, "Ecumenism has as its focus and goal clarity of understanding among Christians and a greater realization of unity among God's people." Such is the ecumenical vision of the Central/Southern Illinois Synod.

## C/SIS Full Communion Context

### Episcopal Church

Diocese of Chicago  
125 congregations  
40,000 members



Diocese of Springfield  
33 congregations (20 of which are self-supporting parishes)  
4,242 members



**Presbyterian Church (USA)**

Blackhawk Presbytery  
77 congregations  
12,095 members

Great Rivers Presbytery  
99 congregations  
13,427 members

Southeastern  
90 congregations  
7,850 members



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**Reformed Church in America**

Illinois Consistory  
4 congregations (in the territory of the C/SIS)  
522 members

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**United Church of Christ**

Illinois Conference  
(roughly the whole state north of  
the greater St. Louis area)  
268 congregations  
81,170 members

Illinois South Conference  
(roughly the greater St. Louis area  
and south in Illinois)  
81 congregations  
20,000 members



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## United Methodist Church

Illinois Great Rivers Conference  
843 congregations  
129,587 members



## Strategy

The Living Into the Future Together (LIFT) initiative of the ELCA has identified a leading priority of the ELCA churchwide expression to be: “Accompanying congregations as growing centers for evangelical mission.” This commitment to accompaniment is a leading priority in the ecumenical strategy of the C/SIS. The generative energy in cooperative ecumenical ministries derives from the Holy Spirit’s initiative in local congregations. Accompaniment as a strategic priority dovetails the full communion vision that “the shape and form of full communion needs to be addressed and answered practically in terms of what will best further the mission of the Church in individual cases.” To pursue a “top-down” or “one-size-fits-all” solution to ecumenical cooperation or ecumenical engagement, with goals and expectations placed upon congregations by synod staff or synod-wide committees, would be contrary to the strategy of accompaniment.

A strategy is a plan of action. The ecumenical strategy envisioned for the Central/Southern Illinois Synod is accompaniment: congregations with congregations; synod staff with congregations; synod committees with congregations. In keeping with the ELCA LIFT initiative, the C/SIS staff and committees accompany congregations in their ecumenical journeys so as to bring into play the resources of the synod and the ELCA. The role of C/SIS staff and committees will vary according to the nature of the ecumenical activity pursued.

### **Local ecumenical projects**

Local ecumenical projects that reflect the ecumenical vision stated above will hold in view our shared trust in the Triune God as the foundation for our shared service in the world. Full communion partners are indeed our ecumenical partners. Nevertheless, as the ELCA Vision

Statement points out, ecumenical cooperation can take place well before full communion. Quite likely, local ecumenical projects will be shared with churches that are full communion partners with the ELCA and with churches that are not.

Examples of local ecumenical projects would be Habitat for Humanity, warming/cooling stations and shelters for those homeless, shelters and advocacy for victims of abuse, Christian youth camps, anti-racism training and equipping, disaster relief projects, foreign and domestic poverty relief projects, Meals on Wheels, home repair, and food pantries.

Synod staff and committees would like to be aware of local ecumenical projects involving congregations of the C/SIS. But most local ecumenical projects will be able to function well without direct involvement of synod staff or committees. Accompaniment may mean sharing the story of the project, raising awareness of the project, networking congregations engaged in the same or similar local ecumenical projects, or supporting funding requests.

### **Local shared ministries**

Local shared ministries that reflect the ecumenical vision stated above will hold in view our shared trust in the Triune God and will also be more explicitly attentive to the theological content of our words and actions. Local ecumenical ministries will likely gravitate to shared ministries with full communion partners, but will not be exclusively so.

Examples of local shared ministries would be youth ministries, young adult ministries, campus ministries, senior adult ministries, Bible studies, and volunteer chaplaincy at prisons and hospitals.

Synod staff and committees would like to be aware of local ecumenical projects involving congregations of the C/SIS. But most local ecumenical projects will be able to function well without direct involvement of synod staff or committees. Accompaniment may mean sharing the story of the ministry, raising awareness of the ministry, networking congregations engaged in the same or similar local ecumenical ministries, or supporting funding requests. Accompaniment may also mean that there are funding and fundraising possibilities within the synod itself.

### **Local shared ministries of worship and sacramental life**

When shared local ministry of worship and sacramental life is pursued on an ongoing and substantial basis, it will be pursued with full communion partners. Initiative will come from the local congregations. Implementation will be a combined effort of the local congregations, synod staff, and officials of the judicatories of the various congregations involved.

### **Utilization of pastoral resources of a full communion partner**

Initiative will come from the local congregations. Implementation will be a combined effort of the local congregation, synod staff, the pastor involved, and officials of the judicatory to which the pastor involved is attached. ELCA agreements with full communion partners provide for availability of ordained pastors of the full communion partners when the ordained pastor is “authorized by the synodical bishop to serve in a congregation or employing entity” (Manual of Policies and Procedures for Management of the Rosters of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) of the ELCA. Letters of call for an ordained pastor or a rostered associate in ministry, deaconess, or diaconal minister of the ELCA may be issued by the C/SIS Synod Council for service in a congregation of a full communion partner on the territory of the C/SIS. Accompaniment will also find expression in ongoing accountability by the pastor and the congregation to the C/SIS and to the other judicatory involved.

A prayer by Thomas Ken (1637-1711)

O our God, amidst the deplorable division of thy Church

O let us never widen its breaches, but give us universal charity to all who are called by thy name.

O deliver us from the sins and errors, from the schisms and heresies of the age.

O give us grace daily to pray for the peace of thy Church, and earnestly to seek it and to excite all we can to praise and love thee; through Jesus Christ our one Saviour and Redeemer. Amen.

Submitted September 14, 2015, by

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Bishop

Central/Southern Illinois Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America