



# Communion: On Being the Church



THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION

Report of the Lutheran–Reformed Joint  
Commission between the Lutheran World  
Federation (LWF) and the World Communion of  
Reformed Churches (WCRC), 2006–2012



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**The Lutheran World Federation  
World Communion of Reformed Churches**

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# Unity: God's gift and calling

- (1) Because of our shared Reformation history, we can affirm that Christian life is life in the church. Our understandings of the church are similar. The sixteenth-century Reformers did not leave the church. We confess with the church of all times and all places that the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. We believe that Christian discipleship can only be lived in the community of Christ's body. At the same time, we recognize that faithful church life may be lived out in various ways. We recognize the church of Jesus Christ there where the gospel is rightly preached and heard and the sacraments are rightly administered, and have a particular understanding of the church that emphasizes both its indispensability for faithful Christian life and its human frailty (and thus its need for reform—*semper reformanda*).
- (2) This Commission has done its work as our communions prepare to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation. We have found much to celebrate in our common legacy. Nevertheless, as we approach half a millennium, we recognize that our Reformation history has also had inadvertent consequences. Frequently we have formed divisive habits in the face of difference, disagreement or difficulty and have been content to live apart. Even within our two communities we have been divided.
- (3) Yet, unity is already ours in Christ. It is the gift of God; we do not create it and cannot destroy it. Divisions, nevertheless, obscure our unity and hamper our witness. In living apart from one another, we fail to demonstrate the unity of Christ. This is a time for renewed theological imagination about what it means to be church and how to live together as church in ways that manifest our unity. It is time to embrace unity as both a gift and calling.
- (4) In recent years, much progress has been made among the churches of the Reformation with regard to mutual recognition and common life. Several agreements between Lutheran and Reformed churches have clarified the relationship of our historic teachings and articulated new understandings. These agreements make clear that we no longer regard as church dividing issues which, in the past, were occasions for separation. For instance, we no longer regard our distinct insights

into the way in which Christ is present in the Lord's Supper or the operation of God's grace in predestination as divisive; there is no longer any need for our continued separation. We celebrate that in many parts of the world Lutheran and Reformed churches live in communion with one another while churches in many other locations are also moving in this direction.

- (5) Yet, in spite of our shared history and understanding of the church and the common agreements that have been in place for decades, churches have not claimed the fullness of the shared life that is available to them. Our realizations of visible unity have been partial and fragmentary. Why is this the case? Have we reached our ecumenical limits? Surely not! It is becoming increasingly clear that a shared history and understanding of the church and agreement in doctrine—although important—do not suffice to make our communion a lived reality. It is not satisfactory simply to appeal to the unity we have spiritually or the unity we will have eschatologically. God-given unity calls us to work toward making it a lived reality, challenges us to be transformed and calls us to new ways of being the church. The New Testament term for this transformation is *metanoia* (turning around).
- (6) Sometimes in order to look forward we must first look back. Our theological forebears in the Reformation, most particularly Martin Luther and John Calvin, were deeply committed to the visible unity of the church. Neither intended the founding of a “new church;” both regarded division in the church as scandalous.
- (7) Martin Luther did not wish for the split in the Western church. Rather, he wanted a fundamental reform of the existing church. Even after his excommunication in 1521, he continued to strive for dialogue, convinced that Rome would come to see the necessity of the reforms. In his “Lectures on Galatians (1531),” he later explained that he himself would kiss the feet of the pope if he came back to the gospel.<sup>1</sup>
- (8) The introduction to the Augsburg Confession, authored by Luther's companion Philip Melancthon and presented in 1530 to the emperor, emphasized that the evangelical part shared all the foundational truths of Catholic teaching and expressed the hope that the pope would convene a general council. For the first generation of Reformers, the thought of a schism in the church was unimaginable.

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<sup>1</sup> WA 40 I, 357.



- (9) Nevertheless, from the beginning, Luther's understanding of the church was not the same as that of the Roman church. He refused to identify this church with the one, true church. He spoke of one *ecclesia spiritualis* that could not be equated with any juridical institution. All the baptized belong to it and it is realized in many different languages and forms in this world.<sup>2</sup> It is visible and tangible. The church is wherever the marks of baptism, the Lord's Supper and true preaching are.<sup>3</sup> Christ is its only head. For the unity of the church to be visible, certain structures are required; these, however, are not a matter of divine right (*iure divino*). Wherever the gospel is preached, all who take part in this office are equal and no special office such as the magisterium or a particular hierarchy are required.
- (10) This understanding is summarized in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession:

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 all ..."<sup>4</sup>

- (11) After 1540, it gradually became clear that a schism in the church could not be avoided. In his late writings, Luther regretted this development. He explained it with the idea that each form of the church in this world is also a sinner. Hence, there cannot be an ideal church in this world. Such may be the wish of Christians, but disunity, wickedness and weakness exist in the church all the same.<sup>5</sup>
- (12) John Calvin shared Luther's regret over the division of the church. He expressed his deep concern in a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury (Thomas Cranmer). Calvin declared that the division of the church

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<sup>2</sup> "Vom Papstum zu Rome, 1520," in *WA* 6, 293.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 301

<sup>4</sup> "The Augsburg Confession—Latin Text—Article VII. Concerning the Church," in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 51.

<sup>5</sup> In "XV Psalmos Graduum, 1540," in *WA* 40 III, 423.

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is to be ranked among the chief evils of our time....Thus it is that the members of the Church being severed, the body lies bleeding. So much does this concern me, that, if I could be of any service, I would not grudge to cross even ten seas.<sup>6</sup>

- (13) Calvin's depiction of Christ's "dismembered" body is a powerful and compelling image.
- (14) Calvin openly recognized the other churches (as churches) in a context inclined to be more restrictive. As he declared

Wherever we see the word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted a church of God exists.<sup>7</sup>

- (15) Several of our Reformed confessions reiterate his convictions and make recurring reference to the "unity" and "catholicity" of the church.<sup>8</sup> These affirmations provide the possibility for recognizing a variety of forms and orders as genuine expressions of church.
- (16) In the *Institutes* Calvin emphatically declares that "no hope of future inheritance remains to us unless we have been united with all other members under Christ our head."<sup>9</sup> In his letter to the Roman Catholic Bishop Sadoletto, Calvin's very definition of "church" revolves around our being bound to one another in Christ. The church, he says,

is the society of all the saints, a society which, spread over the whole world and existing in all ages, yet bound together by one doctrine and the one Spirit of Christ, cultivates and observes unity of faith and brotherly concord.<sup>10</sup>

- (17) In the midst of this heated Reformation debate, Calvin closed his reply to Sadoletto in the bold hope of conciliation,

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<sup>6</sup> Letter to Cranmer (1552), *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, pt. 4.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.1.9.

<sup>8</sup> Scots Confession, Ch.18; Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 54, 67; Second Helvetic Confession, 5.134-137; Belgic Confession, Art. 29; Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.147; Book of Confessions, Presbyterian Church, USA.

<sup>9</sup> *Institutes*, IV, I, 2.

<sup>10</sup> "Calvin's Reply to Sadoletto," in John C. Olin (ed.), *A Reformation Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1966), 62.

the only true bond of ecclesiastical unity would exist if Christ the Lord, who hath reconciled us to God the Father, were to gather us out of our present dispersion into the fellowship of His body, that so, through His one Word and Spirit, we might join together with one heart and one soul.<sup>11</sup>

- (18) In his discussions of the Lord's Supper, Calvin makes clear that we cannot separate communion with Christ from communion with one another. Our celebration of the Lord's Supper assumes this communion.

We shall have profited admirably in the sacrament if the thought shall have been impressed and engraven on our minds, that none of our brethren is hurt, despised, rejected, injured, or in any way offended, without our, at the same time hurting, despising, and injuring Christ; that we cannot have dissension with our brethren, without at the same time dissenting from Christ; that we cannot love Christ without loving our brethren; that the same care we take of our own body we ought to take of that of our brethren, who are members of our body; that as no part of our body suffers pain without extending to the other parts, so every evil which our brother suffers ought to excite our compassion.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 94.

<sup>12</sup> *Institutes* IV, XVII, 38.



# Contextual observations and ecclesial imagination

## **Mandate and methodology of the Lutheran– Reformed Joint Commission**

- (19) The Lutheran–Reformed Joint Commission was established in 2006. Representatives from all around the world were gathered and joined by the theology secretaries and two theological consultants (Lutheran and Reformed). The mandate of the Commission included “monitoring and advising upon Lutheran–Reformed relations around the world” and exploring “the possibility of common actions and statements and seek to promote joint studies relevant to Lutheran–Reformed relations.” Early in the process, the Commission decided that it was essential to conduct its theological discussions about the nature of the church and its unity in constant conversation with contextual and practical issues. The representatives gave reports on church life in their respective contexts. All meetings (held in Utrecht, Netherlands; Windhoek, Namibia; Buenos Aires, Argentina; and Bratislava, Slovakia) included visitation programs in order to see the various ways in which Lutheran and Reformed churches are sharing in witness and mission. Local immersion experiences and conversations with church leaders inquired into the distinctive challenges of the context and the church’s creative responses. The Commission sought in particular fresh expressions of “being the church” and being “in communion.” The Commission worshipped in local churches bringing greetings and encouraging them to work toward unity in the respective contexts. As a result of this methodology, church life was at the heart of the Commission’s theological reflection.
- (20) Alongside these experiences and conversations the Commission sought to acquaint itself with the work of previous Lutheran–Reformed dialogues. The Commission was acutely aware of the risk of an ostensible ecumenical amnesia and that others had labored and it was therefore entering into their labors. A brief listing of resources the Commission consulted is included in this report. The final report intends contextual sensitivity, theological insight and practical useful-

ness for Lutheran and Reformed churches as together we seek to make more visible our unity in Christ.

## **Contextual observations: challenges to unity and creative responses**

- (21) In line with the methodology employed, reports from local contexts played a significant role. By contexts we simply mean the various local situations and structures in which the church bears witness to the gospel. The Commission was reminded once again that our understanding of being the church cannot be strictly based on an abstract definition. The actual contexts in which churches seek to live faithfully are always in a dynamic relationship with theological understandings of what it means to be the church. The churches' actual experiences shape theological understandings which, in turn, may lead the church to challenge (and even seek to change) realities in its context. Context is thus a constitutive part of living out the church as a communion. Lutherans and Reformed have various ways of living together; one model cannot be applied to all contexts. The Commission's work needed to be attentive to the local contexts visited as well as the global context wherein our churches have much in common and much to share.
- (22) A particularly noteworthy insight was the way in which issues of race, ethnicity, economic class, language and culture shape our identities whether Lutheran or Reformed. There are times when these factors are the real church-dividing issues today, quite apart from differences in theology or confessional heritage.
- (23) The contextual situations we encountered in our study and meetings revealed a number of challenges and we witnessed some creative efforts as the churches strive for unity in these contexts. The challenges will be listed below and illustrated by particular examples. Many actually cross contexts, and for each context there are multiple issues—not only the one discussed. This presentation will be strictly illustrative, not comprehensive, and will draw on observations made during our visits and the contextual reflections of members of the Commission. The critical challenges our churches face include:
- Locations where Reformed and Lutherans are in the minority
  - Locations where Christianity is a minority religion
  - Tensions with Pentecostal and Charismatic movements

- Places where the “prosperity gospel” has gained a foothold
- Locations of extreme poverty
- Situations of oppression where the church is called to resistance
- Places where secularization has disestablished the church
- Locations where materialism competes for religious allegiance.

## Latin America

- (24) In Latin America, Protestants have always been a minority in an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic context. Recently, Neo-Pentecostal movements have been attracting more and more adherents. Both Lutheran and Reformed churches struggle with their minority status in relation to Roman Catholicism and the pressures created by the growth of the Neo-Pentecostal movement. The reception of the dialogues between our global communions and the Roman Catholics and Pentecostals is problematic there where relations are not cordial. Traditional ecumenical relations do not work well there.
- (25) Latin America is not unique in feeling the pressure of the Neo-Pentecostal movement. Mainline denominations the world over to some extent share this pressure. The use of modern media has attracted people to the Neo-Pentecostals and their sometimes almost “magical” understanding of the Christian faith is a strong point of attraction. At the same time, this is alien to mainline Protestant traditions, some of which are hesitant to move toward a renewed self-understanding. While it is tempting to be critical of “the other,” it would be more helpful to start focusing on the work of the Spirit and to pray for and work toward spiritual renewal.
- (26) Ecumenical partnerships differ from country to country and face distinct challenges. In Argentina, church leaders observed that the ecumenical movement was stronger during the time of dictatorship. In those days, the churches stood together for human rights and against political imprisonment and torture. Ironically, when the movement lost this focus, it lost much of its direction.
- (27) In Brazil, traditional Protestant churches behave self-consciously as minority churches in relation to the Roman Catholic Church. Ordinarily, relations are amicable and cooperative and the Roman Catholic Church exercises leadership in ecumenical endeavors and social movements. However, in some cases there is friction and the

distinctions of times gone by have remained. This is especially true for the relationship with the more conservative Protestant churches. While rare, overt hostility and exclusion sometimes exist between Pentecostal groups and Afro-Brazilian religious groups. Freedom of religion is guaranteed under the constitution. Roman Catholicism is declining (one percent/per annum) while the “unchurched” and Pentecostals are expanding. Between 1990 and 2000 the Pentecostal churches grew by sixty-one percent. Twenty-two percent of the population is categorized as “evangelical,” a category that includes both Protestants and Pentecostals (the majority).<sup>13</sup>

## Indonesia

- (28) In Indonesia, Christians have always been in the minority. Apart from small pockets where Christians are in the majority, i.e., in Sulawesi, Muslims are in the overwhelming majority. The relationship between Christians and Muslims has been further complicated by the political dynamics, and the often problematic relations between the two faith communities have resulted in a stronger sense of unity among Christians across denominations. Lutheran–Reformed efforts toward increased visible unity are impacted by this reality. The Indonesian communion of churches shares pulpit and table fellowship and there is full mutual recognition of ministers. Many churches regard themselves as post-denominational. The necessity to be in inter-faith dialogue with the Muslim community has shaped expressions of Christianity and challenged confessional identity, particularly in relation to Christology and mission. In Indonesia, Christians downplay Christology and struggle with whether converting Muslims is an appropriate expression of the mission of the church.

## Africa

- (29) In the past, relations between Protestants and Roman Catholics in Cameroon were mainly a formality. Today, there are joint thanksgiving services and the week of prayer for Christian unity is celebrated together. Differences remain but the aim is to work together, also in the area of theological training, and to overcome differences.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://g1.globo.com/brasil/noticia/2012/06/numero-de-evangelicos-aumenta-61-em-10-anos-aponta-ibge.html>



Consequently, the Faculty of Protestant Theology in Yaoundé brings together the mainline churches in Cameroon. Both Catholics and Protestants feel called to think in ways that enhance the visible unity of the various faces of God in Cameroon.

- (30) In Namibia, the Commission encountered concerns about the “prosperity gospel,” which promises health and wealth to those who have enough faith and donate generously to the church. This movement is particularly appealing to people living in situations of desperate poverty such as in Namibia, where most people live on less than one US dollar a day. Even if the prosperity gospel is lacking in theological content, the church must nonetheless ask itself, What are we offering instead? In this regard, some church leaders spoke of the need for theological work that addresses real life issues such as, for instance, a “bread and butter” or “water on tap” theology.
- (31) The story of the church in South Africa is firmly interwoven with the story of and struggle against apartheid. Race has been the primary “church-dividing” issue in this context. Apartheid sanctioned strict racial segregation and political and economic discrimination against all people legally classified as “non-white.” Beginning as a strictly pragmatic approach to mission in South Africa, it later became a full blown theology of support for racial segregation. Scriptural texts were used to sanction apartheid and the church’s role has been mixed. While, on the one hand, some church leaders were the architects of apartheid, on the other, church leaders and their resistance paved the way for the dismantling of apartheid. Both the LWF (1977) and WARC (1982) declared a *status confessionis* in relation to apartheid on the basis of Word and sacrament respectively. For the Reformed, the theological justification of apartheid put in question the credibility of our proclamation of the gospel. For the LWF, communion was not rightly administered if the church was divided by race. The church’s sacramental integrity was at stake in the failure together to come to the table.
- (32) Given the painful legacy of apartheid, church leaders in South Africa are very clear that our divisions as churches are not innocent. It is not enough to be theoretically open to one another. If churches remain racially segregated, then the church does not constitute true communion. Furthermore, theological work must address issues of economic justice and racial equality if it is to be credible. Church leaders spoke of church unity as it was experienced in the midst of

the struggle against apartheid. “How can we come together in the streets and then be separate when we put on our liturgical garb on Sunday?”

## **Western Europe**

- (33) Situations in which the pressure of secularization is considerable and the church is in a marginal position pose a distinct challenge to church unity. The vast majority of Protestant churches live in secularized societies and support the separation of church and state. Nonetheless, they are challenged by the phenomenon of secularization and Uniting and United churches are playing an important role in facing secularization.
- (34) Communion in the vertical sense (with God) is connected to communion in the horizontal sense (with the neighbor). In other words, faith, communion and ethical issues are directly linked. Remembering this connection is imperative if we are to understand and live out communion. To live in isolation and complacency without consideration for and communion with other churches is simply unethical.
- (35) Changing from a model of quantitative to qualitative growth is a spiritual issue and has to be part of every church's agenda. What is the church's role in a secular society? The relationship between church and state is always complicated. Some have observed that the church's disestablishment may be a good thing. As a result of too close a relationship between church and state the church has sometimes lost its prophetic distance and been coopted by the state. Church communion should enable churches to address their own governments and national constituencies. For example, how can the communion of churches together speak to economic and environmental issues? Whereas the churches may remain a small and vulnerable player worldwide, being vulnerable does not mean being without influence. The church in this context should not feel overwhelmed by the enormous social, economic and political forces. The church everywhere relies on a strength made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9).
- (36) Churches in Western Europe (and in the global North, generally) face the growing influx of immigrants, many of whom are Muslim. Often Christian immigrants do not feel at home in the national Protestant

churches and form their own congregations that express their culture and worship in their native language. A recent survey showed that in Geneva, Switzerland, for example, there are around 250 different immigrant churches. Establishing close contact between the “traditional” and the “immigrant” churches has not always been easy. It poses a challenge for both Lutheran and Reformed churches in their quest for unity within their own denominations and shapes the work of the Lutheran–Reformed Communion. In Geneva, *Témoigner ensemble à Genève* [Witnessing Together in Geneva] acts as a bridge for understanding and working together. It is a positive sign that the coordinator of this group was mandated by the Protestant Church of Geneva. In the Netherlands, many immigrant churches work together in *SKIN*, the Dutch acronym for Being Church Together in the Netherlands. This organization helps to bridge the gap between the immigrant churches and the Protestant church in the Netherlands. A general understanding of communion between Lutherans and Reformed has to be adapted to the situation of immigrant churches if communion is being sought.

## Central and Eastern Europe

- (37) The churches in Slovakia are shaped by their experience of having, in the past, been oppressed and even persecuted. At the time, the church was largely an underground movement. While relations between church and state have improved, one of the consequences of their past history is a certain resistance to authority and centralism. People remember the harsh controls over society and the church during the socialist era. Moreover, as a result of the Protestant church’s negative history with the Roman Catholic Church and its program of “re-catholization,” any manifestation of authority is associated with the hierarchical structures of the Roman Catholic Church. These two factors render an interpretation of church instruments of unity, oversight and shared actions difficult. The importance and binding power of the church and its confessions are no longer fully recognized. This presents a challenge for unity both within and between Lutheran and Reformed churches.

## North America

- (38) Prevailing materialism is one of the many challenges faced by the Lutheran and Reformed churches in North America. The consumer society, its commodification of all things and its pursuit of profit at all costs significantly contribute to global economic injustice and ecological destruction. A major component of living out “full communion” is seeking justice in the present crisis (economic and ecological). How can the churches come together to offer a prophetic critique and to proclaim an alternative vision of “the good life”? The issues are complex and church members are complicit in the system as many directly benefit from the current arrangements. In partnership with the World Council of Churches (WCC), the LWF and WCRC are continuing consultations and forming strategies to address questions regarding the fullness of life for all peoples. Resources have been developed to assist in this work.<sup>14</sup>

## Ecclesial imagination: structures of communion

- (39) On its visits to churches in different regions the Commission noted significant differences regarding the extent to which Lutheran and Reformed churches are effectively coming together. In some places, shared formal agreements have been in place for decades; these provide for pulpit and table fellowship and the orderly exchange of ministers. In other places, such agreements are underway, or have not even been considered. Furthermore, expectations regarding what “visible unity” entails and how it might best be manifest vary. In some contexts it takes the form of union churches or union synods, whereas in others there are neither agreed statements nor institutional unions but a history of unity practiced in witness and mission. The Commission hopes that lifting up the many possibilities and sharing them broadly may enlarge our sense of what is possible and stir the “ecclesial imagination” of our churches to consider new expressions of unity. In light of the many and complex challenges facing our churches in their different contexts it is urgent that our churches come together

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<sup>14</sup> *Shalom Seekers: Living the Call to Do Justice* (Christian Reformed Church in North America); *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice* (ELCA); *Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire* (United Church of Canada); *Globalization, Ethics, and the Earth* (Reformed Church in America); *Sufficiency, Sustainability, and Livelihood for All* (ELCA); *Just Globalization: Justice, Ownership and Accountability* (Presbyterian Church, USA).

to address these challenges. How can the communion, declared in formal agreements, become real in these contexts? How can we move from statements about communion to structures of communion? The list below is not comprehensive but provides suggestions as to ways in which churches can live in communion.

## Formal agreements

- (40) Whereas ecumenical dialogues and declarations are important, they are limited in what they can accomplish unless they are transformed into practice. Member churches have not always seen changes within their contexts as a result of these agreements. This has led some to question the importance of continuing the dialogues. Moreover, dialogues sometimes grind to a standstill if the same subject is being discussed repeatedly without any steps forward being taken. Furthermore, some churches in the global South challenge the content of the dialogues and grow impatient when dialogues deal with doctrinal disputes that do not address matters of urgency in their contexts (such as economics, ecology and justice). It is clear that however important the dialogues and agreements may be, work remains to be done to bring them to fruition in ways that make a difference in member churches.
- (41) Formal agreements provide a basis and framework for structures of communion. Therefore they are still an essential ingredient in our progress, in spite of their limitations. The Lutheran and Reformed agreements that are in place represent an achievement and a shared inheritance upon which we can build together. The limitation has largely been a matter of reception. One creative approach would be to organize local or regional dialogue consultations as part of the reception process and to harvest the fruits of the statements by making visible the way in which these impact church life.
- (42) For example, the circle of those who endorse the *Leuenberg Agreement* (1973) continues to widen. This has led to significant theological reflection, the results of which have been published in various studies and statements such as *The Church of Jesus Christ* (1994) by churches in Europe. Leuenberg has also been fruitful for conducting worldwide dialogues between representatives of the LWF and the WCRC. These fruits include: *Toward Church Fellowship* (1989) and *Called to Communion and Common Witness* (2002).

- (43) In the USA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Church of Christ and the Reformed Church in America share in what they term “full communion.” The agreement provides for the mutual recognition of baptism, pulpit and table fellowship and the orderly exchange of ministers, where ministers, if duly called and prepared, may serve in any of these churches. The *Formula of Agreement* by which they committed themselves is based on a theological methodology of mutual affirmation and admonition, allowing both common understandings and continuing differences to be articulated. This approach assumes an ongoing conversation that works out our life together.
- (44) Frequently confessional writings arising in particular historical and ecclesial contexts gain authority and have an impact through the reception and adoption by churches in other contexts. This is true of the *Barmen Declaration*, the *Leuenberg Agreement* and the *Confession of Belhar*.

### Structural expressions

- (45) **Local:** There is a growing commitment to union churches, such as the United churches in Germany, which combine the Lutheran and Reformed traditions. There is a shared understanding that all new church developments in the context will be undertaken together and the churches will be founded as union churches.
- (46) **Regional:** There are also regional unions. The Church of Lippe in Germany includes both Lutheran and Reformed congregations within a shared synod. In 1970, prior to the *Leuenberg Agreement* (1973), they declared pulpit and table fellowship as well as a mutual recognition/exchange of ministers and formed a synod together. Because of its bi-confessional structure, this church has membership in both the LWF and the WCRC. In 2012, the Lutheran and Reformed churches in France decided to establish the new “United Protestant Church of France” in 2013. In these structural expressions our two confessional streams have come together in “unified diversity.”
- (47) **National:** In several places, the Lutheran and Reformed denominations in the same country have united either for practical/political reasons or as a step toward communion (i.e., the Netherlands, Jamaica and Australia).

- (48) **Global:** The LWF's and WCRC's offices provide the structural mechanism for coordinating a variety of joint efforts in the areas of mission, theology, ecumenism and human rights. They oversee formal dialogues and ensure representation wherever appropriate at one another's meetings and assemblies, etc.
- (49) **Within wider ecumenical groupings:** Sometimes the Lutheran and Reformed unity is expressed in connection with a wider communion of churches. Indonesia, for example, has formed a communion of churches that includes Evangelical, Methodist and Pentecostal churches.
- (50) **In theological education:** There are an increasing number of creative ecumenical efforts in institutions of theological education. In Argentina, the ecumenical Instituto Universitario ISEDET (Superior Evangelical Institute of Theological Studies) welcomes all Protestants. There may be specialized courses in distinctive traditions but general theological education is done together. The Protestant faculty in Yaoundé, Cameroon, also works ecumenically and welcomes Roman Catholics. In the USA, two seminaries, originally established as denominational seminaries (McCormick Theological Seminary [Presbyterian] and the Lutheran School of Theology) have formed a partnership that includes the sharing of resources, staff, buildings and a library and participate in an ecumenical cluster of seminaries where students may take courses across the cluster.

## Sharing in mission together

- (51) Significant advances have been made in working together in mission. Communion is realized not only in formal agreements and structurally but also in shared mission. In many cases, local grassroots churches have been engaging in shared mission long before formal agreements of communion have been reached. They demonstrate initiative and eagerness to join together in works of compassion and justice.
- (52) National churches also participate in this unity in witness and mission. In Brazil, there is the sense that a formal dialogue between Lutheran and Reformed denominations is not really needed. These churches see themselves as "already together" as Protestants and children of the sixteenth-century Reformation. They observe that the contextual living out of church unity is more important than formal

agreements. The differences that exist are also considered minor compared to differences to the majority Roman Catholic Church. In Namibia, the sharing in mission is widespread and consistent. Most of the work done in the area of HIV/AIDS is conducted jointly. As a result, resources can be pooled and the duplication of efforts avoided. The Lutheran and Reformed churches in Namibia are clear about the priority of mission and its increased effectiveness when carried out jointly.

- (53) Communion is best expressed in shared work for justice, which includes:
- Sharing of bread and wine as God's own gift to us
  - Joyfully embracing God and neighbor.
  - Confessing our sins
  - Reading the stories of the Bible in light of our own personal, ecclesial, economic and social realities
  - Promoting a theological understanding that integrates and makes room for promoting social and ethical issues
  - Sharing of theological, liturgical and human resources
  - Listening with compassion to the victims and their stories
  - Finding possible ways to heal the victims' pain
  - Stewarding and sharing resources so that the earth and all its inhabitants may flourish
  - Rejecting patriarchy and discrimination and working for a just community in which the gifts of all women and men—young and old—and people of all races and castes can be appreciated and given space to blossom within the church and society.
- (54) When Lutheran and Reformed churches are situated in the same context, there is an opportunity for partnership in addressing the challenges before them. These churches bring the rich heritage of their two traditions to bear. Addressing the challenges of the context together—as churches in communion—may facilitate effective action and a stronger witness to our unity. Because the Lutheran and Reformed churches in each context are connected to the wider world through the LWF and WCRC, there may be a sharing across contexts of the fruits of the work together and the new structures of communion that are emerging.
- (55) Being in communion is the starting point for our joint work in addressing challenges of our particular contexts and to join in ministries of compassion and justice. Nevertheless, our unity is more than a



practical matter of increased effectiveness in mission; it is also a theological matter. We understand ourselves to be “in communion.” The models discussed in this section are examples of what living out our communion looks like. Our communion has its basis in shared theological understandings. In the following section, the Commission seeks to articulate the theological foundation of our communion.



# Communion: On being the church

## Grounding our dialogue: Our common faith

- (56) In the report of the first officially mandated international dialogue (1983–1989) the Lutheran and Reformed representatives confessed together:<sup>15</sup>

We Lutheran and Reformed churches throughout the world profess that we are one in Jesus Christ, with a common heritage in the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Within the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, by the light of the gospel and the creeds of the undivided church, with the saints of all ages, we believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The world and the human family owe their existence to the grace of this triune God who created us in the divine image. We acknowledge that, despite our misuse of the creation and our disregard of human communion, the future of the world and our destiny as human beings are defined by the grace which surpasses all understanding and merit. God's purposes have been revealed and lived out as gracious promise in Jesus Christ our Lord. We believe that the Holy Spirit will empower the fulfillment of this promise in the coming kingdom of God of which the risen Christ is the first fruits.

Jesus Christ is the church's one foundation. He lived a life of healing and teaching, was crucified and rose again for us, reveals himself in the Holy Scriptures and is confessed in the creeds of the church. Together we share the evangelical concern of the Reformation to proclaim the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for us as the gospel, the centre of the Scriptures.

Our salvation is complete in Christ who has fulfilled the promises and the law for us, reconciled us to God and one another and made us one in his one body. Christ now calls us by the Holy Spirit, in union with himself, to participate in his communion with the Father, his intercessions for

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<sup>15</sup> *Toward Church Fellowship* (1989). A Report of the Joint Commission of the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, paras 17–26.

the world, his mission from the Father to the world, and his continuing ministry of service to the needs of all humanity.

We are justified by the grace of God and not by our own works, and are therefore called to communion with God and one another, not on the basis of our own achievement but on the strength of the divine gift. God accepts us into his fellowship, not because we are acceptable in terms of his norms of acceptance – God’s law - but because in Christ by grace God has broken down the barriers which separate us from God. So we are called to accept one another in costly discipleship as freely and unconditionally as God in Christ has accepted us.

We live by faith alone, receiving God’s forgiveness in daily repentance and the gift of new life in Christ, in the hope of the fulfillment of God’s purposes for all creation in his kingdom.

Jesus Christ alone is the word of God. Christ gives himself to us to be known and loved in the prophetic and apostolic witness of the Old and New Testaments. Christ comes to us through the Holy Spirit in all ages in the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, baptism and Lord’s Supper.

In worship, in the richness and variety of our different traditions, we participate by the Spirit in the worship and intercessions of Christ who is the only priest in the church, by whose offering alone we are accepted, and through whom as members of one body we have access to the Father by the one Spirit. The proclamation of the gospel, together with baptism, eucharist and ministry are Christ’s gifts to his one church. By these gifts through the Spirit Christ makes us participants of his one baptism, nourishes us at his table as members of his one body, and shares with us his ministry of reconciliation. These gifts are essential to our identity as the Christian church, for its continuity and constant renewal.

There is no area in life, indeed in all creation which does not belong to Jesus Christ who sends us into all the world to be a sign of God’s kingdom to preach and live the gospel of reconciliation in a common concern for justice, freedom, peace and care for the creation.

Finally as Lutheran and Reformed churches we affirm that full agreement in the right teaching/preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments is necessary and sufficient for the true unity of the church.

- (57) Building on this earlier agreement, the Commission (2006–2012) focused on the implications on our common affirmation of faith for the understanding of the church, its unity and its confession.

# Being the body of Christ

## The church: Creation of the Word (*creatura verbi*)

- (58) The church is the work of the Triune God. God creates and upholds God's church by God's Word, in order to lead humankind to faith in Jesus Christ and to strengthen human beings in this faith.
- (59) The history of the church is grounded in the salvation history of the people of God in Israel as told in the Old Testament (cf. Acts 13:16 ff.; Heb 1:1–2). It is God's will to include all peoples in salvation.
- (60) The church is the efficacious sign of the in-breaking kingdom of God. The founding of the church points to the eschatological salvation community of God. In its being and mission, the church is the herald of the future unity of humankind and the whole creation in God.
- (61) The New Testament calls the church the "body of Christ" (1 Cor 12:12–27; Eph 1:22f, 4:15f). The community of believers is grounded in their unity with Christ (1 Cor 10:16–21). Such unity determines the particular nature of this community.
- (62) Just as Jesus called and gathered disciples through the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom of God, so the calling and gathering of God's people continue through the proclamation of the gospel of Christ since Pentecost (Rom 1:16, 15:19). Wherever people hear and accept this gospel, the community is gathered. The Word of God calls them into Christ's discipleship and establishes and creates the church. The church is fundamentally dependent on this gospel.
- (63) The Spirit of God calls people at all times and in all places into communities of faith. The Spirit joins believers in the community that the Old Testament describes as "the people of God" (Ex 6:7; Judg 20:2) and the New Testament understands to be the "members of the household of God" with Jesus Christ as its "foundation" and "cornerstone" (Eph 2:19–22; 1 Cor 3:11). The fact that there is, and always will be, a church in this world is the work of the Holy Spirit. The proclamation of the gospel happens in the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). The Spirit awakens faith, empowers for witness, grants certainty and authorizes action on behalf of the gospel.

Communion: On being the church

- (64) The divine promise of the true church is given to the church existing in history.

## **Church and justification**

- (65) God's will is the salvation of all people. God reconciled the world to Godself (2 Cor 5:18–19). God offers reconciliation and a new fellowship to those who are estranged. The New Testament witness proclaims God's all-encompassing justifying action in a variety of ways. The Reformers understood God's action toward salvation to be at the center of the Holy Scriptures. In light of this gospel, each Christian life and each Christian doctrine has its true meaning. This applies also to the church. The church stands and falls by this message.
- (66) God encounters believers and communicates Godself to them in the proclamation of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper). In the sacraments, Christ acts through the Spirit among his people. The church is ordered through baptism, in which all the baptized are not only washed and sealed by the Triune God but are "built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood" (1 Pt 2:5). Similarly, in the Lord's Supper/ Eucharist, the community of faith, hope and love finds its focal point: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17). Together with the Word of God, the sacraments are fruitful means of grace for those who believe and, by them, the people of God are built up and nurtured.
- (67) As people receive God's justifying grace in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, they are united in and bound to the community of the church. Thus the church is part of God's justifying action; it is the community in which God's justification is mediated to us.
- (68) Therefore the Reformers also understood the church as the community of believers that proclaim the Word and celebrate the sacraments in truth and who at the same time experience God's grace and grow together as one body.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Conf. Aug. 7; Calvin IRC IV.1.0; Confessio Helvetica Posterior 17; Confession de foi de la Rochelle 28.*

- (69) For that reason the Reformers can also speak of the church as “the mother of believers.”<sup>17</sup>
- (70) The Reformers’ understanding of the church is in consonance with the witness of the book of Acts, which tells us how the first Christians became the Christian community through the preaching of the Word of God, the breaking of the bread, common prayer and holding their goods in common through the power of the Holy Spirit. Through baptism, new members were added to this community (Acts 2:38–47).

## Being in communion

### The reality of the church

- (71) As the creation of the divine Word and the body of Christ in which the Holy Spirit dwells, the historical church points beyond itself. As a spiritual community, it also possesses a social reality that can be experienced in a variety of historical forms. The church of the creeds has visibly manifested itself in the world.
- (72) The frequently emphasized tension (even in the Reformation churches) between the visible and invisible church should not be understood as an opposition. The invisible dimension of the church is accessible to the faithful only in the form of the visible church. The right use of this distinction is the awareness that no visible form of the church can claim to be the only form of the one church of Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup>
- (73) The differentiation between the visible and the invisible church is not a distinction between the visible, false church, on the one hand, and the invisible, true church on the other. God uses the visible church

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Luther’s “Large Catechism” and Calvin’s “Whoever would have God as Father must also have the church as Mother,” *Institutes* IV.1.1.

<sup>18</sup> When the Reformation churches speak of the visible and invisible church the meaning is sometimes misunderstood. This distinction in no way signals an opposition between the two or a minimizing of the essential role of the visible church. The right use of this distinction is a caution against presuming to know who is redeemed and who is not redeemed. In this sense, the true church is known only to God. The distinction also serves as a reminder that no visible form of the church can claim to be the only form of the one church of Jesus Christ.

to proclaim the gospel in the world. That each visible manifestation of the church is always in need of reform is beyond question.

### **The marks of the church**

- (74) The church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic (*una, sancta, catholica et apostolica ecclesia*).
- (75) The church is one because it is grounded in the unity of the Triune God who, through the reconciliation in Christ through the Holy Spirit, leads creation to its consummation. The unity is given to Christians and the churches as a work of God.
- (76) The church is holy because it is God's church. The holiness is the gift of God to the church. This implies that the church, on the basis of its holiness, may also ask for forgiveness. Holiness is given to Christians and the churches as a gift of God.
- (77) The church is catholic (whole and universal) because the Word of God has the salvation of the whole world as its goal. As a community created by God, the church is called to cross all human boundaries (nationality, culture, race, social class, gender). The catholicity of the church is given to Christians and the churches as the will of God.
- (78) The church is apostolic because it is grounded in the Word of God. It proclaims the gospel witnessed to by the apostles, which is reflected in the writings of the Bible. Wherever in the life of the church the Spirit of God brings this message to life, this apostolicity becomes a reality. The apostolicity of the church is given to Christians and the churches in the Word of God.
- (79) Although the Reformation traditions emphasize that the church is the community of the faithful in the proclamation of the Word and celebration of the sacraments, they in no way intend to put Word and sacrament as "extra marks" alongside the creedal marks of the church. This emphasis has much more to do with the right ordering of the church. To the question of where and how we encounter the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church (*una, sancta, catholica et apostolica ecclesia*), the answer is: wherever the Word is rightly proclaimed and the sacraments are rightly administered.



## **The witness and service of the church**

- (80) It is through God's work alone that humankind comes to the certainty of faith. The confession of God's action as the ground and goal of the church remains a point of emphasis in the Reformation traditions.
- (81) God's prevenient action that alone creates, grounds and upholds the church does not occur without the action of human beings. It is their calling to form the church and in all areas—both in and outside of the church—to confess the gospel. This confession involves worship, witness and service of the church and in the lives of all believers. It extends beyond the realm of the visible church into the everyday lives of Christians and therefore into the life of society. Christian life is itself fundamental to the concrete shape of the church.
- (82) Each action by the church should remain transparent to the crucial and fundamental action of God that precedes every human action. In all its activities, the life of the church and the believers will and should point to God. The worship, witness and service of the church are signs of the in-breaking kingdom of God.
- (83) Because human action is also important for the life of the church, the church is always in need of reform. As it is for the justified person, so it is also for the church, in that the church is always both justified and sinful. As the community of believers, the church has to confess its own guilt and ask God to grant it renewal and, through the Holy Spirit, to form it so that it more faithfully conforms to its calling in its worship, witness and life.

## **Communion and ministry**

### **The priesthood of all believers and the ordained ministry**

- (84) The proclamation of the gospel is entrusted to the church as a whole and to its members. Through baptism, all believers are called to witness to Christ and to serve each other and the world. Through faith, they have a share in Christ's office as prophet, priest and king.
- (85) The Reformers emphasized that all Christians live under the call; vocation is a dimension of every Christian's life. For most Christians,

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vocational faithfulness means work in civic, familial and secular structures—work in which they are strengthened and guided by the worship of the community.

- (86) Within the communion of believers, God calls men and women to serve as ministers of Word (*verbi divini minister*) and sacrament. They are called to confront and comfort the local churches with the Word of God and to celebrate the sacraments. In their office, they serve the unity of the congregation and the whole church in instruction, pastoral care and wise leadership.
- (87) The ordained ministry rests on Christ's particular commission and, at the same time, stands together with the whole congregation under the Word of God in Christ's service. This ministry is necessary for the church.

### **The ordained ministry**

- (88) The ordained ministry is the ministry of the Word. It is manifest in the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, "the word of God which you heard from us" (1 Thess 2:13; cf. 2 Cor 11:7), the announcing of repentance and forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus (Lk 24:47–48) and the proclamation of him as the one anointed with the Spirit "to preach good news to the poor [...] to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Lk 4:18).
- (89) The ordained ministry is the ministry of the sacrament. It is manifest in the administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper/Eucharist.
- (90) The ordained ministry is the ministry of *episkope* (oversight). Exercised for the fidelity, unity, harmony, growth and discipline of the people of God under Christ, who is "the shepherd and guardian" of all souls (1 Pt 2:25), this ministry is inseparable from the ministry of the Word and the ministry of the sacrament.
- (91) Ordination is the act whereby men and women are authorized to carry out the ministry of Word, sacrament and *episkope*. The historic continuity of ordination is an element in the proper visible form of the church's unity in space and time, to the end of the age and the ends of the earth.

- (92) Such authorization is singular, non-recurring and irrevocable, as is the act by which it is transferred, i.e., the act of ordination. The laying on of hands is the efficacious sign of God's transforming grace which initiates and confirms the believer in the ministry conferred.
- (93) Ordination is valid in the church catholic. It is thus recognized in all our local churches. (Our churches may, however, establish additional educational, technical and administrative conditions to be met before an ordained person is authorized to serve in particular denominations and contexts.)
- (94) The threefold pattern of the ordained office (bishop, presbyter and deacon) cannot claim to be the only one authorized in Scripture. However, the large majority of churches have maintained it in one form or another to the present day.

### **The ministry of oversight (episkope)**

- (95) The ministry of *episkope* is exercised at the local (for the pastoral care in each congregation), regional (for the connection of congregations among themselves) and universal levels (for the guidance of the supranational communion of churches).
- (96) In all our churches, this ministry of *episkope* is simultaneously carried out personally, collegially and communally.
- (97) The Lutheran tradition highlights the personal office of the bishop, whereas the Reformed tradition is committed to a presbyterial-synodical order. Nonetheless, all our churches concur in regarding the service of *episkope* as serving the unity of the church.
- (98) Our churches agree that differences in their understanding of *episkope* are not church dividing.
- (99) The reciprocal acknowledgement of the ministry and ordination is not impeded, because we mutually recognize in one another the true proclamation of the Word and celebration of the sacraments.



# Being one church

## **The unity of the church as the gift of God**

- (100) The unity of the church is not the churches' work, but God's gift to the churches.
- (101) In Word and sacrament, God gives Godself to humankind for their salvation. God justifies persons through the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments. In doing so, God strengthens their membership in the church, the community of believers. This constitutes the basis of the church.
- (102) For the unity of the church knows no other criteria or conditions than fellowship in Word and sacrament. When this communion is given, the unity of the church is given.
- (103) This understanding binds together congregations within each confessional tradition stemming from the Reformation.
- (104) This understanding applies also to the communion of churches of diverse confessional traditions. If unity in Word and sacrament is given, churches are no longer divided.
- (105) As God's gift in Word and sacrament is essential for the salvation of believers, so it is for the being of the church, its unity and the form of this unity.

## **The conditions for church communion**

- (106) Unity in Word and sacrament is based on agreement on the understanding of the gospel.
- (107) This agreement begins with the common understanding of the gospel as the message of God's justifying action in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

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- (108) If this is achieved, then churches, previously separated, recognize in one another the true preaching of the gospel and the true celebration of the sacraments of the one church of Jesus Christ.
- (109) The agreement on the understanding of God's justifying action includes the common conviction that this message of the gospel is the standard for all church proclamation, all church life and all church order.
- (110) Every question in the church must be measured against unity in Word and sacrament. If differences regarding church life and teaching hinder this unity, this becomes a church-dividing element and must be dealt with and overcome. If, however, this difference does not stand in the way of church fellowship in Word and sacrament, it may be an expression of legitimate diversity and part of the consensus.
- (111) Thus agreement on the understanding of the gospel encompasses a legitimate variety of forms of church life and teaching.
- (112) Therefore the unity effected by the Holy Spirit is not a uniformity but, rather, a reconciled diversity of churches of various backgrounds, histories, spiritualities, theological approaches and distinct forms of church life.
- (113) It is necessary to continue bilateral theological dialogues in order to discern together whether distinctive church forms and teachings can be regarded as legitimate diversity within the declared church communion. Bilateral dialogues also help to find common expressions of worship, witness and service.

### **The declaration of church communion**

- (114) If there is consensus on the common understanding of the gospel, churches, previously divided, can now declare church communion.
- (115) Through the declaration of communion, particular churches mutually recognize each other as true expressions of the one church of Jesus Christ.
- (116) Through this declaration, the churches
- Confirm their consensus on the understanding of the gospel
  - Grant one another pulpit and table fellowship

- Recognize each other's ministry
- Acknowledge each other's ordination
- Provide for the orderly exchange of ministers
- Commit themselves to common witness and service in the world.

(117) Our churches apply this understanding of unity also to their relationship with communities of other Christian traditions. Where- and whenever the true proclamation of the Word and celebration of the sacraments are identified, they recognize these communities as expressions of the one church of Jesus Christ. They do so even when recognition is not mutual.

### **The implementation of communion**

(118) Once declared, church communion demands implementation. As the church must become what it already is, so also the unity of the church, already given by God, must be implemented.

(119) It will be realized when the churches in communion move toward common confession. This common confession includes common

- Spiritual and worship life (*leiturgia*)
- Witness in this world (*martyria*)
- Service in the world (*diakonia*).

(120) In *leiturgia*, *martyria* and *diakonia*, the church acts as a sign of the in-breaking kingdom of God.

(121) This implementation of the communion must be accompanied by a commitment to continued, joint theological work at all levels of church life.

(122) Individual churches cannot remain as they were before. They need to repent (*metanoia*) and explore new paths in the assurance that the Spirit of God leads to deeper communion.





# Our confession is one

(123) As Lutheran and Reformed churches, we have reached a consensus on our common understanding of the gospel.

## **On the authority of Holy Scripture**

(124) The gospel of Jesus Christ is revealed to the world in Holy Scripture. Scripture is holy because it reveals the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world.<sup>19</sup>

(125) Holy Scripture is the decisive source of criteria for the life, work, faith and order of the communion of believers, which is the church (“the rule that rules” *norma normans*).

(126) In order to serve as foundation and decisive source of criteria for the life, work, faith and order of the church, Holy Scripture shall be read, heard, interpreted and applied at every time and in every context and for each time and each context anew.

(127) The valid interpretation of Holy Scripture is the gift of the Holy Spirit who always and everywhere inspires anew both interpreters and hearers.

(128) The valid interpretation of Holy Scripture identifies and formulates the gospel of Jesus Christ in and for a given context.

(129) The identification and formulation of the gospel of Jesus Christ in a given context leads to the identification and formulation of criteria

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Toward Church Fellowship*. Report of The Joint Commission of the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Geneva, 1989), I: Our Common Faith, para. 19. Also cf. *The Amman Declaration* (2006). Agreement of Full Mutual Recognition of Lutheran and Reformed Churches in the Middle East and North Africa, Preface, para. 2: “We see in the Gospel, attested to in the Holy Scriptures, the sole foundation of our life and hope in the Spirit, of our teaching, and of our ministry and worship, since it conveys God’s love for us and for humankind in Jesus Christ, the incarnate, crucified and resurrected Lord and Saviour. [...]”

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for the life, work, faith and order of the church in a given context. It provides the communion of believers with Christian doctrine and ethics relevant to its life.

- (130) Christian doctrine and ethics seek to articulate the gospel of Jesus Christ in and for a given context.

## **On the authority of the confessions**

- (131) Holy Scripture may be validly interpreted both by individuals and the communion of believers that together constitute the church. In other words, the legitimate interpretation of Holy Scripture may be both an individual and a collective act.
- (132) A collective interpretation of the Holy Scripture seeks to be a collective expression of the gospel of Jesus Christ in a given context.
- (133) A collective expression of the gospel of Jesus Christ is a confessional act of the church. A confessional act of the church responds to a specific call to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ collectively.
- (134) A confessional writing formally relates the confessional act of the church to the gospel of Jesus Christ. By doing so, the confessional writing itself becomes a constituent of the confessional act of the church.
- (135) Occasions requiring a confessional act or writing (*status confessionis*) are contextual by nature; therefore both the confessional act and its corresponding confessional writing are contextual.
- (136) The confession is the congruence of a confessional act and a confessional writing of the church in a given context.

## **On the authority of confessional writings**

- (137) Confessional writings witness to collective interpretations of the Bible at specific moments in the history of the church. They convey the gospel of Jesus Christ under specific theological, historical, sociological and economic conditions.

- (138) Insofar as confessional writings convey the gospel of Jesus Christ under specific conditions, their authority is rooted in and as a consequence of Holy Scripture. Therefore, the nature of the authority of confessional writings is essentially mediated.
- (139) Giving guidance to the people of God, yet being guided by the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is witnessed in Holy Scripture, doctrinal writing is therefore essentially a derivative source of criteria for the life, work, faith and order of the church (a “rule that is ruled” *norma normata*).
- (140) The authority of confessional writings is thus derived from the authority of the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is understood by the church, both in the continuity and in the context of its historical existence.<sup>20</sup>
- (141) The nature of confessional writings allows and indeed invites the communion of believers continuously to reassess the writings’ ability to interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ according to the context to which it is related.<sup>21</sup>
- (142) Confessional writings characterize the life, work, faith and order of the church throughout its history. They are essential components of the tradition of the church.
- (143) Member churches of the LWF understand those confessional writings that form an integral part of their tradition as binding doctrinal references of constitutional relevance.
- (144) Member churches of the WCRC understand those confessional writings that form an integral part of their tradition as guidelines and standards for truthful interpretation and accurate contemporary adoption of Holy Scripture.

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, III: Unity in Diversity, para. 71: “In today’s church which is called to witness to Christ in a large variety of situations, 16th century formulations may not be directly applicable. What they meant to affirm, however, is still utterly relevant.”

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566), where the Swiss Reformer Heinrich Bullinger declares that he would willingly agree to alterations to his confessional writing if such alterations are argued for convincingly (“denen, die uns aus dem Worte Gottes eines Besseren belehren, nicht ohne Dankbarkeit nachzugeben und Folge zu leisten”). Heinrich Bullinger, *Das Zweite Helvetische Bekenntnis* (Zürich, 1966), 12.

## The confessional writings of our churches

- (145) The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed (symbols [*symbola*] of the old church), also called the Ecumenical Creeds, form an integral part of the tradition of our churches. They are confessional writings of our churches.
- (146) Alongside the Ecumenical Creeds, member churches of the LWF regard the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, especially the unaltered "Augsburg Confession" and Martin Luther's "Small Catechism," as pure expositions of the Word of God.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, the following confessional writings form an integral part of the tradition of their churches: "The Augsburg Confession of 1530"; "The Apology of the Augsburg Confession" (1531); "The Smalcald Articles of Martin Luther" (1537); "Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope" (1537); "The Small Catechism of Martin Luther" (1529); "The Large Catechism of Martin Luther" (1529); "Epitome of the Formula of Concord" (1577); "The Solid or Thorough Declaration of the Formula of Concord" (1577).
- (147) Alongside the Ecumenical Creeds, member churches of the WCRC do not share an explicit corpus of confessional writings. They understand themselves to be united by general agreement in faith with the historic Reformed confessions.<sup>23</sup> For a considerable number of these churches, however, one or more of the following confessional writings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries form an integral part of their tradition: "The Heidelberg Catechism" (1563); "The Second Helvetic Confession" (1562/1566); and "The Westminster Confession of Faith" (1646).<sup>24</sup> For a considerable number of member churches

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. *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, 1997, II. Doctrinal Basis: "The Lutheran World Federation confesses the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the only source and norm of its doctrine, life and service. It sees in the three Ecumenical Creeds and in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, especially in the unaltered Augsburg Confession and the Small Catechism of Martin Luther, a pure exposition of the Word of God."

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Constitution of the World Communion of Reformed Churches*, adopted 2010, Article II—Basis: "The World Communion of Reformed Churches is committed to embody a Reformed identity as articulated in the Ecumenical Creeds of the early church, in the historic confessions of the Reformation, and as continued in the life and witness of the Reformed community."

<sup>24</sup> Reformed confessional writings of regional relevance include from the German-Swiss Reformation: The 67 Theses or Articles of Ulrich Zwingli (1523); The Zurich Introduction

of the WCRC, confessional writings from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries form an integral part of their tradition.<sup>25</sup>

- (148) In general, different confessional writings form part of the respective tradition of Reformed and Lutheran churches.
- (149) To a considerable degree, the diversity of confessional writings resulted from the variety of contexts in which churches found themselves at the time the confessional writings emerged. Such diversity legitimately reflects the contextual nature of the confessions.
- (150) To some extent, the diversity of confessional writings resulted from doctrinal disagreement between Lutheran and Reformed churches. If touching upon fundamental issues, such diversity may be regarded as doctrinal inconsistency which may weaken the common witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>26</sup>
- (151) Over the course of the last few decades, Reformed and Lutherans have been able to reconcile all doctrinal inconsistencies relevant to the common witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup> The fact that a diversity of confessional writings today still exists is thus no longer evidence of a doctrinal disagreement relevant to the common witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ between Lutheran and Reformed churches.

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(1523); The 10 Bern Theses (1528); Fidei ratio (1530); The Bern Synodus (1532); The Basel Confession (1534); Helvetica Prior (1536); Consensus Tigurinus (1549); Confessio Helvetica Posterior (1562/1566); from the German Reformation: The East Friesian Confession (1528, also called Preachers' Confession); The Smaller Emden Catechism (1554); from the Calvinist Reformation: The Geneva Confession de la Foy (1536); The Geneva Catechism (1542/1545); Confessio Gallicana (1559, from 1571 also known as Confession de La Rochelle); from the Reformation in north-western Europe: Confessio Belgica /Durch Confession (1561); The Dordrecht Canons (1618-19); Confessio Scotica (1560); from the Reformation in (south-)eastern Europe: The Erlauthal Confession (1562); The Hungarian Confession (1562); Consensus Sendomiriensis (1570); Confessio Bohemica (1575).

<sup>25</sup> E.g. *The Barmen Theological Declaration* (1934), the "Confession of 1967"(USA); "A Brief Statement of Faith" (1983, USA); *The Belhar Confession* (1986, South Africa).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Toward Church Fellowship*, op. cit. (note 19), III: Unity in Diversity, para. 52: "One needs however to make a distinction where diversity is concerned. A difference which compromises full agreement in the right preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments makes the church fellowship impossible and thus becomes a church-dividing difference, and an instance of illegitimate diversity."

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, I: Our Common Faith, para. 26: "Finally, as Lutheran and Reformed churches we affirm that full agreement in the right teaching/preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments is necessary and sufficient for the true unity of the church."

The above mentioned Lutheran and Reformed confessional writings today exist in dogmatically reconciled, hence legitimate, diversity.

## Confessing Christ together

- (152) Lutherans and Reformed are united in their rootedness in Holy Scripture as interpreted by the creeds of the Old Church.<sup>28</sup> They are also united in their joint heritage of corresponding confessional acts from the time of the Reformation to our present time.<sup>29</sup>
- (153) Lutherans and Reformed share a common heritage of confessional writings existing in a dogmatically reconciled, hence legitimate, diversity.<sup>30</sup> They share an understanding of confessional writing which is contextual by nature. They are therefore united, not divided, by such legitimate diversity of confessional writings.<sup>31</sup>
- (154) United in a common heritage of confessional acts and confessional writings, Lutherans and Reformed are united in confessing the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, I, para. 19: "Jesus Christ [...] is confessed in the creeds of the church."

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* "Together we share the evangelical concern of the Reformation to proclaim life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for us as the gospel, the center of the Scriptures."

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, III: Unity in Diversity, para. 51: "Following the historical confessions, as Lutheran and Reformed Churches we affirm that agreement in the right preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in accordance with God's word is necessary and sufficient for the true unity of the church."

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, III, para. 52: "This understanding of the unity of the church makes it clear that, rather than unity and diversity being opposites, diversity is part of our unity in Christ."

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *The Amman Declaration* (2006). Agreement of Full Mutual Recognition of Lutheran and Reformed Churches in the Middle East and North Africa, Preface, para. 2; "[...] This confession unites us as churches of the Reformation tradition."

# Recommendations

(155) On the basis of the theological foundations articulated in “Communion: On Being the Church” we affirm that we are in communion and recommend taking several practical steps toward more fully living out the reality of our communion. To

- Call upon churches of the LWF and WCRC to follow the Lund Principle, that is, jointly to carry out whatever we can do together and only work separately there where there is a compelling reason to do so.
- Work more closely together through the offices of the LWF and WCRC in Geneva, Switzerland and Hannover, Germany on such things as preparing liturgical resources, providing for theological education and coordinating ministries of justice and compassion around the world.
- Continue the current practice of having representatives of each communion present at the council meetings of the other.
- Consider holding meetings of the LWF Council and the WCRC Executive Committee in proximity to allow for the better sharing of common work. Consider holding parallel assemblies/general councils of LWF and WCRC at some time in the future. In each case some parts of the meetings could be shared and others separate.
- Continue programmatic collaboration to identify particular agendas for action that need a coordinated approach for maximum effectiveness and work on these together from the offices in Geneva and Hannover (i.e., HIV/AIDS, economic injustice, illegitimate debt, hunger, human rights, ecojustice issues, water rights, etc.).
- Seek appropriate channels of consultation on the way to decision making within existing structures.
- Pay more attention to issues of transitivity as they pertain to Lutheran–Reformed relations. Seek coherence in our ecumenical initiatives so that agreements with each partner are consistent with agreements with all other partners.
- Find a mechanism for sharing more widely current models for structures of church communion.

Communion: On being the church

- Encourage seminaries to share resources and acquaint students with progress toward more visible unity among Lutheran and Reformed churches around the world.
- Make the resources listed in this document (and others as appropriate) widely available through links on the LWF and WCRC Web sites.
- Continue formal structures for ongoing theological conversations and promotion of more visible unity through an ongoing Lutheran–Reformed Joint Commission



# Resources

## **Regional declarations of church fellowship between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions**

On the basis of many years of theological conversations, declarations of church fellowship were possible between Lutheran, Reformed and United Churches in Europe, the USA and the Middle East. These declarations were adopted by the synods of the respective churches. The churches recognize each other as full and true expressions of the one church of Jesus Christ, have fellowship in Word and sacrament and are committed to common witness and service and continuing theological work. The ministries are mutually recognized and the interchangeability of ministers between the different traditions is possible.

- *Leuenberg Agreement* (1973). Agreement between Reformation Churches in Europe, at <http://www.leuenberg.net/sites/default/files/media/pdf/Publications/Konkordie-en.pdf>
- *A Formula of Agreement* (1997). Among the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ, at: <http://www.ucc.org/assets/pdfs/foa-text.pdf>
- *An Invitation to Action* (1983), a first report which did not enable church fellowship.
- *The Amman Declaration* (2006). Agreement of full mutual recognition of Lutheran and Reformed Churches in the Middle East and North Africa, at <http://www.aco-fr.org/docaco1/36-txtofficiels/195-la-declaration-damman.html>

Concerning the theological work after the Leuenberg Agreement, the study on ecclesiology has to be mentioned: *The Church of Jesus Christ: The Contribution of the Reformation toward Ecumenical Dialogue on Church Unity*, (1994). A new and corrected English version was published in 2012 (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt Leipzig). This text was adopted by the General Assembly, but it was not presented to the synods of the churches.

## **Regional declarations of church fellowship between the Lutheran, Reformed and Methodist traditions in Europe**

In 1997, the Methodist churches in Europe declared church fellowship with the signatory churches of the Leuenberg Agreement on the basis of a *Joint Declaration of Church Fellowship* elaborated in a dialogue and adopted by the synods of all the churches. This is how the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CEPE) came into existence.

## **Regional declarations of church fellowship between the Lutheran, Reformed and Anglican traditions in Europe**

Dialogues at the national level have enabled church fellowship as well as the mutual recognition of ministries. Due to differences in the understanding of *episkope*, an integration of the ministries is not yet possible. There is however a common celebration of Word and sacrament, common witness and service. A minister can serve in the other tradition upon request and on a single occasion.

- “On the Way to Visible Unity: A Common Statement,” *Meissen Agreement* (1988). Between the Church of England and the German Evangelical Churches, at [http://www.ekd.de/english/download/meissen\\_engl\\_.pdf](http://www.ekd.de/english/download/meissen_engl_.pdf)
- “Called to Witness and Service,” *Reuilly Common Statement* (1999). Between the British and Irish Anglican Churches and the French Lutheran and Reformed Churches, at <http://dev.qu-int.com/ier/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Reuilly-Declaration.rtf>

In different countries (USA, Canada, Scandinavia and Australia), there are agreements of church fellowship between Lutherans and Anglicans without the participation of the Reformed tradition.

## **International reports**

*Toward Church Fellowship* (1989). A report of the Joint Commission of the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, at [http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/news\\_file/9.pdf](http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/news_file/9.pdf)

*Called to Communion and Common Witness* (2002). A report of the Joint Working Group between the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, at [http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/news\\_file/jwg.pdf](http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/news_file/jwg.pdf)



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the church of all times and all places that the  
church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic

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