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Living Lutheran,
June 2017

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Study guide

Unity in diversity

The 20th anniversary of the Formula of Agreement

By Robert C. Blezard

In a time when it seems fragmentation and rancor are the world's orders of the day, ELCA Lutherans and three denominations of the Reformed tradition—the United Church of Christ, the Reformed Church in America and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—are celebrating 20 years of mutual faith, trust, mission and relationship.

Exercise 1: That we may be one

As Jesus prayed before he was crucified, he asked God to bless his followers “that they may be one.” He continued: “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:22-23).

- When Jesus talks about unity between him and God, what does he mean? What are the dimensions and implications of that unity? Is it a big deal? Why or why not?
- In the same breath Jesus also mentions unity among his followers. What is the relationship between Jesus and God on the one hand, and Jesus and his followers on the other? What are the similarities?
- What does it mean for Christians to be “one”? Can there be no differences at all? How much commonality has to exist before we can say we are one in Christ?
- Recall as many instances as you can from the New Testament about squabbles and disagreements among the disciples and followers of Jesus. Between Paul and the other apostles. In what ways were they “unified” even as they disagreed? In what ways do they provide a model for us to be in full communion partnership with other denominations?

Exercise 2: Mutual interest

In recent decades Lutherans and other mainline denominations, including those of the Reformed tradition, have seen a decline in membership and finances. Given that backdrop, why does it make more sense to draw closer together, to focus on what we have in common, to allow ordained ministers to work across denominational lines, and to ease the way for us to cooperate on common mission and service? What are the advantages? What are the disadvantages? What's at stake?



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Exercise 3: Affirmation and admonition

Centuries ago, when Lutherans and Christians of the Reformed traditions disagreed, they condemned the other for supposed unorthodoxy or heresy. While lifting historical condemnations, the Formula of Agreement also calls for partners to hold one another in mutual affirmation and admonition. This means that while affirming one another's identity and distinction, partners could admonish—question, challenge, rebuke—one another if difficulties arose. The *Living Lutheran* article points out that the Reformed Church in America did just this after the ELCA's 2009 social statement on human sexuality, with the result that the ensuing dialogue helped a new common understanding to emerge.

- Along with trust and good faith, what are other values and qualities that come into play in a policy of mutual affirmation and admonition? What are the advantages of such a provision?
- In what ways are mutual affirmation and admonition the basis for a healthy relationship not only between denominations but also between co-workers, family members, community partners, married couples?

Exercise 4: Your full communion

In the Formula of Agreement, as well as the other full-communion pacts, the ELCA acknowledged that the other Protestant denominations were neither adversaries nor competitors in the Christian marketplace, but rather brothers- and sisters-in-Christ, as well as partners in the mission of the gospel.

- Has that understanding filtered its way down to the congregational level in your community or region? How or why not?
- What efforts has your congregation, your synodical conference or your synod made to engage in mission, pulpit-sharing or cooperative ministry with full-communion partners? How are they going? How might they be strengthened—or initiated?
- Looking at a phone book or community directory or doing an internet search, identify the congregations of ELCA full-communion partners in your area. What opportunities exist? What strategies can you think of to initiate a dialogue with those you haven't reached yet, and to strengthen the ties with those you know?

Discussion questions:

- How and why are Christians better when we work together?
- Should differences of doctrine and practice ever keep Christians from talking or working together? If not, why not? If yes, why, and under what circumstances?



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- How is a full-communion partnership different from conversation, fellowship and ad-hoc cooperation? Should differences of practice and doctrine ever keep the ELCA from entering into a full-communion agreement? If no, why not? If yes, why, and under what kind of circumstances?
- Hypothetically, in what ways do full-communion agreements enable congregations like yours to better fulfill their mission to the gospel of Jesus Christ? Concretely, are any ELCA congregations in your area taking advantage of those opportunities? Is yours? How can the church do a better job?

Unity in diversity

The 20th anniversary of
the Formula of Agreement

By Jill Dierberg Clark

The four member churches of the Formula of Agreement shared the eucharist at their 20th anniversary service March 26.

“Let Us Break Bread Together” was the anthem that resounded loudly and clearly on March 26, as four Christian denominations worshiped and shared the eucharist at the United Church of Christ (UCC) Center in Cleveland. The churches had gathered to celebrate the 20th anniversary of signing the Formula of Agreement, which declares “full communion” exists between the ELCA and three Reformed bodies—the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PCUSA), the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the UCC.

In a service of praise, thanksgiving, repentance, forgiveness and recommitment, heads of communion, local judicatory leaders, ecumenical officers, and local clergy and lay leaders participated in the celebration, which mirrored the service shared between these four churches at the signing of the agreement in 1997.

The event was held in conjunction with a meeting between the heads of communion, where they explored the next chapter of the churches’ lives together as full communion partners.

For the ELCA especially, the agreement signifies a groundbreaking step for its ecumenical commitments. “The Formula of Agreement is the

ELCA’s first full communion partnership,” said Kathryn Lohre, assistant to the ELCA presiding bishop and executive for ecumenical and inter-religious relations. “It is the result of decades of prior Lutheran-Reformed dialogue.”

The ELCA currently has three other full communion agreements, with the Episcopal Church, the Moravian Church in America and the United Methodist Church.

What is full communion?

A full communion agreement is a way for denominations to affirm each other as members of the same baptized body of Christ. It allows churches to recognize each other’s sacraments and affirm their various ministries. It also allows for recognizing the ordination of ministers, which has led to the sharing of clergy between denominations.

During the anniversary service, participant churches declared once again the purpose and intent of the agreement, recognizing and affirming both word and sacrament, but also remembering the need for repentance and reconciliation.

The ELCA’s part in the declaration of purpose stated: “We gather to repent of the ways we have

condemned each other, to reaffirm our mutual baptism, and to encourage the sharing of the Lord's Supper among our members."

For many who participated, the sharing in the eucharist and the recognition of being united in baptism were the most significant and moving aspects of the service.

"Bringing heads of communion and representatives from various communions into the same room, gathered around the same table, breaking bread and experiencing the eucharist is the biggest evidence of God's work among us today," said Karen Georgia Thompson, UCC minister for ecumenical and interfaith relations.

SanDawna Ashley, assistant stated clerk and representative for the PCUSA, shared similar sentiments: "As we shared communion and sprinkled the waters of baptism on those gathered in worship, I saw an image of the body of Christ [and] less denominational differences. We joined together as sisters and brothers committed to each other by a pledge to honor our various faith traditions while remaining in partnership with one another."

Besides these components of worship, attendees also joined together to proclaim unity through prayer, litany and song.



Leaders of the four denominations meet in March: John Dorhauer, United Church of Christ general minister and president (left); Tom De Vries, general secretary of the Reformed Church in America; J. Herbert Nelson, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) stated clerk; and Elizabeth Eaton, ELCA presiding bishop.

Mutual affirmation and admonition

The Formula of Agreement is held together by a framework of mutual affirmation and admonition, allowing for unity in diversity rather than uniformity. As the agreement states: "Whereas conventional modes of thought have hidden the

bases of unity behind statements of differences, the new concept insists that, while remaining differences must be acknowledged, even to the extent of their irreconcilability, it is the inherent unity in Christ that is determinative."

"When the world divides, we as a church say we are not divided."

Lohre explained how this framework impacts partners both individually and collectively: "When churches are held together by this framework, we are able to maintain our distinct and unique Lutheran identity that is gracious but also unapologetically Lutheran. And we are able to claim other denominations in their own distinct and unique forms without seeking the lowest common denominator or abandoning core doctrinal convictions as churches.

"This is a model for full communion that doesn't require losing who you are as you come into close relationship with the other."

This unity has sometimes been put to the test. In 2009 the RCA, within the framework of the Formula of Agreement, admonished the ELCA as a result of the Churchwide Assembly's actions regarding human sexuality.

"This led to theological dialogue on Scripture and discernment among our four churches," Lohre said. "Together we produced a theological report, which affirmed that these differences were not church-dividing. This was one of the greatest examples of mutual admonition and affirmation and how the agreement held up under significant difference."

Making tangible the agreement

Lohre and other denominational representatives also reflected on the inherent potential the agreement holds as a significant countercultural act.

"During the service, we talked about how countercultural it is in a deeply divided society to have a commitment to one another that is bound by this framework—to say we are not divided," she said. "It is true in this particular time and climate but also true in any time and place. When the world divides, we as a church say we are not divided."

Ashley added, "Being able to stay in relationship while respecting and honoring difference is a lesson for the world today."

Besides sharing and recognizing the sacraments, the four churches have made strides in the last 20

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years to bear common witness in other tangible ways.

They've done so at the local level, especially through shared mission in the community, partnership between congregations in service and the exchange of clergy. Nationally, the churches have worked together through theological dialogue and advocacy for the common good.


Through the agreement, heads of each communion and ecumenical officers have developed deep relationships with one another, giving them the assurance to speak with one voice. Today full communion partners agree that those relationships remain a vital aspect of their shared identity.

"We've been in partnership for 20 years, and this has given us the opportunity to share in our differences, to challenge one another, but also to pursue a greater and deeper unity and to bless one another with our individual gifts," said Monica Schaap Pierce, ecumenical associate of the RCA. "Each communion has its own gift it brings to the ecumenical world."

Looking forward

As the anniversary meetings between heads of communion and ecumenical representatives concluded, church leaders expressed confidence and hope that the partnership will remain an important part of each denomination's identity and their life together.

"The identity of the UCC as a united and uniting church is forged in the context of ecumenical commitment and Jesus' prayer that they will all be one," Thompson said. "These agreements are ways in which we can do church together, be the church together and bring witness to what it means to be united in these times."

"This agreement is valuable for us as Lutherans because it reminds us about our common witness in the world," Lohre said. "This is particularly important as we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. We recognize that the church's history and the Reformation are part of a larger story that has unfolded over many years and for many traditions. We acknowledge that the history is not ours nor is it a singular story for all Reformed churches. We recognize our diversity amid commonality." 



Jill Dierberg Clark is a freelance writer living with her husband and twins in the St. Louis area.

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