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Study guide

Stronger together

Ecumenical relationships enrich ELCA congregations

By Robert C. Blezard

Our denomination is a leader in ecumenical relationships, forging strategic alliances and cooperating on mission with other Christians. The ELCA now has special full-communion partnerships with six other mainline denominations. These offer opportunities for mutual growth and development. Is your congregation taking advantage of them?

Exercise 1: One church

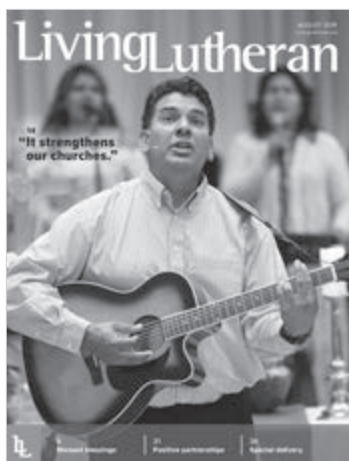
Chapter VII of the Augsburg Confession—the oldest and considered by many to be the most authoritative guide for what it means to be Lutheran—affirms that there is only “one holy, Christian church.” It goes on to define church this way:

It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the sacraments are administered according to the gospel. ... It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by human beings, be observed everywhere” (The Book of Concord, page 42; Fortress Press, 2000).

- Do you agree with the confession that there is only one holy, Christian church? Explain.
- What do you think about the confession’s brief definition of what it means to be a church? Does it surprise you? Do you wish it said more—gave you more to hang on to?
- What are the only two criteria for church?
- Does the definition include only Lutheran churches? Why or why not?
- How does the statement open the door for Lutherans to recognize the “one holy, Christian church” in other denominations?
- In this way, can it be argued that ecumenism—opening ourselves to other Christians—is hardwired into our Lutheran makeup?

Exercise 2: One body

The New Testament repeatedly affirms and celebrates the unity that we have in Christ. As a study group, explore passages that describe the fellowship of believers as “one body” of Christ, including John 17:20-23; Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 1:10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-14; Philippians 2:2; Ephesians 4:4-6; Galatians 3:27-29 and 1 Peter 3:8.



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- From the Scriptures, how would you describe the unity we have in Christ?
- What is it that makes us “one in Christ”?
- How would or should that unity express itself?
- Does unity in Christ mean we all have to be the same? To act the same? To worship the same way? To believe the same things? To emphasize the same parts of our faith?
- How much can groups of Christians differ from each other and still be “one in Christ”?
- Since we are “one in Christ,” how should we treat each other? In actuality, how do we often treat one another?
- What are the major factors that tend to keep Christians isolated in their own churches?
- What does “one in Christ” mean to you in your own faith life? How do you express it?

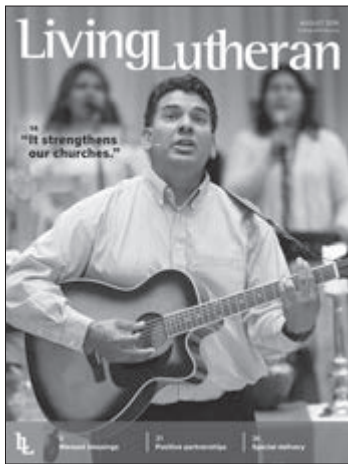
Exercise 3: Our ELCA siblings

Your congregation's constitution outlines a mutually interdependent relationship with your synod, the churchwide expression and other congregations. We are **one** church with **three** distinct and related expressions.

- In what tangible ways is your congregation connected to and part of your synod and churchwide expressions? How do you communicate? Cooperate? Support one another?
- What do your interactions with synod and churchwide say about the closeness of your relationships? To what degree does it reflect the vision of an intertwined church that is described in the constitution? What's keeping your congregation from a closer relationship with your synod and churchwide? How can it be improved?
- What interactions does your congregation have with other ELCA congregations? How well does it reflect the unity we have in Christ and the ELCA's vision as an interconnected church? How can your congregation do better?
- What might your quality of interactions with ELCA congregations, your synod and churchwide say about your potential openness to interactions with non-Lutheran Christians?

Exercise 4: Your Christian neighbors

The Bible and the Augsburg Confession assert there is only one church, and our denomination lives that out by seeking close relationships with other Christians. It has yielded full-communion agreements with



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six other mainline denominations: The Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Moravian Church of North America, the Episcopal Church, and the United Methodist Church.

- Which of these six denominations have congregations in your immediate area? List them. How far away are they?
- In what ways does your synod celebrate or encourage conversations and interactions with full-communion partners? Could it be doing more? Should it? Explain.
- What interactions does your congregation have with these full-communion churches? Looking at the possibilities for cooperation listed in the article's sidebar, do those interactions reflect the full range of possibilities? Why or why not?
- What prevents your congregation from having a closer relationship with those partner churches? What would it take to deepen the relationship?
- Talk about the needs of your congregation and make a list of them. Which might be solved or improved through cooperative effort with one of your full-communion partners?

For action: Explore ways that your congregation can initiate or deepen a relationship with full-communion partners in your area. Present it to your congregation council or pastor for consideration.

Exercise 5: Celebrate unity

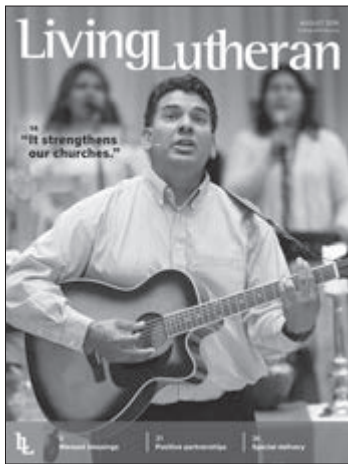
Every year, Jan. 18-25, our denomination joins millions of Christians across the globe for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

- Why is Christian unity a good thing to pray for?
- What has kept Christians from being unified, despite the Bible's clear message?
- Has your congregation ever observed that event? How? Or why not?
- How might your congregation begin or expand its observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity with Christian neighbors?

For action: Draft a list of suggestions for celebrating and observing Christian unity with your congregation's neighboring churches. Give it to your congregation council or pastor for consideration.

Discussion questions

- What are the "pros" of the ELCA's full-communion partnerships? Why? What are the "cons"? Which are stronger, the pros or the cons? Explain.



About the study guide author:

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- Does your congregation enjoy working together with other local churches? Why or why not? What do you think about it?
- If Jesus clearly intended for Christians to be one, why is there so much division among us? How can we get over it?
- Political and social issues have deeply divided our nation. What role can churches play in trying to bridge divisions? How can our full-communion partnerships help set an example to the people in our pews?

STRONGER TOGETHER

ELCA congregations find vitality through full-communion partnerships

By Robert C. Blezard

This past Pentecost Sunday, the day the church hears anew how the Spirit blew into a gathering of Christians to bless and unify them, Kelly Moore's brand-new red stole was more than liturgical garb. It served as a sermon illustration.

"I was talking about how excited I was that I got to wear my new red stole," said Moore, ordained in the Moravian Church in North America and called this spring to serve Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Mocksville, N.C.

You see, Moravian clergy don't vest for worship, and Moore *loves* wearing an alb with a colorful stole. "I could not wait to get to church and put it on," she said.

Appropriate for Pentecost Sunday, Moore explained, the red stole worn by a Moravian pastor in a Lutheran church is a small symbol of Christian unity present on that holy day.

God's intention for sacred community, harmony and unity is a guiding principle for our denomination's ecumenical efforts.

"Unity is a gift that we've already received in Christ," said Kathryn Lohre, ELCA assistant to the presiding bishop and executive for ecumenical and interreligious relations. "Our task as churches is to



Kelly Moore, pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Mocksville, N.C., greets Bradley Rucker after worship. Moore is a Moravian Church pastor.

Photo: J. Stanley Photography



Photo: J. Stanley Photography

Moore greets Ed Foil after worship. She says the congregation of Holy Cross is always curious to learn more about the Moravian Church, one of the ELCA's full communion partners.

“Unity is a gift that we’ve already received in Christ. Our task as churches is to make that visible and to work toward reconciliation where people have sought to divide what Christ has already united.”

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While the ELCA interacts with scores of churches, councils and faith groups across the globe, it has only entered into “full communion” with six denominations. These partnerships recognize strong theological commonalities and establish close relationships that allow for clergy sharing and reciprocal table fellowship (see “Characteristics of full communion,” page 19). It’s because of the ELCA’s 1999 full-communion relationship with the Moravian Church that Moore can serve the ELCA congregation and see the benefits.

“Being in full communion and bonding together makes us stronger,” Moore said. “There’s so much more power and people and monetary support and prayer support, and all of that.”

Moore also chairs the Lutheran Moravian Coordinating Committee, which brings together representatives from both denominations for yearly conversation and planning.

“There’s a real sense of achievement and a real sense of relationship building,” said Moore, who received a warm welcome at Holy Cross from

parishioners who are curious to learn more. “There’s not a Sunday that I walk through that building that somebody doesn’t say, ‘Pastor Kelly, can you tell me about the Moravians?’ ”

In the 21 years since the ELCA began entering into them, full-communion partnerships have proven invaluable to its work in all sorts of ways. The partnerships have helped launch creative ministries and productive mission projects. Working together, denominational counterparts have not only been able to share information and expertise but have also developed programs and launched or revitalized congregations that blend the best of each tradition.

Full-communion partnerships have been a boon, especially for churches that can’t afford a full-time pastor or have trouble finding a Lutheran pastor to serve them, said Tim Smith, bishop of the North Carolina Synod, where Moore serves. Faced with struggling congregations in isolated rural communities, the synod is increasingly working with full-communion partners who are facing the same dilemma.

“It’s not an afterthought for us anymore,” Smith said. “We all have the same mind that we’ve either



Members of Spirit of Faith Lutheran-Methodist Church in Woonsocket, S.D., worship in various locations around town, including a lumber yard, while they wait for the construction of their new building. Spirit of Faith is a new congregation formed from the merger of two area churches—one ELCA and one United Methodist.

got to close these places or work together, and we're choosing to work together."

Lutherans in North Carolina have the longest-running relationship with the Moravians, who are strong there, and they have been working extensively with the Episcopal Church.

"So many of the Episcopal congregations and so many of the Lutheran congregations are small and not viable by themselves," Smith said. "We're looking at a whole lot of yoking—pairing-parish relationships."

Blended congregations

In many cases, Lutherans are working with full-communion partners to consolidate churches into a congregation whose identity is both/and—neither fully Lutheran nor the other. That's the case with Spirit of Faith Lutheran-Methodist Church, Woonsocket, S.D. It formed as a single church after decades of being three struggling independent congregations (one Methodist and two Lutheran) that shared Rhonda Wellsandt-Zell as pastor.

Each of the three congregations was just getting by. In addition to facing the expected 21st-century church challenges, they had a confusing worship schedule that rotated every week and had to shoulder the costs of maintaining three facilities in close proximity.

"All three buildings were in dire need of some pretty significant repairs and renovations," said Rachel Anderson, treasurer of Spirit of Faith. It

was clear that the path was unsustainable and something had to be done.

Understanding this, Wellsandt-Zell recalled the day she challenged members to get serious about their future: "I said to them, 'We have to decide. Are we going to live or are we going to die?'"

The congregations decided to live.

"I said, 'Well then, let's get busy and live boldly!'" Wellsandt-Zell added.

After a period of study and prayer, one of the Lutheran churches went out on its own and the other two congregations voted to merge in 2016 to form Spirit of Faith.

"Through our visioning process, we began to realize that it wasn't so much about the buildings, but what we were called to do as the church," Wellsandt-Zell said. "Once we started doing strong mission focus, looking outside the walls beyond ourselves, everything changed."

Envisioning a life beyond its walls, Spirit of Faith demolished its Lutheran church building and moved into the larger Methodist facility. But this spring they tore down that building too. As they await this fall's completion of a new structure suitable for ministry in the 21st century, they are meeting in community places, including a lumber yard, public pool, baseball field, courthouse lawn and nursing home.

"The transformation of the thinking was that we are the church—we the people," Wellsandt-Zell said. "The building is a tool for us to carry out the mission."



Photos: Courtesy of Spirit of Faith Lutheran-Methodist Church

Rhonda Wellsandt-Zell, an ELCA pastor serving Spirit of Faith, leads a children's program during a worship service held on a baseball field. Through the forming of Spirit of Faith, the congregation has discovered that the denomination title and building are not what make them a church.

This transformation also brought them a new identity that isn't entirely Lutheran and not entirely Methodist, but something bold and new.

"We've really felt more and more just like we're all in this together and we're all family," said Anderson, who belonged to the Methodist church before the merger. "We are all there for the same reason: We want to hear the word of God."

Wanda Swenson, who came to Spirit of Faith from one of the Lutheran churches, agreed: "The Lutheran and Methodist thing doesn't really matter. We've had a common purpose and goal and mission, and that has united us. It just instills in us the energy to go out into the community and do things for others."

When new people join Spirit of Faith, they are given three options to identify themselves—as a Methodist, a Lutheran or simply Spirit of Faith. It has helped the congregation reach people who are unchurched or ambivalent about denominations.

That's also the case at *Camino de Vida* (The Way of Life) in Albuquerque, N.M., a robust Latino mission organized by the ELCA and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), said Ruben Duran, ELCA director for congregational vitality. "The people who come, they know that there are two denominations behind it, and they're not saying I want this or the other," he said. "They say, 'I want to worship God.'"

This illustrates the point that today's people are looking more for a strong and vibrant community

"The Lutheran and Methodist thing doesn't really matter. We've had a common purpose and goal and mission, and that has united us. It just instills in us the energy to go out into the community and do things for others."

of faith than they are a church of a specific denomination. As a result, the old way that we measure the vitality of a church—finance and attendance—is out the window.

"You should be asking, 'What is God doing in people's lives? How are we impacting the neighborhood? What's happening to people's priorities? And how are the people who are in poverty connected to this ministry?'" Duran said.

This understanding has totally changed how the ELCA goes about starting churches.

"In the past, you'd go to a new city, find all the Lutherans and plan a building there, and the people would find you. No more," Duran said. "In the case of these postmodern thinkers, all the resources and materials we have don't apply very well, so we've got to create from nothing."

To learn how to better reach people in a changing religious landscape, the ELCA is

working with its full-communion partners on the denominational level. Duran's counterparts in mission development and church planting have culled information, together hosted workshops and trainings, and share experience and expertise.

In addition to requiring more effort and creativity, today's new congregations also take a lot more time to get established—up to 10 years, Duran said. For this reason, church planting today demands painstaking study and lots of resources. Working together, denominations can share information about specific mission neighborhoods and strategies for gathering faith communities. Most importantly, they can commit enough resources to see the projects to completion.

"That's why it's important to have these ecumenical partners," Duran said. "Together we can carry the weight, the mission, for a longer time and give our developers a chance to succeed."

In the 21 years since the ELCA approved the first full-communion partnership, the experience has been positive and rewarding as the denominations have continued to grow and cultivate new and creative ministry possibilities. Here are some of the ministries that full-communion partnerships have made possible:

- In the Indiana-Kentucky Synod, Grace Village, a Lutheran-Episcopal campus ministry at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind., recently moved into the space of First Presbyterian Church.
- In North Carolina, Moravian and Lutheran women rostered ministers hold an annual retreat.
- United Church of the San Juans in Ridgway, Colo., formed as a federated congregation of four full-communion partners—the ELCA, the United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
- "Called to Beloved Community" is an effort by Episcopalian and Lutheran bishops in Indiana to address racism.
- At the Rocky Mountain Synod's New Beginnings Worshiping Community in the Denver Women's Correctional Facility, partnership with Episcopalians enables them to offer worship in Spanish.
- In the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, ELCA pastor Tom Scornavacchi leads three Common Ground Recovery Communities, including one at St. Gabriel Episcopal Church in Douglassville, Pa.

While there are no additional full-communion partnerships in the immediate future, the ELCA continues to be in conversation and relationship with religious groups around the world. This has been part of the ELCA from its beginning. Just several years after the ELCA's founding, the 1991



David Martinez, a Presbyterian pastor serving *Camino de Vida*, sings and plays music during worship.

"Together we can carry the weight, the mission, for a longer time and give our developers a chance to succeed."

Churchwide Assembly approved the policy statement "A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment," which provides the vision for vigorous engagement with other members of God's family.

"These ecumenical partnerships, whether it's full communion or a dialogue or discourse, or even through councils of churches, have really shaped our self-understanding," Lohre said.

As a leader in ecumenism, the ELCA will continue to reach out to partners in hopes that the results will be as fruitful as they have been so far.

"Full-communion partnerships enable us to grow in our understanding and experience of other members of the body of Christ, and in appreciation for the gifts they bring," said Steve Meysing, assistant to the bishop of the Nebraska Synod. "They give us the opportunity to refresh our understanding of what ELCA Christians believe and contribute to the body of Christ, and invite us to turn outward and consider the needs of our sisters and brothers in faith, their congregations and ministries."


From what she sees, Moore, the Moravian pastor who serves an ELCA congregation in North Carolina, finds full communion a blessing: "It strengthens us. It strengthens our souls; it strengthens our bodies; it strengthens our churches." 



Photo: Isaiah Joel Photography



Children come forward for a program during a worship service at *Camino de Vida*, an ELCA-Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Latino mission congregation in Albuquerque, N.M.

Characteristics of full communion

For the ELCA, the characteristics of full communion are theological and missiological (study of the mission of the church) implications of the gospel that allow variety and flexibility. These characteristics stress that the church acts ecumenically for the sake of the world, not for itself alone. They include at least the following, some of which exist at earlier stages:

- Common confessing of the Christian faith.
- Mutual recognition of baptism and a sharing of the Lord's Supper, allowing for joint worship and an exchangeability of members.
- Mutual recognition and availability of ordained ministers to the service of all, subject to the disciplinary regulations of other denominations.
- Common commitment to evangelism, witness and service.
- Means of common decision-making on critical common issues of faith and life.
- Mutual lifting of any condemnations that exist between denominations.

Source: ELCA Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations

Full communion partners

1997: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

1997: Reformed Church in America

1997: United Church of Christ

1999: The Episcopal Church

1999: The Moravian Church

2009: The United Methodist Church

Source: ELCA Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations

Download a study guide at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the "Spiritual practices & resources" tab.



Robert C. Blezard is an assistant to the bishop of the Lower Susquehanna Synod and editor of *Living Lutheran's* study guides.