

INTER-CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIPS
An Instrument for Study

Commission on Theology and Church Relations
of
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
February 1991

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Introduction

A. Contemporary Context

The area of inter-Christian relationships has undergone considerable change in the 20th century, especially in recent decades. The conditions in both church and society to which the mid-19th century founders of the Missouri Synod addressed the principles of God's Word have changed markedly. Christians today, for example, generally have a more expanded knowledge and experience of the viewpoints of other Christians than did our counterparts in the 19th century. This is due, in large part, to the knowledge explosion of the 20th century. Books and articles on religious questions and personalities are widely read and studied. The electronic media have brought a wide variety of Biblical interpretations, doctrines, and ecclesiastical lifestyles into the living rooms of millions of people. Courses on religion and religious topics have been offered at colleges and universities for many years. Coupled with such developments in modern communication has been the mobility of our population. Christians from various denominations and ecclesiastical traditions have moved to many new communities and have learned to associate with many other Christians in their daily lives and callings.

Without doubt, future church historians will describe the 20th century in terms of the impact of the ecumenical movement. For decades interchurch councils and organizations have continued their efforts to increase understanding and cooperation among Christians of different confessional backgrounds and convictions. Dialogues between the various Christian confessional traditions have been common for a quarter of a century. The results of these discussions are often reported by the secular media, as well as in church journals. Grass roots ecumenism has occurred in many local congregations as they have sought to achieve better understanding and closer relationships with other Christians in their neighborhoods. In many cases, Christians have discovered that their previous attitudes toward other Christians have been based on caricatures. In other cases, Christians with centuries of distance from each other, if not opposition, have drawn closer together as they have studied the Scriptures or engaged in common causes together.

To be sure, the ecumenical movement has too often been characterized by agreeing to disagree, or by seeking the lowest common denominator when differences exist, or by other approaches not in keeping with the principles of Holy Scripture. For such reasons, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has often remained at arm's length from several kinds of ecumenical involvement and interdenominational organizations. Nevertheless, we, too, have participated in a number of ecumenical dialogues and joint efforts with other Christians at both national and local levels. Such involvements have without doubt altered and shaped our attitudes in various ways, including strengthening our convictions of Biblical doctrine and leading us to have more positive attitudes toward Christian brothers and sisters in other denominations.

The growing use of common or similar liturgical texts, forms, and hymns by church bodies whose doctrines remain divergent is also a fact of life in our times. Configurations in American conciliar and denominational structures are quite different from what they were a decade ago, not to mention mid-19th century America. The increased popularity and influence of para- and trans-denominational groups and activities are also factors of our churchly existence today. Through our common interest in dealing with the moral dimensions of social issues such as the abortion question, we have learned to work side by side with other Christian people. In so doing, we have discovered that what drives their convictions is often similar to what drives our own.

Within world Lutheranism, too, many changes have occurred that profoundly affect relationships among us. For 40 years, the Lutheran World Federation has linked most of the world's nearly 60 million Lutherans. Once emphasizing that it was a federation rather than a church, today's Lutheran World Federation sees itself as a "communion" of Lutheran churches with strong ecclesial characteristics. North American Lutheranism has recently witnessed the merger of major Lutheran church bodies in both Canada and the United States. In many respects, these mergers reflect substantive changes from historic Lutheran positions on the Lord's Supper, the authority of Holy Scripture, the ordination of women, the basis of fellowship, and the mission of the church. The ecumenical direction of much of contemporary North American Lutheranism is clearly at variance with the approach of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, as well as with the 19th century confessional positions of the predecessor churches that have merged. Compared to those times, the achievement of confessional consensus is regarded by some as less important today. This is evident from decisions in recent years to establish limited forms of intercommunion with non-Lutheran churches.

One of the most significant changes in American denominational life, including life within Lutheran church bodies, is the factor sometimes called "ambiguous denominationalism." Contemporary denominations tend to cling to their traditional official formulations of doctrine and confession, but without taking them literally or expecting their constituents to believe, teach, and confess them with any strong degree of consistency. Moreover, one commonly finds as much diversity within a single denomination as between denominations. Not uncommonly, Christians with "Lutheran" convictions hold membership in non-Lutheran church bodies. On the other hand, one finds, all too often, that professing Lutherans hold positions and policies at variance with the official confessional positions of traditional Lutheranism. In contrast to the mid-19th century situation when the Missouri Synod was founded and its church-relations principles were first articulated, we can no longer assume that denominational membership clearly and directly identifies one's doctrinal positions and convictions. Interchurch relationships that were fashioned in a time of relatively clear denominational identity surely need to be reexamined in terms of this factor.

Individual Christians, congregations, pastors, teachers, and church bodies interact with and relate to a large number of other Christian, religious, and secular groups and individuals, and they do so in a variety of ways. Such relationships include the following: individual, congregational, denominational, church fellowship, partner church, other Lutheran church bodies, Lutheran federations or councils, interdenominational, ecumenical associations, interreligious, and nonreligious endeavors on behalf of ethical or humanitarian needs. Christians have opportunities as well as responsibilities, not only within each level, but in interacting with or participating in activities or programs in the various other relationships.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has not been immune to the changes taking place in both church and society. Commonsense observation, as well as surveys and polls undertaken, clearly support the premise that many members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod today are less informed than our forebears on the positions and policies of our church body, together with the reasons that underlie them. We, too, have experienced a diminished sense of responsibility for the whole church, coupled with a sometimes exaggerated individualism and congregationalism. Declining denominational loyalty is a factor of contemporary church life that also affects The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. In spite of such factors, however, our Synod continues to display a strong sense of confessional integrity and a desire to remain with the confession of historic, Biblical, Lutheran doctrine even in the face of criticism and contempt.

Recent years have also witnessed a deepened sense of solidarity between the Synod and its sister/partner churches around the world, including a growing awareness of our opportunities to be of service to confessional Lutheranism worldwide.

The many changes that have occurred in contemporary church life cannot be characterized simply as good or bad, but rather require a critical norm. That norm, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod today continues to hold, is the Holy Scripture as the inspired and inerrant Word of God and the only rule and norm for our preaching, teaching, and witness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This Gospel is the heart and center of our faith and life. In a very real sense, today’s task of providing the church with guidance in inter-Christian relationships is the same as it has always been, namely, to apply the principles of God’s Word to the questions of our times and to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we do so. As we seek to apply the same Biblical principles to our life today, we need to be aware of contemporary developments in order to distinguish between timeless Biblical truths and their applications to a particular set of circumstances. If our circumstances and perceptions have changed, it may well be that different applications are in order precisely for us to maintain the same Biblical confession.

Christians have every reason to be strong and confident in the midst of change, for we live and serve under the lordship of Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. With his Gospel and sacraments to sustain us and his faithful Word to guide us, we can critically examine changing conditions on the basis of God’s Word, rather than simply perpetuating the past as an end in itself or blindly welcoming all change. For we are convinced that only God’s Word, not societal change or reluctance to change, is normative for our life and work together.

B. Our Assignment

At its 1977 convention The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod adopted Resolution 3-02A “To Declare a State of ‘Fellowship in Protest’ with the ALC.” In this resolution the Synod noted that “there is considerable evidence of doctrinal disagreement and confusion in understanding the nature and implications of the concept of fellowship itself” and it asked the Commission on Theology and Church Relations “to prepare a comprehensive study and report on the nature and implications of the concept of fellowship.”¹

In the process of carrying out this assignment the Commission conducted 56 “Formula for Concord” conferences throughout the Synod in 1978 as a way of listening to the concerns of pastors and other workers of the Synod concerning fellowship questions at the local level. In addition to raising a large number of practical issues related to fellowship among Christians, the participants in these conferences suggested that the CTCR prepare a Bible study on fellowship that could be distributed to the Synod for study and reaction.² The Commission decided to respond positively to this suggestion and completed its Bible Study on Fellowship in 1979. At its 1979 convention the Synod urged all of its members “to participate in the Bible studies to be shared with the Synod by the CTCR.”³

Taking into account the responses received from this study, the Commission proceeded with the completion of its document entitled “The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship” (April 1981). In this document, the Commission first presented an overview of what the Scriptures say about fellowship, examining not only those sections of the Scriptures in

¹ Resolution 3-02A, *1977 Convention Proceedings*, 125-26.

² See *1979 Convention Workbook*, 72-73, for a complete report on the “Formula for Concord” conferences.

³ Resolution 3-03, *1979 Convention Proceedings*, 117-19; cf. “Bible Study on Fellowship,” prepared by the CTCR in 1979.

which the word *koinonia* itself appears, but also taking into account what God's Word has to say about the spiritual unity which is given with faith in Christ and about external unity in the church based on the confession of the apostolic faith. On the basis of its study of the Biblical material on this subject, the Commission formulated the following nine "Scriptural Principles of Fellowship":

1. Spiritual fellowship with Christ and with all believers is given with faith in the heart (*fides qua*) (1 Cor. 1:2; John 10:16; 17:20-21; Rom. 3:28; 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:4f.; Eph. 1:15-23; 2:8-9; 4:3-6; Gal. 3:26-28; 1 John 1:1-4. Cf. AC, VII, 2; Ap, VII and VIII, 5, 31; SC, II, 5).

2. Faith in the heart (*fides qua*) **comes into being through the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel** (Mark 16:16; Rom. 1:16-17; 10:17; 1 Cor. 1:21; 4:15; 12:3; 2 Thess. 2:14; John 17:20; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:23. Cf. AC, V; AC, VII, 1, 2; IX 1, 2; XIII, 1; Ap, VII and VIII, 8; SC, II, 6; IV, 1-14).

3. For the church today Holy Scripture is the only judge, rule, and norm of the Gospel (Ps. 119:105; Luke 1:1-4; John 20:31; Rom. 1:2; 15:4; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 3:15-16; Gal. 1:8. Cf. LC, V, 31-32; Ap, IV, 81; Ap, XV, 17; FC Ep, Rule and Norm, 1-2; FC SD, Rule and Norm, 3; SA, II, ii, 15).

4. Good works flow out of faith and are responses to the Gospel (John 15:1-11; 17:17; Eph. 4:1-3; Gal. 5:6; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 3:14; 4:7-12. Cf. AC, XX, 27-34; Ap, IV, 74, 106, 111; XII, 37, 82; FC Ep, IV, 11; FC SD, III, 27; IV, 9-12).

5. Love, which heads the list of "the fruit of the Spirit," always seeks the edification of the members of the body of Christ (Gal. 5:22-25; 6:1-5; 1 Cor. 8:1; 13:4-7; 14:12; 2 Cor. 2:4; Rom. 15:1-3; 12:9-13; Eph. 4:15-16; Col. 3:14-15. Cf. Ap, IV, 125, 225-226, 231-232; FC SD, IV, 10-12).

6. The confession of the apostolic faith (*fides quae*) **as it is taught in the Scriptures is mandated by God for the sake of the edification and extension of Christ's body, the church** (Matt. 28:18-20; 1 Tim. 1:3-5; 6:3f.; 2 Tim. 2:14-18; Acts 20:28-32; Gal. 2:4-5, 14; Eph. 4:14-16; Heb. 13:9. Cf. Preface to *The Book of Concord*, p. 13; Preface to Apology, 15-17; Ap, XX, 6-8; FC SD, Rule and Norm, 14f.).

7. Church fellowship (in the sense of external unity in the church) is constituted by agreement in the faith which is confessed (*fides quae*) **and not by faith in the heart** (*fides qua*) (Matt. 3:12; 13:24-30, 36-43; 1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Tim. 1:13-14; 2:19; Gal. 2:9; Acts 2:42. Cf. Ap, VII and VIII, 12-13, 17-19; Preface to *The Book of Concord*, p. 6; FC SD, XI, 94-96; FC SD, VII, 33; FC SD, Rule and Norm, 14; FC SD, Rule and Norm, 1).

8. The refusal to affirm church fellowship (in the sense of external unity in the church) with those who do not confess the faith (*fides quae*) **as it is taught in the Scriptures is not an optional matter but a Scriptural mandate** (Rom. 16:17-20; Gal. 1:6f.; Matt. 7:15-16; Acts 19:8-10; Titus 1:9-16; 2 John 9-11; 2 Thess. 3:14; Treatise, 41-44; FC SD, X, 21f.; AC, XXVIII, 21-26; FC SD, VII, 33).

9. The quest for church fellowship (in the sense of external unity in the church), as well as its acknowledgement when agreement in the confession of the faith has been achieved, are not optional matters but Scriptural mandates (Rom. 12:14-21; 15:5-6; Eph. 4:1-3; 1 Cor. 1:10-13; 2 Cor. 13:11; Gal. 2:9; Phil. 4:2. Cf. Preface to *The Book of Concord*, pp. 13-14; Preface to the Augsburg Confession, 4, 10; FC SD, Rule and Norm, 14; X, 31).⁴

⁴ "The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship," A Report of the CTCR, 1981, 13-16.

In the second section of the report on “The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship” the CTCR discussed the implications of the Scriptural principles of fellowship for “church-body-level relationships.” It reviewed and evaluated four contemporary models for achieving external unity in the church: (1) Conciliarity (WCC), (2) Reconciled Diversity (LWF), (3) Selective Fellowship, and (4) Ecclesiastical Declaration of Altar and Pulpit Fellowship. Having evaluated these models on the basis of the Scriptural principles of fellowship, the CTCR concluded that while “neither divinely ordained nor Scripturally mandated . . . only ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship, offer at least the possibility for being able to take into account all of what the Scriptures have to say about the nature of fellowship.”⁵

In its 1981 study, however, the CTCR also observed that although the Scriptural principles of fellowship remain constant, the specific results of their application at the individual level may differ from that at the church-body level. The principles of fellowship, it said, are not rules of casuistry. Moreover, the Commission noted that there are certain problems which can and do arise whenever pastors and congregations implement altar and pulpit fellowship at the local level (e.g., mobility of people, three-cornered relationships, denominational ambiguity, terminology). In view of this situation, the CTCR concluded by recommending the following: “that the Synod continue to study the topic of fellowship during the coming biennium by giving special attention to the implications of the principles of fellowship presented in this report for relationships and activities between Christians at the congregational, pastoral, and individual levels. Although it is neither desirable nor even possible to develop guidelines which will answer every case of casuistry, it will be helpful if the Synod can develop greater understanding and consensus regarding the implications of the nature of fellowship also at these levels.”⁶

In response to this suggestion the 1981 convention of the Synod requested that the CTCR prepare practical guidelines “to assist the officials, pastors, teachers, congregations, and individuals in the Synod, in determining which practices and activities are appropriate to the various levels of inter-Lutheran and inter-Christian relationships in which the Synod is involved.”⁷

Following consultation with the President of the Synod, the Council of Presidents, and other groups in the Synod, the CTCR adopted a plan for the preparation of guidelines for inter-Christian relationships which included the development of three case studies posing typical situations involving relationships between LCMS members and other Christians at the congregational, pastoral, and individual levels; a joint meeting of the CTCR and Council of Presidents for a pilot discussion of the Scriptural Principles of Fellowship and the case studies; and regional/district pastors conferences. The CTCR gave a complete report to the Synod on the first three stages of this plan in its 1986 convention report.⁸

As the Commission began work on the preparation of a working draft of the guidelines for inter-Christian relationships, it evaluated the discussions which had taken place to that point in its plan. Much thought was given to the extent and quality of these discussions. After a careful review of its work on this assignment, the Commission concluded that it would be helpful to the Synod, as well as to the CTCR, to prepare a study instrument for thorough discussion at the local level of the implications of the Scriptural principles of fellowship for Christians in their daily life and relationships with other Christians.

⁵ Ibid., 42.

⁶ Ibid., 43.

⁷ Resolution 3-01, 1981 *Convention Proceedings*, 156.

⁸ 1986 *Convention Workbook*, 105-108.

The result of this decision is this document. It has two purposes. First, it is intended to assist pastors, congregations, and individual Christians in their study of precisely what the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions teach concerning inter-Christian involvements and activities between individuals, congregations, and church bodies as they seek to be faithful to God's will in this area. Secondly, the document is meant to provide a means by which the members of the Synod may test the agreement that exists in the church in these matters.

This study includes questions for discussion to assist individuals and groups in their consideration of specific situations encountered in the area of inter-Christian relationships (Part IV) and a **Response Questionnaire** form which may be used as a vehicle for sharing with the Commission the results of local study. Participants in this study are encouraged to read the entire document before examining specific points in each section, so that the coherence of the document may be assessed as well.

The Synod at its 1986 convention encouraged all of its members "to continue their study of scriptural teaching concerning Christian fellowship, making use of the CTCR's 1981 report, 'The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship,' and sharing their insights with the Commission, especially regarding the application of scriptural principles of fellowship to specific cases of inter-Christian relationships."⁹ The Commission hopes that this instrument for study will enable the members of the Synod to continue, and even to intensify, their study of this important aspect of their life in the service of Christ and under his Word.

I. The Church and Its Mission

A. The Church

The church is "the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel" (AC VII, 1). In its proper sense, the church is "mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit" and not merely an "association of outward ties and rites" (Ap VII, 5). That the church is constituted by faith in Jesus Christ and not by membership in an external organization (cf. Luke 17:20) follows from the great apostolic and Reformation truth that we are justified through faith. Just as it is only through faith in Jesus Christ that we are righteous in the sight of God, so also the church, simply stated, is the totality of those who have such faith: ". . . for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith" (Gal. 3:26). In the words of the apostle Paul, it is "all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours" (1 Cor. 1:2), and those who are "called into the fellowship of [God's] Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:9).

The church is the body of Christ because it has a living relationship with him who is its head (Eph. 1:22, 23; 4:15-16). Apart from a living relationship with the head, there is no living relationship with other members of the body (Rom. 8:9; 12:5; cf. Ap VII, 5). Apart from faith, there is no church. It is not our membership in any congregation or denomination that makes us "church," but rather the existence of saving faith in Jesus Christ within our hearts. The precise limits of membership in Christ's body, the church, cannot be determined statistically, sociologically, or empirically, for only God himself knows who truly believes in him through Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 2:19).

⁹ Resolution 3-13A, 1986 *Convention Proceedings*, 145.

The church is called into being and recognized by the use of the Gospel and sacraments. The church is *God's* creation (Eph. 1:3-10; 2 Cor. 5:15-21). Because we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to him, the Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel and enlightens us with his gifts. The Holy Spirit works through the instruments of Word and sacraments to create faith in Jesus Christ. That is, the gifts won by our Savior at Calvary are delivered in the ways he has given us for their delivery. We are born and brought into the church by Holy Baptism and the apostolic preaching of “repentance and forgiveness of sins” in the name of Jesus. In the language of the apostle Peter, we are “born anew” into God’s family “through the living and abiding Word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23). When he creates faith through the means of grace, he places the faithful into a community called the church.

Hence, to find or recognize the church we look neither for programs, buildings, nor organizations (important as all of these may be). Rather, we look for the pure and right use of the Gospel and sacraments, knowing that God is the author and creator of the church and that he has promised that his Word will not return to him void but will accomplish his purpose (Is. 55:11). Where the baptizing and teaching are done as mandated by our Lord, there disciples are made and there is the church. Where the Lord is giving out his gifts, there is his church.

The church is united spiritually, for its unity is given with faith in the Gospel. We confess in the Nicene Creed, “I believe in *one* holy Christian and apostolic Church.” We are one with every Christian who lives or has ever lived on the face of the earth. The unity of the church, in this basic sense, is nothing more nor less than the spiritual bond that unites all believers to their Lord Jesus Christ and thereby to each other. This is the “unity of the Spirit” of which the apostle speaks (Eph. 4:3).

This church of true believers, to be sure, exists within a larger assembly of people that includes hypocrites and unbelievers who, for various reasons, are gathered around the Word and sacraments together with true believers. St. John spoke of those who “went out from us, but they were not of us” (1 John 2:19). Our Lutheran Confessions call this larger assembly the “association of outward ties and rites” (Ap VII, 5). This grouping of people is usually what is meant when contemporaries refer to the “church,” but in reality it derives that name from the true church of believers that exists within this larger association.

In considering various decisions affecting relationships among Christians, it is imperative that this New Testament understanding of the church be maintained. Thinking of the church and its relationships in purely institutional and organizational terms creates much confusion and difficulty. Our confessions remind us, “If we were to define the church as only an outward organization embracing both the good and the wicked, then men would not understand that the kingdom of Christ is the righteousness of the heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit but would think of it as only the outward observance of certain devotions and rituals”(Ap VII, 13). In other words, misunderstanding the church may involve a misunderstanding of the Gospel itself. Moreover, because the real nature of the church is spiritual, Christian interrelationships must give a far higher priority to the spiritual basis and dimensions of the church rather than to merger, organic union, and other forms of structural or organizational existence.

B. The Mission of the Church

The mandate of our Lord is to make and nourish disciples of all nations through the faithful use of the means of grace. Our Lord’s Great Commission is very clear. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20).

Through the use of Word and sacraments, the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sustains the church and through these means creates faith in Jesus Christ in the hearts of sinful people and thereby expands the church. Central to the discipling mission of the church is its faithful use of the means of grace. The church has the mandate of its Lord not only to use these means *purely* and *rightly* according to Scriptural norms but at the same time actually to preach, teach, and live them in the interest of his mission. In fact, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, no less than its member congregations and therein each individual member, needs to learn in ever stronger ways to measure its programs, practices, and endeavors in terms of its faithfulness to the Gospel and its effectiveness in carrying out the Lord’s mandate to make disciples of the nations.

Some contemporary Christian churches have caused a great deal of confusion in understanding the mission of the church by acting and speaking as though seeking solutions to the world’s great political and social problems is the primary task of the church. While we recognize that such activities may indeed be appropriate for Christians, individually and in association with fellow Christians, it needs to be underscored that the proclamation of the Gospel remains the distinctive mission God has given to the church. The Gospel, therefore, is to have preeminence in all that the church does.

A basic criterion, therefore, for evaluating proposed activities with non-Missouri Synod Christians, as well as of our own church body, is the degree to which such an activity advances the cause of the Gospel. Since the Lutheran confessional writings are a summary of what the Scriptures teach, the advancement of the Gospel requires that we continue to be a truly *confessional* church as we carry out God’s mission. Thus, too, in our contacts with other Christians we need to strive always to be a confessional church in our firm adherence to and faithful proclamation of “repentance and forgiveness of sins . . . in his name” (Luke 24:47).

II. Truth, Unity, and Love

For confessional Lutherans it is axiomatic that Holy Scripture is the only judge, rule, and norm according to which the faith and life of the church are judged as good or evil, right or wrong (see FC Ep, Rule and Norm, 7). Questions about church-relations practices, like all other questions in the church, are to be answered from Holy Scripture as the inspired and infallible Word of God. Throughout its history, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has sought to be faithful to this understanding. Numerous books, articles, essays, and documents have been produced by the Synod’s theologians which apply the clear teaching of Holy Scripture to the area of church relations.¹⁰

It needs to be recognized, however, that the Scriptures do not explicitly and directly address a number of contemporary questions and situations. Attempts to apply individual Bible passages to specific 20th-century situations must be made with great care and with an awareness that such applications often cause considerable division of opinion. This is particularly the case with New Testament passages which say that Christians are to separate themselves from certain persons, teachings, and practices. Such passages continue to be relevant and helpful in teaching

¹⁰ Particular attention should be called to the first part of the Commission’s 1965 report on *Theology of Fellowship*. This section, prepared by four seminary professors in the late 1950s, emphasizes that God created the fellowship, that God bestows the blessings of fellowship in creating faith, and that in bestowing this fellowship God claims it for the whole life of man (see 1-12).

us that it is God's will for us to avoid those who attack the Gospel and the faith of Christians.¹¹ At the same time, however, care needs to be exercised lest these texts be interpreted to mean that Christians should not attempt to heal schisms in the church and foster the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Biblical passages can be misused in another direction, too. The Bible describes Christians as being united with each other or as sharing one Lord. But it does not teach that differences among them are insignificant or may be ignored, as is sometimes suggested. Moreover, such "unity" passages do not in the first instance have reference to structural and organizational matters, nor do they provide the basis for superficial claims of unity emanating from some Christian circles.

A word of caution, then, is in order about the way we use Holy Scripture to solve contemporary church-relations questions. We must remember that all times and conditions, however much they change, remain under the norm of God's Word and its message of the changeless Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. At the same time, we must face the reality that numerous changes in the area of inter-Christian relationships have taken place in the 20th century, requiring that we constantly reapply the Biblical principles within the context of such changing circumstances and perceptions. But we must take great care lest such theological statements prove to be too complex for ready application to specific situations. Therefore, in the development of guidelines for practical application, it is especially important that we attempt to express our Biblical convictions in simple terms.

We believe that responsible decisions in the area of inter-Christian relationships need to be made on the basis of the Scriptural principles of fellowship from within the context of three basic theological concepts—truth, unity, and love—examined in the light of the nature of the church and its mission.¹²

A. Truth

The church's mission to make disciples of the nations by proclaiming, confessing, and defending the Gospel is inseparably linked to God's mission of sending Jesus Christ to redeem the world and restore it to fellowship with himself for all eternity through faith in his Son (Matt. 28:18-20). Because the church seeks to order everything it does for the purpose of carrying out the divine mission more effectively and faithfully, it is at the same time responsive to Biblical injunctions summoning the people of God to be faithful to him and to his Word through which he communicates and bestows his love and restores us to fellowship with himself.

In the New Testament, and more expressly so in the Johannine epistles, the command to the church to prize, proclaim, and defend its divinely revealed message in its entirety is given for

¹¹ The key passages involved in this emphasis are Matt. 7:15-16; Gal. 1:6-9; Acts 19:8-10; 2 John 9-11; Rom. 16:17-18; Titus 3:10; 1 Cor. 6:14-18. They are given careful exegesis and comment in *Theology of Fellowship*, 23-26. In a summary statement, this document notes that these passages, like all of Scripture, were written for our learning and therefore are properly applied when we avoid people who attack the Gospel and the faith of Christians. The summary statement concludes by stating that the church will be misusing these passages if it employs them "to hinder the church's ongoing attempts to heal the schisms in the church and to foster the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (26).

¹² See Ralph Bohlmann, "The Celebration of Concord," in *Theologians' Convocation: Formula for Concord*, published by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1977, 56-59, 85-89. This essay uses the terms *truth*, *unity*, and *love* as a shorthand way of summarizing three Biblical themes which are crucial for examining confessional ecumenical principles and their implications for us today. The Commission has found this a helpful way to bring together what the Scriptures teach concerning relationships between and among Christians.

the sake of the unity of the church. In response to false teaching and moral deviations which threatened to disrupt, and even destroy, the oneness of Christians with God and each other, St. John summons the churches to which he writes to return to the “word of life,” the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is the means by which such oneness becomes a reality: “We proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). Read in their entirety, John’s letters reveal that the apostle’s charge is for the church to be faithful, in confession and in life, to the Gospel *purely proclaimed*, for false teaching inevitably leads to the dissolution of the *koinonia* (fellowship) divinely given. In 2 John 7, for example, John reports that many deceivers have gone out into the world, who “will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh.” The seriousness of deviation from the doctrine of Christ lies in the potential for the loss of fellowship with God: “Anyone who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God; he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son” (v. 9). Therefore, discernment is necessary (see also 1 John 4:1-6), as well as the recognition that separation from those who do not adhere to the Word properly taught may be required. Always at issue, however, is the preservation of the *koinonia* created by the Gospel (1 John 1:9f.; 2:22f.; 4:3, 15), and the Gospel *faithfully confessed* (1 John 1:9; 2:23; 4:2, 3, 15; 2 John 7; cf. John 1:20; 9:22; 12:42; Rev. 3:5), for error leads not to Jesus Christ but away from him.

The New Testament is replete with many other examples which illustrate the simple but critical point that the Lord expects his church to contend for the faith, to hold fast to its doctrine, and to reject false doctrine (e.g., Matt. 7:15-16; 24:24; Acts 20:27-28; Rom. 16:16-20; Gal. 1:6-9; 1 Tim. 1:3-4, 19-20; 4:1-12; Tit. 1:9, 13-14). This Biblical emphasis may be called in summary form the *truth principle*. It should be noted, however, that nowhere in the Biblical writings, as is sometimes supposed, is the concern for *pure doctrine* presented as imposing an additional requirement upon the church that goes beyond believing and confessing the Gospel. In reality, *doctrine* is simply the articulation and explication, on the basis of Holy Scripture, of the Gospel in all its parts. To be concerned about doctrine is to be concerned about the Gospel.

Moreover, accepting the divinely intended role of Holy Scripture in the life of the church is a critical element of faithfulness to the truth. Holy Scripture was given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit precisely in order to guide the church’s faithful proclamation of the Gospel and use of the sacraments. To accept the authority of Holy Scripture for this task is to follow God’s own way of keeping his church faithful to its mission, and is therefore an intrinsic part of the Biblical Gospel mandate to prize, proclaim, and contend for God’s *truth*. We can summarize this point as follows: *To carry out its mission, the church proclaims, confesses, and defends the truth of Jesus Christ and his Gospel on the basis of Holy Scripture.*

B. Unity

The unity of all believers in Jesus Christ is a given. One with Christ, we are one with each other (1 John 1:3). The unity we have with Christ and with all Christians exists by virtue of our baptism and our faith in Christ. This is to be manifested and expressed in our life in this world and not only in the heavenly world to come. We may employ the term *unity*, or *unity principle*, as a summary way of referring to the Biblical teaching that we Christians are to manifest the oneness we have with each other by virtue of our having a common head, Jesus Christ.

In his high priestly prayer, Jesus prayed for all those in whom faith is created by the Word of the apostles “that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may

they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21 NRSV). Having become one with God the Father with and through his Son Jesus Christ, we are simultaneously one with all other believers in the church (cf. Acts 2:42; Phil. 4:15; 1 John 1:3, 6, 7). Accordingly, St. Paul taught in his letters that Christians are the one body of Christ, the head, united to him by faith and thereby to every other Christian (1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12). What we Christians possess in common unites us in one fellowship: “There is one body and one Spirit . . . one hope . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all” (Eph. 4:4-5). This new relationship to God through Jesus Christ means that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

Since they are one in Christ, Christians are exhorted to speak the same thing, to avoid divisions, and to be joined together perfectly in the same mind and judgment (1 Cor. 1:10-11). In the churches founded by the apostles external unity was threatened—and predictably so (Acts 20:29-30)—by divisions caused not merely by moral failure, but also by departure from apostolic doctrine. The churches at Corinth and in Galatia are noteworthy examples of early Christian communities that suffered internal dissension rooted in the denial of fundamental elements of the Gospel proclaimed by the apostles (1 Corinthians 15; Galatians 1 and 5). In response to this state of affairs, St. Paul calls for harmony based on agreement in what has been taught. He begins (1 Cor. 1:10-11) and ends (2 Cor. 13:11) his letters to the church at Corinth, for example, with the exhortation that the congregation there engage in the ongoing effort to come to agreement on the points that divide them. He calls for unanimity in doctrine and agreement in practice which exhibit the unity created by God’s Spirit through their common baptism into one body (1 Cor. 12:13). Dozens of references in the New Testament stress the need for Christians to recognize and to express their essential unity in Jesus Christ.

The apostles recognized, of course, that the extent of knowledge of the Gospel and all teachings integrally related to it varied among and between Christians in the congregations of the New Testament period. The New Testament epistles leave us with the impression that some congregations apparently possessed a less extensive understanding of apostolic teaching on the Christian faith and life than others (cf. 1 Cor. 3:1-4; 1 Thess. 1:2-10; and Heb. 6:1-2, for example). In every case, however, the aim of the apostle was the expression of baptismal unity in confession and life, necessitating reproof and correction and strengthening in apostolic doctrine.

The Lutheran confessional writings also repeatedly make reference to the Biblical emphasis on the unity of the church and its external expression. When the Augsburg Confession states in its seventh article, “For the true unity of the church, it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments” [Latin], the confession is not in the first instance making a programmatic statement about our modern ecumenical problem. It is rather describing “true spiritual unity, without which there can be no faith in the heart nor righteousness in the heart before God” (Ap VII, 31). Such unity is found where the Gospel and sacraments are used purely and rightly, that is, where the Gospel and sacraments are used without pollution and contamination by human additions or subtractions or changes. Just as pure food and drink nourish and strengthen the body, so it is only through the pure Gospel that God creates the one and only church of Jesus Christ.

Although unity is a given of the church in its narrow and proper sense, it is also a goal for the church as it exists in the world as the “association of outward ties and rites.” Like the Augsburg Confession, other documents and statements have been discussed and produced

throughout the history of the church in order to help restore an outward unity that had been lost among Christians who were inwardly united in Christ. Because it is through the Gospel and sacraments that the Holy Spirit creates faith and thereby brings people into the church and its spiritual unity, the outward unity of the church is dependent on agreement in the confession of the Gospel and sacraments. The Formula of Concord refers to this as “agreement in doctrine and in all its articles as well as in the right use of the holy sacraments” (FC Ep, X, 7). Lest this emphasis on comprehensive doctrinal agreement be misunderstood as requiring something in addition to the “simple Gospel,” it needs to be remembered that the so-called “simple Gospel” is integrally related to all articles of the Christian faith. Because of this interrelationship, the denial or falsification of any article of faith seriously injures the preaching of the Gospel and administration of the sacraments and thereby impedes the very means by which the Holy Spirit creates, builds, sustains, and expands the church.

The spiritual unity of all believers is the presupposition and basis for seeking the empirical manifestations of that unity. It is precisely because we *are* one with all Christians that we are concerned about their spiritual welfare and the way they proclaim the Gospel and administer the sacraments. Our oneness of faith with all other Christians leads and impels us to frank and earnest efforts to seek the preservation of the faith, growth in the knowledge of the Savior, and the sharing of his love with others. On the other hand, it is also for the sake of our common faith that we Christians will sometimes have to remain separate, individually and denominationally, from other Christians who persist in error (Rom. 16:17-20; 2 Thess. 3:14; 2 John 9-11; Matt. 7:15-16; Acts 19:8-10; Gal. 1:6f.). For such separation as is commanded by God himself is intended to serve as a fraternal and evangelical admonition to erring Christians regarding the importance of heeding the whole counsel of God both for the sake of their own salvation and for the mission of the church. To be sure, the Biblical understanding of unity makes it impossible for Christians to shirk their responsibility to seek to manifest their essential oneness with the entire body of Christ, but this must always be done on the basis of agreement in the confession of the Gospel. This understanding of unity can be summarized as follows: *We express the **unity** of all believers in Christ on the basis of our measure of consensus in confessing the Gospel.*

C. Love

Faithfulness to our Lord in confessing his truth and in manifesting the essential oneness of the church is always to be carried out in such a way that we demonstrate the Savior’s love and our own toward all people. We may use *love*, or the *love principle*, as our way of summarizing the New Testament theme that Christians are to manifest the same self-giving love toward each other that Christ gave to the church. Such love is extolled as the greatest of Christian virtues (1 Corinthians 13). Jesus exhorted Christians to love one another just as he had loved them (John 13:34; 15:12, 17). To love is to obey the whole law of God (Rom. 13:8-10). Christians are to serve one another by love (Gal. 5:13), forbear one another in love (Eph. 4:2), speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), and walk in love as Christ also loved us (Eph. 5:2). In virtually every epistle, Christian readers are encouraged to increase their love toward one another. The epistles of John give particular emphasis to this concern, reminding Christians that those who love God should love their brothers and sisters also (1 John 4:21). To be sure, such love is no mere sentimental affection. The apostle Paul’s own example shows that love will not tolerate false pretense and insincerity in a brother (Gal. 2:11ff.). Love is tolerant and longsuffering towards people, but intolerant of false doctrine, since any doctrinal error not only denies God’s truth, but may

jeopardize the faith of fellow Christians. Christian love impels each member of the body of Christ to be genuinely concerned about every other Christian. St. Paul wrote his “painful letter” to correct aberrations in Corinth to let them know “the abundant love” he had toward them (2 Cor. 2:4).

Unfortunately, instances of lovelessness are all too common in the history of relationships among Christians. This occurs, for example, when Christian individuals, congregations, or church bodies minimize doctrinal differences in the name of showing love to fellow believers. At the other extreme, it occurs when Christians who disagree with each other treat one another with bitterness, and even contempt. The Christian way, as we learn it from the Holy Scriptures, seeks to avoid such extremes and to combine concern for God’s truth with sincere love of our brothers and sisters in Christ (1 Pet. 3:15).

We members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod are strongly committed to the practice of Christian love in all our actions, whether directed internally or externally, both in giving witness to the truth (confessional doctrine) and in manifesting and deepening Christian unity. Manifesting true Christian love toward fellow believers includes our clear, strong, and evangelical witness to confessional doctrine in our relationships with others, particularly those we regard to be in error. But it also entails our earnest efforts to correct abuses of Christian love in our midst, including excessive faultfinding, public character assassination, caricaturing the position of others both within and outside of our Synod, and showing disregard for the confessional position of the Synod and the consciences of others by engaging in practices contrary to our synodical agreements. In a word, love also moves us to manifest a spirit of brotherliness, good will, and cooperation in all our relationships with other Christian individuals and church bodies. This Scriptural understanding of love can be summarized as follows: *We are always to manifest Christian love for all believers and indeed for all people.*

Summary

One cannot faithfully express the Biblical teaching on church, mission, truth, unity, and love, without appreciating the central and critical role of the *Gospel* in all of these concepts. The *Gospel* is the greatest treasure and highest priority of the church. The church is the community of those who believe the *Gospel* and whose faith in Christ is bestowed by the work of the Holy Spirit through the *Gospel*. The distinctive mission of the church to make disciples of all nations is accomplished by baptizing and teaching. This mission is carried forward by proclaiming and confessing the *Gospel*. Our commitment to God’s truth means that we proclaim, confess, and defend the *Gospel* in all its articles on the basis of Holy Scripture. The unity of all believers is a unity of faith in the *Gospel*, and our expression of that unity in outward and organizational ways is determined by the measure of our consensus in confessing the *Gospel*. We are enabled to manifest Christian love by the working of the Holy Spirit through the *Gospel*, which not only enables us to love, but bestows Christ’s forgiveness upon us for our repeated instances of lovelessness. In all dimensions and aspects of our inter-Christian relationships, the *Gospel* is at the heart of who we are and what we do.

The centrality of the Gospel for inter-Christian relationships—and indeed for all of Christian faith and life—must not become a mere intellectual abstraction, but it must be and remain a part of the very being of individual Christians and of their corporate congregational and churchly actions. We recognize that our concern for God’s truth will at times appear to be in

conflict with our efforts to manifest our basic Christian unity or the love we have for other Christians. Many of the tensions and difficulties we experience in inter-Christian relationships arise because of seeming conflicts in understanding and applying what the Scriptural principles of fellowship say about truth, unity, and love in the interest of the mission of Christ's church. Specific decisions regarding relationships with fellow Christians must be based on judgments that are faithful to these concepts, with the recognition that the Gospel is always to remain central.

As the church of Jesus Christ carries out its mission of making disciples of the nations and as it determines inter-Christian relationships, none of the three overarching Biblical principles—truth, unity, and love—can be omitted or curtailed. But our recognition of the centrality of the Gospel compels us to note that the truth principle is central to the other two, for the creation of unity and the exercise of love are both dependent upon the proclamation and administration of Gospel truth in Word and sacraments. To be sure, true Christian unity and true Christian love are never in conflict with God's truth, for love rejoices in the truth and unity expresses it. However, when practical decisions must be made and tension exists between expressing Christian unity or proclaiming the truth of the Gospel, unity must yield to truth. For it is better to be divided for the sake of the truth than to be united in error.

III. Theological Implications

A. Because the faithful use of the Gospel in Word and sacraments is the key element in all dimensions of inter-Christian relationships, it must also be regarded as the central measure or criterion of inter-Christian activity.

In applying Biblical principles to questions of inter-Christian associations and activities, our basic task is to determine the relationship of that activity to the faithful use of the means of grace. Fellowship with other Christians at the altar or in the preaching of the Word of God is clearly the pinnacle of inter-Christian relationships. Questions directly associated with the use of the means of grace lie at the very center of our concerns for proper relationships with other Christians. At the same time, we recognize that joint efforts in the area of social ministry or in issues affecting the church as an institution do not ordinarily pertain directly to the use of Word and sacraments and therefore can usually be carried out with less than full doctrinal agreement. Even then, Christians will of course avoid giving the impression by such joint efforts that full doctrinal agreement exists when in fact it is lacking.

The central role of the means of grace in our understanding of inter-Christian relationships explains the reasons why we distinguish between “communion or fellowship in sacred things” (*communio in sacris*) and “cooperation in externals” (*cooperatio in externis*). The former term pertains to the highest and deepest kind of communion or fellowship, namely, the joint use of the means of grace, while the latter refers to matters that are not directly related to the proclamation of the Word and administration of the sacraments, i.e., *external* to the use of the means of grace. As useful as this distinction is in principle (because it is made on the basis of the means of grace), it is nevertheless subject to considerable confusion because of the term *externals*. That a given activity is *external* to the use of the means of grace does not mean we are to regard such an activity as necessarily optional or to be excluded from the church's calling. For instance, cooperation in caring for refugees may not involve the joint use of Word and sacraments, but this certainly in no way diminishes the importance of such common work as a

fitting response to the Lord's command to love our neighbor. Additionally, we must recognize that not all Christian activities fit neatly into one or the other category. With that understanding, however, measuring proposed activities in terms of their relationship to the means of grace remains central to a confessional Lutheran approach to questions of inter-Christian relationships.

B. Consensus in the confession of the Gospel has a higher priority than organizational or structural unity.

The assembling of individual Christians to form congregations should be understood as part of God's will for his church, for it entails the gathering of believers around Word and sacraments, which are the divinely appointed means through which the Holy Spirit creates, nurtures, and sustains the church.

The gathering of congregations into synods, denominations, and other ecclesiastical organizations has not been divinely mandated. However, organizational or structural expressions of unity are very important and should not be underestimated. Ordinarily, the structures and organizations used by Christians are intended to reflect an underlying unity of commitment, conviction, and purpose. Moreover, such organizations or structures can greatly enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of Christian individuals and congregations in carrying out the mission of the church. It can also be cogently argued that ecclesiastical structures at the denominational level also have a certain churchly character because of the functions assigned to them by their constituencies.

Comprehensive consensus in the confession of the Gospel is surely a prerequisite for congregational life and action. When several congregations decide to join together in a trans-congregational structure (which we call a *denomination* or *church body*) in order to carry out their mission more effectively, such structures, too, presuppose comprehensive consensus in the confession of the Biblical Gospel.

There is a tendency in our time to regard denominational mergers or memberships in ecumenical organizations as somehow accomplishing or signifying progress in the continuing quest for Christian unity. However, unless such organizational consolidation represents or strengthens consensus in the confession of the Gospel, this assumption needs to be challenged.

C. Inter-Christian activities are confessional acts.

Whether we speak of the involvements and activities of individuals, congregations, or church bodies, we must recognize that what we do in this area, or fail to do, bears witness to a greater or lesser extent to *what* we ourselves believe as well as to our *perception* of the beliefs of those with whom we relate. In determining whether a contemplated action should be done or not, it is therefore extremely important to consider the witness it will give. As Christians engaged in carrying out Christ's mission, we will want to ask such important questions as, Will the action give a false or unclear witness about God's truth? Will it manifest the kind of love for the brother or sister that includes concern for their doctrinal position? Will it give evidence of the unity which the Spirit gives? Will our failure to be involved with other Christians in a given activity advance or retard the faithful proclamation of the Gospel? The answers to such questions may be extremely difficult to establish with certainty and may differ depending on whether relationships are between individuals, congregations, or church bodies. However, the effort to do so must necessarily be made.

D. Fidelity to God's truth involves the avoidance of both unionism and separatism.

Throughout our synodical history, the attempt to be faithful to God's truth has led us to recognize that it is necessary to follow a policy of "separation" from Christians whose doctrine is persistently contrary to Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. To be sure, the passages of Scripture which command such separation from certain persons, teachings, and practices cannot be applied easily or automatically to many contemporary situations. However, such texts clearly articulate the principle that it is the will of God himself that his people avoid those whose false teachings and/or separatistic, schismatic, and factious activities attack the Gospel and our Christian faith or confession. For this reason, we have believed it necessary to remain apart from a number of other Christian groups or activities, even as we are to admonish those contentious persons among us "who constantly seek to 'expose' the error of others, and so incite quarrels and division among us."¹³

By the same token, we have found it necessary to remind ourselves from time to time that the Biblical principle of separation is quite different from *separatism*. The former is an avoidance based on Scriptural reasons, while separatism is an avoidance of other Christians without adequate Scriptural foundation. Separation may be necessary for the sake of God's truth, but separatism sins against love and divides the church. When practical questions arise in the area of inter-Christian relationships, it is therefore imperative that the Christian community exercise due caution and restraint before invoking the principle of separation. And in every case, such separation is not a first approach but a last resort that follows appropriate fraternal admonition.

Closely related has been the Synod's longstanding concern to repudiate what we have called *unionism*.¹⁴ As an ecclesiastical term, *unionism* came into use in connection with efforts in Prussia to effect a union of Lutheran and Reformed churches in 1817. That union was to be accomplished by declaring the doctrines which divided the two confessions to be differences in nonessentials. Our synodical founders rejected unionism and its infringement of the Gospel. Because this term and the related term *syncretism* identified efforts to achieve or reflect union without the removal of doctrinal differences, this terminology was also used by our synodical fathers to condemn similar efforts at union short of full doctrinal agreement. To this day, Article VI of the synodical Constitution makes the "renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description" one of the conditions for acquiring and holding membership in the Synod.¹⁵

In the course of synodical history, the term *unionism* was broadened to apply to various forms of worship and work carried out by Christians who were not wholly agreed in doctrine and practice. The 1932 *Brief Statement* of the Synod states, "We repudiate unionism, that is, church-fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church . . . and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely."¹⁶ From time to time, individuals in the Synod have expanded the meaning of the term to include several types of joint ecclesiastical activity, including joint public prayer with other Christians.

¹³ Resolution 3-02, 1983 *Convention Proceedings*, 153.

¹⁴ Article VI of the Constitution of the Synod gives the following examples of unionism and syncretism: a. Serving congregations of mixed confession, as such, by ministers of the church; b. Taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession; c. Participating in heterodox tract and missionary activities.

¹⁵ 1989 *Handbook*, 10.

¹⁶ *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod*, 1932, 13.

What, may we ask, is the precise meaning of the terminology employed in Article VI of the Constitution of the Synod? Article VI states that “renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description” is one of the conditions for acquiring and holding membership in the Synod. As one specific example of such unionism and syncretism, Article VI identifies “taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession.”¹⁷ It is the conviction of the Synod that such actions violate the Biblical truth principle by implying either that doctrinal differences do not exist or that they are unimportant. Deliberate failure to observe this constitutional position breaks our synodical agreement with one another, confuses our common witness, creates discord among us, and is a stumbling block to the Gospel.

Some key words in this article should be carefully noted, however. *Unionism* and *syncretism*, as explained above, designate doctrinal indifference and/or compromise in the practice of church fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine. These terms do not refer to every joint Christian activity. *Heterodox congregations* are those whose doctrinal position is contrary to Holy Scripture, as demonstrated either by their own official statements or by their uncritical identification with and acceptance of such a doctrinal position officially held by the church body to which they belong. *Congregations of mixed confession* refer to those who officially subscribe to both the Lutheran confessional writings and to non-Lutheran doctrinal statements or positions. *Services and sacramental rites* refer primarily to the regular and official public and corporate worship services of such congregations. *Taking part* in such services and rites refers both to the conducting of worship services or portions thereof by pastors and to the official sponsorship or involvement of congregations as such in worship services, as distinguished from the occasional attendance by individuals of the Synod at the services of heterodox denominations (such as weddings or funerals). *Membership* refers to the status of congregations, pastors, teachers, and deaconesses who have formally signed the Constitution of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Technically, it does not refer to the baptized and communicant members of synodical congregations.

In summary, because of the variations in understanding and defining unionism within the Synod, it may be useful to focus on the meaning of the term in its original historical context and its usage in official documents of the Synod. Properly understood, *unionism* does not describe various forms of joint Christian activity *per se*. Rather, its essence is *church fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine*, and it entails doctrinal indifference and/or compromise. As such, the condemnation of *unionism* has been and remains an important application of the truth principle because it bids us to examine proposed practices and alliances in terms of whether they entail doctrinal indifference, compromise, or the practice of church fellowship without prior agreement in Biblical doctrine.

E. Complete agreement in confessional doctrine and practice is not necessary for every inter-Christian or interdenominational action.

On the basis of the Biblical principles of fellowship we must insist that expressions of Christian unity be proportionate to the measure of consensus in confessing the Biblical Gospel that we enjoy with the other Christians involved. While not articulated in detail in official synodical documents, this has been in fact the Synod’s way of proceeding for many years. According to our understanding of the Scriptures and the Lutheran confessional writings, full agreement in the whole body of Biblical doctrine is the goal of church fellowship discussions.

¹⁷ 1989 *Handbook*, 10.

However, this should not be understood to mean that such total agreement is necessary for *all* joint Christian associations or activities. Historically, our Synod's readiness to cooperate with other Christians *in externals* on the basis of less than full doctrinal agreement is illustrative of this position. Our cooperation with the National Lutheran Council during World War II, as well as our membership in the Lutheran Council of the U.S.A. throughout its existence (1966-87), are further illustrations of this point. At the parish level, many synodical congregations have found ways to cooperate with neighboring congregations of other denominations in ways that do not compromise confessional doctrine or practice.

As part of the process when individuals, congregations, and the Synod as a whole consider involvement in various joint associations or endeavors, it is important that we encourage one another to raise the question of the amount of doctrinal agreement that exists and then to determine the kinds of joint activity that are consistent with that agreement. Also to be considered as part of this process are the goals or purposes to be accomplished by the association (for example, do they compromise our doctrinal position?).

F. Commitment to the corporate position and actions of a confessional fellowship also involves pastoral care situations requiring sensitivity, understanding, and acceptance among the membership.

Among contemporary Christians divergence from the official positions of church bodies is relatively common. Such divergence is often as great among the members of a church body as it is between the members of separate denominational fellowships, making membership somewhat ambiguous. In this increasingly complex situation our pastors, congregations, and synodical officials are called upon to make judgments about the permissibility and desirability of actions in a manner that reveals both a commitment to the corporate agreements of the Synod and a sensitivity to individual cases where exceptions must be made in the interest of exercising responsible pastoral care. This has been the longstanding approach of our Missouri Synod fathers and explains why they, too, recognized the existence of "felicitous inconsistencies."¹⁸

The Synod's historic joining of agreement in doctrine *and practice* as a prerequisite for church fellowship presupposes that our actions are always necessarily confessional acts. They bear witness to *what* we believe and confess concerning the truth of the Gospel, and therefore must be continually evaluated with utmost seriousness. The decisions of the Synod have specified certain actions required for a united witness to the truth. The Synod's continued existence as a strong confessional church demands a firm commitment to these agreements.

But it must also be observed that the Synod, though not always expressing it in official doctrinal formulations and agreements, has throughout its history recognized the freedom and the necessity of its pastors and congregations to minister individually to Christians of other denominations when truly exceptional circumstances exist or arise.

Emergency medical situations, for example, have long been regarded within the pastoral ministry of the Synod as requiring special consideration. In times of war, and in dealing with the military community generally, our Synod has acknowledged the importance of providing pastoral care appropriate to each situation. The agreement established as an outgrowth of World War II provided the following: "In exceptional situations, where a member of one group earnestly seeks admission to the Lord's Supper conducted by . . . the other group, the individual case in each instance will be considered by the pastor concerned. It is agreed that in such cases

¹⁸ See, for example, Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 1:6, 24, 26f., 29, 30, *et passim*.

particular synodical membership of a Lutheran in the armed forces shall not be a required condition for admission to the Lord's Supper."¹⁹ A similar "pastoral care" situation was recognized by the 1975 synodical convention with reference to campus ministries.²⁰

When the Synod discontinued its official fellowship relationship with The American Lutheran Church in 1981, the Synod noted that it "has long encouraged its congregations and pastors in extraordinary circumstances to provide responsible pastoral care, including the administration of Holy Communion to Christians who are members of denominations not in fellowship with the LCMS." The Synod, therefore, granted that its congregations and pastors were free to provide responsible pastoral care to individuals of The American Lutheran Church as circumstances warrant.²¹

We need to reaffirm and maintain the freedom and responsibility of congregations, both pastors and people, to provide responsible pastoral care to Christian individuals as spiritual needs require. Let it be understood, however, that such situations do not establish the rationale for our synodical corporate actions and witness, nor ought the exception become the rule. Moreover, in such pastoral care situations, officials of the Synod, as well as pastors, congregations, and others, must take care to insure that the immediately affected Christian community is fully informed of the action and understands it as an attempt to be faithful to the Gospel. Finally, the entire Synod must be encouraged to respect the integrity of such pastoral care actions. It is far more in keeping with Christian love to assume that such actions have been taken responsibly than that such actions represent liberal tendencies, doctrinal compromise, or lack of concern for the confessional convictions of the Synod.

G. Motivated by the Gospel to maintain its God-given unity, the church will exercise fraternal and evangelical Christian discipline toward those whose life or doctrine contradicts the teaching of Holy Scripture and vitiates or denies the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The presence of error among Christians is always a matter of grave concern and therefore necessitates the application of Christian discipline. However, the intrusion of error is not immediate grounds for separation or the suspension of church fellowship. Heresy is the *persistent* and *willful* advocacy of error, and erring Christians—whether individuals or churches—need our earnest efforts to correct them before we take the always regrettable ultimate step of separation. But doctrinal discipline is necessary for the preservation of the pure proclamation of the Gospel among us; for the toleration of error does not build or sustain the church nor edify its individual members.

It is important that Christian individuals, as well as congregations, realize their personal responsibility for fraternal admonition and counsel toward other Christians. All of us, pastors and laity, need to be informed about what is being taught, preached, and written in the church so that we can exercise a mutual ministry of concern and support toward each other. Moreover, it is imperative that persons responsible for the public supervision of doctrine and life, such as pastors and the presidents of synodical districts, exercise that responsibility faithfully and evangelically. Those who are not called by the church to this servant ministry should make

¹⁹ "Statement of Agreement Between The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the National Lutheran Council," 1951.

²⁰ Resolution 2-07A, 1975 *Convention Proceedings*, 88-89.

²¹ Resolution 3-01, 1981 *Convention Proceedings*, 154-55.

every effort to assist and support them and to avoid the caricatures and public criticism that constitute sin against both love and truth—and ultimately against the Gospel.

IV. Counsel for Specific Situations

Christians who strive to be faithful to *all* that the Scriptures say concerning inter-Christian relationships frequently find themselves caught in a seemingly irresolvable tension between uncompromising testimony to the Biblical faith and the application of Scriptural principles to the situations of life. On the one hand, the Gospel as proclaimed by the apostles cannot suffer *any* addition or subtraction without endangering faith and the salvation of people. Just as the sinner cannot without great peril “partially” repent, holding on to some sin as if it need not be forgiven, so also the believer cannot choose to be faithful to only a portion of “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). At the same time, however, we Christians realize that we do not live in a perfect world in which decisions can be made without tension between and among the Biblical principles of truth, unity, and love. It simply is not possible to make decisions in the area of inter-Christian relationships that are free from the ambiguities of human judgment. We proceed, therefore, in the confidence that the Lord of the church imparts his Spirit to those who ask, granting us wisdom to know and do what pleases him and serves his divine purposes on earth. The counsel which follows is offered with the humble recognition that all our deliberations in this area must be subject to the Word of God and its unchangeable truth.

In the interest of stimulating discussion of how one moves from Biblical principles to the actual application of those principles, the Commission has appended to this section the three case studies which have been used in previous discussions in the CTCR’s study process (Appendix A). Also noted in this section are other references which are intended to facilitate discussion of the issues commonly faced by our people. In addition, the reader will find useful sample discussion questions included at the end of each of the sections which follow. Since this is a study document, the participation and reaction of the reader is encouraged.

A. *Joint Worship Occasions*

It is the official position of the Synod that its members—pastors, teachers, and congregations of the Synod—are free to lead or sponsor joint public worship services only with its partner/sister churches, and church bodies with whom the Synod is in altar and pulpit fellowship.²²

However, two questions are sometimes raised in our midst about the application of Article VI of the Constitution of the Synod to certain other situations. One is whether the restrictions of Article VI necessarily apply to taking part in special services sponsored jointly by associations or groups of churches not in church fellowship with each other and intended for Christians of several or all denominations in a given area. Examples might be a pan-Lutheran service to commemorate the Lutheran Reformation, a community service of thanksgiving, or an interdenominational service of prayer (for example, for a greater measure of doctrinal unity on the basis of God’s Word, for good crops, for success in combatting moral evils such as abortion, discrimination, or pornography, or for divine help in times of war or other crises).

²² See Constitution, Article VI; 1965 Res. 2-16; 1967 Res. 2-18 and 2-19; and 1969 Res. 3-18.

A second question is whether the restrictions of Article VI necessarily apply to taking part in certain occasional joint activities or gatherings at which worship takes place, as distinguished from the regular and official public and corporate worship services of congregations. Examples would include joint Christian celebrations, gatherings, rallies, convocations, commencements, baccalaureates, dedications, exhibitions, pageants, concerts, colloquia, conferences, and other public events. The purposes of such activities might include the commemoration of a significant event in our Lutheran history; the education of participants in one or more aspects of Christian history or doctrine or in a subject of special interest or importance to all participating church bodies; the exchange of information and viewpoints on issues that divide participants from each other or unite them in a common cause; or mutual encouragement in various cooperative civic or humanitarian causes.

It is our judgment that Article VI and other official statements of the Synod do not explicitly address all such questions and circumstances. Therefore they would limit the participation of synodical pastors, teachers, deaconesses, and congregations in such events only when doctrinal compromise might be involved. More importantly, we believe that under certain circumstances it would be fully consistent with the Biblical principles of fellowship for the members of the Synod to attend or to participate in the conducting or sponsorship of such events or activities. Those circumstances would include the following considerations:²³

1. The event is not to imply that doctrinal unity exists among sponsors or participants. In fact, out of concern for the witness given by such events, it may be desirable that participants openly acknowledge and express, in a positive and sensitive manner, the existence of doctrinal differences.
2. The purpose of the event or activity is to be fully consistent with the positions, policies, and objectives of the Synod.
3. Care has been taken to inform and to listen to the counsel of other synodical pastors and congregations in the neighborhood or community, or any others in the synodical fellowship who may be rightly concerned about the witness given by the event or activity.
4. Permission to conduct, co-sponsor, or participate in the event has been granted by the responsible synodical official (namely, district presidents for events within their districts, and the synodical president for regional, national, or international events).

Discussion Questions

1. In practice, if not in theory, a distinction is sometimes made in our midst between inter-Christian events which involve joint public worship services and those which do not. What criteria might be employed to make this kind of a distinction?
2. In the previous section the Commission has stated that “inter-Christian activities are confessional acts.” Hence, the witness given by specific events becomes a consideration. What Biblical references would suggest that this is

²³ In 1983 the Council of Presidents endorsed for study and counsel in the Synod a series of principles presented in a paper prepared by President Bohlmann applying the Synod’s position on joint worship to the question of participation in certain joint public events held with other Christians (printed in the May 2, 1983, issue of *The Reporter* under the title “The Missouri Synod and Joint Worship”). The Commission has taken these principles into account in presenting the considerations given here.

a workable criterion in the Synod for judging the appropriateness of an inter-Christian activity? What pastoral concerns need to be brought to bear on decisions in this area of our church life?

B. Ecumenical Wedding Services

In the mid-seventies, the Synod gave considerable attention to the fact that in mixed marriages the pastors of both parties to the marriage are being invited with increasing frequency to participate in the wedding service. At that time, the Synod's Commission on Worship, Commission on Theology and Church Relations, and Council of Presidents all considered various aspects of this question and issued opinions. Thereafter, the 1977 synodical convention affirmed the validity of Article VI of the synodical Constitution with reference to this matter and stated the Synod's expectation that our pastors and congregations would follow this article with respect to mixed wedding ceremonies.²⁴

Since that time, many pastors and congregations of the Synod have found it both possible and pastoral to apply the advice of the Council of Presidents, which stated that participation in such marriage ceremonies should "not be as co-officiant, worship leader, or celebrant, but should be arranged in such a way that it is not an official part of the worship service, nor a solemnizing or celebrating of the marriage."²⁵ Typically, this has meant that the guest pastor brings a brief word of greeting, perhaps including an appropriate Scripture verse and prayer immediately before or after the wedding service proper, that is, immediately after the processional or just before the recessional.

There are situations, however, where the application of this resolution has not worked out well in practice but has, on the contrary, provided an occasion for a confusing witness to the truth, unity, and love principles. This is especially the case where congregations in the same part of the country have differed widely in their interpretation of the precise meaning of the "participation in such marriage ceremonies" which is allowable in the advice offered by the Council of Presidents' guidelines. Because this question is one which arises with such frequency, the Commission believes that it deserves special attention in this report. In fact, it can serve as a case study in the practical application of the basic Biblical concepts which should inform our relationships to brothers and sisters in Christ in church bodies not in doctrinal agreement with The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.²⁶

²⁴ Resolution 3-25, 1977 *Convention Proceedings*, 136.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ In September 1982 the Bishop of the Synod's sister church, the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK) of Germany, distributed to the pastors of SELK a number of guidelines for "Acting Pastorally in Connection with Wedding Ceremonies Involving Mixed Marriages." One of these guidelines states that "when, in spite of intensive discussions, the desire for [a] jointly conducted wedding ceremony persists, the pastors of our church should not be prevented from conducting an Evangelical Lutheran marriage ceremony in which a minister of the Roman Catholic Church or of the Evangelical State Church also participates." It is also noted, however, that "in such a case we are dealing with a pastoral solution, made on the basis of compassion, to an emergency situation," and that "every pastor must decide for himself on the basis of his conscience" what is best in such cases. Also implicit is the understanding "that the members of our church have no right to demand the privilege of a jointly conducted wedding ceremony." Several exceptions to the above statement are also noted, such as participating in a ceremony involving a Roman Catholic mass or "any participation with female pastors of the State Church."

Attention might also be called to "Guidelines for Inter-Christian Marriages" prepared in 1988 by the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations of the Lutheran Church of Australia. These guidelines allow for the possibility of participation in jointly conducted wedding ceremonies, under the guidance of the LCA's theses on joint prayer and worship. Such cases are seen by the LCA as "exceptions," which "should be agreed to only after

As congregations and pastors of Synod respond to requests to participate in mixed marriage wedding services, there are a number of basic realities and concerns which need to be taken into account—concern for the wedding couple and their families as well as for the witness given to the wider community of believers both in congregations and in the community at large. First of all, the truth principle demands recognition of the fact that there are vitally important differences in the confession of the Gospel in the two traditions to which the prospective marriage partners belong. Nothing should be done in the wedding service which would serve to minimize these differences or give the impression that they are insignificant or of no consequence. At the same time, the unity principle also demands a recognition of the fact that in mixed Christian marriages we are proceeding on the basis of the assumption that we are dealing with brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we are one in the body of Christ and for whom we desire to manifest love. Furthermore, our desire is to do all that we can do, short of compromising the truth of the Gospel, to bring God’s Word and the prayers of God’s people to bear on this marriage union.

It is also important to keep in mind the nature of a wedding service performed in the church. Such a wedding service is a public worship service conducted under the jurisdiction and supervision of the congregation. At the same time, it differs from the regular and official *services and sacramental rites* of a congregation in that it is held at the specific request of the wedding couple and in order to perform a rite in behalf of the state (and thus possesses an *occasional* nature).

The consideration of participation in mixed wedding services needs to take all of these factors into account. The major concern of all involved in such decisions is that the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ be brought to bear on this marriage and that a clear, consistent witness be given. Respect for the worship practices of the church should be engendered by careful explanation of their meaning and rationale, thus avoiding as much as possible the impression that worship life in the congregation is merely a matter of adherence to rules. It is the opinion of the CTCR that ordinarily the suggestions offered at the beginning of this section can serve well to take into account the basic principles of truth, unity, and love. Under no circumstances should joint communion be celebrated. But there will be occasions when the circumstances and *pastoral care concerns* call for responsible flexibility. Responses to invitations to participate in mixed marriage ceremonies should be consistent with the considerations given in the previous section of this document entitled “Joint Worship Occasions” (see pp. 22-23). In this connection the Commission would call attention to words which it included in an earlier report:

It must also be recognized that unusual and difficult situations can and do arise in this world. Responsible commitment to our mutually agreed-upon fellowship policies does not mean legalistic slavery to rules. Rather, this very commitment itself demands freedom for responsible pastoral ministry. When, in certain unusual circumstances, our regular way of proceeding would get in the way of a ministry of Word and sacrament to a person in spiritual need, then an alternative way of proceeding must be sought. In such cases the advice and counsel of brothers in the ministry can be of inestimable value. It should also be recognized that individuals equally committed to the Scriptural principles

consultation with the president of the District of which the pastor is a member.” Guideline 3 states that “when a pastor is invited to take part in a non-Lutheran marriage service, it may be appropriate for him to read the Word of God, to preach the Gospel at such a service, and to pronounce a blessing on the couple, provided that the liturgy and prayers of the service do not contain doctrinal aberrations.” For the full text of both statements, see Appendix C.

of fellowship may not always come to identical conclusions regarding specific ways of proceeding in administering pastoral care in such exceptional cases.²⁷

Discussion Questions

1. Is the distinction between regular and official *services and sacramental rites* of a congregation and an occasional service usable for evaluating the appropriateness of an ecumenical wedding service?
2. Is it possible for the Biblical mandate to confess the truth to be compromised by allowing *no* joint participation in wedding services? Give an example and discuss.
3. In your judgment, is the guideline of the Council of Presidents as presented in 1977 Resolution 3-25 “To Speak Regarding Lutheran/non-Lutheran Weddings” (see p. 24 above) a pastorally responsible way to deal with requests for joint participation in wedding services? Is it adequate? Inadequate? Explain.

C. Membership in Councils, Federations of Churches, and Para-denominational Associations

Merger, organic union, and the establishment of altar and pulpit fellowship are based on comprehensive doctrinal agreement, while federations, councils, or ministerial associations usually represent efforts to provide structures for achieving such agreement and/or for carrying out work and activities consistent with the mission of the church. Membership in such federations or councils is permissible whenever (a) its doctrinal basis is consistent with the Synod’s; (b) membership would assist the attainment of doctrinal agreement where it does not exist; (c) the federation, council, or association as such does not engage in activity which would identify it as a church; (d) membership would not imply that member churches are in doctrinal agreement when in fact they are not; (e) membership would not identify member churches with undesirable or questionable positions or activities of the organization as a whole or with any of its member churches. When such concerns are adequately met, membership becomes primarily a question of feasibility.

When contemplating membership in national or international councils and federations, it is imperative that the understandings and concerns of partner/sister churches be considered and respected. On the local and regional levels, similar concern should be displayed for the opinions and sensitivities of other members of the Synod, especially in the immediate neighborhood, and for receiving the counsel of the district president.

Similar considerations as those expressed above apply for membership and participation in a number of para-denominational organizations and activities. To the extent that such organizations are clearly involved in efforts that are compatible with our own principles and policies, our members should be encouraged rather than cautioned about involvement. Similarly, a number of neighborhood, community, or business-related Christian activities, such as Bible study groups or prayer breakfasts, frequently attract members of our congregations. In all such cases, our lay members are encouraged to seek the counsel of their pastors to assist them in making a faithful confession of Biblical doctrine as they meet with other Christians. In offering counsel, pastors will warn against the uncritical acceptance of teachings and materials that are contrary to Scriptural and confessional doctrine, while at the same time urging the kind of

²⁷ “Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship,” 46.

witness that will win the respect of those who hear. Such activities often provide a fine opportunity to bear witness both to the truth of the Gospel and to the unity of all Christians within the body of Christ, while also providing informal opportunities to remove caricatures and misunderstandings that have plagued inter-Christian relationships for decades.

Discussion Questions

1. What factors should pastors take into account at the local level when considering membership in a ministerial alliance? Under what conditions would such membership be advisable? Inadvisable?
2. What advice would you offer to a member of your congregation who is struggling with a decision as to whether to continue participation in a neighborhood Bible Study that has “unLutheran” emphases?
3. Under what circumstances would it be proper for a member of the Synod to belong to a national or international council when such membership may involve endorsement of some positions and/or activities which conflict with synodical positions?

D. Admission to the Lord’s Supper

Admission to the Lord’s Supper as a responsibility of the church presupposes that Christ has entrusted to it the faithful administration of the sacrament. Significantly, the apostle Paul solemnly reminds the *congregation* at Corinth (the *you* of 1 Cor. 11:23 is plural) of what constitutes faithful use of the sacrament (just as also individual members of the congregation are surely addressed). The apostle impresses upon the church that not only is Jesus himself the food and drink of the meal, but he is also the host. Therefore, his instructions regarding the meaning and use of the sacrament are to be heeded for the sake of the spiritual benefit and welfare of those who commune. Indeed, *the church* is called to a faithful stewardship of this sacred treasure (cf. 1 Cor. 4:1).

St. Paul reminds us that when Christians commune together they engage in a corporate act of confession and proclamation. He exhorts the Corinthians: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you [plural] proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26). That proclamation embraces the entire Christian Gospel as we know it from Holy Scripture, including the reality of Christ’s body and blood present in the Lord’s Supper where he offers all the blessings of his redemptive work to all who believe in him. Because fellowship at the Lord’s Table is a confession of a common faith, it would not be truthful for those who affirm the *real presence* of Christ’s body and blood in the sacrament to join those who deny it at the altar. Their common *communion* would give witness that the last will and testament of Christ can rightly be interpreted in contradictory ways. Only those who share in a common confession of faith should commune together.

For this reason, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod follows the historic practice of close(d) communion, which regards unity of doctrine as a prerequisite for admission to the sacrament.²⁸

²⁸ Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 75-83. See Resolution 2-19, 1967 *Convention Proceedings*, 93; Resolution 3-08, 1986 *Convention Proceedings*, 143; and 1983 report of the CTCR on “Theology and Practice of the Lord’s Supper,” 19-23.

Close(d) communion seeks to prevent a profession of confessional unity in faith where there is diversity and disagreement. It would be neither faithful to the Scriptural requirement for admission to Holy Communion (1 Cor. 11:27ff; cf. 10:16-17) nor in keeping with the corporate nature of this sacrament for a Christian congregation to welcome to its altar those who do not share a common confession of faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Communing at the Lord's table is also an individual action. Each communicant who eats and drinks the body and blood of the Lord in faith receives the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Personal examination and preparation help individual communicants receive the sacrament worthily, that is, as Christians who recognize and repent of their sins and who truly believe that the crucified and risen Christ is present in his body and blood given in the sacrament and is received for the forgiveness of their sins.

The fact that Holy Communion is both a corporate and an individual action has implications for admission to the Lord's Supper. Because of the corporate nature of the Lord's Supper, pastors and congregations bear a responsibility in helping to counsel and support one another in their life together:

- to help communicants know the very nature of the Lord's Supper;
- to help communicants judge the state of their own readiness for receiving Christ's body and blood in the sacrament;
- to help individual communicants understand that communing is a confessional act that identifies the communicant with the corporate confession of the host congregation;
- to help communicants understand and accept the responsibilities involved in being under the spiritual care of their pastor.

Bulletin announcements, communion cards, sermons, and especially personal visits with communicants continue to provide many occasions for assisting individual communicants in approaching the Lord's table responsibly and joyfully. This involves both personal spiritual preparation and a clear sense of identifying with the corporate doctrinal confession of the host congregation.

Congregations also have an important responsibility to see to it that those desiring to commune are provided with opportunities for spiritual counsel before communing. Congregations, assisted by their pastor, have a special responsibility for helping communicants understand that their communing with that congregation entails acceptance of that congregation's confession of faith, and for helping guests understand what that confession is. Where communicants cannot joyfully embrace the confession of the host congregation, they should not commune.

Although Holy Communion is a corporate action, a heavy responsibility nonetheless also rests on the individual Christian in deciding whether to participate in a congregational communion service. Pastoral counseling and congregational practices such as confession and absolution, confirmation instructions, and announcement can be helpful in assisting the individual communicant to commune worthily and beneficially at the Lord's Table. The preaching and teaching activities of the pastor should include instruction regarding communion practices, especially for the purpose of assisting members of the congregation as they, too, provide information to prospective guests.

In the one New Testament epistle that explicitly treats the practice of Holy Communion (1 Corinthians), St. Paul's admonitions include especially the necessity of personal self-examination on the part of individuals present. These warnings were aimed at a community

fractured by heresy and violations of Christian love. Abuses in the church at Corinth were serious and in need of immediate attention. Drunkenness and selfishness perverted the Corinthians' celebration of the *Lord's Supper* in which his very body and blood were present and received. St. Paul did not ask the spiritual leaders of the Christian church or the church itself to issue rules or to develop general admission policies. Rather, he simply exhorts, "Let a man examine himself and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Cor. 11:28). The apostle attaches great importance to such self-examination, noting that failure to discern the Lord's body entailed eating and drinking judgment to oneself (11:29). He places the primary burden for such discernment upon individual self-examination and nowhere else.

The role of church-body declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship also needs to be rightly understood in relationship to the corporate and individual nature of the Lord's Supper. When The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and another church body declare that they are in altar and pulpit fellowship because they share a common confession of the Gospel and all its articles, that means, among other things, that the members of their congregations are welcomed to receive Holy Communion at all congregations of the two church bodies without further examination of whether they accept the corporate doctrinal confession of those congregations (remembering, of course, that *individual* readiness to commune is a question that always needs to be addressed by every communicant, whether a member of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod or of another church body).²⁹

In practice, most of those communing at synodical congregations will be members of the host congregation, other synodical congregations, or of congregations belonging to a church body with which The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has formally and officially declared altar and pulpit fellowship. However, the church body's declaration of fellowship is to be understood more as recognizing eligibility for Holy Communion, after due personal preparation and pastoral care, rather than as a principle absolutely excluding all others belonging to church bodies where no such fellowship has been declared.

The Synod has long recognized that conditions may exist or occur which call for responsible pastoral care in making exceptions to normal fellowship policies and practices. Beyond the exceptions officially recognized for wartime emergencies and campus situations, it sometimes happens that visitors who belong to congregations of other Christian denominations desire to commune at the altars of our synodical congregations. In addition to the ordinary questions of pastoral care that occur when guests are present, such questions as the following also need to be asked: Do such visitors share our confession of faith, perhaps in disagreement with the confession of their own congregation and church body? Do they understand that communing with our congregations gives witness to their acceptance of our doctrinal confession? Are such visitors under any pastoral or congregational discipline which should keep them from communing? Would their communing at our altars cause offense within our congregation on the grounds that such communing represents a weakening or compromise of the congregation's confession of faith? When the answers to such questions are satisfactory, guests should be welcomed.

²⁹ In the Large Catechism, Martin Luther wrote concerning the words by which Christ instituted the sacrament: "So everyone who wishes to be a Christian and go to the sacrament should be familiar with them. For we do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come" (LC V,2).

Discussion Questions

1. In the present context, the rationale for the practice of close(d) communion is not well known nor is it widely understood. What Biblical directives concerning the responsible administration of the sacrament need special emphasis today?
2. What suggestions can be offered today for pastors and congregations in implementing the practice of close(d) communion?
3. In providing pastoral care to those desiring to commune as guests, how important is it to determine whether they are regularly communing elsewhere at the same time?
4. How does one guard against the impression that denominational identity is in and of itself a requirement for admission to the sacrament?
5. In dealing with an individual case of pastoral care which may be judged to be an “exceptional circumstance,” what factors should be taken into account before admission is granted?

E. Non-Lutheran Speakers at Missouri Synod Events

In keeping with our synodical principle that only pastors of our own church body or of church bodies in official altar and pulpit fellowship with the Synod should be invited to preach from our pulpits, it goes without saying that congregations will ordinarily not invite others to preach. However, in very rare circumstances, there may be a reason for making an exception to this general principle. For example, pastors from a church body formerly in fellowship with the Synod or whose church body is currently in the process of seeking fellowship with the Synod, and who identify with the Synod’s doctrinal position, may be invited to preach the sermon in an emergency or special situation. In all such cases, however, the circumstances must be carefully explained well in advance to the district president, who, in turn, must give his approval. Every effort should also be made to inform congregational members of the circumstances.

In nonpreaching situations, or in events or activities other than congregational worship, it may on some occasions be edifying for the community to hear from non-Missouri Synod speakers. Our seminaries and colleges for many years have benefited from hearing and discussing the viewpoints of non-Missouri Synod speakers on a wide variety of theological topics. Rallies and convocations that focus on specialized areas of activity may likewise invite non-LCMS speakers to address such events, as long as their participation is not understood as preaching and does not convey a negative witness to the truth of God’s Word. Similar principles should be followed when considering congregational invitations to special congregational events. If there is doubt about the witness value of inviting a given speaker, the district president should be invited to give his approval.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the differences, if any, between non-LCMS speakers being granted permission to speak at LCMS events and LCMS speakers accepting invitations to speak in non-LCMS events?
2. Some in the Synod have suggested over the years the separation of *altar* fellowship from *pulpit* fellowship. The Synod has consistently rejected such overtures. To the best of your knowledge, why has this been the case?

F. Consultation in Beginning New Ministries

In our world of more than 5 billion people, three out of four persons do not know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In that situation, it is ordinarily not only unwise and unprofitable, but detrimental to the church's God-given mission elaborated in Part I, to establish new congregations or ministries that are in direct competition or conflict with those of neighboring congregations. However, this general principle cannot be made into an absolute law, for situations exist from time to time where our witness to the truth or unusual opportunities suggest that we proceed even though other Christian groups are working nearby. God may open doors to unique opportunities to bear witness to his Gospel (cf. Acts 14:27; 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; Col. 4:3). The Synod is therefore committed to consulting with other Christian church groups before beginning new ministries (including foreign mission work), and it asks for a similar courtesy from other Christian bodies.

Discussion Questions

1. In what areas is special guidance needed for members of the Synod as they seek to cooperate with other Christians in the establishment of new congregations or ministries at the local level?
2. What kind of cooperative endeavors work well? Poorly? Why?

G. Doctrinal Discussions or Dialogues with Other Christians and with Non-Christians

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has long been characterized by a willingness to discuss theological differences and ecclesiastical practices with anyone who will allow us to do so without compromise. Such conversations help to remove caricatures, promote a better understanding, and provide an opportunity to resolve historic differences under the Word of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Since 1965, the Synod has been an official participant in dialogues with Roman Catholics and subsequently with most other major confessional families within Christendom. The primary responsibility for such church-body level discussions rests with the Synod and its officials. Similar conversations are frequently helpful at district and regional levels as well. For the sake of good order, all such discussions should have the prior approval of the appropriate synodical officials. Likewise, conversations at the local or community level may also be very helpful and should be encouraged. Again, prior consultation regarding such conversations should be carried out with the respective district official, usually the district president.

It should be emphasized that, at all levels of the Synod, every effort should be made to help our members understand the nature and purposes of such discussions. Properly understood, such conversations represent a strong confessional Lutheranism at its best and give us many opportunities to bear witness to the Gospel of our Lord.

Discussion Questions

1. Examine the “Guidelines for LCMS Participation in Ecumenical Dialogues” adopted by the CTCR in 1975 and included in the appendix to this study instrument (attached as Appendix B). Discuss the rationale given for the Synod's participation in such dialogues.
2. Under what conditions would it be appropriate for the members of the Synod to participate in ecumenical discussions? Inappropriate?

Appendix A

Case Study 1

Pastor Schmidt, a longtime leader in District and Synod, and also prominent in interreligious and civic affairs in the community in which his LCMS congregation is located, is invited to preach at a “Service of Prayer for Christian Unity.” The service is to be held on a Sunday afternoon in the local Catholic cathedral because of the large number of people expected to attend. Clergy from the neighboring Catholic and Protestant congregations will participate by leading various portions of the service, e.g., invocation, Scripture readings, prayers, the Apostles’ Creed, and benediction. Holy Communion will not be celebrated. Participating clergy are encouraged to wear their regular vestments for Sunday worship. Pastor Schmidt is informed that this event is to be publicized as a community worship service, led by clergy representatives of church bodies not in communion with each other because of continuing doctrinal disagreements, for the purpose of praying for greater Christian unity among them.

Pastor Schmidt, upon the reception of this invitation, discusses it with his congregation. He begins by referring them to Article VI of the Synod’s Constitution, which lists as one of the conditions for acquiring and holding membership in the Synod the “renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description, such as serving congregations of mixed confession as such, by ministers of the church” and “taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession.” He also reminds them of the Synod’s traditional practice not to participate in such joint public worship services. At the same time he tells his congregation that, as the preacher at this service, he would have the opportunity and freedom to proclaim the pure Gospel. He tells them that if he accepts this invitation, he intends to state clearly in his sermon that there are important doctrinal disagreements between the participating denominations and to spell out the necessity of their attaining agreement in the confession of the Christian faith before entering into an ongoing communion with one another. He states that in this way he would be able to bear witness to the Scriptural teaching that all Christians are part of the Holy Christian Church and that we Lutherans recognize the members of other Trinitarian denominations as brothers and sisters in Christ. He concludes by asking them if they would consider his acceptance of this invitation improper and contrary to Scripture.

The majority of the members of the congregation are pleased that their pastor has received this invitation. They encourage him to accept it as a way of helping to overcome the prevalent view in the community that Lutherans are “outsiders” or a sect like the Jehovah’s Witnesses. They tell him that a failure to accept this invitation would be widely perceived by the community as a statement that the Lutheran Church does not consider the other churches to be Christian. And they assure him that his participation should not be regarded as unionistic and therefore at odds with Synod’s Constitution since it would not present a witness of unity where doctrinal disagreements continue to exist.

Several members of the congregation, however, strongly oppose their pastor’s participation in this “joint public worship service.” They tell him his acceptance of this invitation would be a direct violation of the Constitution of the LCMS and an embarrassment to other LCMS pastors and congregations in the community who have declined such invitations in the past. Even more important, they say, is the fact that the Scriptures tell us to mark those who teach contrary to what God’s Word teaches and to avoid them. Since we Lutherans believe, they

say, that the churches to be represented in this service do precisely this, it is therefore contrary to God's will to conduct joint worship services with them and thereby give the impression that all of us are agreed on all those teachings that really count.

Pastor Schmidt, undecided as to what he should do in this situation, comes to you for advice and counsel. What will you say to him? What do you think he should do? Why? Would it make any difference if the participants in the service were Lutheran churches not in church fellowship with the LCMS?

Case Study 2

Don Johnson, only a nominal Christian prior to his marriage five years ago into a staunch LCMS family, has become a very active member of a Missouri Synod congregation. Two years ago he was elected chairman of his congregation's Evangelism Committee, and under his leadership the congregation has for the first time in its existence begun to make an impact in the community.

Just recently the Billy Graham organization announced that it would be conducting a week-long evangelistic crusade in the metropolitan area in a few months. Mr. Johnson, along with selected leaders in all of the "evangelical" churches in the community, has been contacted by the organizers of the crusade to take part in it. In addition to receiving invitations to serve on the multid denominational planning committee for the crusade, Johnson is also asked to serve as a leader of one of the information groups scheduled to be held for those making a decision for Christ each evening. He is invited to attend a prayer breakfast for all the local church leaders to "kick-off" the planning of the crusade, at which time he will have an opportunity to present a personal testimony of how Christ has changed his life and offer one of the prayers.

Excited about the possibility this crusade offers him and his congregation for witnessing to Christ in his community, Mr. Johnson is enthusiastic about the upcoming crusade and ready to accept the appointment to serve on the planning committee. But he is surprised when his wife asks him if he has cleared his participation in the crusade with their pastor, since she has always been taught that the Missouri Synod was opposed to working with other denominations in such endeavors. Johnson tells his wife that he believes that working together with other Christians in witnessing to Christ should take precedence over denominational emphases or differences in doctrine in view of the urgency of Christ's mission. Moreover, he informs her that his letter of invitation expressly states that all participants in the crusade must agree to talk only about the central Gospel message of the forgiveness of sins through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ, and to avoid such divisive issues among evangelicals as infant baptism, the Lord's Supper, the inerrancy of Scripture, and the millennium.

Nevertheless, Mr. Johnson is concerned about what his wife has told him. He therefore decides to visit with his pastor and see what he has to say about his participation in this crusade. You are his pastor. What do you say to him?

Case Study 3

Beth Beltz, the daughter of the chairman of an LCMS congregation, is engaged to be married to Stanley Lockwood, the son of the pastor of the neighboring Episcopal Church.

Shortly after announcing their engagement, the couple pays a visit to Beth's pastor, tells him about their plans, and asks him to conduct their wedding ceremony. But they also inform him that they have decided to ask Stanley's father to read the Scripture lessons during the service.

Upon hearing of their plans, the pastor congratulates them and expresses his pleasure upon being asked to perform the marriage ceremony. But he also informs them very tactfully that it is contrary to the position of the LCMS for its pastors to conduct joint wedding ceremonies with pastors of congregations not in altar and pulpit fellowship with the Missouri Synod. He suggests, therefore, that Pastor Lockwood be asked to lead the guests in a brief prayer at the beginning of the wedding banquet to be held immediately following the marriage service.

Much to the pastor's disappointment, the bride-to-be is not at all satisfied with this arrangement. She tells him that she is well aware of the position of the LCMS on joint public worship services, that she has discussed this matter with her father, and that she has even read 1977 Resolution 3-25 "To Speak Regarding Lutheran—Non-Lutheran Weddings." She points out that this resolution of the Synod quotes from a statement adopted by the Council of Presidents that said that "*participation* in ecumenical ceremonies 'should not be as co-officiant, worship leader, or celebrant,' but should be arranged in such a way that it is not an official part of the worship service nor a solemnizing or celebrating of the marriage." She goes on to say that, while she is somewhat confused about the practice of the LCMS in this area, she feels that it allows for some sort of participation in the actual church service. It was for this reason, she explains, that they had not requested her fiancée's father to preach the sermon or perform the marriage itself. She states that their request was consistent with the practice of the Synod, since her congregation regularly permitted non-Lutherans to sing solos during worship services, allowed a member of the Gideons to address the congregation during a public worship service each year, and had on one or two occasions even permitted a chancel drama group, whose cast contained non-Lutherans, to present the sermon during Sunday morning worship. She concludes by asking the pastor to explain why this request to have her future husband's father, who is a pastor of a Christian church, read from the Bible during their wedding service was contrary to the practice of the LCMS while these other forms of participation by non-Lutherans in public worship were not.

The pastor finally agrees to reconsider their request and tells them that he will meet with them again in one week. He comes to you, his Circuit Counselor, for advice. What do you say to him?

Appendix B

Guidelines for LCMS Participation In Ecumenical Dialogs

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod carries out ecumenical studies and participates in dialogs with other denominations for the purpose of identifying areas of agreement and of disagreement and for the sake of giving a Lutheran witness to the truth as it is revealed in the Scriptures and confessed in the Lutheran Symbols.

The President of the Synod is the chief ecumenical officer of the Synod. He is to “represent the Synod in official contacts with other churches and Synods” (*Handbook*, 2.27g).

The CTCR is to assist the President at his request in discharging his constitutional responsibilities, specifically “in dealing with other church bodies; in initiating and pursuing fellowship discussions with other church bodies” (*Handbook*, 2.109b 2 bb, cc).

Consonant with the above, the CTCR at the request of the President of the Synod suggests to him the following guidelines for participation in interchurch dialogs:

1. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod representatives in ecumenical dialogs shall be appointed by the President of the Synod. The CTCR is prepared to assist the President, at his request, in selecting LCMS representatives and suggests that consideration be given to the appointing of at least one CTCR member to each dialog team.

2. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod representatives in ecumenical dialogs shall be appointed after the convention of the Synod for renewable terms of two years.

3. The main value of interconfessional dialogs is found in the joint study of the Word of God on theological issues. Ordinarily the Synod does not consider “consensus statements” essential to the purposes of interconfessional dialog. If “consensus statements” are contemplated, LCMS representatives shall seek the advice of the President of the Synod in consultation with the CTCR.

4. Each dialog team of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod shall report in writing to the President of the Synod after each dialog meeting and shall submit a comprehensive report of its activities during the biennium to the President of the Synod and to the CTCR for review and report to the convention of the Synod.

Adopted by the CTCR, January 1975

Appendix C

SELK Guidelines

1. Mixed marriages bring with them a number of serious difficulties for pastoral care as well as for the worship and sacramental life and the confessional consciousness of the respective church members, and especially for the confessional education of the church of such marriages.

Like the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church has always called careful attention to the dangers and problems arising from mixed marriages. Therefore, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, as a matter of principle, cannot advocate confessionally mixed marriages since thereby the deepest fellowship of the marriage partners in their Christian faith is jeopardized or even rendered impossible. At an early stage, pastors should call attention to the fact that it is important for Christians to hold the same faith as their spouses and to practice that faith jointly in a single congregation.

However, the different faiths of the marriage couple do not prevent them from having a church wedding in our church.

2. If a couple of different faiths desires to be married in our church, pastors should persistently advocate using the Evangelical Lutheran wedding ceremony and preferably without the participation of a minister of another faith. Attention may be called to the fact that actually there is no such thing as an “ecumenical wedding ceremony.” In any case, the couple must decide whether it wants to be married in the Roman Catholic Church or in the Evangelical Lutheran Church. As it does so, the couple should be aware of the fact that the Evangelical Lutheran wedding ceremony does not in any sense agree with the canonical form prescribed by the Roman Catholic Church, even when a Roman Catholic priest participates in the ceremony.

The only alternative to an Evangelical Lutheran wedding, namely, to let the wedding be performed in a Roman Catholic Church and by a Roman Catholic priest, would subject a decisive step in life to the proclamation and blessing of a church, which, in essential dogmatic declarations of doctrine, departs from Holy Scripture and the scripturally grounded confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. In this whole problem area, a clear understanding ought to be achieved with the bridal couple in premarital consultations.

3. Experience, nevertheless, teaches that couples of different faiths not infrequently insist on a so-called ecumenical wedding ceremony. In such cases, the reasons advanced for it may merit consideration and should be respected out of pastoral concern. Thus, for example, the person of a different faith may have such close ties with his church that he would not want to forego having a minister of his faith participate in the wedding ceremony. Also, the confessional loyalties of both families frequently play an important role. Precisely at this point, the wedding ceremony in a mixed marriage which involves the participation of the minister of the other faith can contribute to the maintenance of family peace and the strengthening of respect for the doctrinal position of the other person.

When, in spite of intensive discussions, the desire for such a jointly conducted wedding ceremony persists, the pastors of our church should not be prevented from conducting an Evangelical Lutheran marriage ceremony in which a minister of the Roman Catholic Church or of the Evangelical State Church also participates.

However, it must always be maintained that in such a case we are dealing with a pastoral solution, made on the basis of compassion, to an emergency situation. Here every pastor must decide for himself on the basis of his conscience that is bound by the Word of God, as well as his

pastoral responsibilities. This includes the understanding that the members of our church have no right to demand the privilege of a jointly conducted church wedding ceremony.

4. Ecclesiastically, such a jointly conducted church wedding ceremony for a couple of different faiths can only be justified when it is clear that it does not entail any pulpit or altar fellowship. Therefore, the minister of the other confession can jointly participate only in limited ways, namely, through Scripture readings, prayers, and benediction. The wedding sermon should be preached by the Evangelical Lutheran pastor, who should also perform the actual rite of marriage.

To be sure, even in such a limited participation by a minister of another confession, one cannot lose sight of the fact that this entails a form of church fellowship, although it is clearly below the level of pulpit and altar fellowship. Therefore, in reaching a decision concerning such a jointly conducted wedding ceremony, attention must be paid to the position and tradition of the congregations, in addition to the theologically bound conscience of the officiating pastor. The pastor should do everything possible to avoid causing confusion and offense. An understanding with the elders should be reached at an early date. The proper superintendent should also be consulted.

Finally, we should also make sure that the participating minister of the other confession stands committed to the creeds of the ancient church and joins us in confessing the Triune God as well as the incarnation and redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Together with us he must also regard marriage as a divine institution and stand for its indissolubility and sanctity, as well as for the Christian family.

5. More serious problems are posed by the joint participation of pastors in the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church in a Roman Catholic wedding ceremony. In that case, the Lutheran pastor participates in a worship service which at least in part is based upon the unscriptural doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. We would, therefore, like to strenuously advise against such joint participation. To be sure, there are some known cases, particularly in predominantly Catholic areas, where members of our church have pleaded with their pastor not to leave them alone in their wedding ceremony performed in a Roman Catholic Church. In such cases, it has been possible now and again for the Evangelical Lutheran pastor to preach the wedding sermon and thereby to bring a clear, Biblical witness to the gospel and the divine institution of marriage.

The joint participation of an Evangelical Lutheran minister in a Roman Catholic wedding ceremony cannot even be considered in a case where a nuptial mass is held, since thereby the question of altar fellowship is involved.

In the case of participating in a Protestant State Church wedding ceremony, its prevailing theological pluralism requires that particular attention be paid to the acceptance of the ecumenical creeds and the understanding of marriage.

Any participation with female pastors of the State Church is to be absolutely avoided.

Lutheran Church of Australia Guidelines

1. The pastor's action, when invited to take part in a marriage service conducted by a minister of another denomination, or when requested to permit a minister of another denomination to take part in a marriage service conducted by him, will be guided by the theses on joint prayer and worship (Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions of the Lutheran Church of Australia, A3, A4).

2. In accordance with these principles, participation in an official capacity in services conducted by churches not in altar and pulpit fellowship with the LCA, as well as inviting clergy of such churches to take part in services conducted by Lutheran pastors, will be seen as exceptions, and should be agreed to only after consultation with the president of the District of which the pastor is a member.

3. When a pastor is invited to take part in a non-Lutheran marriage service, it may be appropriate for him to read the Word of God, to preach the Gospel at such a service, and to pronounce a blessing on the couple, provided that the liturgy and prayers of the service do not contain doctrinal aberrations.

4. For confessional reasons, a Lutheran pastor will not invite a minister of another church, which is not in altar and pulpit fellowship with the LCA, to preach at a marriage service conducted by him. However, such a guest minister may be invited to read from the Word of God, and to give a blessing or greeting.

Response Questionnaire

1. Which of the following statements most nearly characterizes the response of your group to the Commission's "Inter-Christian Relationships" study instrument? (Circle the most appropriate response and explain your choice.)
 - a. The guidance for inter-Christian relationships provided in this document is not faithful to all that the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions teach and, while reflecting an awareness of the contemporary situation in which the church finds itself, **will nevertheless encourage unionistic activity.**

Comments:

- b. The guidance for inter-Christian relationships provided in this document, while faithful to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions as far as it goes, does not fully reflect an awareness of the contemporary situations in which the church finds itself and **will therefore encourage divisive, separatistic activity.**

Comments:

- c. The guidance for inter-Christian relationships provided in this document is faithful to what the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions teach, reflects an awareness of the contemporary situation in which the church finds itself, and **will encourage the proper application of Law and Gospel in inter-Christian relationships.**

Comments:

