

#774 “Full Communion” Relationships and the Mission of Christ, Part 2

This week we bring you the second half Bishop Marcus C. Lohrmann’s “Full Communion Relationships: An Ecumenical Way Forward,” which he presented earlier this year in an ecumenical lecture series at Lourdes University in Sylvania, Ohio. As you’ll recall from [last week](#), the first half of Marcus’s lecture presents the rationale behind the ELCA’s various “full communion” agreements. In this second half, he reflects on the experiences of having lived and worked with those agreements, and he discusses both the challenges they pose and the benefits they offer.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team.

Full Communion Relationships: An Ecumenical Way Forward
Lourdes University, Sylvania, Ohio
February 24, 2013
[Part 2]

D. Some Gifts Received Through Full Communion Relationships

The ELCA has now had over fifteen years of experience with full communion relationships. What are some of the gifts that have been received through these relationships? Chief among them is the growing understanding that by the grace and mercy of God in Christ Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit we know

ourselves to be one. What defines us is that our identity is deeply linked to the God who in Christ Jesus claims us in baptismal water and feeds us with the Bread of Life (John 6). That trumps all that would divide us, including sin, death, and the power of the devil. Many of us historically have defined ourselves by our denomination. I have increasingly referred to myself as a Lutheran Christian as a way of pointing to the more profound identity. We experienced that more profound identity several years ago when United Methodist Bishop Bruce Ough preached a powerful sermon at a Eucharist Service for our Synod Assembly.

These relationships provide an occasion for joy for marriages, families, and friends that have been divided among denominations now in full communion relationships. In the past we often would speak of being converted from one denomination to another. The commonly accepted inference was that to leave one denomination for another risked betrayal of our faith and the heritage of our family. Some days ago I talked with an elderly couple, recently married, who spoke about how their individual faiths have been enriched through their experiences with the other's Christian faith tradition. "I'm learning to talk about Jesus," the Lutheran confessed with a laugh.

Through these relationships, we have developed a growing awareness of and appreciation for what has shaped the faith, life, and witness of the other. One of our retired pastors who has been serving an Episcopalian parish commented, "God really does have a sense of humor. I was an outspoken opponent of the full communion relationship with the Episcopalian church. Now I am serving one. And what a gift this has been for me." Recently I attended Sylvania United Church of Christ for Lutheran church historian Martin Marty's presentations. During the course of my weekend at that church I learned that one of the predecessor churches of the UCC was among the first to speak out again

slavery. I did not know that, although I did know that the UCC and its predecessor bodies have a long tradition of seeking to make the link between one's confession of faith and how that impacts matters of justice. We are the body of Christ. We need each other and the distinctive gifts we bring to the whole for the sake of Christ's mission in the world.

Full communion relationships insist that we move together in conversation in the face of potential disagreement rather than cutting off the other. Full communion relationships establish and understand the ongoing role of mutual affirmation and admonition. It is no secret that Christians in this country and in our denominations have struggled mightily with matters of sexuality. The ELCA's full communion partners have had differing perspectives on this matter. In 2010, the Reformed Church in America invited the ELCA, the Presbyterian Church, and the United Church of Christ, partners in the Formula of Agreement—along with the Christian Reformed Church, the Disciples of Christ and the Moravians—"to engage in a consultation on the interpretation and use of Scripture in moral discernment and ethical decision-making." Papers have now been compiled that explore the following topics: "Jesus is Lord"; "Scripture and Decision-Making in the Church"; and "Practices for Moral Discernment in Christian Community."

Attentiveness to other Christian traditions can deepen a growing awareness of our own tradition. Several years ago, the Rev. Dr. Michael Kinnamon, former General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, provided leadership for a retreat for Ohio Council of Churches denominational leaders. He commented that ecumenical conversations require the most substantial understanding of our own traditions. The full communion relationships allow us, in conversation with those we are getting to know better, to know our own tradition better, warts and all.

The full communion relationships enable us to more naturally share gifts with each other. The Northwestern Ohio Synod has used the Rev. John Edgar, a former United Methodist executive and now pastor at Church of All People in Columbus, as a resource for our urban parishes who seek to have vital word and sacrament ministries that also connect with the communities of which they are a part. Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus hosts Bexley Hall, a seminary of the Episcopal Church, as they both prepare leaders for Christ's church. Imagine how the lives of seminarians are enriched through those relationships. Over the years the staff of the Northwestern Ohio Synod has met with the staffs of the Episcopalian Diocese and Western Conference of the United Methodist Church. Picture how those emerging relationships paved the way for greater collaboration for the sake of God's mission in this territory.

Most of the counties in Northwestern Ohio are in numerical decline, with congregations in many instances reflecting that decline. Full communion relationships allow us to have conversations concerning how we might better collaborate for the sake of word and sacrament communities of faith. For example, for about five years Pastor Mike Wiechers has served two parishes, one ELCA and one Episcopalian, in Port Clinton. Both congregations rejoice in the relationship. We presently are in conversation with full communion partners concerning shared ministry in other communities. I suspect that such contexts will multiply in the next years.

It is not hard to come up with more examples of the gifts received through full communion relationships. Participants in this gathering surely could provide more stories and illustrations.

E. Some of the Risks and Challenges of Full Communion Relationships

Are there risks and challenges related to full communion relationships? I think there are. One is the possibility that participants become theologically indifferent. Many applaud full communion relationships simply because they like it when people work together. Togetherness for its own sake is the ultimate goal. I understand the appeal. You have heard the statements celebrating togetherness: "There are many paths to the grist mill." "We are all heading for the same place so we might as well work together." Then there is the oft quoted, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere." Full communion relationships could be perceived by some as fostering such thinking. When that takes place, it is a loss. Theology and doctrine do matter. I like the definition of doctrine that insists, "Doctrine is what must be said in order for the gospel to be heard." My hope and prayer is that full communion relationships foster such trust that we can explore the deepest truths of the Christian faith in order that the gospel may be heard for the sake of Christ's mission to the world.

One challenge is that we fail to maximize the gift of these relationships. This is hard work. Denominational and congregational leaders are often busy with our own "stuff." The principal of homogeneity too often shapes our lives. We are more comfortable with those with whom we have a shared history. The matter of tending to demonstrable unity in Christ in order that the world might believe gets lost in our trap of denominational self-preoccupation.

Another risk is that full communion relationships can become an excuse for adopting survival tactics instead of wrestling with the question concerning the ways in which our relationships can enable us to be signs of and participants in God's in-breaking reign in Christ Jesus. Imagine a Lutheran congregation and a United Methodist congregation that are considering forming a shared ministry because numbers and income are down. Perhaps the

congregations can no longer afford a pastor and the supporting of two buildings. Consider the questions, is this only about survival of the sacred territory of these buildings or is it about faithful mission? How do we raise that question? How do we discern the answers? But if in the end it is only about survival, then maybe, at least in some respects, something needs to die. There is Biblical precedent for such a view. Referring to his own death and resurrection, our Lord declares, "Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat first falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

It is also possible that full communion relationships and the sense of renewed strength that may come from those relationships may diminish the perceived necessity of addressing critical issues that are facing the church and its witness to Christ. All of us can name those issues. My list of those issues would include the reported negative perception of the church that leads the unchurched to dismiss it as judgmental and hypocritical; the inability of many of our churches to connect with young people in the face of other, "more attractive" alternatives; our inattentiveness to Christians of other traditions often not involved in our dialogues; our struggle with articulating a "theology of the cross" to a mainline Christian culture that has opted for what Kenda Creasy Dean in her book, *Almost Christian*, calls "moralistic therapeutic deism"; the inclination of many of our churches to function more as a club than as signs of and participants in God's in-breaking reign in Christ Jesus; our inability to nurture the Christian faith as reflected in the growing ignorance of Scripture even among those who identify with our congregations. We have major work to do with respect to knowing how to be intelligible to the culture while also conveying the scandalous good news of Jesus Christ. It would be a missed opportunity, if not a tragedy, were

our ecumenical dialogues and full communion relationships to fail to address these matters as well.

F. A Way Forward

The title of this presentation is "Full Communion Relationships: An Ecumenical Way Forward." Perhaps the risk in the title is that it might suggest that if only we do the proper work, we can accomplish the unity of the church. At last fall's meeting of the ELCA Conference of Bishops, we had the privilege of receiving a presentation by Bishop Denis Madden, chair of the Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. As he concluded his address he commented, "2017 is the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. Should we not be doing something together to mark this important occasion and to point the way toward unity?" Then he continued:

John Borelli in an America magazine article entitled "In the Beginning: How the Work of Christian Unity Got Started" sites an episode that took place in the Vatican on December 2, 1960. Doctor Geoffrey Fisher, the Archbishop of Canterbury, had a meeting with Pope John XXIII. The Holy Father read from an address in which he enthusiastically referred to that time when other Christians could return to Mother Church. The Archbishop of Canterbury courteously and with deference corrected His Holiness: "Not return....None of us can go backwards. We are looking forward, until in God's good time, when our two courses approximate and meet." The pope pondered for a moment and then said, "You are right."

Madden continued:

Let me thank you again my brothers and sisters for your kind hospitality today. It is wonderful to be with you. Let me encourage you in your work of Christian Unity. We know that

Christ has sent the Holy Spirit to guide us. We need to rely on this guidance always. Despite our difficulties and occasional discouragements, there is more that unites us than divides us, so let us continue in faith to work that "all may be one."

I would already identify the "more that unites us" as the Incarnate One who went the way of the cross and empty tomb for us and for our salvation. As we are about this holy work of unity, we know our crucified and risen Lord prays for us, "...that we may be one...that the world may believe." By the power of the Holy Spirit, God even now draws us together through this One who has been lifted up for the life of the world. And so we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Presented by:

Marcus C. Lohrmann