

# The “Koinonia” Project<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

The “Koinonia Project” is an initiative by the office of the President of the Synod<sup>3</sup> designed to foster that theological discussion under the Word of God which we pray will strengthen our joint witness to the saving doctrine and bring greater unity to our practice of the same for the sake of God’s people. Our Synod does not need a new confession, but a greater understanding of and renewed commitment to what we as evangelical Lutherans have always confessed, to what we have been given. Our goal as we study together is to follow the pattern of the Formula of Concord in which our forebears laid out 1) a clear statement of the points at issue, 2) an explication of what we affirm together on the basis of Scripture, and 3) what we therefore reject. The purpose of this is to make our Gospel proclamation clear, for the sake of all. We seek, not compromise on the lowest common denominator, but clear confession of the truth of God’s Word and salutary agreement as to how the doctrine can be put into practice. Our basic method is to develop theological study groups following similar patterns across the Synod. We are now (2013) in the “pilot phase” in the development of these groups.<sup>4</sup> This present concept paper (which President Matthew Harrison has asked the undersigned to develop) outlines the project as follows:

- The Word of God
- Unity, Concord and Harmony
- The Goal of the Koinonia Project
- Basic Values of the Koinonia Project
- The Koinonia Project and the Nature of the Synod
- Basic Elements of This Effort (including the nature of the study groups)
- Steps Being Taken in Development
- Several Suggested Strategies Recommended by the Harmony Task Force (called for by 2007 Synod Resolution 4-01A) and how they might relate to the Koinonia Project
- Summary

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<sup>1</sup> We recognize that the term “Koinonia Project” can be misleading, as though true koinonia were our work that we establish through our effort, our “project.” As we hope to make clear below, true koinonia is God’s gift, whole and complete in the Lord Jesus. Our “project” is to study the Word of God together, because that is where God gives His gift of koinonia in Christ.

<sup>2</sup> This concept paper needs to be read alongside the Report of the Task Force for Synodical Harmony appointed by the Council of Presidents and the Board of Directors in response to 2007 Resolution 4-01A. The Harmony Task Force focuses on the need for repentance of sinful behaviors and for greater harmony in our life together. This “Koinonia Project” concept paper, while acknowledging the need to repent of sinful behaviors, focuses on the need for theological dialog under the Word of God to seek greater concord in doctrine and practice. In essence, this paper seeks to carry forward with both foci, because both are equally needed as we move forward.

<sup>3</sup> Article XI.B.3 of the Constitution of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod gives the President this authority: *“The President has and always shall have the power to advise, admonish, and reprove. He shall conscientiously use all means at his command to promote and maintain unity of doctrine and practice in all the districts of the Synod.”* (2010 Handbook, p. 18)

<sup>4</sup> The appendices to this paper give examples of how members of the study groups hold one another accountable to the Word of God and our Confessions.

- Appendices with Sample Approaches for Study Groups

## **The Word of God**

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the **fellowship**, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:42 ESV).*

*God is faithful, through whom you were called into **the communion of** His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment (1 Corinthians 1:9-10 ESV, modified).<sup>5</sup>*

*I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your **partnership** in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all **partakers with** me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel (Philippians 1:3-7 ESV)*

*...and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of **fellowship** to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised (Galatians 2:9 ESV).*

*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a **participation** in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a **participation** in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (1 Corinthians 10:16-17 ESV).*

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<sup>5</sup> For consistency, we have used the English Standard Version for these references. The ESV actually translates verse 9 (πιστὸς ὁ θεὸς δι' οὗ ἐκλήθητε εἰς κοινωνίαν τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν.) as "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." This implies, however, that "koinonia" is a static thing when in reality "koinonia" is better understood as the action or activity of sharing together in something. But this activity is NOT our doing. It is always God's doing, God's gift. Koinonia activity is always Christ's work in His means of grace. God calls us into participation or communion in Christ. Dr. Jeff Kloha of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, suggests that a better translation of verse 9 would be: "God is faithful, through whom you were called into **participation together in** His Son, Jesus Christ." By way of comparison, the NIV translates verse 9 as "God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." The "Witness, Mercy, Life Together" resource page (<http://www.lcms.org/emphasis>) offers a download of the abbreviated edition of Kittel's *Theological Dictionary*; this resource translates 1 Cor 1:9 as "fellowship with God's Son." The full article by Hauck in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 804 notes that "Paul uses koinonia for the religious fellowship (participation) of the believer in Christ ... According to 1 Cor 1:9 Christians are called to participation with the Son ... They are lifted up to be his fellows." See Jeffrey Kloha, "Koinonia and Life Together in the New Testament," *Concordia Journal* 38 (2012), 24-36. While "participation" helps us see that koinonia is the action of sharing in something, "participation" may also evoke the idea that the koinonia is an event created by our action, our effort to participate in the common thing. But koinonia in Scripture is ultimately not our action but Christ's. God gathers us into fellowship. God calls us into communion with Jesus. God gives the gift of sharing in Christ, not through our effort or planning, but by His Spirit in His Word of promise. To emphasize the passive nature (on our part) of the action, perhaps the best word to use in 1 Corinthians 1:9 is "communion." "God is faithful, but whom you were called into the communion of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." God makes us sharers in Jesus. Jesus acts on us by His means through His Spirit. It is an event, something that happens, but Jesus is always running the show, from beginning to end.

The root word in Greek is the verb, “koinonein,” which means “to participate together in something.” “Koinos” is the thing in common in which the people involved participate together. The “koinonoi,” the “participants,” are the ones sharing together in the common thing. The word “koinonia” encompasses the whole action, the whole thing that happens when God brings about our sharing together in the common thing.<sup>6</sup> “Koinonia” is usually translated into English with words like “fellowship,” “partnership,” “communion” or “participation,” depending on the context (see the various uses highlighted above, of which there are a number of other examples throughout the New Testament, both positive and negative).<sup>7</sup> While “koinonia” refers to a number of different activities resulting from God’s gift in Christ to share in something common, when we confess in the creed, “I believe in ... the communion of saints,” we are confessing that God Himself has brought us into “koinonia” with Christ and with all who are in Christ, living or dead. When we speak of our unity in Christ, we “believe one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church,” for there is but one Christ, “one body and one Spirit... one hope... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all...” (Ephesians 4:4-6, selected portions). This one body of Christ is not limited to The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, but encompasses all believers in Christ. Our incorporation in the body of Christ and the action of sharing in Christ are both God’s work, given by God’s grace. In other words, “koinonia” describes activity, a continuing repetitive action, not simply a static thing. It is a condition God creates when He calls us into Christ, an action that needs to keep on happening. The language of “event” tempts us to think that a “koinonia event” is something we plan and control. Nothing could be further from the truth. Koinonia is God’s doing, God’s working, God’s gift. It happens through God’s means. Jesus is running the show from beginning to end. It is His communion into which He calls us.

Where does one find believers in Christ? Our Confessions tell us we will find believers wherever the Word of God is proclaimed and the sacraments are given out according to Christ’s institution. It is interesting, is it not, that in each of the passages listed above, when the word “koinonia” is used, what we Lutherans call the means of grace (God’s Word and Sacraments in Christ) are quite often also in view. So in our understanding of Scripture, “koinonia” is not something we achieve by our efforts, but is worked by God through His Word of Law and Gospel. “Koinonia” in Christ happens by God’s doing through the means in which God is always working, namely, in the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments. These are the Church’s identifying marks, and the true source of our fellowship in Christ. Our life together, then, is first and foremost a gift of God’s grace in Christ, a working of God’s Spirit by His Word. Koinonia is to be brought into what Jesus has done for us. He takes what we have, our sin and death, and gives us all He has, His life and His righteousness. We now have fellowship with one another because the Lord Jesus Himself unites us in fellowship with the Father:

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with*

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<sup>6</sup> Many of these thoughts are gleaned from Jeffrey Kloha, “Koinonia and Life Together in the New Testament,” *Concordia Journal* 38 (2012), 24-36. Yet we have also sought to avoid the use of the word “event” to describe koinonia. An event implies something with a beginning, a middle and an end. An event has planners, people who control what happens. Koinonia, on the other hand, is gift, Christ’s action, Christ’s work.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Romans 15:26; 2 Corinthians 6:14; 8:4; 9:13; 13:13; Philippians 2:1; 3:10; Philemon 6; Philippians 4:15 (verb); 1 Timothy 5:22 (verb – “do not have fellowship with another man’s sins”); Hebrews 2:14 (“since the children share in blood and flesh”... Jesus partook of the same things); 1 Peter 4:13 speaks of a sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

*the Father and was made manifest to us – that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have **fellowship** with us; and indeed our **fellowship** is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.*

*This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have **fellowship** with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have **fellowship** with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us (1 John 1:1-10 ESV).*

While “Koinonia” encompasses the whole activity of sharing in the “common thing,” the action is always (when we are speaking of participation in Christ) worked by Christ where Christ gives His gifts, His Word and Sacrament. Koinonia is not our work, but is, in the end, something Christ does. We do not come together to form koinonia ourselves, but Christ gathers us by His Word. We recognize and rejoice in the koinonia Christ works. We also remember here that the One who establishes koinonia is the Living Lord Jesus, the Crucified One who still bears in His body the blessed wounds of our redemption, but is now the Living One, bodily raised from the dead, never to die again. He is Lord of all! He is Lord of our koinonia. He is Lord of our brothers and sisters. He is alive, the First Born from the dead, the beginning of the new creation. He came to the disciples and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me” (Matthew 28:18). In essence then, though we read, study, confess and proclaim His Word, koinonia is His work, His doing among us by means of that Word.

Our practice of “altar and pulpit fellowship” is actually an application of this understanding of koinonia. When, on the basis of Scripture, we recognize “altar and pulpit fellowship” between Church bodies, this also is not our work but Christ’s. Our call is simply to recognize Christ’s work when we find that, by His Spirit in the Word of God, we are making with others the same confession of faith in Christ. This is not something to assume, but is recognized by examining one another’s teaching and confession. In other words, the outward sign of fellowship between groups of Christians must be based in what is taught and confessed by those groups, in “saying the same thing” about the Living Christ and His Word (see 1 Corinthians 1:10). As our confessions put it, the church’s identifying marks, the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments, are the true source of our fellowship in Christ, our life together. All of this is Christ’s work in His Word. Koinonia is never our contrivance, something we create or control. It is given to us. Our communion is always found in the marks of the Church, which are Christ’s work. The real koinonia is found in the body and blood of Christ. Our fellowship is established then, not by our negotiation, but by Christ Himself in His Word. What a joy it is, then, when we meet fellow Christians and discover that we are one in doctrine and practice! We celebrate Holy Communion together (“altar fellowship”), then, when we have as gift this oneness in the pure preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacrament in accord with this divine Word. No matter how much discussion on our part goes into its discovery, this oneness is Christ’s work, Christ’s gift in His Word.

What is true of relationships between church bodies is doubly true when it comes to our communion in Christ within our Synod. True koinonia is Christ’s work in His Word, also among us. That’s

why “The Koinonia Project” is focused on addressing areas of disagreement and division in our midst by means of theological discussion in, with and under the Word of God, and informed by the Confessions of our Lutheran Church. Christ gives His gift of koinonia, always anchored in the Church’s marks. True koinonia in our midst is given by Christ in His Word. The renewal of our “concord and harmony” will come as we are together in the Word of God, for that’s always where Christ gives His Spirit to work in us and to renew us. Therefore, we pray Christ’s blessing on this work in His Word, for it is the blessing of the Lord of all, “who is, who was, and who is to come” (Revelation 1:8).<sup>8</sup>

### **Unity, Concord and Harmony**

The “Koinonia Project” is an initiative by the Office of the President<sup>9</sup> designed to foster theological discussion under the Word of God so that we, as a Synod of church workers and congregations, understand more clearly our unity in Christ and are drawn by God’s Spirit into greater concord in our teaching and greater harmony in our life together as God’s people. These three aspects of our fellowship, our life together in the Gospel, namely unity, concord and harmony, were identified as essential by the Task Force for Synodical Harmony appointed by the Board of Directors and the Council of Presidents in response to 2007 Synod Resolution 4-01A. Here’s how the Task Force sought to define them clearly:

**Unity:** *The oneness that all believers in Christ have with each other through Spirit-given faith in Jesus created through the means of grace. “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:4). This unity cannot be seen by human eyes, but we confess it by faith: “I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic church” (Nicene Creed).*

**Concord:** *The oneness that believers in Christ seek to manifest and express in their confession of the Gospel and “all its articles” (FC SD X, 31). The church’s unity as confessed in the Creed is a “given.” Concord in doctrine and confession is a goal that we “strive to maintain” (Ephesians 4:3) by God’s grace on the basis of his Word. St. Paul urges the Christians at Corinth—and us—to speak the same thing, to avoid divisions, and to be perfectly united in the same mind and judgment (1 Corinthians 1:10-11). The Book of Concord sets forth what we in the LCMS continue to affirm without qualification as a “single, universally accepted, certain, and common form of doctrine,” drawn from the Word of God, that bears faithful witness to the oneness of doctrine and confession that serves as the basis for true concord in the church.*

**Harmony:** *The oneness that believers in Christ seek to manifest and express in their life together as God’s people. Paul urges those who are united in Christ and who seek to manifest that unity through concord in doctrine and confession to be eager to maintain this unity “in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). He reminds the Christians at Corinth that Christ-like attitudes and behavior are crucial to their efforts to maintain doctrinal concord (1 Corinthians 13). Above all, says Paul in Colossians, “put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:14). “Paul urges that there be love in the church to preserve harmony...lest the church disintegrate into various*

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<sup>8</sup> Conversations with several professors at both of our seminaries have helped me think through this section.

<sup>9</sup> See note 3, above, also Article XI.B.3 of the Constitution of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (*2010 Handbook*, p. 18).

*schisms and lest enmities, factions and heresies arise from such schisms” (Ap. IV, 232).<sup>10</sup>*

The Task Force on Synod Harmony Report then brings all three together:

*In summary, unity focuses on our oneness with Christians everywhere by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Concord focuses on our oneness in doctrine and practice. Harmony focuses our life together in Christ to be characterized by Christ-like attitudes, particularly love.<sup>11</sup>*

### **The Goal of the “Koinonia Project”**

In light of these definitions, the goal of this project is to help our people, by God’s grace and Spirit in His Word, perceive more clearly our unity in Christ and to express with greater unanimity the concord (the oneness in doctrine and practice) Christ desires for us under the Word of God for the sake of our witness before the world. We pray that this will also help us toward a greater sense of harmony in our life together as a Synod. There is no denying that we have several areas of disagreement and unresolved problems that plague our life together including, but not limited to: questions of worship forms, communion practice,<sup>12</sup> fellowship, mission strategies, church and ministry issues, to name the most obvious examples. Some would say the differences are usually only matters of practice, yet theology and practice cannot be separated. A pastor’s teaching will be reflected in his practice and a pastor’s practice is his theology in action (though because of human weakness, a man’s practice may not always fully match what he professes to believe). Here we also recognize there are varieties of practice that can carry the true doctrine. There are also other practices that will negate the true teaching. Because of this, we need to discuss and clarify how faithful teaching (doctrine) and faithful doing (practice) are intimately connected and ought be congruent. Just as at the time of the Formula of Concord, a healthy agreement on the nature of adiaphora, things neither commanded nor forbidden, will be essential to harmony.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Task Force for Synodical Harmony Report to the Board of Directors and Council of Presidents of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, pp. 1-2. This present work seeks to bring together the concerns of both the Harmony Task Force and the Koinonia Project.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the matter of how the concept of “koinonia” or “communion” relates to our varying practices of admission to the Lord’s Supper, is something that needs to be reviewed again under the Word of God. Much more could be said here, but it is not the purpose of this paper to explain faithful communion practice. Suffice it to say that what we do with the sacrament must be rooted in what the sacrament is, that the bread is a communion in the body of Christ, and the cup is a communion in the blood of Christ, and that one confesses what is taught from the altar at which one communes (1 Corinthians 10:16). The action is always Christ’s. He “runs the show.” He gives His body in and with the bread. He gives His blood in and with the cup, for the forgiveness of sins. It is His doing in His Word.

<sup>13</sup> Essential to this process will be the clarification of the relationship between doctrine and practice. Of course, there can be a variety of practices that support the true doctrine. Yet there may also be practices that seem harmless on the surface, but may in fact lead to false understandings. Our discussion of practice always needs to take into account the question of what is being taught by any particular practice. For example (and hopefully this example is reasonably neutral in 2011), it was the practice some 40-50 years ago of the congregation in which the author was raised to publish annually the exact amount of money every individual member gave to the Lord’s work. When the congregation came to the realization this practice led to pride on the part of some, shame and guilt on the part of others, and gave the impression that some were more equal in the body of Christ, the congregation discontinued the

## **Observations**

In addition, we need to recognize that our internal fellowship is stressed and polarized not only by disagreements in theology and practice, but also by the resultant political movements and accompanying sinful personal behaviors.<sup>14</sup> For years we have sought to solve theological problems by political means (voting), but this has only perpetuated the polarization to the point that, in the eyes of some, we are a Synod not in fellowship with itself.<sup>15</sup> Others see our Synod as a collection of “aggrieved minorities,” each looking to grab what it can, whenever it can. And the relative anonymity of the internet makes it easy to write in the blogosphere things about people we would probably never say in person. We also observe: the habits we learn in controversy (e.g. the 1960s and 1970s) may continue long after a particular issue has been resolved.

In contrast, spiritual health and life, unity, concord and harmony come when God, in mercy, works repentance, forgives sinful attitudes in the blood of Jesus, and gives faith, reconciliation and concord, all through His Word. We need to deal with one another as precious souls, blood bought, redeemed by Christ and Him crucified. We need to do together the hard theological work to help each other hear the Word clearly so that our thinking, speaking and practice are more unified under the Word of God. In essence, then, the true goal of the Koinonia Project will not be reached without repentance, forgiveness of sins and renewal of faith by means of the Word of God.

That is why the “Koinonia Project” cannot become a political process, that is, something determined by close convention votes with winners and losers, but must be and remain a spiritual and theological effort. Faithful teaching, faithful practice, mutual repentance and forgiveness for the sake of Christ will only be God’s work among us. Our Confessions tell us God gives His Gospel...

...which gives guidance and help against sin in more than one way, because God is extravagantly rich in His grace: first, through the spoken word, in which the forgiveness of sin is preached to the whole world (which is the proper function of the gospel); second, through baptism; third, through

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practice. It was unintentionally teaching something false. Our intent by this example is simply to illustrate that what we do does teach, and that we always need to ask whether what we do is actually communicating the truth of Scripture or something else. What we do affects what we teach. In other words, we need to come to a better understanding together of what actually constitutes adiaphora in the first place. See [Augustana VII](#) and [Formula of Concord X](#).

<sup>14</sup> The Task Force for Synodical Harmony gave a preliminary report in the 2010 Synod Convention Workbook, pp. 74ff. In that report and in their report to the COP and BOD cited above, they identified seven aspects of disharmony in the Synod: 1) Inability to deal with diversity; 2) A lack of civility; 3) A politicized culture; 4) Primarily a clergy problem; 5) Poor communication across “party lines”; 6) Lack of accountability; and 7) Distrust. We note here that these are, for the most part spiritual problems – sins – that can be addressed only by repentance and forgiveness. The way we deal with one another is a theological issue.

<sup>15</sup> We are not saying all political activity is sinful. In and of itself, political activity is neutral and can be used for good or ill. After all, we do have the right to persuade and seek to influence one another in positive ways as sisters and brothers in the body of Christ. However, the adoption of a theological resolution by a vote of 53% of the voting delegates does not serve to unify, but often simply motivates the 47% to go home angry, organize better, so that they can obtain 52% at the next convention. That part of the process, we believe, is part of what serves to perpetuate the polarization. This is why, by the way, it would have been a positive step, in our opinion, had the Synod adopted 2010 Resolution 8-23 to make it necessary for significant doctrinal resolutions to be adopted by a 2/3 majority.

the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys and also through the *mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters*" (SA III, IV).<sup>16</sup>

Without this constant guidance and help against sin in the Gospel, the Koinonia Project will surely come to nothing.

We seek to proceed in the spirit of the Augsburg Confession, which sought to lay out clearly what unites us, as we confess in Article VII:

*It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.*

*For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously [eintrachtlich, "with one accord"] according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by human beings, be observed everywhere. (AC VII.2ff)<sup>17</sup>*

In other words, our unity in Christ is found in the Gospel purely preached and the Sacraments administered according to the divine Word. Here this includes concord, that is our oneness in doctrine and in practices that comport with the true doctrine. Thus, we are called to believe God is at work in our midst through His Word of Law and Gospel to draw us to Himself, not separately, but together in His "koinonia." All of us constantly need the daily change of heart God works through repentance and faith. The problem belongs to all of us. None of us is exempt. We are each, every last one of us, called to examine our actions and attitudes toward one another so that we confess our sins, trust God's promise and speak forgiveness to one another. But again, it is **absolutely essential that our theological issues are addressed by a thorough process under the Word of God where we come to clear agreement on 1) the points at issue,<sup>18</sup> 2) what we confess together, 3) what we reject and 4) what we will therefore do together, on the basis of Scripture and our Confessions.** This effort to do so we have chosen to call "The Koinonia Project" because we pray God will strengthen our oneness in doctrine and practice under the Word of God and build us in our fellowship, our "koinonia" together.<sup>19</sup> For again, koinonia is a sharing of what is given, given by Christ in His means of grace.

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<sup>16</sup> Kolb and Wengert, p. 319, *emphasis added*.

<sup>17</sup> Kolb/Wengert, p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> In concert with the approach of the Formula of Concord, agreeing on the specific points at issue is the first and most important step toward genuine resolution of controversy and the restoration of concord.

<sup>19</sup> In preliminary discussions regarding the Koinonia Project some have expressed the fear that this will take too long and is only a delaying tactic to "avoid facing the inevitable." Others are afraid the Koinonia Project is something of a ruse hiding a desire to "purge" the Synod of "undesireables" like them. We note that the normal bylaw processes among us of ecclesiastical supervision and doctrinal dissent according to the bylaws will have to continue as they do now, separate from the Koinonia Project. However, the Koinonia Project is neither a delaying tactic nor a purge but it must become, we pray, an honest Spirit-guided effort over time to do what it takes to engage one another in theological listening and the discussions necessary to work towards unity, concord and harmony.



## **Basic Values of the Koinonia Project**

### Focus on Christ in His Word

- Our study and discussion are focused on Christ crucified and raised from the dead, confessed in the Word of God, for Jesus Himself “is our peace...” (Ephesians 2:14).
- We pray we undertake this work with a God-given humility under the Word of God and with much prayer!
- If, as we have emphasized, koinonia is God’s gift, why is there disharmony? The simple answer is two-fold: we sin against one another and we sin against Christ by not being together in His Word. God desires to work repentance of sin while giving a renewed focus on hearing together the Word of Christ. “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Colossians 3:16a).
- We look for integrity with one another before God – honest, heart-felt, open dialog – recognizing we do have problems of doctrine and practice to address together, and praying for that openness to one another God gives as we hear the Word of God and each other.
- That is why it is essential for this process that we spend time together in the Word of God, in worship, and in prayer with and for each other. The marks of the church are the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments and true fellowship (koinonia) is always fellowship in the church’s marks.<sup>20</sup>
- We will also work together on this, recognizing the nature of the Church as we confess it in the Augsburg Confession. Study of the first several articles of the Augustana should be an essential part of the “Koinonia Project.” Real progress will have to be based on overwhelming clarity regarding confession of sin, salvation, the central article of justification and a means of grace approach to ministry.<sup>21</sup> From there we also move to the example of the Formula of Concord with its careful explication of the Word of God in the face of controversy.

### A Collaborative Effort

- Collaboration is a basic value for the Koinonia Project – this is not just a “passing fad” in the President’s Office, but a process in which many more are brought on board, beginning with the design phase. The project must work by attraction, not coercion. As of December 2011, there are several areas where we are working, by the request of local authorities, to develop pilot study groups. Lay people also need to be involved in these discussions.
- The project is coordinated by the President’s Office through the First Vice President, but it must become an ongoing integral part of our life together as a Synod.

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<sup>20</sup> Apology VII & VIII, Kolb/Wengert, p. 174. As we seek greater unity in the Word of God, we must spend time together in that Word. God works through His Word. True koinonia is found in the church’s marks, the Word of God purely preached and the Sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution. (See also the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph of the introduction to this paper.)

<sup>21</sup> We recognize that such a study of the Augustana will take place in a context where many secularizing tendencies of our culture along with disparate theological views are invading also our Synod. In response, some will tend to imitate the look and feel of American revivalism. Others will seek solace and greater certainty in a liturgical legalism. Without going into a lot of detail, our purpose in making this observation is simply to recognize that there are theological streams foreign to our Confession that have entered our Synod. The Augsburg Confession, on the other hand, is both a clear confession of the Gospel that unites us, but it also shows, in clear summary, what we therefore reject.

- The preliminary design phase has involved in some way the Harmony Task Force, Board of Directors, Seminary Faculties, COP and CTCR.
- The project also needs to become more inclusive as it develops. In other words, while the initial movement of the project is coming from the leadership of the Synod, how this is done on a local level will need to be worked out together on the local level.<sup>22</sup>

#### Personal and Individual

- The Harmony Task Force brought a series of recommendations to the Council of Presidents and Board of Directors in November 2010 regarding strategies for restoring harmony among us.
- Though theological issues are primary, the personal cannot be separated from the theological, for how we deal with one another is ultimately a theological issue. The Report of the Harmony Task Force referenced above chronicles real pain and real concerns that must be addressed spiritually through repentance and forgiveness. Following are the strategies the Task Force suggested, strategies that need to be addressed by the responsible authorities:

**1) Synod-wide studies** of the Scriptures and the Confessions, including studies by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, covering specific topics such as; the 8th Commandment, a theology of diversity, Christian virtues and civility, the political culture of the church, accountability and harmony.

**2) Our seminaries and universities** include these topics in the formation of our clergy and professional workers.

**3) Training & modeling** for and by the Council of Presidents, the Circuit Counselors, and all other church leaders.

**4) A Code of Conduct**, developed with input from across the Synod, adopted by the Synod, in which we express common expectations of one another and seek to hold ourselves and one another accountable for appropriate behavior.

**5) Those who are charged with ecclesiastical supervision** must be trained to hold us all accountable when our actions and attitudes are inappropriate.

**6) The need for continuing education.**

**7) The clergy** must recognize their responsibility and engage in working toward greater harmony within our Synod.

**8) The dialog must include all positions**, at every level of the church; within our congregations, circuits, auxiliaries, Synod-wide theological convocations and smaller focus groups as well.

**9) Communication** is a key issue. We need to learn to use the media appropriately-officially and unofficially.<sup>23</sup>

- The Koinonia Project will need to incorporate these recommendations from its inception (see below for suggestions as to how this may be done). For instance, each study group will have to agree at the beginning of their work how the members of the group will deal with one another. In essence, they will develop a simple understanding together as to how the group will work together and how the members of the group will hold one another accountable.

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<sup>22</sup> For instance, efforts to design pilot groups are being undertaken together with the local district and/or circuit.

<sup>23</sup> Report of the Task Force, pp. 17-18.

- How the recommendations of the Task Force will be carried forward in the context of the Koinonia Project will be fleshed out further by the discussion of this paper in the Council of Presidents, the Board of Directors, the CTCR, the seminaries and others.

#### Also Broad Based

- The Koinonia Project is broad based, in the sense that the approach must be replicated broadly across the Synod, and also broadly reported in the sense that, while discussion groups need to have freedom to dialog within themselves without fear, these are not secret negotiations, but at appropriate times the Synod at large needs to hear and support the results of the dialogs, as well as provide input.
- All-encompassing – every member of the Synod (i.e. every ordained or commissioned minister, every congregation), as well as lay leaders, are eventually invited to participate in the effort.
- **We cannot work by coercion** in this project, but always by invitation, fraternal persuasion, and attraction, centered always in the Word of God and our confession, for the sake of the mission.
- We must begin with those who are willing, drawing in more and more of the skeptical as we move forward. Yes, some may look on the “Koinonia Project” with suspicion, thinking, “this is just another attempt on the part of one group in the Synod to enforce conformity on the rest!” Only as we work together on the project, seeking to proceed in the love we have from Christ (see 1 Corinthians 13:4-7) will such suspicions be alleviated. To this end we much be mutually accountable to one another. We pray God to give us the wisdom to work in the spirit of John 17 where Jesus prays that His church may be one. We recognize that if this is perceived as a means to “purge” the Synod of “undesirables,” it will not accomplish anything. But that’s also why we must discuss our next section:

### The Koinonia Project and the Nature of the Synod

Article VII of the Synod’s Constitution reads, simply:

In its relation to its members the Synod is not an ecclesiastical government exercising legislative or coercive powers, and with respect to the individual congregation’s right of self-government it is but an advisory body. Accordingly, no resolution of the Synod imposing anything upon the individual congregation is of binding force if it is not in accordance with the Word of God or if it appears to be inexpedient as far as the condition of a congregation is concerned. (2007 Handbook, p. 13f)

What does it mean that the Synod “is but an advisory body”? This concept is often misunderstood to mean that congregations and pastors have the right to thumb their nose, so to speak, at actions and positions of the Synod they do not like. To answer this question we first have to determine what is in view when our forefathers wrote in the constitution: “In relation to its members the Synod... is but an advisory body.” What is the Synod? The Synod is not the staff of the International Center – the IC is a tool of the Synod. The Synod is not the Council of Presidents or the Synodical President. They are officers of the Synod. The Synod is not even the convention – conventions are meetings of the Synod (members of the Synod gathered together). Conventions of the districts are meetings of the Synod in that area (district conventions, for example, at one time were called “District Synods”).

In essence then, the Synod is a fellowship (“koinonia”!) of congregations, pastors and commissioned ministers who share the same confession of faith.<sup>24</sup> The Synod is the sum total of all its members, seeking to work together collectively under the Word of God, to confess Christ before the world. Members of the Synod are congregations, together with their ordained and commissioned ministers. Individual members of congregations are technically not members of the Synod, but are members of congregations that have joined the Synod. Again, the Synod is congregations, together with their pastors and commissioned ministers. To say it another way, the Synod is us. Each district is the Synod itself in that area. Each circuit is the Synod in that locale. Each congregation, as a member of the Synod, is the Synod in that place. Since the Synod is a confessional fellowship, as members of the Synod we are mutually accountable to one another in the Lord through our membership in the Synod as a whole.

Because the Word of God rules over us in the Synod, we do not have a hierarchy, nor do we operate by coercion. Instead we operate by fraternal persuasion under the Word of God.<sup>25</sup> We serve the same Lord and seek to “take every thought captive to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). Matters of doctrine are decided by the Word of God. In all other things, we seek to work together in love. In its most basic form, the members of Synod in each local area seek to advise one another in brotherly fashion to help one another hear God’s Word clearly, confess Christ boldly and live together in holy love. The Synod is pastors and congregations who have come together to confess the truth and to help one another serve faithfully and extend the Kingdom of God. No one has any power over the other except the power of the Word of God and the power to advise and persuade one another.<sup>26</sup> This writer believes one of our maladies is that we have forgotten how to do this (which is why the 2010 Convention mandated study of Articles VI and VII should probably be part of the Koinonia Project). Our confession says “...the church cannot be better governed and maintained than by having all of us live under one head, Christ, and by having all the bishops equal in office (however they may differ in gifts) and diligently joined together in unity of doctrine, faith, sacraments, prayer, works of love, etc.” (SA II, IV9)<sup>27</sup> The “Koinonia Project” will involve human beings, people in positions of leadership, relationships of influence, all seeking to persuade one another and

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<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, this statement is certainly true – every member of the Synod has made the same vow and signed the same constitution (see Article II of the Synod’s Constitution for our Confessional basis) with its confession of faith. On the other hand, disagreement exists as to what that means, as well as concern that we may not always be living up to that Confession.

<sup>25</sup> “...according to the constitution under which our synodical union exists, we have merely the power to *advise* one another, that we have only the *power of the Word*, and of *convincing*... Why Should and Can We Carry On Our Work Joyfully Although We Have No Power But the Power of the Word? The principle and most important motive is the following: Because Christ has *given* His servants this and no other power, and because even the holy apostles *have appropriated* to themselves no other power and therefore have seriously *warned* the servants of the church against claiming every other power... Let us above all and in all matters be concerned about this, that the pure doctrine of our dear Evangelical Lutheran Church may become known more and more completely among us, that it may be in vogue in all of our congregations, and that it may be preserved from all adulteration and held fast as the most precious treasure. Let us not surrender one iota of the demands of the Word. Let us bring about its complete rule in our congregations and set aside nothing of it, even though for this reason things may happen to us, as God wills. Here let us be inflexible, let us be adamant...” (CFW Walther’s First Presidential Address, 1848, translated by Paul F. Koehnke, CHIQ).

<sup>26</sup> See also CFW Walther, *Essays for the Church*, Volume II, “On the Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod,” 1879 Iowa District Convention Essay, Concordia Publishing House, 1992, pp. 31ff.

<sup>27</sup> Tappert, p. 300.

working together under the Word of God. Yet the “Koinonia Project” is not intended to form convention resolutions and bylaws but is designed to help brothers and sisters talk with each other about our theology and how our theology works out in practice. Its purpose is ultimately to help each other hear and confess God’s Word clearly. If convention resolutions are produced, these will have grown organically (as we come closer to the goal of the process) from the consensus God will have worked by and around His Word. That’s because true “koinonia” and lasting harmony and concord are ultimately not our work (though we work and pray hard toward that end) but are gifts of God given through the Word of God.

We have, and will always have in our midst, the activities of leadership, influence, fraternal persuasion and making decisions by voting in convention (a.k.a “politics” in a neutral sense). These are all necessary for a human organization to operate. Like anything in God’s created order, however, they can be used for good or for ill, and we all must confess our sins of commission and omission (and “no mission”!) in these areas.<sup>28</sup>

Our unity and harmony must be found in what Christ has given us to believe, teach and confess together, but when that common confession is ignored, damaged or lost, we are tempted to restore harmony by writing rules and calling for doctrinal discipline (especially of others!). However, multiplying rules and bylaws will not solve our difficulties. It is actually a symptom of our malady to believe we can solve a problem (more likely, get our way) by writing a rule or be explaining (away) a rule in our favor. The Koinonia Project cannot be about making new rules but must be about spiritual renewal, repentance and forgiveness, and learning together to confess clearly again what Christ has given us in His Word.

But how is this done?

### **Basic Elements of This Effort**

What are the basic elements of the “Koinonia Project”? What will we actually do? How will this be done? As implied above, the essence of the “Koinonia Project” is the formation of theological study and discussion groups of 8-12 persons each, facilitated by a chaplain/facilitator. We have been developing the following list of suggestions for what this will take and what the groups will look like. We recognize this list is quite preliminary and offers only a broad sketch of the process. We continue to work with various groups to “flesh this out” and to “put legs on” the proposal.<sup>29</sup> It will take time and much more input from many quarters:

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<sup>28</sup> Even as we speak of the nature of the Synod we remember that our Synod must not become a sect. Synod is a “koinonia” but not the ultimate “koinonia” spoken of in 1 Corinthians 1:9. God has given us partners around the world who share the fellowship of the Confession of faith in the Book of Concord. More than that, the whole of Christ in His body must always be in view as we seek faithfully to confess His name. When we say, “I believe one, holy, catholic and apostolic church” we are not speaking of the LCMS, nor even “the evangelical Lutheran church,” but of all believers in Christ across space and time. That’s why we work as carefully as we do, for the Church is much more than what we see in our time, or our Confession of faith. We confess the faith also to our contemporary fellow Christians of heterodox confessions as well; we do not just talk amongst ourselves.

<sup>29</sup> The Northern Illinois District is one pilot district in which we are developing one approach – beginning with one initial group and expanding to others as we go (See Appendix One for the initial plans in Northern Illinois). We are also

### Preparatory Work

- 1) Enlist the theological leadership of the Synod (Seminary faculties, COP, CTCR and BOD) to support and be involved in the process. The work of the Harmony Task Force is essential for this effort. The strategies recommended by the Task Force referenced below must be carried forward along with the Koinonia Project. Our work to draw people into the process is ongoing. We are working with these groups in the design phase to obtain both support, input, direction and participation from the beginning. This is being done.
- 2) We need to enlist the people of the Synod in concerted prayer for this effort and provide materials for the same.
- 3) We will need to agree on a process for forming theological study groups. Perhaps 3 or 4 can be asked to form a group by each one bringing one or two of their own choosing with them (but see below, on the nature of the groups). Existing groupings (e.g. circuits) could also form study groups. Lay people need to be drawn in. More thought and preparation is needed in this area. However, we are sure to learn from the intentional formation of several pilot groups at the beginning of the process.
- 4) Every discussion group should begin, not necessarily with the controverted issues, but with discussion of what it means to be a Synod of brothers and sisters who walk together. What is our calling as brothers in the office of pastor? How are we called to BE with each other as brothers? What does that mean for honest dialog? Each study group could begin with a discussion of the Report of the Harmony Task Force.
- 5) Every group should have a chaplain/facilitator whose job it will be to center the group in the Word of God and in prayer by leading the group in regular worship and holding the group accountable to the best of what we are called to be together as brothers and sisters in Christ. Materials and training would have to be provided for this. In other words, the spiritual aspects of this process (repentance, Bible Study, prayer, worship) will have to be at the center of the entire experience rather than at the margins. The group should begin with a list of behaviors that we pray will characterize the discussions, and those that we will need to avoid because they will destroy the discussions. Groups will need to provide the opportunity for individual confession and absolution, for we are sinners, and the need will arise! See Appendix Two.

### The Nature of the Study Groups

- 6) Bring respected and capable people together for dialog in a non-political way, representing various understandings and views. Each participant, however, is present as an individual. No one will be representing "constituents," but each person speaks only for himself or herself. This effort must be outside the usual political process in the Synod. Though we pray that study groups will be multiplied across the Synod, we will begin with several pilot groups to show the way.
- 7) Particularly the pilot groups are forming by invitation. We ask a small number of leaders and theologians to participate. Each then bring one or two others with them of their choosing to make a group (for each issue) of 10-12. We are using more than one means to form pilot groups. In one

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working on another approach in Nebraska – developing circuit conferences as study groups. Others are in development as well – the South Wisconsin District, plus individual circuits elsewhere. Appendix Two, developed for the most part in Nebraska and refined in Northern Illinois, gives an example of the mutual accountability necessary for a theological study group in the Koinonia Project.

district, there will be a first group specifically chosen by district leadership. In another district, there will be a planning group, but that group will quickly draw in all the circuits. In other places, individual circuits have requested to become pilot study groups for the koinonia project.

- 8) Respected Seminary representatives are essential to the process. Some consultation is taking place. More consultations with both seminary faculties are needed.
- 9) Those attending would need to be principled, respected, reasonable people of integrity who are also able to have influence with others of like mind. This would include not only ordained men, but qualified commissioned ministers and lay people, men and women, namely, individuals representing a diversity of backgrounds – age, experience, ethnicity, gender, etc.
- 10) Several pilot groups of 10-12 should be gathered, perhaps each one assigned a specific problem. Yet over time, various groups will need to be multiplied across the Synod, also utilizing existing groupings of people.<sup>30</sup>

#### The Work in More Detail

- 11) Reflecting the need for repentance, forgiveness and change in behavior, the groups themselves will need to live in the Baptismal rhythm of repentance and forgiveness, confession and absolution, always lifting the matter to God in prayer. The Praesidium and Council of Presidents must take the lead in demonstrating lifestyles of repentance and prayer. Perhaps this could also be done through a series of sermons on the ten commandments and/or Table of Duties. Materials to lead the people of the Synod in prayer on this will also need to be prepared (see #2 above).
- 12) The group(s) should meet regularly for worship, study of Scripture and confessions, and prayer together. Remember, it is the Word of God that works repentance and faith. “Koinonia” is a gift, and God gives His gifts by His Word, the Word of the cross of Christ. To this end, every group should include a trained chaplain/facilitator whose job it will be to provide the opportunities for worship and prayer, as well as to hold the group accountable to the behaviors we have agreed to as members of the Synod. How do we live together and deal with each other as brothers and sisters in Christ? In the groups that have developed so far, this chaplain has become absolutely essential.
- 13) Every group should begin with the positive values we share as members of the Synod, leading also toward confession of sin, that is, how each of us has not lived up to those values. Each group will need to agree on the behaviors that will characterize the discussions and reject those behaviors that will tend to destroy them.
- 14) In other words, a way needs to be found for each group to operate together, developing relationships of trust, while also including feedback from outside the group (to prevent a closed feedback loop). A study of healthy group dynamics will be important for the sake of the process. While the group must function well together, means must also be developed to broaden the base of involvement early.
- 15) The study groups will not assume agreement in the Gospel, but will begin with a study of the first several articles of the Augustana. We need to be clear on what we believe about sin, grace, the central article of justification and an understanding of the Church gathered by and around the Word and Sacraments, this in the face of the “secular spirituality” of our age, together with the twin temptations to American evangelicalism or a liturgical legalism (just to name a couple).

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<sup>30</sup> As of January 2013 several pilot groups have been at work across the country. The experience of these groups show, in general, both the great need and the great difficulty of the task before us. But “with God all things are possible” (Mark 10:27).

- 16) The study groups must be developed as “safe places” for honest theological conversation. While district presidents are always engaged in the ecclesiastical supervision of the doctrine and life of the members of the Synod, people need to be able to participate in the conversations of the “Koinonia” groups without fear of retaliation. Immediate accusations of false teaching within a group, for instance, will quickly lead to the breakdown of the group. At the same time, while remaining “safe” for all involved, groups will want to move toward the ultimate goal of confessing what God’s Word calls us to teach and to do together. Again, see Appendix Two.
- 17) Each group may take at least a year to identify the issues and to form a “statement of the controversy” (*status controversiae*). The group would have to agree on a wording that expresses clearly the question: what exactly is at issue in this matter? (It may happen, of course, that a group comes to agree on a “statement of the controversy” in less than a year, but adequate time must be given to be clear and concise. **We have to take the time that it takes!** But before we begin we cannot possibly predict how long it will take.) How much will this cost? We do not know, but funds are being, and will have to be, sought from many sources.
- 18) To be sure they truly understand one another, the representatives of the various groups would have to learn how to state the issue and the concerns of the opposite viewpoint in a way that is comfortable for the opposite group. This can only be done in the context of a group that is fully willing to place itself under the Word of God.
- 19) Such a process will enable the group to understand and to agree on what the issue actually is. What is really at stake in the dispute/controversy? How does this issue affect the Gospel? (Disagreement is not really important unless it does affect the Gospel.) How does each position impact faithful Gospel proclamation?<sup>31</sup>

#### Identifying Areas of Agreement and Disagreement

- 20) By the second year we would begin to identify areas of agreement. What do we affirm together? What do we therefore reject? Where are we truly disagreed? How does the Word of God apply? How do we hear the Word of God on this topic? How do the confessions keep us focused on Christ and the Gospel at the center? How has the church of all places and times spoken on the matter? Where do we agree? Where do we disagree? How does it matter? How does it affect the church’s work of mission and mercy? How does it impact the church’s life together?
- 21) Then we need to clarify our statements of affirmation, and our statements of what we reject until all the participants agree: Here is how we will proceed together. Here is where the Word of God instructs us. Here is where we must confess the clear Word of God in what we say and do. Here is where we are given Christian freedom. Here is where we disagree and where we have more work to do. Here is what we will agree to do together out of love for one another and for the common good.<sup>32</sup>
- 22) Along the way, we would have to put in place a means whereby such efforts would be studied by the rest of the Synod, church workers and lay people. Perhaps a good portion of the work could be done through the internet – there are many possibilities as to how we would take the necessary

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<sup>31</sup> The Gospel is more than a generic “God loves you,” but its heart is in the vicarious atonement of Christ on the cross. It is “blood red” with Christ’s shed blood by which we are reconciled to the Father.

<sup>32</sup> That’s because how we treat one another and how we live together ARE theological issues. To win the brother for Christ is always the point of our theology – that’s why we speak the truth in love. Our theology is incarnational – the Word of God became flesh in Jesus.



steps of broadening the base of agreement. But there would have to be a long term process of study to involve as many as possible in the agreement. We MUST find a way to replicate similar study groups across the Synod, also enabling the various groups to communicate with one another. We are brothers and sisters in Christ called to walk along side each other as faith-filled advisors, helping one another hear God's Word clearly so that we confess Christ boldly before the world. (Doctrine and mission are two sides of the same coin!)

- 23) At present, we have received some grant funds to support several pilot groups to work on issues such as worship, communion practice and perhaps a code of conduct (these are simply suggestions). Of course, these first groups would not be comprehensive, but simply pilot groups to work out the problems in the process we are not able at present to foresee. The Council of Presidents may wish to form such a group to show the way. Much more needs to be done in the next triennium (2013-2016) to deepen and to expand the word.
- 24) The Council of Presidents will discuss with the President's Office how similar study groups can be replicated in districts and how these groups might communicate with one another to feed into one another. As of this writing (the first half of 2013), the Council of Presidents is working through study and discussion of the Scriptural teaching on the office of the ministry among us. Though the COP is not calling itself a "koinonia study group," it is in essence following these principles in how it is conducting itself in the study.

#### But Will It Work?

- 25) What should be done if people decline to participate in the project? First, we pray, then we make the process go forward in such a way that they will say, "Wait! Why wasn't I involved in that process? There's nothing to be afraid of!" In other words, not coercion but attraction. The goal is to seek in Scripture and the Confessions the concord we need so that we live out the unity Christ has given with the harmony Christ desires for His church.
- 26) Can this work? If God's Word has the power the Bible says it does, yes it can. Will this be difficult? More than you or I can imagine it. As difficult as this task will seem to you after reading this paper, the actual working of the project will be, humanly speaking, at least ten times more difficult! This will take time, money and work, but is it impossible? No! We serve a God who does the impossible, even raises the dead! His Word is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). If we say, "It will never work! THEY will never listen!" (Whoever "they" are, for us.) If we say that, we are really saying, "Yes, I believe the Word of God works for me, but I don't think God's Word can change HIM or HER." And such a position is really a position of unbelief, a position that says God's Word lacks the power God says it has. We need to ask each other: what do we have to lose? Only our unbelief, our fear, our sin. What do we have to gain? Christ and His kingdom, as we pray in the Lord's prayer: "Thy Kingdom come! What does this mean? God's kingdom comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come to us" (SC III, Kolb/Wengert, p. 356). "Let's go forward!"
- 27) Do we stop all mission work while we do this? No! The mission of the church in witness, mercy and life together must go forward. In Acts 15 they gathered to resolve theological questions for the sake of the mission! In our day, the church's work of testifying to Christ before the world, proclaiming His cross and resurrection, reaching hurting people in love and mercy, and bringing people together in the "koinonia" of the Gospel must continue even as we seek by God's Spirit in the Word of God to resolve issues that trouble us. Life together is part of the mission, along with

witness and mercy. Perhaps a further result is that greater mission efforts will be initiated precisely through such groups!

### **Steps We Are Taking in Development**

- An earlier version of this concept paper was presented to the new Synod Praesidium August 10-11, 2010, which fully supports the “Koinonia Project” in concept.
- Consultation has taken place with the Chairman of the Task Force on Synod Harmony, Iowa District West President Paul Sieveking, to see how these efforts complement and include each other. 1<sup>st</sup> VP Herbert Mueller met with the Harmony Task Force in September 2010. Harmony Task Force recommendations need to be folded into the process in the future. These are all insightful and helpful.
- The Report of the Task Force on Synodical Harmony was presented to the Council of Presidents and Board of Directors of Synod in November 2010. This “Koinonia Project” concept paper (in draft 8.5) was presented to the COP and BOD for discussion and input at meetings held in February 2011. The BOD and COP directed that the consultation mentioned above take place and that the Report of the Task Force on Synodical Harmony be published by the President’s Office (after this consultation) and that the suggestions and recommendations of the Harmony Task Force need to be taken into account through the development of the whole project. See the next section, outlined below.
- Again, how we live together with one another is an essential part of the project – see the suggestions outlined below regarding a possible “Code of Conduct.”
- This concept paper has been discussed in the CTCR in December in preliminary fashion, and again in February 2011 (Draft 8.5). However, more discussion and input will be necessary.
- The seminary faculties and Concordia University System theological faculties received a report on “The Koinonia Project” in May 2012, but more consultation will be important as we proceed.
- Materials will have to be developed, etc.
- Though initial discussion of the “Koinonia Project” concept paper (Draft 8.5) took place in the Council of Presidents in February 2011, much more discussion will have to take place. Draft 9.0 was published on the Synod’s Web Site in March 2011. This present draft is being published now.
- From these initial discussions we hope to develop a clear way forward under God’s Word for these efforts. The CTCR and the COP (et al) need to develop a clear plan for the implementation of the strategies suggested by the Task Force on Harmony (see below).
- Again, the process needs to cultivate in us Baptismal lifestyles of repentance and prayer, as the Scripture says, “Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19). We pray for that “time of refreshing” for our Synod.
- Until this point, much of the development of the project has taken place within the President’s Office, coupled with the significant consultations outlined above (and others!).  
**We are moving forward at the present time with an Advisory Group of seven pastors**

**helping with the revision of Draft 9.0. This present version (10) is one result of that work.**

More consultations, especially involving lay people, will also be necessary as we grow the project. Much work needs to be done to develop materials for the study groups. Pilot groups are being organized in several districts and circuits (as of this writing in September 2012). We hope to learn what is most helpful for future groups and what might be less helpful.

- Discussions have begun and need to be continued as to how the Koinonia Project approach can be carried out more than locally or regionally. In other words, “Koinonia discussions” need to take place also more generally, for instance, within the Council of Presidents and the CTCR, between our seminary faculties, and involving other Synod-wide groups. This part of the process is presently in the beginning stages of development by means of ongoing discussions with members of the above named groups.
- An intriguing idea is developing between two districts, one in the heartland, and another on the coast, to bring the two together for extended theological discussion. Not much more can be said at present, but the idea is promising.
- Please remember that the “Koinonia Project” is a long term effort on the part of our Synod. During the present triennium (2010-2013) we are in the exploration and development phase of the effort.
- Much more work will need to be done on a much broader scale in the next triennium (2013-2016) to enable this effort much more deeply to permeate our life together as a Synod.

**A Development of the Harmony Task Force Strategies as Part of the “Koinonia Project”**

In the following numbered paragraphs, we quote the suggested strategies of the Task Force for Synodical Harmony, listing below each one recommendations for how the individual strategies might be implemented. The strategies are included in *italics* with the recommendations listed below each.<sup>33</sup> Numbers 4 & 5 and 6 & 9 appeared to go together in terms of possible strategies. Much more work needs to be done by the appropriate authorities to bring these recommendations to life in our ongoing life together. You will note that these recommendations take us far beyond a small initiative from the office of the President of the Synod. Much greater involvement by a much wider group of leaders needs to be developed for these strategies to be evaluated and revised, for them to take on life and be effective. Much more needs to be done by all of us as our leaders lead in an a-political manner.

**1) *Synod-wide studies of the Scriptures and the Confessions, including studies by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, covering specific topics such as; the 8th Commandment, a theology of diversity, Christian virtues and civility, the political culture of the church, accountability and harmony.***

- The President’s Office, together with the Council of Presidents and the CTCR, will need to discuss how this might be done.
- Writing assignments must be made, editing options considered, materials prepared,

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<sup>33</sup> Report of the Task Force, pages 17f.

funding sought, etc. Perhaps some of this could be assigned to one or more of the early discussion groups to be formed in the “Koinonia Project.”

- According to 2010 Convention Resolutions, the President’s Office and others are in the process of developing studies of Articles VI and VII of the Synod’s Constitution and what they mean for our life together today.<sup>34</sup>

**2) Our seminaries and universities include these topics in the formation of our clergy and professional workers.**

- The President’s Office will need to work with the Seminary and University Presidents and Academic Deans to consider how this might be done.

**3) Training & modeling for and by the Council of Presidents, the Circuit Counselors, and all other church leaders.**

- The Council of Presidents will need to make the discussion of how this will be done a top priority.
- District Circuit Counselor Conferences could be a place to bring this forward with the leadership of the District Presidents.

**4) A Code of Conduct, developed with input from across the Synod, adopted by the Synod, in which we express common expectations of one another and seek to hold ourselves and one another accountable for appropriate behavior.**

**5) Those who are charged with ecclesiastical supervision must be trained to hold us all accountable when our actions and attitudes are inappropriate.**

- The Council of Presidents might examine the fine work done in the Michigan District on a “Code of Conduct” (see also #4). Perhaps instead of calling it a “Code of Conduct” we might title it, “How We Live As Brothers and Sisters in Christ.”
- Perhaps the COP Document from the 1980s, “Commitments of the Shepherd,” should simply be revised and updated.
- Both of these documents could be studied and recommended by a group in the “Koinonia” Project. Perhaps a committee of the COP could work with a broader discussion group on this. We have all we need in the Scriptures and confessions to teach us how we act toward one another (see the Table of Duties in the Catechism), but a “code of conduct” might help us discuss in greater detail how the Scriptures apply to our situations today. We are all called to ask – where do I need to repent? We have to get past our tendency to say, “we will have harmony when YOU agree with ME!”
- The Council of Presidents will need to have ongoing discussion and study of the task of holding church workers accountable for their teaching and life.

**6) The need for continuing education.**

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<sup>34</sup> Article VI reads, in part: *Conditions for acquiring and holding membership in the Synod are the following:*

1. *Acceptance of the confessional basis of Article II.*

2. *Renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description, such as:*

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.*

3. *Regular call of pastors, teachers, directors of Christian education, directors of Christian outreach, directors of family life ministry, directors of parish music, deaconesses, certified lay ministers, and parish assistants and regular election of lay delegates by the congregations, and also the blamelessness of the life of such.*

4. *Exclusive use of doctrinally pure agenda, hymnbooks, and catechisms in church and school.*

Article VII is quoted above, page 9.

**9) Communication** is a key issue. We need to learn to use the media appropriately – officially and unofficially.

- Pastors Conferences, Circuits, Congregations, District Conventions, Seminaries, and the Council of Presidents all should discuss how these needs can be stressed. However, someone needs to take responsibility for this so that it is not lost in the shuffle of all the other responsibilities we all have.

**7) The clergy** must recognize their responsibility and engage in working toward greater harmony within our Synod.

- How we help one another live in the Baptismal rhythm of repentance and forgiveness is essential.
- We might ask the Council of Presidents to ask all District Pastoral Conferences to discuss the Report of the Task Force and the proposal for a Koinonia Project.
- Perhaps a Circuit Winkel Bible Study series on the topics of concord and harmony might be prepared.
- How we live together must not be an afterthought, but the spiritual dimensions of repentance and prayer, of worship and Bible Study, of confession and forgiveness, must be at the core of the effort. We live together by Law AND Gospel, not coercion.

**8) The dialog** must include all positions, at every level of the church; within our congregations, circuits, auxiliaries, Synod-wide theological convocations and smaller focus groups as well.

- It is imperative that we begin the “Koinonia” Project to get at the sources of the theological tensions among us.
- It is also imperative that we pray together, that we confess to God and to one another our failures to live up to who we are as the Baptized children of God.
- The discussion then takes place under the aura of mutual confession and forgiveness.
- The dialog engendered by this project must be comprehensive, as this strategy suggests.
- Theological dialog is necessary to work toward concord and harmony, but it must be dialog focused on seeking resolution under the Word of God and our Confessions.
- If we agree on what Scripture teaches, what then will we agree to DO together as a Synod on any one particular issue?

### **Summary of the “Koinonia Project”**

The “Koinonia Project” cannot be a political process, but must be a spiritual process centered in the Word of God, repentance and prayer, forgiveness and charity.<sup>35</sup> A resolution of the Synod will not resolve our problems. Nor do we need a “new confession.” But we do need a deeper understanding of the Scriptures and the Lutheran confessions as they apply to the issues that trouble our unity and motivate the formation of parties (turning various groups into “aggrieved minorities”). What do we mean? We have, for 60 years, been trying to solve theological and spiritual (relationship) problems through political means – adopt my resolution, vote my candidate in, even if it’s only by a few percentage points, and we’ll change the Synod... No we don’t. We only make the “losing side” go home angry, seeking to garner enough

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<sup>35</sup> Again, this is not to negate the need for leadership, influence and fraternal persuasion, not to mention voting. But it simply recognizes that a resolution pushed through a synodical convention often does not satisfactorily resolve an issue, particularly if it passes with a slim majority.

political support to “win” the next time. I believe the theological conferences held in recent years have paved the way for a completely different approach, one at least as old as the Formula of Concord. **In the “Koinonia Project” several representative groups will meet together to work on a basis for agreement that includes the following: 1) a clear statement of the controversy – what is the real point at issue? 2) clear statements of what we affirm together; 3) clear statements of what we reject; and then 4) an agreement of what we will therefore DO together. This material then needs to be studied and worked on together throughout the Synod so that the Word of God has its way with us in our life together, our witness to Christ and our service for the world.**

One more time: What do we have to lose? More to the point, what opportunities will we lose if we do not go forward with this? May God help us be faithful! Our forebears wrote in the Preface to the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration:

Herewith we again whole-heartedly subscribe this Christian and thoroughly scriptural Augsburg Confession, and we abide by the plain, clear, and pure meaning of its words. We consider this Confession a genuinely Christian symbol which all true Christians ought to accept next to the Word of God, just as in ancient times Christian symbols and confessions were formulated in the church of God when great controversies broke out, and orthodox teachers and hearers pledged themselves to these symbols with heart and mouth. Similarly we are determined by the grace of the Almighty to abide until our end by this repeatedly cited Christian Confession as it was delivered to Emperor Charles in 1530. And we do not intend, either in this or in subsequent doctrinal statements, to depart from the aforementioned Confession or to set up a different and new confession.<sup>36</sup>

In following them, we ought do no less!

*In nomine Jesu!*

+ Herbert Mueller  
June 2013

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<sup>36</sup>Tappert, Theodore G.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 2000, c1959, p. 502.

## **Appendix One**

### **Example of Northern Illinois Approach – Draft**

1. Bring together 7-12 pastors in the district for an initial group. The groups would consist of men who:
  - a) Represent the diverse views of our district.
  - b) Are well respected by the people who hold those views.
  - c) Are willing and able to make the necessary time commitment to see the project through.
  - d) Know how to play nice with others.
2. The group would initially convene for a retreat type gathering facilitated by a neutral person with some experience in group process. The goals of this meeting would be to:
  - a) Build personal relationships among the group.
  - b) Study the biblical mandate and benefit of committing to building the unity of the church.
  - c) Develop a statement on the issue of unity citing areas of agreement and disagreement. This would pay particular attention on how the issue of the unity of the church informs and affects our life in the church. What must we do and what are the limits of unity.
  - d) If time permits begin to work on the identification of issues that divide the unity of the church.
3. In subsequent meetings the group should continue to work on the statement covering the issues of unity. When the statement is completed or taken as far as they are able the group would seek outside input. Possible avenues for doing this would be:
  - a) Seek the reaction of the district president
  - b) Making the statement available to all district pastors asking for reaction
  - c) Asking the seminary faculty at both seminaries for comment.
  - d) Asking the CTCR for their opinion.
4. After reviewing the input from various sources continue to refine the statement and develop a final version to be considered by other Koinonia groups to be formed.
5. Newly formed Koinonia groups will go through the original study on unity done by the original group and consider the final version of their study of unity. They will then work through the issue giving their assent or developing suggestions for improvement.
6. During the time the secondary groups are working on the unity study the initial group can begin the process of working through one of the issues they have identified as divisive. (i.e. Closed Communion)
7. While working on the unity statement the group can begin to take on the issues they have previously identified as divisive.
8. When sufficient time has passed for the secondary groups to consider the issue of unity the DP shall convene a meeting open to all the pastors of the district to consider a joint statement on the issue, The goal will be to put together a statement that has the support of at least 75% of the pastors of the district. *[Meeting of NID Praesidium, August 16, 2011.]*

## **Appendix Two – Mutual Accountability**

*Note: This document was prepared and revised in the Nebraska District Koinonia Group, then further refined (“lightly”) in the Northern Illinois District Koinonia Group. It is offered here as an example of how Koinonia theological study groups can work together. + Herb Mueller*

### **LCMS Koinonia Project Study Group**

#### **Our Accountability to One Another**

*Revised*

1) We begin with the assumption we are:

- Baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38-39, Romans 6:1-7, 1 Peter 3:21, Titus 3:5, 1 Corinthians 3:16)
- Brothers in the office of the ministry Christ has given His Church
- Sharing the same Confessions or Symbols of the evangelical Lutheran Church (we have all signed on to Article II of the Constitution of the Synod).

The Synod, and every member of the Synod, accepts without reservation:

1. The Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice;
  2. All the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God, to wit: the three Ecumenical Creeds (the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed), the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Large Catechism of Luther, the Small Catechism of Luther, and the Formula of Concord. (2010 Handbook The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, Constitution, Article II.)
- Men of integrity who will deal honestly with each other. (Matthew 5:37, Ephesians 4:25)

2) We work under the authority of the Word of God by fraternal persuasion. What does this mean? (2 Peter 1:3-4, Proverbs 1:7, Matthew 6: 32-33, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Ephesians 4:15-16; 5:15-16, Psalm 119:105, 2 Peter 1:3, Joshua 1:8, Colossians 3:16). What does it mean to work under the authority of the Word of God? It means:

- The Word of God rules in our midst:

*Because the Word of God rules over us in the Synod, we do not have a hierarchy, nor do we operate by coercion. Instead we operate by fraternal persuasion under the Word of God.<sup>37</sup> Matters of doctrine are decided by the Word of God. In all other things, we seek to work together in love. In its most basic form, the members of Synod in each local area seek to advise one another in brotherly*

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<sup>37</sup> “...according to the constitution under which our synodical union exists, we have merely the power to *advise* one another, that we have only the *power of the Word*, and of *convincing*... Why Should and Can We Carry On Our Work Joyfully Although We Have No Power But the Power of the Word? The principle and most important motive is the following: Because Christ has *given* His servants this and no other power, and because even the holy apostles *have appropriated* to themselves no other power and therefore have seriously *warned* the servants of the church against claiming every other power... Let us above all and in all matters be concerned about this, that the pure doctrine of our dear Evangelical Lutheran Church may become known more and more completely among us, that it may be in vogue in all of our congregations, and that it may be preserved from all adulteration and held fast as the most precious treasure. Let us not surrender one iota of the demands of the Word. Let us bring about its complete rule in our congregations and set aside nothing of it, even though for this reason things may happen to us, as God wills. Here let us be inflexible, let us be adamant...” (CFW Walther’s First Presidential Address, 1848, translated by Paul F. Koehnke, CHIQ).



*fashion to help one another hear God's Word clearly, confess Christ boldly and live together in holy love. (Koinonia Project Concept Paper, p. 9)*

- What about formal doctrinal and theological discipline? In this arena we leave that to those to whom it has been given, namely, the district presidents.
  - Participation is voluntary – we do not work by coercion but by attraction (to the Word of God). (1 Corinthians 12:3, 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14, Romans 15:13)
- 3) We begin with a discussion of what it means to be a Synod of brothers and sisters who walk together. What is our calling as brothers in the office of pastor? How are we called to BE with each other as brothers? What does that mean for honest dialog? (The report of the Harmony Task Force could be helpful here). (Psalm 133, Hebrews 10:25)
- 4) We seek lovingly to hold one another accountable both to the behavior and to the confessions of faith entailed in all the articles of our Synod's Constitution (includes Articles III and VI, along with Article II).
- 5) We will also remember Christ has given His Church one way of dealing with sin – repentance and forgiveness. We will seek to grow in helping each other live in this baptismal rhythm of confession and absolution give to us by our Lord.
- 6) We will ask: what are the positive virtues we share as members of the Synod? This discussion may (probably ought to) lead to confession of sin, that is, a recognition of how we have not lived up to those virtues. The Chaplain is available to speak Christ's word of forgiveness in the absolution. In other words, we have to deal with the "sin aspect" of our present situation. Brothers baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ will take the time to confess their sins one to another and forgive one another in the name of Christ. (Isaiah 53:4-5, John 1:29, 1 Peter 2:24, 1 Peter 1:18-19, 1 John 2:2) Some may question whether the assumptions made in #1 above still pertain. However, the Confessions we share must be at the center of our discussion and the core of our responses to the issues that face us.
- 7) We will hear the Word of God together: (Acts 2:42-46, Hebrews 10:25, Isaiah 55:10-14) We will commit to pray for one another and for this process. Our commitment to the Word of God entails both of these aspects.
- Our discussion is framed by the Word of God as we take time in worship and in prayer, using the resources our Synod has provided in *Lutheran Service Book*.
  - In our discussion of an issue – we will always be asking, what does the Word of God really say? How do the confessions of our Church help us confess the Word of God clearly?
- 8) We will deal with each other honestly and with integrity. We will seek together to make this group a "safe place" for honest theological conversation. (Ephesians 4:29, Matthew 5:37) Personal comments and the expressed opinions of others shall be kept confidential to this process unless agreed upon by the group.
- 9) We will not "dodge" issues or belittle the concerns of others. We will bring issues forward in a calm spirit of brotherly concern. We will recognize we are coming together not just for the sake of discussion, but to work toward the goal of greater harmony under the Word of God. (Matthew 5:23-26, Matthew 18:15-20, Luke 6:37-42, 1 John 1:8)

10) We must take the time necessary to:

- identify clearly the true issue under discussion and agree on a wording that expresses clearly the question: what exactly is at issue in this matter?
- learn how to state the concerns of “the other side” in a manner they will recognize. We must be sure we fully understand a position someone else has taken before critiquing or condemning it.
- explore what we affirm together: What do we therefore reject? Where are we truly disagreed? How does the Word of God apply? How do we hear the Word of God on this topic? How do the confessions keep us focused on Christ and the Gospel at the center? How has the church of all places and times spoken on the matter? Where do we agree? Where do we disagree? How does it matter? How does it affect the church’s work of mission and mercy? How does it impact the church’s life together?

11) Our goal is to come to agreement on what we affirm and what we reject until the participants agree: Here is how we will proceed together. Here is where the Word of God instructs us. Here is where we must confess the clear Word of God in what we say and do. Here is where we are given Christian freedom. Here is where we disagree and where we have more work to do. Here is what we will agree to do together out of love for one another and for the common good.<sup>38</sup> That’s because how we treat one another and how we live together ARE theological issues. To win the brother for Christ is always the point of our theology – that’s why we speak the truth in love. Our theology is incarnational – the Word of God became flesh in Jesus.

12) All our activities will comport with the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment.

13) We will use e-mail communication to **only** share information about forthcoming meetings, notes taken by the Facilitator of meetings, information about resources for our study and discussion together. We will share book titles, copies of theological papers, essays, monographs, articles, and PowerPoints that will be helpful to our discussion at Group meetings. We will **not** use e-mail communication for discussion between meetings, as a means to speak to disagreements or as a venue for confession and absolution with one another.

14) The Facilitator as well as each study group member is to calmly hold the group accountable to this way of proceeding. See the further explanations in the Koinonia Project Concept Paper. (Galatians 6:1) We pray that, as we live together in this manner under the Word of God, God will also use His Word to enable us to grow in mutual trust and accountability with one another, all for the sake of our proclamation of the Gospel.

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<sup>38</sup> That’s because how we treat one another and how we live together ARE theological issues. To win the brother for Christ is always the point of our theology – that’s why we speak the truth in love. Our theology is incarnational – the Word of God became flesh in Jesus.

### Chaplain & Facilitator Job Descriptions

- 1) The **Chaplain** will center the group in the Word of God and in prayer by leading the group in regular worship and holding the group accountable to the best of what we are called to be together as brothers and sisters in Christ. Suggestion:
  - Use the resources of LSB – no argument or agenda here, just agree to use the book Synod has provided.
  - Use the lectionary – there is no agenda other than allowing the Word of God to have its way with us.
- 2) Reflecting the need for repentance, forgiveness and change in behavior, the **Chaplain** will lead the group in living in the Baptismal rhythm of repentance and forgiveness, confession and absolution, always lifting the matter to God in prayer.
- 3) The basic task of the **Facilitator** in the Koinonia Project Study Group process is to hold the members of the group accountable to the behavior and the guided study outlined in the Koinonia Project Concept Paper and the document entitled “Our Accountability to One Another.”
- 4) The **Facilitator** convenes the group and holds individuals accountable to its agreements. (See Concept Paper, #12, p. 12).
- 5) Both the **Chaplain and the Facilitator** do not, in their work, take one side or the other (whatever each of their own opinions), but they are always on the side of the whole group’s discussion (the “process”).
- 6) The **Chaplain and Facilitator** both help the group develop as a “safe place” for honest theological conversation. While district presidents are always engaged in the ecclesiastical supervision of the doctrine and life of the members of the Synod, people need to be able to participate in the conversations of the “Koinonia” groups without fear of retaliation. Immediate accusations of false teaching within a group, for instance, will quickly lead to the breakdown of the group. At the same time, while remaining “safe” for all involved, groups will want to move toward the ultimate goal of confessing what God’s Word calls us to teach and to do together.