

A Report on the Meetings of ELS, LCMS, and WELS Leaders 2012–2015

Background

In 2012 the leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) decided to hold an informal meeting, which was held in December 2012. The impetus behind the meeting was the election of Rev. Mark Schroeder as president of WELS in 2007 and the election of Rev. Matthew Harrison as president of the LCMS in 2010, providing a new opportunity for discussions.

It had been many years since any meetings had taken place between these synods, which were once in fellowship as members of the Synodical Conference. When fellowship was suspended (ELS/LCMS in 1955 and WELS/LCMS in 1961), it was understood that contacts should continue to be made to try to overcome the differences. The WELS convention in 1961 resolved “that under conditions which do not imply a denial of our previous testimony we stand ready to resume discussions with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod with the aim of reestablishing unity of doctrine and practice and of restoring fellowship relations, these discussions to be conducted outside the framework of fellowship.”

Since the preliminary, get-acquainted meeting in December 2012, all three synods have passed convention resolutions that have encouraged continued informal discussions. Additional meetings were held in December 2013 focusing on the doctrine of church and ministry, in December 2014 focusing on the doctrine of church fellowship, and in December 2015 focusing on hermeneutics (methods of biblical interpretation). With this document, we as participants want to give a mutually approved report to our respective synods about the status of these informal meetings.

Surprises

There have been many surprises for all participants in our meetings. Even though the ELS and WELS have not been in fellowship with the LCMS for over 50 years, we found—as we shared our situations openly and honestly—that we have much in common as leaders and as synods. We were able to put to rest some caricatures about our respective synods.

In particular, LCMS participants were surprised to learn how much pain was caused and still exists in the ELS and WELS because of the dissolution of the Synodical Conference in the 1960s. LCMS participants were happy to hear about the high esteem that is present in the ELS and WELS for the public ministry and the pastoral office, and to learn about the nuances of the ELS and WELS fellowship doctrine and that it is not applied in a legalistic way.

ELS and WELS participants, on the other hand, were surprised to see the conservative and confessionally faithful stance of the LCMS leaders, and how open they are to listening and trying to understand the viewpoint of others. ELS and WELS participants learned much about the structure and operation of the LCMS, including the fact that the documents and statements of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR), unless adopted by the synod in convention, do not constitute the official doctrinal position of the LCMS. ELS and WELS participants were heartened to hear LCMS leaders acknowledge with sadness that the ELS and WELS were compelled to break fellowship with the LCMS to avoid the tragedy of the doctrinal controversy that befell the LCMS in the 1970s, and that LCMS leaders are continuing to work for faithfulness in Scriptural doctrine and practice in their synod.

Most of all, it was a pleasant surprise to recognize that doctrinal agreement exists in many areas, some of which we will document here.

Agreement

First and foremost among areas of evident agreement is the fact—quite astonishing in our world today and not at all to be taken for granted among those who claim to be Lutherans—that we all agree wholeheartedly on the formal and material principles of theology. We agree that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God and the only source of authority for doctrine and practice. We agree that the chief message of the Bible is justification by grace through faith in the merits of Jesus Christ, and that the entire Bible is Christ-centered. In light of this agreement, it seems that there is reason to continue to discuss doctrine together with the hope that we may be able to come to full agreement under the guidance and blessing of the Holy Spirit.

All of us also confess without reservation (*quia*) that the Lutheran Confessions are a correct exposition of the Holy Scriptures. When discussing hermeneutics, we found that we say basically the same thing: Our doctrine is based on Scripture, and when we compare Scripture with the Lutheran Confessions, we find that they agree. Therefore we subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions and use them as normative for teaching in the Lutheran Church.

In our sessions, we identified a number of biblical doctrines or practices where we acknowledge that we teach the same thing in our three synods, including the following:

- The Trinity
- The person and work of Christ
- Justification by grace through faith
- Genesis 1–11 is actual history, for example with a six day creation, Adam and Eve, and the fall
- The real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper
- Baptism
- Law and gospel
- Means of grace
- Eternal election of grace
- Conversion
- Two kingdoms
- End times
- Resurrection of the body
- Antichrist
- Third use of the law
- Rejection of women's ordination
- Rejection of infant communion
- Worship
- Need for ecclesiastical visitation and doctrinal supervision

We also called to mind how all three synods expressed agreement with *A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* when it first appeared in the early 1930s. This doctrinal statement still reflects areas of agreement today.

Of special note in our discussions was the doctrine of the church, because, to the surprise of ELS and WELS participants, it seemed that we agreed with each other on this doctrine. We also acknowledged agreement in regard to current social issues, such as the sanctity of life, human sexuality, and religious freedom. Last but certainly not least, there was special joy to understand that we all hold to objective justification—that God declared the *world* righteous through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and that we all recognize it to be the urgent mission of the church to take this gospel to the entire world.

Challenges

In spite of the above areas of agreement, a number of significant differences (real or perceived) remain that need to be thoroughly addressed. It should be stated clearly that we do not expect to reestablish church fellowship in the near future. All of us are convinced that church fellowship requires complete agreement in doctrine.

For example, in our discussions on the ministry, it has become evident that we carry on church life in very similar ways. We all want well-trained, male pastors to shepherd our congregations, and we all have other church offices such as Lutheran school teachers that serve together with pastors. But we talk about the necessity of the pastoral office in different ways and present the scriptural basis of the doctrine differently, in part due to our different histories and the different concerns that we face. We recognize that further discussions on this topic will need to take place.

In our discussions about church fellowship, we have found that we agree on the general principles and on the practice of closed communion. But we differ on what we say about prayer fellowship.

There also are other potential issues that we have not yet discussed fully, including the roles of men and women, cooperation in externals, and international church relationships. There is ongoing concern about the consistency of practice in our church bodies. None of us sees an easy path to fellowship, and none of us wants to compromise any part of God's Word in the process.

Plans and Hopes for the Future

In view of the progress we have made, we intend to continue to meet to pursue additional topics. The tone of our discussions has been positive and friendly, and we have come to a level of mutual respect and trust.

Perhaps God may guide us to a reestablishment of fellowship at some point in the future, a goal for which we pray and work. But even if we are not able to practice church fellowship, we have found benefit in talking together about church work, in patiently trying to understand the issues better, and in providing a measure of encouragement in our lives of repentance and fidelity to Scripture. Gradually we may also look for ways to include others from our synods in these inter-synodical discussions.

Around us in America we see a culture that is increasingly hostile to Christianity. It is good to be in conversation with the few who are still committed to confessional Lutheranism. This is something that the LCMS especially has been trying to do around the world, bringing Lutherans together and encouraging them to be faithful to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

Anyone who has advice in regard to ELS/LCMS/WELS relations is invited to direct it to one of the undersigned participants. Certainly, all who read this report are encouraged to remember our discussions and our respective synods in prayer.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Romans 15:13).

This report was approved by the following meeting attendees on December 2, 2015 in Jacksonville, FL:

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