

Theological Considerations and Procedural Guidelines

Regarding

The Recognition of Altar and Pulpit Fellowship

Between

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and Another Church Body¹

Article III of the Constitution of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) lists as the first objective of the Synod that

- 1) *The Synod, under Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, shall—Conserve and promote the unity of the true faith (Eph. 4:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:10), work through its official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies, and provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism (Rom. 16:17), and heresy.*

This document sets forth theological considerations and procedural guidelines for the CTCR as it considers making recommendations about recognition of altar and pulpit fellowship with another church body.

I. Delineation of Responsibilities

1. The President of the Synod

The President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is “the chief ecumenical officer of the Synod.” The LCMS Bylaws state the following in this regard:

- a) *He shall represent the Synod, in consultation with the appropriate board or commission, in official contacts with all partner churches by aiding, counseling, and advising them and strengthening the relations with and among them.*
- b) *He shall develop protocol documents between the Synod and partner church bodies according to which the Synod and its agencies will work together with its partner churches in foreign mission fields, which documents are also to be respected by agencies, auxiliaries, and recognized service organizations.²*

¹ An initial “Policy for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Declaring Altar and Pulpit Fellowship with Another Church Body” was adopted by the CTCR in April 2003 in response to a request from the President of the Synod, then revised in 2014 to reflect 2010 convention action (e.g., 2010 Res. 3-04A) and 2010 and 2013 changes to the Synod Bylaws. Further revisions were made and approved by the CTCR on September 17, 2020. The current version of this document was approved by the CTCR on December 8, 2023.

² A protocol document is an official, written agreement between the LCMS and a partner church that is executed by the respective church leaders and that codifies the recognition of altar and pulpit fellowship while establishing certain protocols for inter-church relations upon which the two church bodies have mutually agreed. Protocol agreements are intended and expected to be permanent (unless subsequent revisions are mutually agreed upon by both church bodies).

c) He or his representative shall represent the Synod in official contacts with other church bodies. (Bylaw 3.3.1.1.2 (a–c))

2. The Commission on Theology and Church Relations

The Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) is “to assist the President of the Synod in matters of church relationships” (Bylaw 3.9.5). The CTCR is to “assist the President at his request in discharging his constitutional responsibilities for maintaining doctrinal integrity as he relates to other church bodies” (Bylaw 3.9.5.2.2).

The Bylaw further explicates the CTCR’s responsibilities as follows:

- a) It shall address itself to and evaluate existing fellowship relations for the purpose of mutual admonition and encouragement.*
- b) It shall address itself to potential fellowship and/or partner church relations as follows:*
 - 1. Formal recognition of altar and pulpit fellowship between the Synod and another church body shall be proposed at a convention of the Synod only after the approval of the commission.*
 - 2. Formal recognition of altar and pulpit fellowship between the Synod and a small formative, emerging confessional Lutheran church body (identified as such by the President of Synod as chief ecumenical officer) may be declared by the Synod President only after the approval of the commission and consultation with the Praesidium. Such recognition shall be subject to the endorsement of the subsequent Synod convention.*
 - 3. Formal recognition of a mission of the Synod as a self-governing partner church shall be proposed at convention of the Synod by the Board for International Mission after the approval of the commission. (Bylaw 3.9.5.2.2 (a–b))*

3. The Synod in Convention

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in convention, acting on the basis of a recommendation of the CTCR and/or Board for International Mission [BIM], declares recognition of altar and pulpit fellowship with another church body. (Bylaw 3.9.5.2.2 (b) (1) (3))

In cases where the President of Synod has declared recognition of altar and pulpit fellowship with “a small, formative, emerging confessional Lutheran church body” the subsequent Synod convention is asked to endorse the declaration. (Bylaw 3.9.5.2.2 (b)(2))

4. Members of the Synod

Members and officers of the Synod will respect this orderly procedure and shall not move ahead of the Synod as a whole by engaging in altar and pulpit fellowship before such has been officially recognized. Members and officers should consult with the President or his representative and the Office of International Mission (where necessary) before making contacts with or making overseas trips to church bodies with whom we are not yet in fellowship (see Bylaw 3.8.3).

So that these provisions may be carried out with consistency and in faithfulness to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, a relationship of altar and pulpit fellowship between another autonomous church body and the Synod shall be officially recognized in the following manner.

II. Basic Considerations

In considering whether the Synod should declare recognition of altar and pulpit fellowship with another church body, the President of the Synod and the CTCR shall take into consideration the following criteria.

1. Altar and pulpit fellowship is a relationship that has agreement “in doctrine and in all its articles” as its basis (FC SD X 31).

While the church’s internal unity is perfect and known only to God (Eph. 1:4), the limits of external fellowship are determined by whether the Gospel is preached purely and the sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution. The Gospel and the sacraments are in themselves always pure. In this way they create and preserve the church in her hidden unity throughout the world. Yet, when church bodies make public confession of the Gospel and the sacraments, tragically some obscure or explicitly contradict the teaching of the Gospel and the proper administration of the Sacraments. For this reason the limits or boundaries of the external fellowship are creeds and confessions. Churches in altar and pulpit fellowship share the same confession, including the rejection of errors that contradict this confession. Where churches cannot agree on a common confession, the basis for church fellowship does not exist.³

2. Altar and pulpit fellowship is a relationship which signifies agreement not only in a church body’s formal statements but also agreement in the implementation of the formal confessions of a church body in its actual life and practice.

Confessional ecumenism recognizes the importance of practice as the application of doctrine to life. Proper formulations of the meaning of the Gospel on the basis of the Scriptures, necessary as such formulations are, are no substitute for actually preaching, teaching, and living the Gospel and using the sacraments. Practice is a fair indication of fidelity to the Gospel. For example, it does little good to point to an excellent formulation of the lodge problem in a synodical constitution if in fact that policy is not being followed in the parishes. It means little to point to a fine statement on the inerrancy of Holy Scripture in the Brief Statement or the United Testimony of Faith and Life if, in fact, that position is no longer consistently followed. We need to remember that the Augsburg Confession (VII) is talking about a Gospel that is actually taught and proclaimed and about sacraments that are actually administered. Why? Because it is through the ‘practice’ of the Gospel, if you will, that the Holy Spirit creates and sustains His church. To be sure, not all items in the area of practice are clearly defined in the Word of God, and this needs to be recognized. But where they are, or where they clearly relate to the Gospel, there can be no ecumenical retreat to

³Office of the President and Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Understanding of Fellowship* (February 2000), 5.

the safety of written formulations at the expense of what is actually happening in the church's parishes as well as its seminaries, colleges, publishing houses, boards and commissions. Herein lies one of the chief reasons why The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod holds doctrinal discussions with other Lutheran groups prior to the establishment of altar and pulpit fellowship.⁴

3. Altar and pulpit fellowship is an officially-recognized relationship between two self-governing church bodies or ecclesiastical entities.

In addition to agreement in confession, factors that may need to be taken into account in making a recommendation for altar and pulpit fellowship with another church body include its history, self-understanding, and confessional and organizational stability and maturity. That is, the process for considering recognition of church fellowship must be realistic with regard to external circumstances of the two churches. In the case of established church bodies with significant traditions of theology and practice, a more formal process may be appropriate. In the case of a small, formative, emerging confessional church body without extensive structures or organizations a simpler process may be appropriate.

4. Altar and pulpit fellowship is a relationship that affects all those church bodies with which each of the two newly related church bodies holds church fellowship.

Early on in the process of contemplating the possibility of altar and pulpit fellowship, the churches with which the Synod is already in church fellowship are to be informed of this prospect. The President of the Synod and the CTCR will take into account input received from the Synod's partner churches as the possibility of church fellowship with this church body is considered.

5. Existing LCMS mission work may be a factor in the contemplation of possible altar and pulpit fellowship with a church body. When the LCMS has current missionary personnel or when it has had missionaries in the past serving in the country or region where the church body is located, the Office of International Mission should be informed and consulted.

III. Procedures

- A. In the case of considering formal recognition of altar and pulpit fellowship with an established church body (in distinction from "a small, formative, emerging" church — see III.B., below), the following procedures are in order:
 1. When relationships between the Synod and another church body have reached the point that church fellowship between them is contemplated, the President of the Synod, in consultation with the CTCR, is responsible for formally initiating this process. Early on in the process, the President and/or the CTCR will inform the partner churches of the Synod of this development and invite their input regarding possible altar and pulpit fellowship with this church body.

⁴ Ralph Bohlmann, "Celebration of Concord" in *Theologian's Convocation: Formula for Concord* (1977), 69-70.

2. The President of the Synod may designate an individual to serve as his assistant or representative in his responsibility as chief ecumenical officer of the LCMS. In such cases the assistant will serve as directed by the President, interacting with church bodies as needed and working with the CTCR toward the fulfillment of its responsibilities in church relations.
 3. Working together with the head of the church body with which church fellowship is contemplated, the President or his representative shall arrange for doctrinal discussions between representatives of the two church bodies. Synod representatives to these discussions shall be appointed by the President of the Synod, ordinarily including representation from CTCR membership or staff. These representatives shall report regularly to the President and to the CTCR on these discussions.
 4. After thoroughly reviewing pertinent documents (e.g., historical information, constitution and bylaws, doctrinal statements, formal descriptions of the church body's theology and practice, etc.), together with reports from those involved in doctrinal discussions (and others as deemed necessary and appropriate), the CTCR, in consultation with the President, shall either recommend that the Synod recognize altar and pulpit fellowship with this church body or decline to do so.
 5. If the CTCR recommends that the Synod recognize altar and pulpit fellowship with this church body, it shall immediately report this to the President of the Synod. The President or his representative shall inform this church (and the Synod's partner churches) of this recommendation. The Commission on Theology and Church Relations shall prepare an overture to this effect for consideration by the next Synod convention. The President's office, in consultation with the head of this church body, is to coordinate the preparation of a protocol document in the language of each church body to be signed by the heads of the respective churches following adoption of the resolution recognizing church fellowship.
 6. If the CTCR declines to recommend recognition of altar and pulpit fellowship with this church body, it shall prepare a statement delineating the reasons for this decision, which is to be shared with the President of the Synod. The President or his representative shall inform this church body of the CTCR's action. Continued discussion and consideration may follow. If the concerns which caused the CTCR to decline to approve altar and pulpit fellowship are not able to be resolved, the President will inform the members of the Synod and the Synod's partner churches of this action of the CTCR.
- B. When the recognition of altar and pulpit fellowship with "a small, formative, emerging confessional Lutheran church" is contemplated (Bylaw 3.9.5.2.2(b) (2)), the following procedures are in order:
1. As a first step, the church shall be asked to share with the Synod President and the CTCR any information and/or documentation that identifies its doctrinal convictions (for example, doctrinal statements, its constitution and bylaws, copies of doctrinal materials used in the church, materials for training clergy and laity, and so forth). On the basis of such information and discussions with church leaders, the CTCR, in consultation with the President, shall determine whether this church is committed to the full authority of the

Scriptures as the infallible Word of God and subscribes without reservation to the *Book of Concord* (to the extent that it is available in the primary language of the church).

2. If questions about the church body's commitment to the authority of Scripture and/or the Lutheran Confessions are answered satisfactorily, and when relationships between the Synod and the church body have reached the point that church fellowship between them is seriously contemplated, the President of the Synod, in consultation with the CTCR, is responsible for formally initiating this process. He will inform the Praesidium that the process has begun and, early on in the process, he will also inform the partner churches of the LCMS, inviting their input.
3. Working together with the head of the church body with which church fellowship is contemplated, the President of the Synod shall arrange for visitation of the church and doctrinal discussions between representatives of the two church bodies. Synod representatives to these discussions shall be appointed by the President of the Synod, ordinarily including representation from the CTCR or its staff. The head of the church body or his representative shall also be welcome (and assisted, as necessary) to visit Synod offices, congregations and institutions.
4. After such visitation(s) and doctrinal discussions, the Synod representatives shall provide a written report, including relevant doctrinal materials, to the President of the Synod and to the CTCR. After consideration of this report, the CTCR shall formally forward to the President its recommendation regarding church fellowship with this church body.
5. If the CTCR recommends recognition of fellowship with this church, the President, after consultation with the Praesidium, shall either declare such recognition or decline to do so.
 - a. If the President declines to declare recognition of fellowship, continued discussion and consideration may follow. If the concerns which caused the President to decline to approve altar and pulpit fellowship are not able to be resolved, the President will inform the church body of this decision, as well as the Synod's partner churches.
 - b. If the President declares recognition of fellowship, he shall inform the church body (and also the Synod's partner churches) of this action. Subsequent to the recognition of fellowship and prior to the next Synod convention, the CTCR shall prepare an overture to the Synod convention requesting endorsement by the Synod of the President's declaration of fellowship. The President's office, in consultation with the head of this church body, is to coordinate the preparation of a protocol document in the language of each church body to be signed by the heads of the respective churches following the Synod's endorsement of church fellowship.
6. If the CTCR declines to approve recognition of altar and pulpit fellowship, it shall prepare a statement delineating the reasons for this decision, which is to be shared with the President of the Synod and the Praesidium. Continued discussion and consideration may follow. If the concerns which caused the CTCR to decline to approve altar and pulpit fellowship are not able to be resolved, the President will inform the church body of this decision, as well as the Synod's partner churches. The members of the Synod shall also be informed of this action via the Synod's official publications.

7. If the Synod President does not act on a recommendation by the CTCR to recognize church fellowship in time for consideration by the next Synod convention, the consideration of church fellowship is to be ordinarily remanded to the CTCR for review and reconsideration in the subsequent triennium.
- C. When formal recognition of a mission of the Synod as a self-governing partner church is contemplated (Bylaw 3.9.5.2.2(b) (3)), the following procedures are in order:
1. The Board for International Mission (BIM) shall inform the Office of the President and the executive director of the CTCR of its recommendation that the mission in question be recognized as a partner church. Information and/or documentation that identifies the mission's doctrinal convictions (for example, doctrinal statements, its constitution and bylaws, copies of doctrinal materials used in the church, materials for training clergy and laity, and so forth) shall be shared with the CTCR.
 2. If upon review of this material the CTCR approves the recommendation of the BIM, the CTCR shall prepare an overture to this effect for consideration by the Synod at the next Synod convention. If the CTCR declines to approve the recommendation, it shall prepare a statement delineating the reasons for this decision, which is to be shared with the President of the Synod and the BIM. Continued discussion and consideration may follow.
 3. Upon CTCR approval of the BIM's recommendation, the President's office, in consultation with the head of the newly self-governing church body, is to coordinate the preparation of a protocol document in the language of each church body to be signed by the heads of the respective churches following the Synod's recognition of this mission as a self-governing partner church.
- D. The procedure for contemplating and/or recommending the termination of recognition of altar and pulpit fellowship with another church body is as follows:
1. As noted above (page 1), the Bylaws stipulate that the President "shall represent the Synod, in consultation with the appropriate Board or Commission, in official contacts with all partner churches by aiding, counseling, and advising them and strengthening the relations with and among them" and that "he or his representative shall represent the Synod in official contacts with other church bodies" (Bylaw 3.3.1.1.2 a, b).
 2. The Bylaws further state that the CTCR "shall assist the President at his request in discharging his constitutional responsibilities for maintaining doctrinal integrity as he relates to other church bodies" (Bylaw 3.9.5.2.2) and, in that capacity, "shall address itself to and evaluate existing fellowship relations for the purpose of mutual admonition and encouragement" (Bylaw 3.9.5.2.2 a).
 3. In light of the above, when relationships between the Synod and another church body have reached the point that, regrettably, the termination of recognition of altar and pulpit fellowship is contemplated because it appears that agreement "in doctrine and in all its articles" (FC SD X 31) no longer exists (cf. "Basic Considerations," Pages 3–4 above), the President of the Synod, in consultation with the CTCR, is responsible for formally initiating this process.

4. Working together directly with the head of this church body, the President shall arrange for doctrinal discussions between representatives of the two church bodies to identify the cause(s) of concern which have led to the initiation of this process. Synod representatives to these discussions shall be appointed by the President of the Synod, ordinarily including representation from CTCR membership or staff. These representatives shall report regularly to the President and to the CTCR on these discussions.
5. The President of the Synod may designate an individual to serve as his assistant or representative in his responsibility as chief ecumenical officer of the LCMS. In such cases the assistant will serve as directed by the President in interacting with this church body.
6. If as a result of these discussions the concerns leading to the initiation of this process are able to be resolved — praise and thanks be to God! The heads of both church bodies may wish to discuss specific steps that can be taken, mutually agreed upon and supported by leaders in both church bodies, to strengthen the relationship between the two church bodies and help ensure that such concerns do not arise again in the future.
7. If as a result of these discussions the concerns leading to the initiation of this process are not able to be resolved, the President of the Synod, speaking the truth in love, shall convey this decision clearly to the head of the church body in question, indicating the need to bring this serious matter to the attention of the Synod in convention. The President may then advise the CTCR to prepare an overture regarding this matter for consideration by the next Synod convention. He shall also determine the best and most appropriate way(s) to inform the members of the Synod and the Synod's partner churches of this regrettable situation and the need to place this matter before the Synod in convention.

Adopted December 8, 2023
Commission on Theology and Church Relations
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod