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JANUARY-APRIL 1993

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"Inter-Christian Relationships: An Instrument for Study": A Preliminary Report

Samuel H. Nafzger

In 1981 the synodical convention of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod adopted a resolution requesting that the Commission on Theology and Church Relations prepare "practical guidelines . . . to assist the officials, pastors, teachers, congregations, and individuals in the synod, in determining which practices and activities are appropriate to the various levels of inter-Lutheran and inter-Christian relationships in which the synod is involved."¹ In response to this assignment, the CTCR developed a five-stage process for the preparation of the requested guidelines: (1.) the development of three case studies posing typical situations in which members of the synod frequently relate to Christians in church bodies not in altar and pulpit fellowship with the LCMS;² (2.) a joint meeting of the CTCR and the Council of Presidents for a pilot discussion of these case studies in the light of the scriptural principles of fellowship as understood by the synod over the years; (3.) discussion of these case studies in district and regional pastors' conferences throughout the synod;³ (4.) the preparation of a preliminary draft of guidelines for synod-wide study and response to the CTCR; and (5.) the final report of the Commission on Theology presenting practical guidelines for inter-Christian relationships for use by the members of the synod. By means of this process the commission has from the very beginning of its work on this assignment sought to involve the entire synod in this project.

The commission has now completed the first four steps of this process. As it begins work on the last stage of producing the final draft of practical guidelines for inter-Christian relationships, it has decided to share with the synod a summary of the responses which it has received to its preliminary draft, together with a brief review of the nature of the assignment which it has been given, and a listing of the basic presuppositions underlying the commission's approach to this project. The Commission on Theology is grateful to *Concordia Theological Quarterly* for responding positively to its request to publish this article, and it is the hope and prayer of the commission that the members of the synod will find it useful as they continue their study and discussion of this extremely sensitive and

pressing issue.

**I. Background and Context for the Assignment
to Prepare Practical Guidelines for
Inter-Christian Relationships**

A. Sectarianism and Syncretism

Article III of the synod's constitution lists the "objectives" or "purposes" for the formation of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. The very first of these objectives reads:

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.⁴

Two of the "Conditions of Membership" listed in Article VI of the constitution are also pertinent here:

Conditions for acquiring and holding membership in the synod are:

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 minsters of the church;
 - b. Taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession.⁵

These two sections from the synod's constitution make reference to two dangers or errors concerning inter-Christian relationships against which the members of synod want to be on guard as they relate to other Christians: sectarianism and syncretism.

On the one hand, the LCMS on the basis of such Scripture

references as Paul's words in Ephesians 4:3-6 and 1 Corinthians 1:10 recognizes that, properly speaking, there is only one church, the body of Christ. This is what is confessed in the Third Article of the Nicene Creed: "I believe one holy, Christian, and apostolic church." The constitution of the synod clearly indicates that this "one church" is not to be identified with the LCMS. One of the purposes of the synod is to "work toward fellowship with *other* Christian church bodies" (emphasis added). Thus, the error of sectarianism must be warned against. On the other hand, the LCMS recognizes, also on the basis of Holy Scripture, that it must provide a defense against heresy, *id est*, false teaching. The members of synod, therefore, renounce "unionism and syncretism of every description."

Down through its history, the synod has attempted to be faithful to both of these teachings of Scripture in its practice of inter-Christian relationships. Its members covenant with one another to seek to avoid syncretism (unionism) by agreeing with each other not to hold joint public worship services with church bodies with which the synod is not in doctrinal agreement or church fellowship. At the same time, the synod has also sought to avoid what is referred to as sectarianism (separatism) by working to resolve doctrinal disagreements with other Christian churches and by cooperating with them in various ways where this can be done without compromising the means of grace. It has sought to draw this distinction on the basis of the traditional principle "communion in sacred matters and cooperation in external matters" (*communio in sacris* and *cooperatio in externis*). It is on this basis that the LCMS has traditionally drawn a distinction, for example, between altar and pulpit fellowship on the one hand and prayer fellowship on the other.

This understanding of what the Scriptures teach about inter-Christian relationships has resulted in the synod's insistence on "agreement in doctrine and practice as the basis for church fellowship."⁶ But at the same time, its desire to "work through its official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies" has led it to participate in all of the national bilateral ecumenical dialogues conducted by Lutherans in the U.S.A. since 1965. The concern to avoid the twin dangers of separatism and syncretism prompted the synod to be a founding member of the Lutheran

Council in the U.S.A. (LCUSA),⁷ membership in which was held by the CTCR to be consistent with the synod's understanding of what the Scriptures teach about inter-Christian relationships.⁸ But the synod has also repeatedly rejected membership in the Lutheran World Federation as conflicting with our principles of fellowship.⁹ The members of synod reject the conducting of joint public worship services with church bodies with which it is not in church fellowship but, from the days of Walther and his participation in worship at free conferences, the LCMS has not rejected participation in joint worship in various festivals, observances, convocations, pilgrimages, and devotional situations of all sorts.

Not everyone in the synod has always been in agreement regarding all of the implications of these practical distinctions between "sectarianism" and "syncretism" in hard cases, but as long as the members of the synod were convinced that everyone was operating on the basis of the same basic scriptural principles of fellowship, difficult questions in the area of inter-Christian relationships were able to be handled on a case by case basis, and the benefit of the doubt was usually given to fellow-members of the synod in exceptional situations. But with the growth of our synod into a large church existing in a wide variety of situations, increasing tensions in this area have become evident, with the result that the level of confidence and trust among the members of the synod has decreased. More and more questions have been raised in the synod about inter-Christian relationships in recent decades, and in 1981 the synod formally asked the CTCR to prepare some "practical guidelines" to help the members of synod know how to determine "which activities are appropriate to the various levels of inter-Lutheran and inter-Christian relationships in which the synod is involved" (1981 Resolution 3-03A). This brings us directly to the commission's assignment to prepare practical guidelines for inter-Christian relationships.

B. The Assignment to Prepare Practical Guidelines

In 1977 the synod, in the midst of discussing its relationship to the American Lutheran Church with which it was in church fellowship, reported that there was considerable confusion in the

synod concerning "the nature and implications of the concept of fellowship."¹⁰ Noting this, the synod asked the CTCR to do a comprehensive study of this topic.¹¹ After four years of study the commission published its report on "The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship." In this document the CTCR begins by reviewing the New Testament use of the Greek term for fellowship, *koinonia*. Pointing out that a presentation on the nature of fellowship must necessarily include but not be limited to a study of this term, the commission went on to say that much is said in the New Testament about the concept of fellowship in sections where this word does not even appear (e.g., Ephesians 4; John 17; Romans 16). Moreover the word, *koinonia*, which means literally "joint participation in a common thing," is in itself a neutral term.¹² The New Testament uses it to refer to the common collection made by the Macedonians for the saints in Jerusalem (Romans 15:26; 2 Corinthians 9:13). This term is used by the apostle Paul to refer to the relationship between wine and the blood and the bread and the body of Christ in the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). It is used to describe the association of fishermen in the fishing business (Luke 5:10). It is even used to refer to participation in other men's sins (Ephesians 5:11). Most often, however, the word *koinonia* is used in the New Testament to refer to spiritual unity in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:8; 1 John 1:3), and to the external manifestation of this unity (Acts 2:42, Galatians 2:19).¹³

In its report the commission summarizes what the Scriptures teach concerning the nature of fellowship in nine principles. The first three take up "spiritual fellowship" with Christ. This spiritual unity is a matter of "faith in the heart" and is therefore hidden from human eyes. This is a relationship which binds Christians together with Christ and with each other in the one, holy, Christian church in a spiritual unity which transcends external divisions of time, space, and denominations. This fellowship or unity comes into being with faith in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit working through the gospel in word and sacrament. It is therefore a gift from God and not the product of human effort. Here we are in the realm of the doctrine of justification.

The commission's next three principles turn to a consideration of

the role of the *confession* of the apostolic faith in connection with a discussion of the nature of fellowship. Now we are in the realm of response or sanctification. Just as faith manifests itself in acts of edifying love, so those who have been made one in the body of Christ will confess and teach the gospel, and they are to do this in conformity with the gospel as it has been recorded by the prophets and the apostles in Scripture. The purpose is that the body of Christ may be edified and extended. Edifying love will manifest itself in a variety of ways depending on the circumstances. But the Scriptures teach that Christians never seek to manifest this unity in Christ by compromising the gospel, the means by which the spiritual unity of the church comes into being in the first place.

The commission's final three principles address the specific topic of "*church* fellowship." Unlike spiritual unity, which is a matter of faith in the heart, church fellowship is constituted by agreement in the faith which is confessed and not by faith in the heart. St. Paul appeals to the Christians in Corinth "by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1: 10). When the gospel is not confessed in conformity with the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, external unity does not exist in the church, and *church* fellowship has no basis. Church fellowship, therefore, is not a given. It is a matter of confession. It involves human effort. Here we are in the realm of sanctification. To separate from fellow Christians when there is agreement in the confession of the faith would be separatistic. To act as if there was agreement in the confession of the gospel when there is no agreement would be syncretistic and would undermine the gospel. These nine principles summarize what the CTCR understands the Scriptures to teach about the nature and implications of the concept of fellowship.

The second part of the CTCR's report is entitled "The Implications of the Nature of Fellowship for Church-Body-Level Relationships." In this section, the commission examines four frequently mentioned ways that church bodies today at the institutional or denominational level seek to demonstrate unity in Christ with one another: (1.) conciliarity; (2.) reconciled diversity; (3.) selective

fellowship; and (4.) ecclesiastical declarations of church fellowship based on majority vote.

Following an evaluation of each of these models on the basis of the nine scriptural principles of fellowship, the CTCR concludes:

Of these models for external unity in the church which have been examined in this report, only ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship offer at least the possibility for being able to take into account all that the Scriptures have to say about the nature of fellowship. The Commission on Theology and Church Relations, therefore, while recognizing that this model is neither divinely ordained nor scripturally mandated, is convinced that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod should continue to seek to carry out the scriptural principles of fellowship at the church body level by means of ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship based on agreement in doctrine and practice.¹⁴

It was on the basis of this understanding of the implications of the concept of fellowship for church-body-level relationships that the synod proceeded in 1981 to break altar and pulpit fellowship with the American Lutheran Church.

But the CTCR went on in its 1981 report to say that there are certain problems which can and do arise with the implementation of ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship. There are the problems of "ambiguous denominationalism," "three-cornered relationships," and the mobility of members with their consequent moving of their church affiliations back and forth between church bodies not in altar and pulpit fellowship—a kind of "serial unionism," one could say. And the commission refers directly to "the problem of terminology and levels of agreement." It is in reference to this problem that the commission states:

Through the use of the word "fellowship" almost exclusively to refer to a formal altar and pulpit fellowship relationship established between two church bodies as the basis of agreement in the confession of the faith, some have been given the impression that no fellowship relationship other than spiritual unity in the body of Christ can or should exist

among members of Christian churches not in altar and pulpit fellowship. The fact that the LCMS is closer doctrinally to a church body which at least formally accepts the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions than to those denominations which do not is often obscured by the "all or nothing" approach that frequently accompanies ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship.¹⁵

The CTCR goes on to add one more problem:

Finally, it is sometimes overlooked that, although the scriptural principles of fellowship remain constant, the specific results of their application at the individual level may differ from that at the church-body level. The principles of fellowship are not rules of casuistry.¹⁶

For these reasons, the CTCR itself, already in 1981, recommended that the implications of the nature of the scriptural understanding of fellowship be applied not only to church-body-level relationships, but also to relationships between members of the synod and other Christians at all levels in which the members of synod are involved. The CTCR states:

Because of these factors the commission recommends that the synod continue to study the topic of fellowship during the coming biennium by giving special attention to the implications of the principles of fellowship presented in this report for the relationships and activities between Christians at congregational, pastoral, and individual levels. Although it is neither desirable or even possible to develop guidelines which will answer every case of casuistry, it will be helpful if the synod can develop greater understanding and consensus regarding the implications of the nature of fellowship also at these levels.¹⁷

It was in response to this specific recommendation of the CTCR, as well as to a number of other overtures presented to the synodical convention of 1981, that the synod proceeded to ask the CTCR to prepare practical guidelines for inter-Christian relationships.

In effect, then, the synod has requested the CTCR to take the

scriptural principles of fellowship which it had presented in its report "Nature and Implications" and on this basis to give some "practical guidelines" for their application at the level of individual Christians, individual pastors, and individual congregations as they relate to Christians belonging to church bodies not in altar and pulpit fellowship with the LCMS. The CTCR has been asked to complete the work started in "Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship" by applying the principles of fellowship delineated there, not only to church-body-level relationships, but also to the myriad of questions confronting our people today at the individual level with respect to questions about participation in such activities as neighborhood Bible studies, ecumenical prayer breakfasts, community choirs, convocations and conferences on college and seminary campuses, and worship events such as services of thanksgiving for the end of a war, pro-life celebrations, and occasional devotions of all sorts.

This, then, is the commission's understanding of the assignment which has been given to it. The commission's "Study Instrument" on "Inter-Christian Relationships," therefore, is not a new report on fellowship. It is rather the application of its previous work in this area—"Theology of Fellowship" (1965), "A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism" (1974), and "The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship" (1981)—to situations which arise among the members of the synod as they relate to Christians belonging to church bodies not in church fellowship with the LCMS. The purpose of this draft, therefore, is not to discuss *church fellowship* but rather, given the synod's understanding of church fellowship as meaning agreement in doctrine and practice between two church bodies, to offer guidance in applying the scriptural principles of fellowship "to the various levels of inter-Lutheran and inter-Christian relationships in which the synod is involved" (1981 Resolution 3-03A).

II. Summary of Responses to "Inter-Christian Relationships: An Instrument for Study"

"Inter-Christian Relationships" has been the most widely studied CTCR document in recent years and perhaps ever. At the request

of the commission, the study of this document has been on the agendas of circuit (*Winkel*) conferences throughout the synod. A total of 267 responses to this draft have been received by the CTCR as of June 21, 1992. One hundred and five responses have come from circuits, ninety-nine from individual pastors, eleven from congregations, nine from various kinds of study groups, ten from lay persons, and thirty-three were unsigned. In addition, three LCMS partner churches have shared their reactions to this draft. At least one response has been received from every district in the synod.

The commission has requested that the synod study this "Study Instrument" carefully, and it has included some questions to stimulate critical reflection. Three intentionally provocative statements were suggested as possible responses:

- (a.) The guidance for inter-Christian relationships provided in this document is not faithful to all that the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions teach and, while reflecting an awareness of the contemporary situation in which the church finds itself, will nevertheless encourage unionistic activity.
- (b.) The guidance for inter-Christian relationships provided in this document, while faithful to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions as far as it goes, does not fully reflect an awareness of the contemporary situations in which the church finds itself and will therefore encourage divisive, separatistic activity.
- (c.) The guidance for inter-Christian relationships provided in this document is faithful to what the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions teach, reflects an awareness of the contemporary situation in which the church finds itself, and will encourage the proper application of law and gospel in inter-Christian relationships.

The commission has not requested responses to its draft in order to find out what is going on in the church so that it might then provide some theological rationale for what is already taking place, but

rather so that the entire synod might join the commission in studying what the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions have to say about "Inter-Christian Relationships."

The great majority of those who responded to the commission's study document have expressed appreciation for the opportunity to discuss this issue together with their fellow-members of synod, and many have noted that their study of this issue is continuing. In what follows we shall now seek to give the members of synod a feel for the kinds of reactions which the commission has received to its preliminary draft, and we shall do so by presenting a few excerpts from the responses themselves. We shall present this sampling of responses according to the three-fold options included in the CTCR "Study Instrument."

A. Responses Seeing the Draft as Promoting Unionism

Some responders hold that these guidelines, as presently constituted, would promote unionistic or syncretistic relationships with Christians not in church fellowship with the LCMS. A number of reasons for this conclusion are suggested. Some hold, for example, that this draft departs from Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, and the traditional understanding of the LCMS on fellowship.

If one is not in total agreement in doctrine, based upon the truth of the gospel, one *should not* have inter-Christian relationships.

Church fellowship which is also referred to as "confessional fellowship" includes every joint expression of a common faith. Every expression and manifestation of unity in belief is included in the "avoid" directive of Romans 16:17. It is all-inclusive. There are no degrees of avoidance. In the New Testament all expressions of fellowship are treated as a unit. They are all ways of expressing a common faith worked by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. . . . There are no expressions of a shared faith which are excluded from church fellowship.

Church fellowship is a unit both in respect to the doctrine of Scripture . . . and in respect to the various expressions of a

shared faith that they all be considered a unit or an indivisible whole.

Some responders believe that this document has changed the biblical, confessional, historic definition of and approach to "unionism."

For the history of our synod we have said that joint worship with those not in doctrinal agreement was sin. This document suggests that there are occasions . . . that we may participate in . . . Will this not cause doubt in our people to say, "What other scriptural teachings that our synod has taught for years can now be questioned. Have we stopped teaching that the Bible is a clear book?"

Some responders hold that the commission makes a false distinction between "regular" and "occasional" services.

Acceptance of a ridiculous distinction between "regular and official public and corporate worship services" and "certain occasional joint activities and gatherings at which worship takes place," as though the LCMS constitution would allow such a distinction, is patently and obviously false.

Some responders say that the CTCR's draft is inconsistent or even self-contradictory in places and therefore will confuse and mislead rather than clarify and guide.

Most abstained rather than voted [in our circuit] because they felt the document was too confusing: almost as if put together by a committee which could not agree . . . itself.

The pastors [of our circuit] were especially concerned with kind of an "open door" attitude conveyed in this study. Many good statements were given and much good discussion in keeping with the historic position of the Missouri Synod. And then toward the end of a good discussion, paragraph, section, or in summary, there are such words as "but," "however," "at the same time," etc., as if to convey the attitude that we are in a different time than before, as if to say that our time is different now and we have to do things differently.

Other responses suggested that while this draft is not itself theologically incorrect, it is ambiguous, unclear, imprecise, and therefore unhelpful. More specific, clear-cut "black on white" directives are needed, they said, and there should not be so much attention devoted to how to handle exceptional situations.

I am not stating that I believe your study to be in error. It is a very important resource for the church of 1991. But the abstract way in which you have attempted to address the issues we face, may confuse those whom God has entrusted to my care. My people are struggling with the issue of "inter-Christian relationships" and I believe that this document can be a great resource only if it can rid itself of what I see from my situation as an ambiguous position through your use of terms.

I find much good in this report. The report makes much progress in its first stated purpose, i.e., assisting pastors, congregations and individual Christians in their study of what the Scriptures and the Confessions say about fellowship. It has given me opportunity to examine what I have probably taken for granted. But in its present form I feel it will encourage unionistic activity.

The vague and undefined terminology employed throughout renders the study document ambiguous and subject to varying interpretations. By blurring terms and concepts this document stands as a theological chameleon which can be read in any number of different ways depending upon the reader and his agenda . . . This kind of ambiguity can in no way be a service to pious souls who seek the certainty and clarity of God's holy word.

Finally, there were those who suggest that this draft, while not unscriptural or even unclear, is nevertheless not helpful because of the current climate in the synod. They say that it offers "loopholes" and reasons for justifying current unionistic activities rather than giving clear-cut direction and guidance.

Our concern is not so much that unionistic activity would be encouraged as much as that unionistic activity that has

already been taking place would now be condoned and legitimized by strong implications in this document and by an air of permissiveness inherent . . . Avoid the tendency to reflect so much upon what is happening in society and cling more to the guidance and direction given by the word.

Hopefully, our present pastors are in agreement with the first sentence in the first full paragraph on p. 6 and with the nine "scriptural principles of fellowship," pp. 7-9. However, will future synodical clergy make the exceptions apparently permissible in Section IV, "Counsel for Specific Situations," the rule? I fear so . . . In this day of doctrinal compromise and spiritual confusion, heed well the last sentence under the summary on p. 23: "For it is better to be divided for the sake of truth than to be united in error."

B. Responses Seeing the Draft as Promoting Separatism

Disagreeing dramatically with the responses listed above, some responders report that in their view, this draft gives guidance that is basically separatistic in nature.

The content was well organized and established. The topic is timely and fits in with the struggles that many congregations are facing today. But we feel that in some areas the content has limited the dialogue between churches. If we are to gain our brothers, we need to be able to communicate with them. In this matter we feel that the document has become too legalistic and hinders fellowship with other congregations. We would ask that the commission once again review this work, and present a more open hearted approach to others that profess the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some responders believe that this draft curtails the freedom of the gospel.

I sympathize . . . with the CTCR over this assignment. The topic is difficult, and the application of the topic is even more difficult. The document incorporates some beautiful language about the gospel at the heart and core of the church and the church's conduct of the mission which the Lord has

given the church. . . the gospel which is so clear in the first section is subjected to distinctions and caveats in such a way in the remainder of the document that the freedom of the gospel is curtailed, hemmed in, and controlled as the document reaches its conclusions . . . for the practice of inter-Christian relationships. The issue is the one of "freedom" and "control" under the gospel . . . And the result in this document is mixed.

Some of those responding write that what the members of the synod need now is encouragement to interact with other Christians, not discouragement.

Certainly a lot of good thought has gone into this document, but it seems to try to straddle the several fellowship and political stances in our synod. Not that this is wrong, but I do not believe it gives us the needed encouragement and guidance for inter-church relations. It seems it puts more emphasis on truth than on love. As one of my colleagues put it, "It seems to reflect more the mind of Aristotle than the mind of Christ." There were no suggestions on how we can *listen* to other Christians. There seemed to be no room for confession of our shortcomings and failures with other Christians, hence no need for absolution. It seems that the harder you try to become definitive at relationships with other Christians, the more difficult such relationships become. On the other hand, many of us are establishing relationships on different levels with other Christians, only because we are fighting a common enemy.

Some of those responding believe that this document as it now stands does not fully appreciate the contemporary situation which exists in our society and the need for concern for individuals.

My response, in summary, is that it [this document] does not fully reflect an awareness of the contemporary situations in which the church finds itself and will therefore encourage divisive, separatistic activity. My thirty-eight years of pastoral care have resulted in my caring first for individual Christians—and second for Christian institutions. If the two

come into conflict, I feel compelled to give individual Christians' concerns first priority. I do not mean for that to be an anti-institutional posture; I mean only that I regard it as the best New Testament approach to pastoral care that I can exercise. With all due respect to your commission and to our church body, I am convinced that our LCMS is far more concerned about these kinds of matters than the New Testament would warrant us to be. I say that not in a spirit of rebellion or defiance, but rather from the stance of wanting to reflect as faithfully as I can what our Lord himself would want me to do in specific pastoral inter-Christian relationships.

Some responders hold that this draft asks the right questions, but that it does not show its awareness of the fact that non-Missouri Synod Lutherans do not understand our practices in this area.

This document is seen by some as the "final straw." I believe that it asks the right questions! It is time for us in the LCMS to understand that the other Christians don't understand what we think we're trying to do. More flexibility is necessary—but with caution—in our relationships with other Christians.

*C. Responses Seeing the Draft as Providing
Helpful and Doctrinally Sound Guidelines*

Some responders express special appreciation for the discussion on truth, unity, and love and the need to maintain the tension inherent in seeking to be faithful to each of them.

We commend the commission for maintaining the centrality of the gospel in this document. . . . We also commend the commission for recognizing that there is a necessary tension between these three principles [truth, unity, and love]. This tension shall be there until Christ returns. We believe that when one does not perceive the tension between these principles one has sold out or simply ignored one of the three principles in a legalistic sort of way. . . . We believe that this tension will necessarily be felt throughout the synod as we attempt to walk together and yet allow each other the

freedom in the gospel to apply the gospel to our own specific situations.

Some of the responses find helpful the emphasis in this draft on applying principles rather than on offering specific solutions to difficult situations.

We appreciate this presentation of scriptural-confessional principles without the institution of a new canon law. One of the paper's values is its consideration of the diversity of the contemporary situation. This document encourages us to apply principles rather than spoon-feeding us with applications. The discussion we had encouraged us to deal with our practices in an atmosphere of trust. One thing we discovered is that when we walk together in synod, we don't always apply our shared principles in the same way. Then the question is: Can we trust each other as each of us applies scriptural-confessional principles to our ministry?

Some of the responders say that this draft's guidance keeps the law-gospel distinction prominent.

The telling phrase in deciding upon a response is that in the statement above, "proper application of law and gospel." This study encourages careful thought as to how such a proper application may be carried out. Separatism and unionism are, at best, well-intentioned efforts that treat either law or gospel too lightly. This study encourages holding as tightly as possible to Scripture's gospel message in the wide sense, yet it differentiates between holding to and proclaiming that gospel and applying that message so that the hearer might understand.

Some responses are grateful for the openness of this document and its pastoral approach.

This document does *not* encourage unionism [nor] divisive activity. There was a pleasing flavor of responsible openness in the document. I hope you forward *this* document [to the synod as final version]. I found it very pastoral and aware of how people live and relate in the 1990's.

I commend the commission for its study. This is an issue which must be faced; hopefully the results of the study will lead to common practice within the synod to reach lost souls. It is imperative that our synod take a strong stand to advance the cause of the gospel in conformity with our scriptural-confessional position, and in an increasingly non-Christian society we must create an atmosphere where we can walk together in that mission. We who are in the military ministry daily experience the tensions of being missionaries in a sea of pluralism. We want to be orthodox and evangelical. We want to represent our church body with integrity while being winsome and prudent in practicing proper pastoral care.

A number of responses express appreciation for the recognition in this draft that the contemporary scene has changed greatly over the years.

As a whole, I believe the paper is very useful. Its topic is one that every pastor and congregation faces, and I would again echo the spirit and reason for which the convention mandated that this study be done. I do not agree with those who argue that nothing has changed in our culture or church body, and so it should be business as usual. My prayer is that we continue to study these questions so that we can come to a God-given consensus that is in harmony with both Scripture and our confessional understanding.

D. Other Responses

A good number of those who responded indicated that none of the suggested responses fit their group's reaction, or that their group itself was not of one opinion on these matters.

First of all, let me say that this paper is worthwhile, timely and greatly needed. I can truly appreciate how your work tried to find that elusive ground where scriptural and confessional principles meet the day to day individual cases that we find in our ministries. I tried to use the summary questions in the back of the document, but I did not find a category that fit my response to the paper as a whole. If I

were to create one, it would be: While this paper is faithful to the Scriptures and to our Lutheran Confessions in summarizing their content and guidelines, as well as the contemporary situation in which the church now proclaims Jesus' death and resurrection, at times the paper failed to show how its applications flowed from these God-given principles, and therefore could easily be abused in a unionistic and non-scriptural manner.

The choices don't quite fit our group. We are not in agreement among ourselves about what the Scriptures and the confessions say about inter-Christian relations. Our points of view range all the way from the most exclusionary version of LCMS tradition on inter-Christian relations to a willingness to practice fellowship with any genuine Christian . . . Some see this booklet leading to further unionistic activity, while others see it leading toward more divisive and separatistic activity.

Some of those who responded have suggested that certain points made in the draft—such as the witness value of inter-Christian activities—need to be given greater emphasis.

In summary, our evaluation of the CTCR document is that it is well reasoned, sensitively drawn, and stands on a firm biblical and confessional base. Our chief concern is more one of punctuation. It needs to more clearly emphasize: the context of our actions and what they are perceived by others as actually saying; the meaning of the term gospel as a criterion for deciding church relations (proclamation, doctrinal corpus, or both?); the terminology with which we either accuse or excuse our actions; and the priority of inter-Christian relations within a congregation and denomination over those between denominations.

One of the synod's sister churches, following careful study of this draft in two pastors conferences, offers the following response:

The CTCR document "Inter-Christian Relationships" has been deeply appreciated for its comprehensive presentation of the whole question of church fellowship, its basically

truly conservative, scriptural, and confession-bound approach, its honest presentation of the present situation of Christianity, Lutheranism, and even conservative Lutheranism (ambiguous denominationalism, lack among members of a clear identification of the official position of their church, etc.), the concern for pastoral care and the continuous will to do justice to both sides of the mission entrusted to the church, preaching the gospel wherever it is possible without compromising the truth. All these aspects of the paper among many others raised much sympathy. . . .

The pastoral conferences of our church . . . too are concentrating on all kinds of problems and situations relating to church fellowship and decided to go on studying and discussing them, and hoping that we may achieve full agreement on all points. So our reaction at this time can only be partial. But it seems right now that we shall probably not be able to go along with all suggestions made in the document, because, according to our opinion, not all of them allow us to safeguard the uncompromising attitude that should always be the mark of a confessional Lutheran Church. But at this time we don't feel able to say more than that. We need more time to study the whole set of problems raised by the question of church-fellowship.

While many more responses could be presented here, these representative quotations provide an overview of the kinds of responses which the commission has received to its preliminary draft.

III. Basic Presuppositions Informing the Preliminary Draft of "Inter-Christian Relationships"

A careful review of the responses to the commission's preliminary draft reveals that a good number of responders are either not aware of the nature of the commission's assignment or of the commission's previous work in the area of fellowship.¹⁸ It may be helpful, therefore, at this time to lay out some of the basic presuppositions with which the CTCR has approached this assignment.

A. The principles of fellowship presented in the Scriptures are normative for confessional Lutherans as they relate to Christians belonging to church bodies not in doctrinal agreement with the synod. The commission believes that its previous reports on fellowship faithfully present the principles of fellowship taught in the Scriptures which should guide the members of synod in relating to other Christians at all levels.

The commission's draft does not go back to ground zero as it seeks to give guidance to the synod for relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ who belong to church bodies not in altar and pulpit fellowship with LCMS. Rather it seeks to apply the principles presented in its previous reports on fellowship—"Theology of Fellowship" (1965), "Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism" (1974), and "Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship" (1981). It has not sought to develop a new doctrine of fellowship but rather to apply the traditional principles of fellowship which have guided the synod from its very beginning to the contemporary questions regarding relationships between members of the synod and Christians belonging to church bodies not in church fellowship with the LCMS.

B. As the members of the LCMS interact with Christians belonging to church bodies not in altar and pulpit fellowship, of critical importance is the distinction between the spiritual unity of the church, which is given with faith in the heart, and external unity in the church, which is based on agreement in the confession of the gospel.

From its very beginning the LCMS has clearly distinguished between what Walther refers to over and over again as the invisible church and the visible church, and what the CTCR refers to as the spiritual unity of the church and external unity in the church. This distinction is especially discussed in the CTCR report of 1974, "A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism," on the basis of the distinction in the Lutheran Confessions between harmony in the church (Latin, *concordia*; German, *Einigkeit in der Kirche*) and the unity of the church (Latin, *unitas*; German, *Einigkeit der Kirche*). Confusion results when this distinction is obscured or denied. Corresponding to this distinction is the distinction which theologians have traditionally made between the *fides qua*, the dynamic faith in the heart

created by word and sacrament which binds believers together in Christ, and the *fides quae*, the faith which is confessed, which is the basis for external unity. We in the LCMS have a long history of using the same English word "fellowship" to refer both to the unity of the church in Christ in the one, holy Christian church (*una sancta*) and also to the relationship which exists between two church bodies which have agreement in the confession of the Christian faith. The following quotation from C. F. W. Walther illustrates so clearly this dual use of the term fellowship in our circles:

Whoever is not in inward fellowship with the believers and saints is neither in fellowship with Christ. On the other hand, whoever is in fellowship with Christ is in fellowship also with all those in whom Christ dwells, that it, with the invisible church. Accordingly, he who restricts salvation to fellowship with any visible church therewith overthrows the article on the justification of a poor sinner in the sight of God.¹⁹

Walther uses the same word fellowship to refer to "inward fellowship (*Geimeinschaft*) with the believers" and also to "fellowship (*Gemeinschaft*) with any visible church," expressly contrasting these two distinct relationships. Consistent with the Scriptures themselves, we in the LCMS use the word fellowship to refer to the relationship which binds all Christians together with Christ and with each other in the *koinonia* or communion of the saints. But we also use the same word to talk about "declaring fellowship" or "breaking fellowship," thereby referring to "church fellowship." It is precisely in the dual use of this word fellowship that misunderstanding often arises. The specific topic under consideration in the commission's draft of "Inter-Christian Relationships" is the external expression of the unity which all Christians have in Christ but where agreement in confession is lacking. The very possibility of discussing guidelines for inter-Christian relationships is therefore dependent on the possibility and validity of making this distinction.

C. External unity in the church, *id est*, church fellowship, has as its necessary basis complete agreement in doctrine and practice.

The discussion of inter-Christian relationships in the draft under

discussion is based on the understanding that the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions teach that external unity in the church means agreement in confession. Church fellowship means "agreement in doctrine and practice." This necessarily implies that there can be no "levels of *church fellowship*," for there can be no levels of "complete agreement." Either agreement in the confession of the gospel exists or it does not exist. Where there is agreement in the confession of the gospel, it would be separatistic for church bodies not to commune together, to exchange pulpits, to lead public worship services together—*id est*, to remain apart from one another.

D. Inter-Christian relationships are not a matter of "all or nothing."

The LCMS does not hold to what some refer to as "the unit concept of fellowship." The LCMS has never held to this understanding. Walther participated in worship and prayer with individuals not in altar and pulpit fellowship with the LCMS. Up until 1944 the terms "prayer fellowship" and "joint fellowship" were used synonymously by the synod to refer to praying together with Christians not in doctrinal agreement with one another. The catechism of 1943 (Question 216), as well as the newly revised catechism (Question 206), says with reference to the Lord's Prayer: "In Jesus all believers are children of the one Father and should *pray with* and for one another" (emphasis added). Prayer is worship. Christians do not pray with non-Christians, but believers in Jesus pray for and with one another. The synod's assignment to the commission that it prepare practical guidelines for determining "which practices are appropriate to the various levels of inter-Lutheran and inter-Christian relationships in which the synod is involved" assumes that all Christians are bound together in the "communion of the saints," that it is possible to express this unity in Christ with Christians belonging to church bodies not in complete doctrinal agreement in some ways such as praying together in certain situations, and that it is possible to do this without compromising the scriptural principles of fellowship.

In holding to this position the LCMS finds itself in conformity with confessional Lutherans from the time of the Reformation. It is instructive to refer to the reports of the CTCR regarding this point.

In its report of 1965, "Theology of Fellowship," which was formally approved by the synodical convention of 1967, the commission states:

Those who subscribed to them [the Lutheran Confessions] were automatically in pulpit and altar fellowship with one another. Those who did not subscribe to them, but adhered to other confessions, were, according to the Preface to the Book of Concord, not condemned as heretics . . . This followed inevitably from the doctrine of the church as it is contained in the Lutheran Confessions . . . However, while *communicatio in sacris* was impossible with men who were not considered heretics but erring Christians, the Preface of the Book of Concord recognizes a responsibility of Lutherans toward such erring Christians . . . so-called colloquies . . . were repeatedly held by Lutheran theologians with Roman Catholic and also with Reformed theologians. At the colloquy of Regensburg in 1601 neither Lutherans nor Roman Catholics appear to have considered it improper to open the colloquy and the individual sessions of the colloquy with prayer. Numerous passages in the official minutes of this colloquy state that all meetings were opened with liturgical prayers and that representatives of both sides changed off in conducting the opening devotions.

At the Colloquy of Thorn in 1645 where Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed met, the Lutherans asked that the same procedure be followed. When the Catholics refused and insisted that they alone conduct the opening devotions, the Lutherans refused to attend the devotions under these conditions.

From these cases it appears that the Lutherans, during the period of orthodoxy, did not refuse as a matter of principle to pray with Reformed, and even with Roman Catholics. They did refuse when they themselves were treated as heretics.²⁰

From these points the commission concludes the following:

Our synod should understand that, in the case of doctrinal

discussions carried on with a view to achieving doctrinal unity, Christians not only *may* but *should* join in fervent prayer that God would guide and bless the discussions . . .

Our synod should clearly recognize that, in the case of necessary work on the local, national, or international level, when the faith and the confession of the church are not compromised, and where it appears essential that the churches of various denominations should cooperate or at least not work at cross purposes, our churches ought to cooperate willingly to the extent that the Word of God and conscience allow . . .²¹

In the many cases which do not seem to fall readily under the guidelines enunciated above (e.g., prayers at all kinds of meetings) every Christian should for his own person observe the apostle's injunction, "Let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind," Rom. 14:5 . . .²²

In its report of 1974, "A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism," the commission says that "the unity of the church [*unitas*] is the presupposition, not the goal, of ecumenical endeavors (AC Preface, 10)."²³ This is the presupposition "for continuing ecumenical endeavors throughout Christendom,"²⁴ and the measure of agreement in the confession of the faith serves as a guide for setting ecumenical priorities: "Since on the confessional spectrum there are church bodies on one end with whom we already enjoy a great deal of agreement and church bodies on the other end with whom we have larger areas of disagreement . . . it is a basic principle that . . . those nearest us in the faith merit our closest contact and most persistent ecumenical effort."²⁵

This view that inter-Christian relationships are not a matter of all or nothing, which provides the presupposition for the commission's work on this assignment, contrasts sharply with that of the Wisconsin Synod. One of the WELS official documents states:

We may classify these joint expressions of faith in various ways according to the particular realm of activity in which they occur, pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship, prayer fellowship, fellowship in worship, fellowship in church work, in

missions, in Christian education, in Christian charity. Yet insofar as they are joint expressions of faith, they are all essentially one and the same thing, and are all properly covered by a common designation, namely, church fellowship. Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith.²⁶

It is for this reason that the WELS rejects joint prayers or worship of any kind with individuals who belong to church bodies not in altar and pulpit fellowship with WELS.²⁷ This is not now, nor has it ever been, the position of the LCMS (although individual LCMS theologians down through the years and even today may advocate similar views). It was primarily a disagreement over this very point that led the WELS to break church fellowship with the LCMS in 1961. In this connection, it is enlightening to review an open letter sent by Drs. W. M. Oesch and Manfred Roensch, professors of the sister-church of the LCMS in Germany, in 1961 to President Naumann of the Wisconsin Synod. It reads in part as follows:

. . . It should be possible in certain situations to express one's Christian faith *together* with Christians from false-believing churches . . . Our attention must be directed not toward avoiding all mutuality of faith manifestations, but toward overcoming all that compromises the *notae purae*. This positive approach governed Dr. C. F. W. Walther's actions at the free conferences . . .

It was the unanimous conviction of the Overseas Committee that this definition of church-fellowship by placing all manifestations of a common faith on the same level actually . . . puts the Wisconsin Synod in a position which is to some extent outside of the Scriptures themselves. . .²⁸

E. The scriptural principles of fellowship must be distinguished from their application in specific situations.

The commission states in its report of 1981, "The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship":

Although the Scriptures have much to say about the spiritual

unity which binds all believers together in the body of Christ and with one another, and despite the exhortations of the inspired writers that the church should seek to manifest its given unity externally without endangering the means by which the unity of the church is created, God's Word does not prescribe specific procedures for carrying this out in each particular case. . . The Scriptures, rather than presenting the church with specific regulations for each and every inter-Christian relationship, set forth fundamental principles which are to be applied to the unique situation in which Christians find themselves at any given point in history.²⁹

This distinction between the principles of fellowship and their application in specific situations may be illustrated in the ministry of the apostle Paul. As the CTCR has noted, in one situation Paul decided to circumcise Timothy (whose father was a Greek and mother a Jew) "because of the Jews that were in those places" (Acts 16:3), while in another situation he chose not to circumcise the Greek Titus (Galatians 2:3). The very principle that the gospel be purely preached was applied in differing ways in different circumstances.³⁰

This presupposition implies that confessional Lutherans, as they seek to be faithful to the scriptural principles of fellowship, will recognize the need to guard against the danger of turning the scriptural principles of fellowship into legalistic rules. Moreover, confessional Lutherans will recognize the necessity of allowing for some flexibility in applying the scriptural principles of fellowship in difficult situations. This means that Article VI of the synodical constitution and its condition of membership excluding taking part in "the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations" is itself an application of the scriptural teaching that the gospel never be compromised and is not the principle of fellowship itself.

Nor is "unionism" a term that can be applied automatically to all joint work or worship with those not in complete agreement with one another. In 1932 Francis Pieper asserted in the *Brief Statement*: "We repudiate unionism, that is, church-fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the church, Rom. 16:17; 2 John 9:10, and as

involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, 2 Tim. 2:17-21."³¹ The key word here is "church-fellowship." Not all manifestations of unity in Christ outside of church fellowship are necessarily to be rejected as compromises of the gospel of Jesus Christ and therefore forbidden by Scripture.

F. Confessional Lutherans recognize the need for responsible commitment to the covenants of love they make with one another with respect to inter-Christian relationships.

The CTCR has prepared its preliminary draft of guidelines for inter-Christian relationships with the presupposition that the members of a confessional Lutheran Church intend to keep the covenants they make with each other with respect to their contacts and activities with Christians in other church bodies. The violation of these agreements makes impossible the mutual trust and confidence among the pastors, teachers, and congregations of the synod which are necessary for pastoral ministry. As the CTCR has previously stated:

Freedom for responsible pastoral ministry goes hand in hand with responsible commitment to mutual decisions. It is impossible to have one without the other. A lack of responsible commitment invites the very suspicion and mistrust which inhibits responsible pastoral care. But genuine commitment to our agreed-upon procedures builds the atmosphere of confidence and trust in which freedom for pastoral ministry thrives.³²

This presupposition, to be sure, implies that it is also proper and indeed even necessary to re-examine our "covenants of love" with one another from time to time to see if such agreed-upon ways of proceeding with respect to applying the scriptural principles of fellowship are still the best and most effective ways of relating to other Christians in the present context. The "Instrument for Study" prepared by the CTCR provides just such an opportunity for this kind of re-examination. Covenants of love can and need to be revised from time to time. But they ought not be disregarded and violated unilaterally. To arbitrarily dismiss our agreed-upon ways of carrying out inter-Christian relationships is devoid of integrity and is itself a loveless act and therefore contrary to the scriptural

principles of fellowship.

Conclusion

When we talk about inter-Christian relationships, we must carefully define our terms. We must recognize that the Scriptures use the term fellowship to refer to two distinct but not separate relationships: unity in the Body of Christ, and the manifestation of this unity externally. The challenge facing us in the LCMS today is to manifest our fellowship in the Body of Christ externally in ways which take account of all that Scripture says—both about guarding the truth of the gospel delivered to us, and also about actually manifesting this unity, lest we be guilty of falling into either the error of separatism or the error of syncretism. The synod has asked that the CTCR prepare some "practical guidelines" as to how this can be done in faithfulness to the scriptural principles of fellowship. The commission appreciates the many responses which it has received to its preliminary draft and looks forward to continuing to receive responses from the members of the synod as it works on the completion of this assignment. May God bless our continuing study of this sensitive issue so that we may be found faithful to all that He has to say about this topic, and also so that our way of discussing this issue will itself serve to strengthen our relationships with each other in the synod.

Appendix

Questions and Answers **"Inter-Christian Relationships: An Instrument for Study"** **(CTCR, 1991)**

1. Why did the CTCR prepare the document "Inter-Christian Relationships: An Instrument for Study"?

The 1981 synodical convention adopted a resolution (3-03A) asking the commission to prepare "practical guidelines . . . to assist the officials, pastors, teachers, congregations, and individuals in the synod, in determining which practices and

activities are appropriate to the various levels of inter-Lutheran and inter-Christian relationships in which the synod is involved." This document represents the commission's preliminary response to this assignment.

2. Does this document present a new approach in our synod to the doctrine of fellowship?

No. As the CTCR stated in the *Reporter-Alive* of December 9, 1991, "The commission with this document has not initiated a new approach to the doctrine of fellowship." Rather, this document should be viewed against the background of the commission's many years of study of the issue of fellowship. It seeks to apply the scriptural and confessional principles of fellowship as presented in its previous reports on fellowship (e.g., "Theology of Fellowship," 1965; "A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism," 1974; "Bible Study on Fellowship," 1979; "The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship," 1981) to relationships between the members of synodical congregations and Christians belonging to church bodies not in altar and pulpit fellowship with the synod.

3. Is there anything new about this document?

Yes. The nature of the assignment itself is new. The synod has asked the commission to take the scriptural principles of fellowship which have guided the synod through the years and apply them to new questions and problems confronting our people today regarding participation in such things as community Bible studies, ecumenical prayer breakfasts, community choirs, and occasional gatherings and worship events of all kinds. Because the report deals with these contemporary issues, it of necessity offers some new applications of our historic principles of fellowship.

4. Does this document suggest that there are or can be levels of *church fellowship* (altar and pulpit fellowship)?

No. The commission firmly believes that any discussion of inter-Christian relationships by confessional Lutherans must

be faithful to the scriptural teaching that external unity in the church means complete agreement in doctrine and practice. Nothing is said in this document of 1991 which qualifies in any way this position. Agreement in doctrine and practice is the very essence of altar and pulpit fellowship, and this necessarily means that there can be no "levels of church fellowship." Either there is agreement in the confession of the gospel or there is not.

5. Has our synod historically held to an "all or nothing" approach to the issue of fellowship?

No. The LCMS has never ascribed to an "all or nothing" understanding of fellowship (sometimes called the "unit concept of fellowship"). As stated above, the synod has consistently held that there can be no "levels" of *church fellowship*. But our synod has never held that total agreement in doctrine and practice is necessary for *every expression* of Christian fellowship. The synod's very assignment to the commission that it prepare practical guidelines for determining "which practices and activities are appropriate to the various levels of inter-Lutheran and inter-Christian relationships in which the synod is involved" assumes that it is possible to express unity in Christ with Christians not in agreement in confession in ways short of altar and pulpit fellowship which do not compromise the scriptural principles of fellowship.

6. Is it the official and historic position of the LCMS that *all* forms of joint prayer and worship apart from complete doctrinal agreement are necessarily unionistic?

No. The first president of the synod, C. F. W. Walther, participated in free conferences where worship and prayer with individuals not in altar and pulpit fellowship with the LCMS took place. Up until 1944 the terms "prayer fellowship" and "joint prayer" were used synonymously by the synod to refer to praying together with Christians not in doctrinal agreement with one another. The catechism of 1943 (Question 216) as well as the newly revised catechism

(Question 206) say with reference to the Lord's Prayer: "In Jesus all believers are children of the one Father and should pray with and for one another." The key factor in determining whether a given activity should be judged as "unionistic" is not whether this activity involves any kind of "worship," but rather whether such an activity involves the public proclamation of the word and the celebration of the sacraments so as to give a false or misleading witness which compromises the truth of the gospel.

7. Does this document reject the traditional distinction between *communio in sacris* and *cooperatio in externis*?

No. On the contrary, this distinction is affirmed in this document. The commission does say, however, "As useful as this distinction is in principle (because it is made on the basis of the means of grace), it is nevertheless subject to considerable confusion because of the term 'externals.' That a given activity is *external* to the means of grace does not mean that we are to regard such an activity as necessarily optional or to be excluded from the church's calling." "Additionally," the commission says, "we must recognize that not all Christian activities fit neatly into one or the other category. With that understanding, however, measuring proposed activities in terms of their relationships to the means of grace remains central to a confessional Lutheran approach to questions of inter-Christian relationships" (ICR, p. 24).

8. Why did the CTCR attempt to give specific answers to specific fellowship questions in this document?

The synod specifically requested that the CTCR prepare "practical guidelines" which would "assist the officials, pastors, teachers, congregations, and individuals in the synod, in determining which practices and activities are appropriate to the various levels of inter-Lutheran and inter-Christian relationships in which the synod is involved." The CTCR understood this to be a request for "real answers to real questions"—for specific guidance in applying the

scriptural principles of fellowship to a variety of typical situations and activities confronting the officials, pastors, congregations, and individuals in our synod today. The commission recognizes, of course, that "it is neither desirable nor even possible to develop guidelines which will answer every case of casuistry" (ICR, pp. 9-10). The commission has also stated, however, that "it will be helpful if the synod can develop greater understanding and consensus regarding the implications of the nature of fellowship also at these levels" (ICR, p. 10).

9. Do not some of the answers given by the CTCR contradict Article VI.2 of the synod's constitution?

Article VI of the constitution, which renounces "unionism and syncretism of every description," is affirmed repeatedly by the commission in the document. At the same time, the commission in this document does wrestle very frankly and directly with such crucial questions as "the precise meaning of the terminology employed in Article VI" (ICR, pp. 27-28) and the application of Article VI to various "special services" and "certain occasional joint activities or gatherings at which worship takes place, as distinguished from the regular and official public and corporate worship services of congregations" (ICR, pp. 33-34). In this connection, the commission expresses its judgment "that Article VI and other official statements of the synod do not explicitly address all such questions and circumstances" (ICR, p. 34) and that "it is simply not possible to make decisions in the area of inter-Christian relationships that are free from the ambiguities of human judgment" (ICR, p. 32).

10. Is there any connection between the CTCR's document and Dr. Nafzger's essay on "Levels of Fellowship"?

In 1987 Dr. Nafzger was invited by the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. to give a paper at a conference held in Puerto Rico on the assigned topic "Levels of Fellowship: A Missouri Synod Perspective." A few months later he was invited to give this same essay at the 1987 Circuit

Counselors' Conference. Before accepting this invitation and after sharing this essay with the members of the CTCR, Dr. Nafzger requested guidance from the CTCR concerning this invitation. In response, the commission encouraged him to accept the invitation, "urging" him to give "as broad a coverage of the subject as possible." In this essay Dr. Nafzger states that, from the Missouri Synod perspective, there can be no levels of unity in Christ nor any levels of *church fellowship*. But he also illustrates how the LCMS' consistent understanding of fellowship from the time of Walther through the CTCR reports on fellowship allow for various levels of expression of unity in Christ outside of altar and pulpit fellowship.

Although the commission, therefore, encouraged Dr. Nafzger to share his paper in the synod, this essay was not prepared in connection with the synod's assignment to the Commission. It does illustrate the legitimacy of the synod's assignment to the CTCR to prepare practical guidelines for inter-Christian relationships.

11. Has there been complete agreement within the commission itself regarding this assignment on "Inter-Christian Relationships"?

No. This has been a difficult assignment for the commission, and there has been disagreement within the commission as the work on this assignment has continued over the past ten years. Two of its sixteen voting members requested that their negative votes be recorded when "Inter-Christian Relationships: An Instrument for Study" was adopted.

All of the members of the commission are of one mind, however, in holding that only the Word of God can determine doctrine in the church. Synods, councils, faculties, commissions on theology, as well as individuals, can err. Right doctrine is never a matter of majority vote, and therefore no one on the commission wants in any way to suppress the viewpoints and opinions of the individual members of the CTCR. At the same time, it is true that the

overwhelming majority of the CTCR, following years of intense study, is convinced that this document is faithful to the Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and the synod's historic position on fellowship.

12. If the commission is "convinced" that this document is scriptural and confessional, does that mean that the final version of this document is, in effect, already written, and that critiques of this document will be ignored?

Absolutely not. The commission is taking very seriously the responses it is receiving to this document, and intends to make good use of them as it works toward the completion of this assignment. While the commission does not do its theology by means of an "opinion poll" (whether the results are positive or negative), it greatly values the comments, concerns, and insights of the members of the synod regarding its work.

13. How many responses to this document has the commission received, and from whom?

As of April 15 [1992] the commission has received 260 responses to its study document on "Inter-Christian Relationships." About one hundred have come from circuits in the synod, one hundred from individual pastors, and the remainder from laypersons, study groups, congregations, *et cetera*. At least one response has been received from every district in the synod. The commission has also received a number of responses from its partner churches around the world.

14. Have the responses been mainly positive or negative?

The commission did not ask for "positive" or "negative" responses, but for critical study and review of this document. The reactions themselves have been very wide-ranging, from highly critical to very approving of this draft. Most fall somewhere in the middle. Of the approximately one hundred circuit responses, for example, sixty percent chose none of the three responses offered on the response question-

naire. Many have provided suggestions for strengthening the document to avoid misunderstanding and misuse. The great majority of the responses have expressed appreciation for the process which the commission is following and for the opportunity to study and discuss this issue. It is apparent that this document is being widely discussed and studied throughout the synod, and the commission is grateful that so many have shared their reactions.

15. Is it the commission's intention to present a final draft of this document for adoption at the convention in Pittsburgh?

No. Various rumors and reports notwithstanding, this has never been the commission's intention. The commission has been working on this assignment for over ten years, and its work will not be completed until all responses have been received and analyzed, critical issues have again been raised and discussed, and a final draft of the document has been prepared and approved. The commission has no desire or intention to rush this critical process. At the same time, it does seek to complete this assignment as soon as possible, hopefully well in advance of the 1995 convention of the synod.

16. Does the commission plan to offer a detailed report to the synod on the responses it has received to this study document?

Yes. At its meeting in April 1992 the commission asked its executive director to prepare such a report for timely publication, if possible in one of the seminary journals. This report will also set forth some of the basic presuppositions underlying the study document and clarify some apparent misunderstandings about its purpose and content.

Endnotes

1. *Convention Proceedings*, 1981, Resolution 3-03A, "To Prepare Guidelines for Inter-Christian Relationships."

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2. See Appendix A in "Inter-Christian Relationships: An Instrument for Study," CTCR, 1991, pp. 48-52.
 3. For a detailed report on the results of these conferences see the *Convention Workbook*, 1986, pp. 105-108.
 4. *Handbook of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod*, 1989, p. 9.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
 6. *Convention Proceedings*, 1971, Resolution 3-26, "To Study 'A Statement Regarding Lutheran Unity.'"
 7. *Convention Proceedings*, 1965, Resolution 3-12, "To Enter Proposed Lutheran Council in the USA."
 8. *Convention Proceedings*, 1977, pp. 45-46: "On the basis of the study and evaluation called for in 1971 Res. 3-18 the CTCR therefore concludes that Missouri Synod participation in LCUSA is consistent with the Synod's scriptural and confessional position" (p. 46).
 9. *Convention Proceedings*, 1969, Resolution 3-14, "To Apply for Membership in Lutheran World Federation."
 10. Cf. *Convention Workbook*, 1977, p. 44.
 11. *Convention Proceedings*, 1977, Resolution 3-02A, "To Declare a State of 'Fellowship' with the ALC."
 12. "The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship," A Report of the CTCR, 1981, p. 9.
 13. *Ibid.*
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
 16. *Ibid.*

17. Ibid.
18. To provide information on a number of questions raised concerning the CTCR's assignment and its "Study Instrument" on "Inter-Christian Relationships" the Executive Director of the CTCR prepared a document entitled "Questions and Answers: 'Inter-Christian Relationships: An Instrument for Study' (CTCR, 1991)" and distributed it to the Council of Presidents on May 1, 1992, for their use in responding to various inquiries. These *Questions and Answers* are attached as an appendix to this article.
19. C. F. W. Walther, *Walther and the Church*, ed. Wm Dallmann, W. H. T. Dau, and Th. Engelder (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1938), p. 70. Cf. *Die Stimme unserer Kirche in der Frage von Kirche und Amt* (1852), p. 179: "denn wer nicht in innerlicher Gemeinschaft mit den Gläubigen und Heiligen steht, der steht auch nicht in Gemeinschaft mit Christo; hingegen wer durch den Glauben in Gemeinschaft mit Christo steht, der steht auch in Gemeinschaft mit allen denen, in denen Christus wohnt, d.i. mit der unsichtbaren Kirche. Wer daher die Seligkeit an die Gemeinschaft mit irgend einer sichtbaren Kirche bindet, stöszt damit den Artikel von der Rechtfertigung eines armen Sünders von Gott allein durch den glauben an Jesum Christum um."
20. "Theology of Fellowship," A Report of the CTCR, 1965, pp. 18-19. Cf. 1967 Resolution 2-13, "To Adopt 'Theology of Fellowship' for Reference and Guidance."
21. Ibid., p. 28.
22. Ibid.
23. "A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism," A Report of the CTCR, 1974, p. 9.
24. Ibid., p. 12.
25. Ibid.
26. *Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod*, 1970, p. 51.

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27. On the basis of this unit concept understanding of fellowship, for example, WELS considers it unionistic for "a soloist who does not share our faith to lead us in worship" at a wedding service; cf. *The Northwestern Lutheran*, October 1983, p. 278. It is also considered unionistic for a WELS congregation to have a non-WELS member play the organ for public worship, or for a WELS member to play the organ in a congregation not in church fellowship with WELS; cf. *The Northwestern Lutheran*, April 15, 1989, p. 152. In response to the question as to whether it would be contrary to the WELS teaching on church fellowship to sing Handel's *Messiah* with a community chorus, the answer is that it all depends. If the purpose of the singing is that the chorus "merely performs the great works of choral heritage," then participation by a WELS member "is not religious unionism—the false fellowship of disparate faiths." But "if some in the community chorus want to make the singing of the *Messiah* an expression of religious oneness," then the "confessional response must be to withdraw"; cf. *The Northwestern Lutheran*, November 15, 1990, p. 397.
 28. Letter from Professor W. M. Oesch, D.D., and Pastor Manfred Roensch, Dr. Theol., to President Oscar J. Naumann, July 28, 1961 (in the files of the CTCR).
 29. "The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship," pp. 18-19.
 30. Ibid., p. 19.
 31. *A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1932), p. 14.
 32. "The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship," p. 46.