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## **Confessional Lutheranism in the Ecumenical World: A Missouri Synod Challenge**

**Samuel H. Nafzger**

In the spring of 2004, a Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) pastor doing graduate studies at General Theological Seminary in New York sent me a copy of an essay he had written for the Anglican/Lutheran Historical Conference. The title of his paper was “The Ecumenical Agenda of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.” He began this paper with these words:

Curious things happen whenever “ecumenism” and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod are mentioned in the same breath. Eyebrows are raised. Laughter, registering everything from incredulity and sarcasm to exasperation and unease, can be heard. Invariably someone utters some form of “Now, I’ve got to hear that!” Even more curious is the fact that very often these reactions arise from within the Synod’s membership. The topic of this paper . . . produced some rather interesting reactions. One individual was rather astonished. “You mean there actually is an ecumenical agenda?” Another provided the gentle reminder that, unless the conference was considering composer John Cage, a blank sheet of paper would hardly qualify as acceptable, although it might be eminently readable. Still another posed the rather intriguing question, “How many ways can you find to say the word ‘No’?”<sup>1</sup>

An e-mail I received a couple of weeks ago while I was working on this presentation illustrates this point of view. Its author asked:

In view of Synod’s Constitution (Article III, Sec. 1) why does the Missouri Synod not consider the subject of Ecumenism to be a top priority? I have been a member of LC—MS congregations now for over 75 years, and there does not seem to be any interest at all in this subject, on the part of congregations, Districts, or the Synod as a whole. . . . I know we have occasional talks and dialogues with the ELCA, but there

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<sup>1</sup> Edward J. Callahan, “The Ecumenical Agenda of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod” (unpublished paper in the Commission on Theology and Church Relations files, 2004).

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is no true emphasis on Ecumenism, and there are many in our Synod that wonder why.<sup>2</sup>

It is also true, however, that not everyone agrees with the viewpoint expressed above. There are those who feel that the Missouri Synod has already gone overboard in its involvement in ecumenism. When it was announced in the Synod's official paper, *The Reporter*, for example, that the LCMS had accepted an invitation to rejoin the Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue in the USA, a layman from the Southeastern District of the Synod sent me the following letter:

Perhaps . . . the Catholics now see a glimmer of hope that they may drag some more Lutherans down the abyss with them as they have done with the ELCA. Before we go chasing after new doctrines, perhaps we should get our own house in order. . . . The message we have, the Catholics have already heard and rejected. I believe participation in this proposed round of discussions to be nothing more than an *ego trip for LCMS executives!* In my opinion, you will be squandering the Lord's treasury if you spend one cent, or even one minute, on this endeavor, while there are so many true mission opportunities to the unchurched needing our support! Do I sound outraged? You bet I am.<sup>3</sup>

Each of these viewpoints is reflective of attitudes and positions regarding ecumenical endeavors not only of lay but also clergy members of the LCMS. These polar opposite positions on Missouri Synod involvement (or lack thereof) in ecumenical endeavors are indicative of the spectrum of views which are present in the Missouri Synod about ecumenism, views that I have sought to take into account as I worked on this assignment.<sup>4</sup>

In order to address the challenge that "the world of ecumenism" poses for the Missouri Synod, which certainly wants to be a confessional Lutheran church, I believe that it would be most helpful if we first of all took a look at what the Lutheran Confessions have to say about the church and its unity.<sup>5</sup> It will then be helpful if we sketch out the position of the

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<sup>2</sup> E-mail message to author, December 13, 2006 (on file in the CTCR offices).

<sup>3</sup> Letter to the author, December 2, 2005 (on file in the CTCR offices); emphasis in the original.

<sup>4</sup> This article was originally a paper delivered at the 2007 Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The topic of this paper was assigned.

<sup>5</sup> All members of the Synod, which includes the congregations of the Synod, have signed its constitution. The Confessional article of the LCMS constitution says that every member of the Synod accepts without reservation "all the Symbolical Books of the

Missouri Synod on ecumenism as presented in the Synod's constitution, doctrinal statements, and resolutions, as well as consider what the Synod has actually done by way of involvement in ecumenical endeavors. Only then will it be possible to say something about the nature of the challenge which the ecumenical world poses for the LCMS.

### I. The Lutheran Confessions on the Doctrine of the Church and Its Unity

The Lutheran confessional writings do not explicitly address the topic of ecumenism. They do present a clear doctrine of the church, however, which, as Robert Preus has pointed out, is "well thought through,"<sup>6</sup> and which lays out the theological foundation for the ecumenical endeavors of a confessional Lutheran church, and which does indeed talk about how to work for external unity in the church.

The "one holy, catholic church," says Philipp Melancthon in Augsburg Confession VII, is "the assembly of all believers" (CA VII, 1; German) or "the assembly of saints" (CA VII, 1; Latin). The Apology of the Augsburg Confession calls the church "a spiritual people . . . reborn through the Holy Spirit" (Ap VII and VIII, 14). Martin Luther, in the Large Catechism, states that the church is "a holy little flock and community of pure saints under one head, Christ" (LC II, 51), and in the Smalcald Articles he refers to the church as "holy believers and 'the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd'" (SA III, 12, 2). In so describing the church, the Lutheran confessors demonstrate their agreement with the understanding of the church and its unity presented in the Nicene Creed where it is confessed that we believe "in one holy, catholic, and apostolic church."<sup>7</sup>

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Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God." LCMS Constitution, art. 2, sec. 2. It is therefore to the writings contained in *The Book of Concord* that we must turn in order to see what confessional Lutheranism believes the Scriptures teach about the doctrine of the church and its unity.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Preus, "The Basis for Concord," in *Formula for Concord: Essays* (St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1977), 12.

<sup>7</sup> The inclusion of the three Ecumenical creeds in *The Book of Concord* provides a clear insight into the Lutheran confessors' understanding of ecumenism. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, in the "Editors' Introduction to The Three Ecumenical Creeds," state: "The compilers of the Book of Concord itself understood the Augsburg Confession as a creed or, using the Greek and Latin term they preferred, 'symbol' of their time, reflecting the same faith as found in the three ecumenical creeds. . . . Inclusion of the ecumenical creeds in sixteenth-century books of doctrine dates back at least to the *Corpus doctrinae Philippicum* of 1560. . . . Their inclusion underscored the deep conviction

Lest he be misunderstood in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Melanchthon not only says what the church is; he also confesses what it is not. The Apology expressly rejects the position of Roman Catholicism that the church consists of all those who profess the Christian faith *and* who are also under the rule of legitimate pastors and the Roman Pope. According to Melanchthon and the Lutheran confessors, the church is not essentially a visible, tangible, entity or institution.<sup>8</sup> The church is the assembly of believers, of those who truly have faith in their hearts in Jesus Christ.

This understanding of the church and its unity leads the Lutheran confessors to make a fundamental distinction between what they referred to as the church *properly* speaking (*proprie dicta*), and the church *broadly* speaking (*late dicta*). Responding to Rome's rejection of the understanding of the church as "the assembly of the saints" (CA VII, 1), Melanchthon writes: "We grant that in this life hypocrites and evil people are mingled with the church and are members of the church according to the external association of the church's signs—that is, the Word, Confession of faith, and sacraments—especially if they have not been excommunicated" (Ap VII and VIII, 3). However, this does not mean, he continues, that the

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among Evangelical theologians that the Reformation, far from breaking with the ancient church, upheld and recovered the chief teachings of the universal Christian faith. Throughout the history of the church, people have witnessed to that gospel, as the creeds themselves bear testimony." In *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, tr. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Robert Bellarmine, who writes: "The church is an assembly of men, an assembly which is visible and perceptible to the senses just like an assembly of the Roman citizenry, or the kingdom of France or the Republic of Venice." *Disputationes de Controversiis Christianae* (Paris, 1615), I:982. This continues to be the Roman Catholic understanding of the church down to the present. Karl Rahner, for example, writes: "Since the visibleness and visible unity of the Church are constituted by the sacramental and juridical authority of the Church (which latter includes in its turn the teaching and ruling authority of the Church), *all and only those belong to the Church as members who are visibly, i.e., in the external form, subject to two powers of the Church. And everyone who, on the social plane, is cut off or has withdrawn himself from one or both of these powers, is not a member of the Church.*" Rahner, "Membership in the Church According to the Teaching of Pius XII's Encyclical '*Mystic's Corporis Christi*,'" in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2, trans. Carl Kruger (Baltimore: Helican Press, 1963), 17; emphasis added. Cf. also "*Dominus Iesus*": *On the Unity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Churches*, issued on September 5, 2000, by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It was published in *Origins* 30, no. 14 (2000): 209–219. Paragraph 17 states that "the ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery, are not Churches in the proper sense."

church is "only an association of external ties and rites like other civic organizations." On the contrary, the church "is principally an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of persons" (Ap VII and VIII, 5). Lest he be misunderstood, Melanchthon then repeats what he had said earlier:

Hypocrites and wicked people are indeed associated with this true church according to the external rites, nevertheless when the church is defined, it must be defined as that which is the living body of Christ and as that which is the church in fact as well as in name. . . . If we define the church only in terms of an external government consisting of both the good and the wicked, people will not understand that the kingdom of Christ is the righteousness of the heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Instead they will think that it is only the external observance of certain religious rites and rituals. (Ap VII and VIII, 12-13)

He concludes: "Thus, the church, which is truly the kingdom of Christ, is precisely speaking the congregation of the saints" (Ap VII and VIII, 16). In other words, the Apology clearly distinguishes between the *una sancta*, "the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church," which is the church properly speaking, and the local and territorial entities with their rites, orders, and external membership, which is the church broadly speaking.

This does not mean, however, that the Lutheran confessors regarded the church as some kind of a "platonic republic" which did not actually exist in the real world. This church really does exist, insists Melanchthon. It consists of "true believing and righteous people scattered throughout the entire world" (Ap VII and VIII, 20). True, the church properly speaking is hidden from human eyes. Its actual limits are not visible. But we do know where it is located because of its "marks: the pure teaching of the gospel and the sacraments" (Ap VII and VIII, 20).<sup>9</sup> Wherever the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered, there is the church. It is made up of real people. It never exists, however, as an institution. As

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Preus notes that "the Word does not cease being a mark when it is for some reason not taught in all its truth and purity. The intrusion of error does not automatically or immediately destroy the marks of the entire congregation. Paul struggled with this situation at Corinth and Galatia. . . . This seems to be essentially what Melanchthon is saying throughout [CA] Article VII." Preus, "The Basis for Concord," 18 n. 11. See also C. F. W. Walther, who says that the Reformed church may be called "a true visible church in a *qualified* sense." Walther, "Communion Fellowship: Western District Convention 1870," in *Essays for the Church*, vol. 1, 1857-1879 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 203; emphasis added.

Luther once put it, "The church that is without sin must be invisible and spiritual and is grasped only by faith."<sup>10</sup>

This understanding of the church had fundamental implications for how the Lutheran confessors regarded their efforts to overcome their disagreements with Rome. The purpose of their confession at Augsburg, as they saw it, was not to bring about the unity of the church in the strict sense. This unity already existed. They were members of this church even though they were no longer a part of the church in Rome. Their hope and their desire was to overcome the divisions in visible Christendom. It was to this task which they devoted their energies in writing the Augsburg Confession and its Apology.

The compilers of the confessional documents included in *The Book of Concord* emphasize the desires of the Lutherans "to live in one Christian church in unity and concord" (CA Preface, 4). In the Preface to *The Book of Concord*, they made it clear how the agreement in confession demanded by the Holy Scriptures could actually be achieved. "There was no better way," they said, to overcome their disagreements with Rome as well as the later internal disagreements that had arisen among the Lutherans themselves, than "thoroughly and accurately, on the basis of God's Word, to explain and decide the divisions that had arisen in connection with all the disputed articles, to expose and reject false teaching, and clearly confess the divine truth" (Preface to Book of Concord, 8). As the writers of the Formula of Concord had put it, they sought genuine agreement in confession that would not be guilty of "papering over differences and simply giving the appearance of unity." Rather, they wanted "to treat the issues in a fundamental way" (FC SD XII, 5). Compromise on doctrinal matters as a way to achieve concord in the church was out of the question for them. The authors of the Formula of Concord state: "[W]e have no intention of giving up anything of the eternal, unchangeable truth of God (which we also do not have the power to do) for the sake of temporal peace, tranquility, and outward unity" (FC SD XI, 95).

This way of working for external unity in the church, they maintained, "keeps God's honor intact, does not abandon the divine truth of the holy gospel, and concedes nothing to the slightest error." They were convinced that "enduring unity in the church requires above all else a clear and binding summary and form in which a general summary of teaching is

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]*, 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-1993), 7:710,2-3.

drawn together from God's Word, to which the churches that hold the true Christian religion confess their adherence" (FC SD Rule and Norm, 1).

To summarize, the Lutheran confessors clearly distinguish between the church properly speaking and the church broadly speaking. The unity of the church properly speaking already exists. Its unity is a given. It comes with faith in the heart. The church broadly speaking as it manifests itself in the world, however, is not united. It is divided, rent by divisions and schism. Genuine concord in the church broadly speaking can be attained only on the basis of agreement in the faith which is confessed, the *fides quae*, that is, on the basis of doctrinal agreement, as the Formula of Concord states: "For this reason the churches are not to condemn one another because of differences in ceremonies when in Christian freedom one has fewer or more than the other, as long as these churches are otherwise united in teaching (doctrina) and in all the articles of the faith as well as in the proper use of the holy sacraments" (FC SD X, 31; emphasis added).

## **II. Ecumenism in the LCMS**

Article III of the Synod's Constitution provides the framework and sets the tone for the LCMS's official position on ecumenism. The very first "objective" or purpose for the formation of the Synod is that

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 structures toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies, and provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism (Rom. 16:17), and heresy. (LCMS Constitution, art. 3, sec. 1)

According to its constitution, ecumenical endeavors must have high priority in the life of the Synod. The actual wording used in the LCMS Constitution is important. This article states that the Synod shall both "conserve" the unity of the true faith, and that it shall "promote" it. The unity of the true faith possesses a two-fold dimension. It is a "given," but it is also something "to be striven for."

Moreover, in this article the Synod states that *conserving* and *promoting* unity is not simply a theoretical matter. It demands actual effort on the part of the members of the Synod. The Synod shall "work" through its official structures. It is necessary that the members of the Synod actually do something to implement "the unity of the true faith." It is also significant that the scope of these ecumenical endeavors, according to the Missouri Synod's constitution, extends to "other Christian church bodies" and not just to other Lutherans. Finally, the Synod in this constitutional article recognizes that these ecumenical endeavors "provide a united

defense against schism, sectarianism and heresy." Conserving and promoting the unity of the true faith will help the Synod to keep from falling into isolationalistic sectarianism and the sin of separatism on the one hand and into false teachings based on a compromise of the gospel on the other. Both of these errors produce the scandal of divisions in visible Christendom.

Article VI of the Synod's Constitution is also relevant when delineating the position of the Synod on ecumenism. This article lists as the first two requirements for holding membership in the Synod the "acceptance of the confessional basis of Article II" and the "renunciation of unionism and syncretism" (LCMS Constitution, art. 6, sec. 1-2). Two examples of the latter are expressly listed:

- a. Serving congregations of mixed confession, as such, by ministers of the church;
- b. Taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession. (LCMS Constitution, art. 6, sec. 1)<sup>11</sup>

This official "condition of membership" (as the constitution calls it) on the part of synodical pastors and congregations regarding joint participation in ecumenical worship services is often misunderstood, especially outside the Synod, but also by many within the Synod. Moreover, it is to a large extent responsible for the popular belief that the Missouri Synod has no ecumenical agenda, or, even worse, that it is anti-ecumenical.<sup>12</sup>

The Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR)—the entity which since 1962 has been given the task to provide guidance to the Synod in matters of church relations—has been asked to prepare no less than ten documents in its 45 years of existence on the subject of ecumenism.<sup>13</sup> These CTCR reports delineate and discuss the principles

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<sup>11</sup> See Samuel H. Nafzger, "Syncretism and Unionism," *Concordia Journal* 29 (2003): 240-264.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. LCMS, "Resolution 3-03B: To Study Fellowship Principles and Practices," in 1998 *Convention Proceedings* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1998), 114. See also the results of an analysis of 4300 responses to "The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship," a document prepared by the President of the Synod and the CTCR, in 2001 *Convention Workbook* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2001), 48-51.

<sup>13</sup> These reports and reviews include "Theology of Fellowship" (1965); *A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism* (1974); *The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship* (1981); "The LCMS Response to the Commission on Faith and Order of The World

which govern the Synod's ecumenical endeavors. It will be helpful, I believe, to highlight some of these principles.

After a review of the Scriptures, the early church, and the Reformation period on fellowship matters, "Theology of Fellowship" (1965) calls upon the Synod to be on guard against the twin dangers of unionism and separatism and to "shun" both of them. This document concludes with guidelines which it calls "Scripturally sound, and in harmony with the Lutheran Confessions." The first two of these guidelines are the following:

1. Our Synod should treasure the fellowship in the Gospel and in the sacraments which it enjoys with its sister churches and which it expresses through what is usually called pulpit and altar fellowship; and it should foster this fellowship with all diligence;
2. Our Synod should work zealously for the extension of this fellowship by engaging in doctrinal discussion with other churches in the interest of achieving such fellowship where this can be done without compromising sound doctrine.<sup>14</sup>

The 1974 report *A Lutheran Stance toward Ecumenism* most directly relates to this topic. In this document the CTCR defines "as ecumenical

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Council of Churches to the Text of 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry'" (1985); "Inter-Christian Relationships: An Instrument for Study" (1991); "A Response to the U. S. Lutheran-Roman Catholics Dialogue Report VII 'Justification by Faith'" (1992); "Admission to the Lord's Supper: Basics of Biblical and Confessional Teaching" (1999); "The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship" and "The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship: A Report on Synodical Discussions" (both of these documents were prepared jointly by the President's Office and the CTCR in 2000); and "Guidelines for Participation in Civic Events" (2004). In addition to the documents listed above, in 1999 the CTCR prepared and distributed to the members of the Synod study guides for "The Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification," "The Porvoo Statement and Declaration," and "The Formula of Agreement" (adopted by the ELCA, the Presbyterian Church [USA], the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ).

<sup>14</sup> The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Commission on Theology and Church Relations, "Theology of Fellowship," in *Supplement to the Report and Recommendation of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1965), 27. This report was adopted by the Synod in 1969 for "Reference and Guidance." It is important to note, in view of the withdrawal of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) from the Synodical Conference, that this report states on the same pages that "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. . . ." "Theology of Fellowship," 27–28.

endeavors" all those efforts which have as their purpose "to remove the barriers that separate Christians into denominational groups" and to end "strife and divisions among Christ's 'afflicted and scattered churches' (Ap Preface, 19)."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, "God-pleasing concord and harmony" in the church is one of the "fruits of the Spirit" for which Christians "earnestly long and fervently pray."<sup>16</sup>

On the basis of a review of Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians, and Paul's letters to Timothy, as well as of the Lutheran Confessions, this report discusses topics such as the sphere and the scope of ecumenical endeavors. It is important to pay special attention to what this document says about the goal of ecumenical endeavors. It states:

Since the sphere of ecumenical endeavors is properly the *Una Sancta*, it is self-evident that the goal of such efforts is not to create the unity of the church (*unitas, Enigkeit der Kirche*). The *unitas* of the *Una Sancta* is given with the faith that joins all Christians to their one Head, Christ, and to each other in the little holy flock which is without sect or schism (LC II, 51). The unity of the church is the presupposition, not the goal, of ecumenical endeavors. (CA Preface, 10)

Ecumenical endeavors are directed toward achieving unity *in* the church. While *unitas* is a constant characteristic of the church, *concordia* is not. Instead of concord, agreement, and peace, there are dissensions (Ap XII, 90) and religious disputes (FC SD XI, 94) which cause "divisions." (FC SD Rule and Norm, 19)

It is to those divisions which obscure and seem to belie the unity of the church that Lutheran ecumenism addresses itself in the spirit of the Augsburg Confession in order to bring about Christian concord.<sup>17</sup>

Understood in this sense, the CTCR does not hesitate to speak of "the necessity of ecumenical endeavors."<sup>18</sup>

Building on its earlier reports, in 1981 the CTCR directed its attention to *The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship*. In this report it

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<sup>15</sup> The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1974), 4

<sup>16</sup> *A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> *A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism*, 9.

<sup>18</sup> *A Lutheran Stance toward Ecumenism*, 9; emphasis added.

presents nine "Scriptural Principles of Fellowship."<sup>19</sup> On the basis of these principles, the Commission proceeded to evaluate four models for achieving external unity in the church that are frequently mentioned in the ecumenical world today: first, "Conciliarity," promoted by the World Council of Churches; second, "Reconciled Diversity," which has its origins in the Lutheran World Federation (in an essay which was given in 1977 at the LWF Assembly in Dar es Salaam); third, "Selective Fellowship," sometimes suggested by members of the LCMS, and which was actually practiced for a time by the old ALC; and, fourth, "Ecclesiastical Declaration of Altar and Pulpit Fellowship" based on the results of doctrinal discussions held by representatives of two church bodies moving towards church fellowship, which was the historic practice of Lutheran churches throughout the world.<sup>20</sup> Following its evaluation of each of these models, the CTCR concluded:

Of those models for external unity in the church which have been examined in this report, only ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit offer at least the possibility for being able to take into account all of what 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.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to this recommendation, the Commission also urged that the Synod "continue to study the topic of fellowship" so that the members of the Synod can develop greater understanding and consensus with respect to the implications of the Scriptural principles of fellowship "for relationships and activities between Christians belonging to churches not in church fellowship with the Synod" at the congregational, pastoral, and individual levels.<sup>22</sup> The assignment to prepare such guidelines was

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<sup>19</sup> The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1981), 13–16; hereafter *Nature and Implications*.

<sup>20</sup> These evaluations appear in *Nature and Implications*, 21–38.

<sup>21</sup> *Nature and Implications*, 42. In coming to this conclusion, the Commission was actually renewing the recommendation which it had made sixteen years earlier in its "Theology of Fellowship" report.

<sup>22</sup> *Nature and Implications*, 43.

subsequently given to the CTCR by the Synod.<sup>23</sup> In response to this assignment, the CTCR in 1991 prepared a study document titled "Inter-Christian Relationships: An Instrument for Study," and it is presently nearing completion of its final response to this assignment.

One other important document should be mentioned. It has the title "The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship." In 2000 the CTCR, working jointly together with the Office of the President of the Synod, at the request of the Synod, prepared "Study Materials" for a discussion at the conventions of each of the Synod's 35 districts. This document was subsequently adopted by the Synod "for continued use and guidance" at its 2001 Convention.<sup>24</sup> This document begins by reaffirming the critically important distinction between the church's internal unity and its external unity:

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.<sup>25</sup>

This document reaffirms the historic position of Lutheranism that "doctrinal differences cannot be tolerated either within or between church bodies and are by their nature disruptive and divisive of altar and pulpit

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<sup>23</sup> See LCMS, "Resolution 3-03A: To Prepare Guidelines for Inter-Christian Relationships," in *1981 Convention Proceedings* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1981), 156.

<sup>24</sup> See LCMS, "Resolution 3-07A: To Commend 'The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship' and CTCR Report on the Synodical Discussions," in *2001 Convention Proceedings* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2001), 137–138.

<sup>25</sup> Office of the President and Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship: Study Materials* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2000), 5; hereafter *Church Fellowship: Study Materials*.

fellowship."<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that this document expressly states that it has not discussed "the many questions that remain concerning the various ways individual Christians might relate to each other,"<sup>27</sup> something which the Commission is addressing in its forthcoming report on inter-Christian guidelines.

Yet we must ask: How does the LCMS's actual practice in carrying out ecumenical endeavors stand up in light of its understanding of what the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions have to say about the church and its unity? Consistent with its understanding of the *necessity* of ecumenical endeavors, the Synod has been a part of almost all of the bilateral Lutheran dialogues held in the United States since 1965. It was a founding member of the Lutheran Council in the USA, and since 1998 it has declared itself to be in church fellowship with a number of church bodies around the world such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Latvia, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lithuania, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Haiti, and, most recently, with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya. It has done so only after having assured itself that the Synod was in fact in agreement in doctrine and practice with these churches. At its February 2007 meeting, the CTCR prepared a recommendation for the consideration of the June 2007 synodical convention on altar and pulpit fellowship with the American Association of Lutheran Churches (AALC). It should also be noted that the Synod has been a member of the International Lutheran Council (ILC) from the time of the Council's formation in 1993. The ILC includes in its membership church bodies with which it is not in altar and pulpit fellowship. At the same time, the Synod is not a member of the National Council of Churches or the World Council of Churches, and it has refused to join the Lutheran World Federation because membership in the LWF, either implicitly (before 1990) or explicitly (after 1990) means church fellowship with all of the Federation's members, many of which hold doctrinal positions contrary to that of the Synod. Moreover, when it became clear that the Synod was not in doctrinal agreement with the American Lutheran Church with which it had declared altar and pulpit fellowship in 1969, it terminated this relationship in 1981.

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<sup>26</sup> *Church Fellowship: Study Materials*, 16. In 1956 Franklin Clark Fry, president of the United Lutheran Church in America, wrote: "Insistence upon agreement in doctrine as a precondition for church fellowship is the distinguishing mark of Lutherans among all Protestants and should never be relaxed." "Franklin Clark Fry's Presentation of United Lutheran Attitude, 1956," in *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America*, ed. Richard C. Wolf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 547.

<sup>27</sup> *Church Fellowship: Study Materials*, 16.

I want to conclude this section with selected positions of a resolution adopted by the LCMS Convention in 1983. This resolution, titled "To Strive for External Unity in the Church," provides a good summary of the Synod's position on ecumenism.

WHEREAS, The Scriptures of God (Rom. 12:14-21; 15:5-6; Eph. 4:1-3; 1 Cor. 1:10-13; 2 Cor. 13:11; Gal. 2:4; Phil. 4:2) mandate the quest for church fellowship (in the sense of the external unity of the church), as well as its acknowledgement when there is agreement in the confession of the heavenly doctrine "according to God's Word of the Prophetic and Apostolic Scriptures . . ." (FC SD Comprehensive Summary 16); and . . .

WHEREAS, The true unity of the mystical body of Christ can never be broken or destroyed, for this unity consists of the unity of believers with our Lord Christ, nevertheless, this unity with Christ will move every true child of God to long for, to work toward, and urgently to pray that the visible church may be united in one confession, in love, in one great goal, in every way to express the unity which the members have with Christ their head, and which Christ the Son has with the Father and the Holy Spirit (John 17); therefore be it

*Resolved*, That in these last days we urgently pray God the Holy Spirit to grant unity and concord to the visible church on the basis of a pure and correct understanding of the doctrine revealed from heaven in the sacred Scriptures of the apostles and prophets; and be it further

*Resolved*, That we exhort one another to true and genuine contrition and repentance for the sins of prejudice, ridicule, caricature, separatism, pride, lack of Christian charity toward Christian people of other denominations, which hinder the work of the Spirit of God in bringing about the visible unity of the church and true Christian concord; and be it further

*Resolved*, That we recognize that contentious persons who constantly seek to "expose" the error of others, and so incite quarrels and division among us, are to be admonished according to the words of Christ and His apostle, Matt. 18:15-17 and Rom. 16:17; and be it further . . .

*Resolved*, That we . . . give priority to the question of how we may give expression to the external unity of the visible church without compromising the truth of our faith and confession; and be it further

*Resolved*, That we undertake this quest for external unity of the church with patience, willing to bear with one another's human failings and

weaknesses in both piety and understanding, so that as a Synod we may with one mouth and one tongue give glory to God . . . .<sup>28</sup>

### III. The Ecumenical World's Challenge to Missouri

The English word "ecumenical" is rooted in the Greek word *oikos*, which means "house," and in *oikoumene*, the Greek word for "inhabited world." The word "ecumenical" therefore is analogous to the word "catholic" or "pertaining to the whole."<sup>29</sup>

Understood in this sense, what does the "ecumenical" or whole church as it exists in the world today actually look like? There are, according to the most recent accounts of demographers, a little over six billion people on planet earth as we begin the twenty-first century. Approximately one-third of these people may be classified as in some sense Christian. Of these two billion Christians, 52.9% (1.1 billion) belong to the Roman Catholic Church and 10.8% (215 million) belong to the Orthodox communion. Anglicans (80 million) and Lutherans (80 million) each claim 4%. The remaining 28% of the world's Christians, at least according to David Barrett's 2001 edition of his *World Christian Encyclopedia*, belong to 34,000+ different Christian denominations.<sup>30</sup> This figure represents a 39% increase in new church bodies during the past twenty years. According to these figures, 660 new churches come into existence every year, or about 2 per day. These statistics, however, tell only a part of the story regarding the nature of what may well be the greatest challenge which the ecumenical world presents for the Missouri Synod at this point in time. In recent years, debate in our society over issues such as abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, and stem cell research has produced internal divisions in many American church bodies. These horizontal divisions frequently cut across the historical, vertical divisions between the denominations. The result is, for example, that pro-life Catholics and Lutherans may feel a

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<sup>28</sup> LCMS, "Resolution 3-02: To Strive for External Unity in the Church," in 1983 *Convention Proceedings* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1983), 153.

<sup>29</sup> *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church* states that the use of the term ecumenical began "in the *Lutheran Book of Concord* (1580), where the three ancient creeds are designated as 'the three catholic or ecumenical symbols.'" *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, ed. Julius Bodenseick (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965), 1:750.

<sup>30</sup> David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 2nd ed., 2 volumes (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1:3, and Table 7-5 on 2:10.

closer affinity for each other than they do for pro-choice members of their own church body.

There is an even more pervasive change taking place today that affects the entire world in which we live. I mean the contemporary communications revolution caused by the advent of the Internet. This development, coupled with the highly publicized sexual scandals of a number of church bodies, has strengthened the anti-institutional forces already present in the world today. As a result of these and many other developments, people are no longer gaining their identity from the organizations to which they belong to the same extent that people did a generation or two ago. The end product of the effects of such forces as these is the loss of a clear confessional identity of the traditional denominations, producing the phenomenon sometimes referred to as “ambiguous denominationalism” or “cafeteria catholicism.” Not all of the Lutherans are in the Lutheran church, not all the Baptists are in the Baptist church, and so forth.

These developments pose a major challenge for confessional Lutheran churches like the Missouri Synod as they seek to manifest the unity given with faith in Jesus Christ on the basis of church-body-level declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship. They insidiously eat away and undermine the corporate understanding of the church as the body of Christ, and they obscure the confessional underpinnings of a church body today that seeks to be faithful to its confessional foundation.

In order for Missouri to try and meet this challenge, it must, in my opinion—in addition to doing a better job of teaching its own members and instilling in them the teachings of confessional Lutheranism—also recognize that the topic of inter-Christian relationships and ecumenical efforts has not been exhausted with a reaffirmation of the historic Lutheran understanding of church fellowship based on agreement in doctrine and practice. To be sure, this must continue to be done. According to the Scriptures, “external unity in the church is a matter of the right confession of the prophetic and apostolic faith.”<sup>31</sup>

The topic of inter-Christian relationships, however, is so much larger than the doctrine of church fellowship. The Synod has been slow to recognize this fact. If the Missouri Synod is to meet the challenge cast its way by the ecumenical world of today, it will be necessary for it to become more, not less, engaged in opportunities to interact with brothers and

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<sup>31</sup> *Nature and Implications*, 15.

sisters in Christ not in church fellowship with the Synod. Theological symposia, for example, provide just one example as to how this can be done without compromising the principles of fellowship presented in the Lutheran Confessions. We in the LCMS must confess that there is a reason why the Synod's ecumenical record is so often misunderstood and caricatured today.

At the heart of confessional Lutheranism's understanding of the doctrine of the church is the distinction which the Lutheran Confessions make between the church properly speaking and the church broadly speaking. This is a distinction that many Christians today—including many in the Synod—do not seem to understand. When this distinction is not made, two errors threaten. These errors are illustrated by the examples mentioned at the beginning of this paper—the opposite reactions to the ecumenical endeavors of the LCMS. If the given unity *of* the church properly speaking is divorced from the scriptural mandate to seek doctrinal agreement, ecumenical endeavors will soon be regarded as a waste of time and effort, and separatistic sectarianism threatens. The unity in Christ shared by all Christians provides the motivation, as the Scriptures teach, for seeking to manifest this unity externally. On the other hand, if the unity *of* the church is identified with concord in the church, then “faith in the heart” becomes the basic criteria for external unity. Faith in the heart, however, is hidden from view. Inevitably the apostolic admonition of the Scriptures—“that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you” (1 Cor 1:10), to avoid those “who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine you have been taught” (Rom 16:17), and “to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:30)—are set aside and made of no effect. The end result is doctrinal compromise which undermines and threatens the very means through which the unity of the church comes into being in the first place.

The LCMS is committed to confessional ecumenism. It has an ecumenical agenda. Together with the Lutheran confessors of the sixteenth century, it desires to manifest the oneness in Christ that it has with all Christians by being united with them “in teaching and in all the articles of the faith as well as the proper use of the holy sacraments” (FC SD X, 31). If it does not do this, it ceases being a confessional Lutheran Church. In a 1957 essay titled “The Nature of the Unity We Seek: A Missouri Synod Lutheran View,” Martin Franzmann wrote:

We desire that men be united in a gladly resolute, radical, and total submission of faith to God as he has revealed himself in his Son, Jesus Christ. . . . This Word made flesh, this Son of God, in turn, is known to us

only and can become ours only by the apostolic word of those who witness to him, those words which the living, potent, and creative presence of the Paraclete has made to be the divinely valid witness to Christ . . . . We have Christ in this inerrantly loosing and binding apostolic word, or we do not have him at all. We seek unity, then, as we seek it under God and in Christ, in a full and common obedience to Holy Scripture.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Martin H. Franzmann, "The Nature of the Unity We Seek: A Missouri Synod Lutheran View," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 28 (1957): 801-802.