

The Response of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland to the LWF study document “The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion”

Part I: The gift of communion (ecclesiological)

- 1) *What concepts and ideas in the study document are most helpful for strengthening the identity of your church?*

Budapest 1984 Assembly: altar and pulpit fellowship as an indication of communion

The document is a helpful reminder to the member churches of the statement and commitments made by the LWF at the Budapest 1984 Assembly on the communion of the Lutheran churches “in pulpit and altar fellowship, in common witness and service, in the joint fulfillment of the missionary task, and in openness to ecumenical cooperation, dialogue and community”, and that communion is an expression of “the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church”.

The statement implies that the visible unity of the church is already concretely, if not fully, a reality among the Lutheran churches, which also makes it easier for the churches of the Lutheran tradition to fulfil their ecumenical vocation with the other world communions. It therefore concludes: “Thus, they are committed to work for the manifestation of the unity of the church given in Jesus Christ.” For our church and her members, this formulation enables an understanding of the close connection we enjoy with other member churches within the family of the LWF.

The ecclesiological nature of LWF organs and the member churches?

The concrete organisation of the world communion should also be seen as a sign of the character of the LWF’s communion, and as an “expression and instrument of this communion” in the process of becoming “increasingly a conciliar, mutually committed communion by furthering consultation and exchange among its member churches and other churches of the Lutheran tradition”. However, this also raises questions concerning the ecclesiological status of the LWF secretariat, council, church leaders’ meetings, and assemblies in relation to member churches. This remains unclear, and represents a challenge to our understanding of the concrete meaning of our membership of the worldwide communion. It is clear that these organs possess some of the features of consistorial, conciliar, or synodical decision making and episcopé within the LWF.

The gift through word and sacraments as the basis of communion in Christ

Concerning the theological and existential understanding of the emerging communion, it is helpful to describe its development as a “gift”. It is a sacramental gift of God – a gift and a task. His Holy Spirit leads us closer to each other through word and sacraments. This makes it easier for Lutherans to understand the nature and purpose of “communion ecclesiology” as a manifestation of the real presence of Christ in word, sacrament, and in believers’ faith in Christ. The pure proclamation of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments and the divinely instituted ministry serving them belong to the core of Lutheran ecclesiology, along with faith and love as the fruits of the gospel’s

proclamation. It is therefore important and helpful to our understanding and identity to connect communion (*koinonia*) with Christ in word and sacraments “through faith and participation in his saving work” with “...[a] deep solidarity with one another [that] intrinsically includes the sharing of material and spiritual resources”, and that “...this impels mutual commitment and common life and action”.

Unity in visibility, diversity and dynamism

It is both very important and helpful to underline that if the goal of ecumenical work is not uniformity, nor should it be within the Lutheran family of churches. Furthermore, it is good to emphasise that we are not alone in the world as Lutherans. We are also accountable in our ecumenical relationships: for example, the form of communion is described in Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue as “unity in visibility, diversity and dynamism”. To use General Secretary Martin Junge’s terminology: we aim to be “transcontextual”. It is important to recognise the context, but at the same time we are and aim to be part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church of Jesus Christ.

Episcopal ministers’ meetings as an instrument of communion?

Regarding the work of the LWF as an “expression and instrument of communion”, it might be good to utilise better the potential of meetings of episcopal ministers (bishops and others who exercise episkopé) as an instrument of communion building in the LWF’s tool box. The Lund statement on Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church states: “Episcopal ministers are called especially to serve the church’s unity and its living tradition in ways that are clearly recognizable and accountable.” From an ecclesiological perspective, the Lutheran local churches are basic units, and the LWF secretariat already serves the bishops and other church leaders in facilitating joint gatherings, consultations, and projects. One of the archbishops or presiding bishops could act as chair of the LWF episcopal ministers’ meeting, following the principle of rotation. A concrete way to organise this might be to have an episcopal ministers’ meeting as part of a regional LWF church leaders’ meeting within the LWF Assembly. The episcopal ministry is already involved in these meetings in practice. This dimension could be developed further, and would also represent a step forward ecumenically.

From LWF to LC?

“Lutheran World Federation. A Communion of Churches” may be interpreted as ambivalent and signalling that the communion cannot decide whether it is a federation or a communion. Following the model of the “Anglican Communion” and the “World Communion of Reformed Churches”, renaming the LWF officially as the “Lutheran Communion” would represent a conclusive step. This would help to contribute to a more coherent understanding of the “Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion”. The 500th anniversary of the Reformation presents a good opportunity for this change.

2) Does this document help your church to understand itself as part of the global Lutheran communion?

We Lutherans need each other

The Nordic folk churches have traditionally enjoyed close relations with their respective nation states, and this remains the case, in spite of the fact that these churches are very active, both internationally and ecumenically. A process of transformation in the context of intercultural challenge is in progress.

At the same time, however, the Europe-wide and globally neo-nationalistic tendencies and complex international political and interfaith challenges also influence our church. It is therefore important to underline that both the communion of the Lutheran churches and the ecumenical family of the church of Christ are at the same time global and local, manifested in local churches and congregations. This is what it means to speak of ecclesial catholicity. We are all both givers and receivers. This is part of the nature and mission of the church. The document may be helpful in the ongoing process of understanding the meaning of our changed situation as a folk church.

Support for our ecclesial Lutheran identity

Ecclesiology has not traditionally been a priority for reflection in the Lutheran tradition. It is therefore illuminating for many Lutherans to underline that the “development from federation to communion reflects an evolving understanding of an ecclesial relationship” and that this ecclesial development is explicitly connected with a biblically anchored communion ecclesiology. Communion ecclesiology is widely recognised as an ecclesiological foundation – even if it is understood differently in various ecclesiological traditions – as the Faith and Order document, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, indicates. It might also be useful for the LWF to reflect on the outcome of the Lutheran churches’ responses to this F&O document.

3) Share the theological themes arising in your church during the study process of this document

In general, the explication of the theological background and consequences of “autonomy and accountability” in ecclesial life is an acute theme for our church. As this LWF study process and the study process of our churches concerning the F&O document *The Church* run in parallel, some points are quoted here from the ELCF’s General Synod’s official statement about the F&O document of November 2015. In answering the question “What adaptations or renewal in the life of your church does this statement challenge your church to work for?” the main features of our General Synod’s reply were:

“We should... articulate more clearly... that we belong to a global communion of local churches. We should also continue to work to identify common criteria for discussion about legitimate and illegitimate diversity and moral questions in the church, and in our efforts for unity between the churches, as well as the concrete solutions that will best serve the church’s handling of such matters. ...The challenges of secularisation and religious and social pluralism call us to find new ways of acting and thinking that keep the word of God visible. Within the church this will require a correct balance between the faith experience of God’s people, the insights of individual theologians, and the discernment of those in ordained ministry concerning the faith and doctrine of the church. At the same time the ideals prevailing in our society highlight democratic decision making, requiring us to reflect on how the teaching office of the church and its normative tradition are understood in our own contexts. The word of God serves as a general criterion, but individual office holders, parishioners, and organs may interpret this in different situations in different ways, which can lead to tension. This will require ongoing work to strengthen unity within our church, between the church’s movements, and with other churches. The question often crystallises around who exercises authority in the church. Those who interpret the word, in particular public office holders and synodical institutions, should be able to recognise the limits of legitimate and illegitimate diversity, and thus safeguard the church’s unity (II D). At the same time, they should facilitate the transformation of the missional environment that is required

for legitimate diversity. The challenge is compounded by the fact that sometimes peripheral matters may become a threat to unity from the perspective of the teaching of the gospel. There is not always unanimity concerning specific criteria for unity and what is essential for the teaching of the gospel. The document therefore challenges us to examine unity from the perspective of the limits of legitimate diversity in the internal discussion and work of our church.

As a Nordic folk church, we are experiencing change in our traditional position in society. The loss of financial resources may be seen as an opportunity for the church to develop a more communal working structure and self-understanding. In this way *koinonia* might be realised more profoundly in the life of our church and its parishes. We will need to move away from clerical and church worker centred models towards a greater inclusion, accountability, and recognition of parishioners. The ecumenical welcome given to immigrants and the building of contacts with migrant churches also call us to adopt new ecclesiological models (cf. § 7). The fracturing of homogenous culture and its replacement by cultural pluralism calls our church to a continuous consideration of how we can proclaim the gospel in languages, symbols, and images that are meaningful in our own time (§ 28).

...In our consideration of the link between the church's decision making and the will of God, the WCC's experience of consensus decision making may prove helpful, aiming as it does 'to give voice to the voiceless and to uphold unity in diversity' (§ 54)."

Part II: Discerning and living out communion

1) Does the document help your church to relate constructively to diversity in its pastoral ministry?

From our perspective, the study document is correct in suggesting that we should ask ourselves "how to engage with disagreements in the communion in a critical but constructive way". One such area of disagreement relates to questions concerning family, marriage, and sexuality. The LWF document on Gender-Justice should be read in this light. It is helpful that the document reminds us that "we should not qualify these issues as 'socio-ethical' alone, but also as issues of church order and discipline that play a role in the proclamation of the gospel". We need to discuss and analyse the relationship between ethics, doctrine, and praxis more deeply.

Resources for accountable decision-making

The study document lists some good principles for accountable and constructive decision making:

- 1) The gospel is the core of our life in communion.
- 2) Word and sacraments are events of communion.
- 3) The message of the cross heals our brokenness.
- 4) The Word of God creates and affirms both unity and diversity.
- 5) The gospel entails freedom, respect and bearing with one another.

It is essential to underline (1) the importance of the gospel of Jesus Christ and his grace as the basis of our Christian faith and life. Grace is *extra nos*, not based on some kind of moralism. Yet we are called to new life in Christ in love. This commandment of love is expressed in the golden rule, in the Ten Commandments, and in the double commandment of love as a crystallisation of the law and the prophets. The natural moral law, understood within the theological context of law and gospel, continues to play a pivotal role in Lutheranism.

It is helpful to be reminded that the churches live in different contexts, and that “it is not always easy for churches in different contexts to appreciate pastoral considerations in other contexts”. It is wise advice to state that “members of the communion keep each other informed with regard to how they are trying to remain faithful to the gospel despite their contextual demands”. The situation is more difficult when within the same context different conclusions are drawn. When this arises it is important to emphasise that the representatives of both viewpoints seek to remain faithful to the gospel.

For Lutherans, the hermeneutical core of the Bible is “*was Christum treibet*”. However, this principle does not mean that the gospel should be interpreted in the abstract, but, rather, in the light of Scripture. The different perspectives of the four gospels, for example, suggest that diversity belongs to Christian witness. Christological dogma manifests a paradox and mystery at the centre of Christian faith. This is not to suggest that interpretation is arbitrary, but to emphasise our common faith in the work of the Triune God in creation, redemption, and sanctification, and in the humanity and divine Sonship of Jesus Christ, who is therefore our Saviour. The Christian life is to be a disciple of Christ.

It is important to recognise both the historical context of a particular biblical text and our various contemporary contexts. However, the perspective of our common Christian heritage that was also important for Luther, which views the church as both liturgical community and communion, should not be abandoned in the hermeneutical process. Only thus can the deep spiritual and theological meaning of any scriptural text be fully discovered.

It is also important to address question (2), concerning our sharing of the Eucharist and the endangering of communion when this is not possible. This requires further elaboration.

Where Lutheran identity and pastorally wise reflection are concerned, it is essential to highlight that (3) “the church is, above all else, the church of the cross, which is ever being rehearsed in our lives (1 Cor 1:18.25)”. In our context the theology of the cross is principally understood as a counterpart of the theology of glory and as a pastoral approach to the brokenness of our lives in the light of faith, hope, and love. Perhaps we might benefit from seeing and visualising the cross more as “an affirmation of God’s solidarity with... [the marginalized] and accompaniment in the story of liberation that is the history of God”.

The study makes the wise suggestion: (4) “Each church should be able to explain why and how biblical arguments are used in the discussion.” This is something we need to continue to explore.

It is useful and necessary to underline that (5) “the churches may be called to bear with one another, respecting differing choices as expressions of their own freedom”. However, we cannot avoid the question of truth and the challenge of explicating legitimate and illegitimate diversity on the basis of our common Christian faith. However difficult it may be, patient work done in an atmosphere of grace and truth may prevent church-dividing disputes and help us to maintain communion in discussing the issues that may jeopardise it. . Mutual prayer and service “is our antidote to pride and our path to bearing with the other in love.” In the section entitled “Need for discussion” (p. 24) it seems that the question of truth is encompassed by the conclusion: “The communion will need to explore healthy forums for mutual correction, exhortation and encouragement.” Such a forum would probably be useful both within our churches and for the links between them.

Points for further discussion

The Points for Further Consideration are most helpful and clear. Point one, which explains the concrete meaning of accountability, is especially useful for us in describing the inter-church context and the impact of our decisions on our pastoral work.

Point two gives a sufficiently concrete explanation of the hermeneutical task and challenge, while not neglecting the importance both of understanding Scripture as the Word of God and of the Lutheran Confessions.

Point three, concerning the diversity of voices, is necessary; it is also good to underline the interdependence of autonomy and accountability. However, the bullet points under point three are perhaps the most abstract: a reflection, no doubt, of the sensitive nature of the topic within the communion. There is a need for more concrete elaboration in this respect.

2) What are the practical ways to deal with different interpretations of the Bible that can strengthen churches in the communion?

It needs first to be clarified and explained how different conclusions can be drawn from the same texts of Scripture in the light of the Lutheran Confessions, our common Christian heritage, and our different contexts. It is easier to accept disagreement if and when it is cogently argued that different conclusions are possible on the basis of reason, faith, and tradition.

When interpretations are argued too narrowly on the basis of a certain contextual approach or of a biblicist textual interpretation without sufficient hermeneutical and doctrinal reflection, dialogue is more difficult. The Bible, Lutheran tradition, and context should all be considered in discussions between churches that aim to strengthen our communion.

Praying for each other and respecting each other’s search for truth and convictions without pressure or hidden or imperialistic agendas on the basis of mutual learning and openness as disciples of Christ may in the long run bring good results.

3) *Share examples of how your church is engaged in communion building and mutual relations*

The ELCF is active in many areas of communion building, in cooperation with the LWF. In our bilateral international contacts Finn Church Aid and our seven official mission organisations are especially active globally, and have many Lutheran and ecumenical partner churches worldwide. Our church also has bilateral agreements on partnership and cooperation with several Lutheran and other churches. Among the smaller Lutheran churches, we have especially close links with those in Estonia, Russia, and Hungary.

Our church is also active in the WCC and CEC, as well as in the Communion of Porvoo Churches. We are also a participating church in the CPCE. We have much fruitful exchange with our Nordic Lutheran partner churches and with our Baltic Lutheran friends. We have a long tradition of theological dialogue and other contacts with the Russian Orthodox Church. Our church is active in the Finnish Ecumenical Council, and has bilateral dialogues with the Catholic Church in Finland, the Finnish Orthodox Church, the Finnish Baptists, and the Methodists, while maintaining close contacts with the Pentecostals and the Evangelical Free Church.

In our own church cooperation with some of the Lutheran revival movements has faced some challenges, especially regarding the ordination of women, but also with regard to the administration of the sacraments. The bishops have met leaders of the revival movements and published guidelines on cooperation. The joint *Expression of Joint Will* (2009) by the bishops and revival movement leaders states: “1. We wish to promote the development that revival movements and the communities they form are more clearly than previously part of the activities of the church and parishes. In this way they will bring their input into the renewal of parish life. ... 3. We wish to act jointly in order to ensure that no one is discriminated against in the church on the basis of his or her gender, conviction, or view of the ordained ministry.” Currently, there is also a working group of the Bishops’ Conference which is reflecting on our policy regarding the so-called worship communities within our church. The working group aims to build bridges, facilitate constructive discussion, and prevent fragmentation. Where the occasionally polarised discussions on same-sex relationships and other sensitive issues are concerned, the bishops have published some theses under the title *Invitation to Fellowship* (2014). The discussion continues.

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