



A Note on Altar and Pulpit Fellowship in the LWF

1. At the 2012 NALC Convocation some delegates expressed reservations regarding the decision to apply for membership in the Lutheran World Federation and to ask our congregations to ratify this decision. Most of the reservations were based on Article III of the LWF Constitution, which declares, “The Lutheran World Federation is a communion of churches which confess the Triune God, agree in the proclamation of the Word of God and are united in pulpit and altar fellowship.” The concern is that joining the LWF will put the NALC in official altar and pulpit fellowship with all other members of the LWF.
2. The fellowship implications of joining the LWF are indeed a legitimate concern and joining should not be undertaken without understanding the full implications of membership. The LWF was founded in 1947 as a federation of Lutheran churches to coordinate their response to the suffering caused by the Second World War. Over the years the federation of Lutheran churches came to see itself as a communion of Lutheran churches and in 1984 adopted the goal of altar and pulpit fellowship on the basis of a common confessional subscription. Accordingly, in 1990 it incorporated into its Constitution the words of Article III quoted above.
3. This goal was never reached, a fact that the LWF acknowledged in 2009 in the “Report of the Renewal Committee.” Last year the LWF announced a five-year strategic plan, “Strategy 2012-2017.” In this plan the LWF articulated its current vision for the organization and outlined its goals for the next five years, leading up to the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. In doing so, it explicitly reinterpreted the relationship of member churches, not as “pulpit and altar fellowship” but rather as a form of “communion.”
4. In a detailed explanation of this concept it becomes clear that this “communion” refers to a fellowship that consists in respectful acknowledgement of differences in doctrine and practice combined with mutual admonition, forgiveness, encouragement, learning and sharing resources and activities to the extent that such sharing fosters the particular member church's mission (strategy, pp. 7-11). The absence of full doctrinal agreement among current members is now acknowledged, with explicit reference to disagreements on human sexuality and different interpretations of the Scriptures (p. 21a). Altar and pulpit fellowship is not mentioned even once in the catalog of Aims, Goals, and Strategy Commitments (Strategy, pp. 19-32).
5. The LWF’s current understanding of the relationship among its member churches leaves no doubt that membership in the LWF will not change our congregational fellowship practices at all. NALC congregations have the responsibility to determine who may commune with them. There are a variety of practices among our congregations on this matter, but the decision lies with the congregation. Likewise, NALC congregations have the responsibility to determine who

will lead worship in our congregations; presently our pastors, and in some cases the church councils, make these decisions. LWF membership would not alter these congregational rights and responsibilities.

6. The NALC as a whole may continue to seek formal fellowship agreements with other Lutheran bodies in accord with the NALC Constitution. At the present time the North American Lutheran Church has no formal agreement with any member church of the LWF except the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus.

7. Joining the LWF will make no change in the fellowship relationships of the NALC; but it will allow the NALC to join other Lutheran churches in defending orthodox Lutheranism within the LWF. It will also strengthen the voice of orthodoxy in global ecumenical discussions where the LWF is currently the only vehicle authorized to enter into dialog with other denominations on the global stage. May our witness to and through the LWF become one more opportunity for the Gospel of Jesus Christ to continue to sound throughout the world.

For the Joint Commission on Theology and Doctrine,

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