C. Healing Divisions Within the One Church

God's Spirit is actively healing the Church. Although considerable progress has been made in ecumenical relations in recent years, the healing of old divisions must continue. How do we draw upon the meaning and power of the sacraments for Christian unity? New questions have arisen about the profile, identity and role of Lutherans in these ecumenical relations. New challenges also arise from Christians with whom we have not been in dialogue. How is the LWF involved and how might it be involved in new ecumenical pursuits? What are the difficult matters that must be addressed? Toward what ends?

Life is a journey. Images of journeys abound in the Bible, from the Exodus to the itinerant ministry of Jesus to Paul's missionary trips. Images of a journey evoke experiences and impressions that outline important truths about life. They portray a dynamic, changing picture of a horizon that provides glimpses of new possibilities.

The Church also is on a journey, not frozen in time, but moving from familiar landscapes to unknown ones, changing in order to remain faithful. Traveling this journey is difficult without maps, which help direct us into unfamiliar territories we may already have anticipated in our imaginations.

Church unity and diversity

When we confess in the Creed that we believe in "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church," we are rehearsing the map that has been handed down to us. It does not show details, just a path for exploring what it means to be church. In this journey we come across other roads, travelers, histories—all of which have embarked on the same journey. We meet because the map is not our doing, but God's.

The guide for our lives as Christians is grounded in the holy, unifying presence of God in Jesus Christ revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. Lutheran and other churches have emphasized that the church partakes in God's own life whose innermost reality is love, communion. Through God's Word of healing reconciliation and sharing God's very life through the sacraments, God draws people into this communion or *koinonia*.

Discuss how this has occurred in ecumenical dialogues in which you or your church have participated. Which dialogues have been especially important for your church? (Refer to the section on Ecumenical Affairs in the Six Year Report)

The Holy Spirit flowing to our hearts and bodies makes us long for what is not yet fully realized—the healing of the many divisions still fracturing the one Church. We cannot enjoy this wholeness if our divisions are not healed. This is why the unity of the Church is so crucial, for it corresponds to the unifying love of God for all that God has created.

The LWF is deeply committed to pursuing the unity of the Church. Our faith tells us that the unity of the Church is one of the marks that we have to look for, because this is the direction toward which the Spirit blows and points. Out of many the Spirit makes us one, inviting and guiding us into this unity. Our corresponding task is to unfold the meaning and the forms of this unity that we share in the triune God. The Spirit that stirs up belief also heals our divisions.

Ecumenical dialogues are one of the important ways through which the healing gift of the Spirit is realized. Through them we are able to see with different eyes the many barriers of separation that have been erected between our churches and traditions. Yet, we also realize how much we share on account of our faith in Christ and the communion in the Holy Spirit. The ecumenical dialogues are not only human political negotiations, but real developments in our commitment to witness to the Spirit which the Father through the Son pours out on the Church. They are signposts on a journey during which we ourselves may need to change, as we recognize with new eyes our fellow travelers who seek the same destiny.

God showers the Church with many gifts, disclosing the wholeness that God promises for creation The Spirit creates unity not in spite of but through the recognition and reconciliation of diversity. Diverse *charisms* are signs of the presence of the Spirit. In short, we find a unity in plurality, or a unity through diversity. This diversity can become a token of discord if each claims to be an exclusive or the most central manifestation of the Spirit. The gifts are many, but to be *charisms*, genuine fruits of the Spirit, they need to be placed in service of the whole body. Paul reminds us that the spiritual gifts are meant for the edification of the body, for the whole community of faith (1 Cor 14).

The Christian church is a diverse reality precisely because it is a creature of the Spirit. Creating unity out of diversity seems to be the *modus operandi* of our God. There is no plan of God which excludes this diversity, whether in the world at large or in the church. Dictator-

ship or authoritarian regimes are not consistent with God's purposes. The wholeness to which the church witnesses is lived out in the mutual recognition of these different gifts, as well as in a common commitment to mission.

When human sin transforms the richness of diversity into hostile, exclusive and fighting groups, an essential aspect of God´s work is breached (1 Cor 3). This pain in the church is also God's pain. The Spirit aches and yearns for the unity of all creatures. It is a Spirit of unity and fellowship, and therefore also a Spirit of reconciliation, of networking, of bridging spheres that are often separated or alienated. Church divisions, no matter how historically justifiable they have been, are certainly a "*skandalon*" to the work of the Spirit.

Discuss some examples of where these painful kinds of divisions exist. How have, or should they have been dealt with?

Encounter, dialogue, recognition and fellowship are in and of themselves important aspects of the church's ecumenical journey. They also are important for the witness and mission of the church in the world. Commitment to Christian unity is intimately related to our commitment to being a communion in a divided world. Furthermore, the unity of the churches may be a crucial step toward overcoming other forms of human division. Through their ecumenical engagements, many Lutheran churches have experienced a renewal in their vision and mission in the world.

For these reasons, it is unfortunate when the church's prophetic role of witnessing to the healing and wholeness that God promises is weakened by tension and strife over the church's ecumenical engagements. This sometimes occurs in relations between churches, but also within a church, for example, over understandings of ministry or positions on ethical issues. Faithfulness to the Spirit who unites may on occasion result in new divisions. In the face of these possible difficulties, we trust in a God for whom encounter, dialogue, recognition and fellowship are essential dimensions of God's intentions for creation.

Discuss examples of how churches together have addressed divisions in society.

Healing through ecumenical engagements

The oneness of the Church precedes our quest for visible unity. As churches living in history, with various creaturely limitations, we may be unable to move quickly to visible and full unity. Yet there are milestones on our churches' ecumenical journey that indicate different levels of approach, conversation and fellowship with other churches. For instance, some of our churches have begun this journey by cooperating with other Christian bodies on certain social, economic and cultural issues, or by forming regional or national conciliar bodies. This occurs with a sense that the healing of life in society is closely interwoven with the healing of church divisions. Christian praxis in society—through diaconal work or by forging common responses to hunger, war and disaster—has and still is a critical dimension of the churches' ecumenical endeavors.

Churches have also formally engaged in bilateral and multilateral dialogues on doctrine and church practices. Here ways are sought to reach consensus about the apostolic faith we confess. Often, the aim is to build on mutual recognition of baptism, and to move toward eucharistic sharing and mutual recognition of ministries, so that the common mission in the world may become more credible and effective. Drawing on a past of fellowship

and collaboration, some churches have moved into a visible unity where eucharistic sharing and mutual recognition and interchangeability of ministries occur. These represent different dimensions in ecumenical engagement and should be seen as complementary; the realization of one dimension leads to another.

How is your church engaged in dialogues with other churches? What have been the important breakthroughs in international dialogues? How should these be pursued further?

Dialogues and other ecumenical engagements have presupposed and shown different understandings of unity. They have developed out of the needs in particular contexts, and with a view to resolving particular difficulties or safeguarding certain values and understandings. Our sense of what needs to be healed depends on what understanding of unity we advocate.

Churches of the Lutheran communion, for example, have highlighted "reconciled diversity." As the 1977 LWF Assembly stated:

> this position encourages an understanding of unity which allows rooms for the diversity of confessional traditions and the existence of communities to foster these traditions.[1]

Reconciled diversity was never meant as a static model, simply accepting all existing differences, nor is it a sanctioning of the confessional status quo, as though characteristics and differences are eternal, unchangeable essences. Reconciled diversity is an interpretation of the nature of the Church and its unity stemming from the biblical understandings of the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. Reconciliation is a dimension of the gift of salvation that the Spirit makes available to us. Its unfolding belongs to the life of discipleship. Emphasizing reconciled diversity does not stand in the way of considering institutional aspects of the visible unity of the Church. But, it takes seriously that diversity is inherent in human life, and all of creation. Diversity is reconciled when it is accepted as in principle legitimate, when claims and actions that are destructive for human fellowship are appropriately dealt with and when differences are not only tolerated, but also appreciated on account of God's grace. In the ecumenical context, reconciled diversity upholds the value of differences as an integral aspect of the testimony of the New Testament regarding the church and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Models with different emphases, such as conciliar fellowship and *koinonia*, also play important roles in furthering Christian unity. They are also biblically grounded, and address unity and diversity. *Koinonia*, which has been predominant in ecumenical discussions of the World Council of Churches in recent years, is basic to the ecclesiology of communion in the LWF. The quest is for the full, visible unity of churches at local, regional and global levels.

There is broad agreement that the unity to which we are called is marked by

- a common confession of the apostolic faith,
- a common sacramental life entered through one baptism and celebrated together in the eucharistic fellowship,
- a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognized and reconciled, and
- a common mission witnessing to all people through the gospel of God's grace and serving the whole of creation.[2]

Considerable ecumenical progress has been made in these areas in recent years, leading to structural forms of church fellowship. Several LWF member churches in Europe and North America have entered formal ecumenical agreements at the regional level with Anglican and/or Reformed churches. Anglican-Lutheran dialogues in Africa, Asian and Latin America are also an encouraging sign of commitment to Christian unity through forms of shared life, often taking into consideration the particular social challenges the churches face. In Europe, Lutherans and Methodists have achieved significant forms of church fellowship in several countries. In the coming years, there is likely to be a further development of regional agreements. A continuing internal LWF agenda is to clarify the ecumenical profile of Lutheran churches that simultaneously relate to churches of both episcopal and non-episcopal traditions.

The visible unity of the Church is also promoted through continued international dialogues, which the LWF participates in as a worldwide communion. These enable member churches to act together as one global ecumenical partner. Important progress is being made in dialogues with the Anglican Communion, the Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

What are the questions and relationships that ecumenical work of the LWF should especially give attention to in the future?

Healing within the Lutheran communion

Our dialogues with other Christians bring joy, renewed enthusiasm and high hopes. To walk the pathway of the reconciling gift of the Holy Spirit, however, also involves frustration, disappointment and disagreement. In these dialogues, we learn that our partners may have expectations, understandings and goals different from our own. It is important to discover and understand these differences, so that we can adjust and redirect the goals we set for ourselves and for others. This is an inescapable dimension of "reconciled diversity."

On other occasions, however, our ecumenical progress or stalemate may evoke sharp disagreements within and among the Lutheran churches themselves, and differences in how Lutherans understand their role in the ecumenical movement. What is considered a "gift" by some is considered a "Trojan horse" by others; what is a reasonable compromise to some is seen by others as a betrayal of the Lutheran confessional tradition.

Discuss some examples of where these kinds of differences have emerged. How should they be dealt with?

These disagreements can spark a necessary and lively debate around the issues at stake in Lutheran interpretations of Christian unity (with special reference to Article VII of the Augsburg Confession). This comes to the fore when we face the conditions for Christian unity that are set forth by other Christians with whom we are in dialogue. Are these compatible with the interpretation of the gospel that the Lutheran Confessions uphold? The Lutheran confessional writings do not fully develop a Lutheran doctrine of the Church. The implicit ecclesiological concept assumes as its living context the rich complexity of practices traditionally associated with the sixteenth-century Western church.[3] What is clearly spelled out is that the church's sole grounding is in the justifying Word, which is "the true treasure of the Church." For some, this is enough

for Christian unity; for others, this neglects other matters essential for the sake of this treasure.

How have these other factors played a significant role in ecumenical discussions you have experienced?

Among Lutheran theologians this has generated a renewed interest in the different possibilities of interpreting the confessional notions of agreement and consensus (*consentire*). There is a sense that former interpretations have excessively stressed that the agreement has to be reached at all levels of Christian doctrine, which made it all but impossible to agree with Christian churches other than those which uphold the Augsburg Confession. However, "doctrine" in the original Lutheran understanding involved something different from rigid doctrinal formulas. Although the Lutheran reformers never denied that the faith of the Church can be formulated in authoritative language, they strongly emphasized that the meaning of doctrine unfolds in proclamation, through Word and sacraments, and in relation to the rest of life. "Doctrine" is inseparably related to the living core of the gospel, namely, the grace of God that justifies the sinner for Christ's sake. It is the justifying and healing presence of God among the assembly of believers that constitutes the ground for the Church and its unity.

Ecumenical agreement and dissent is not only a matter of purely confessional or doctrinal issues. For every church and tradition there is a certain "ethos" that is expressed together with its faith, in both explicit and implicit ways. This can be observed on topics such as the authority to interpret Scripture, forms of church discipline and oversight, liturgical expressions, gender language and the church's moral teachings. From a Lutheran point of view, none of these should become conditions for church unity. In the search for visible church unity, it is essential to clarify the relationship between the unifying gospel and the wider issues churches face.

Perspectives and insights from the social sciences can provide indispensable assistance for understanding and clarifying other factors in society that affect ecumenical relations, dialogues and their reception. We should encourage the insights from a wider spectrum of disciplines and voices than those involved previously.

New challenges and avenues for Christian unity

The ways in which dialogues are conducted and the decision as to who participates are strategic matters when speaking about the unity of the Church. The diversity ascribed to the gifts of the Spirit among the churches can also be applied to how ecumenical issues are approached and by whom. Diverse experiences and approaches need to be recognized and represented in ecumenical dialogues. Priorities and institutional forms are integral aspects of the ecumenical landscape.

In your church, who participates in the ecumenical dialogues / encounters? Do you feel that a sufficient diversity of voices and areas of expertise are represented?

Questions such as the following are sometimes raised: Should ecumenical dialogues primarily be a matter for experts who discuss and develop documents? Or, should they also be practical ways of recognizing and understanding better those who are different from us? Are dialogues more theory or practice?

What, if anything, needs to be proposed about the assumptions, methodologies and participants in LWF-related ecumenical dialogues?

This, however, is a false dichotomy. Ecumenical relationships move in complementary ways. The documents resulting from dialogues call for certain practical, visible results for the unity of the Church. But, what results are being sought, and who determines such? How can the concerns of different regions of the world be balanced in determining how the Lutheran communion is represented? Experience shows that persons representing the North, and who speak German or English, tend to have an "upper hand" in many ecumenical contexts where Lutherans are involved. How can this be counteracted? These are important opportunities for incorporating different experiences and challenges in the ecumenical field.

It is key that those who officially represent the churches remain at all times faithful to the gospel and sensitive to the experiences and demands of the believers whom they represent. In this sense, greater attention should also be given to the "groundwork" that has already been laid by the multitude of those brothers and sisters who, in their daily lives, further the coming together of different traditions—through friendships, marriage, families, work and community activities.

In paying more attention to these relationships between Christians, new ecumenical "demands" confront the churches. One of these is the intense yearning to share together in the Eucharist. Many times, ordinary lay persons legitimately question the slowness of church leaders to solve matters important to their religious sensitivities. Indeed, it is painful for couples, friends and families who share so much in life to be unable officially to partake of the same table of the Lord. It therefore becomes even more urgent to grasp anew the healing gift of the Spirit, not only through words in documents, but as a reality in our daily lives.

For many of our churches, different forms of diaconal ministry—including relief and development work, socio-political advocacy, defense of human and environmental rights—have long been inroads to further joint ecumenical commitment. Many congregations of various denominations work cooperatively in local communities; national councils of churches (many of them including the Roman Catholic Church) take active roles in speaking out publicly on a range of issues. Internationally, the Lutheran contribution to ecumenical advocacy has been a priority for many years, including now with work on HIV/AIDS. In recent years, the challenges of economic globalization as well as the common peril of ecological destruction have proven to be fertile ground for a renewed ecumenical cooperation that transcends confessional theological walls. These relationships, based on a shared vision and practical experience, are an important expression of our ecumenical commitment, and a significant foundation on which to build other ecumenical initiatives in the search for unity.

While the lack of a deeper **theological** dialogue can lead to a weakening of ecumenical commitment once the "practical" concern fades, it is also true that the ecumenical commitment becomes a more "real" and enduring matter when pre-

What more should the LWF be saying or doing on the question of eucharistic sharing with those churches with which we are not yet in full communion?

ceded by different experiences of practices, collaboration **and** dialogue. In any case, it is crucial that theological conversation not only **follow** commitment after the fact, but that it be an integral dimension continually accompanying this praxis. The churches' praxis colors and conditions the theological issues deemed necessary and relevant, as well as the partners in dialogue and encounter. It is crucial that international dialogues respect the different methodologies and experiences, which must be balanced by the more traditional, academic methodology.

This becomes especially important if our ecumenical work is to relate to churches of the whole communion. For example, the fact that many churches in the South have had practical experiences of ecumenical engagement with new partners has given this engagement special characteristics. The most conspicuous history, tradition and advances in the unity of the Church have been among churches in the North. Their contexts have provided the main methodologies of dialogue, which generates a language and certain codes that reflect both a richness and a deficiency. The richness shows the depth and the new insights that ecumenical dialogue can bring to the partners in the conversation, both regarding one's own and the other's tradition. The deficiency is that this method and language may be quite valuable for certain regions and agendas, but not necessarily for all.

Churches in the South have to some extent assimilated this methodology and appreciate the resulting theological and ecclesiological resources. Furthermore, in many cases they have been enriched by the local and regional bilateral dialogues

carried forth by these churches. However, this tradition of ecumenical engagement is quite foreign to many of the new churches and movements that have sprung up especially in the South—and with whom many Lutheran churches are beginning to engage ecumenically. For many of these newer churches, the experience of the anointing by the Spirit and lack of a confessional tradition are their identifying "marks." For them, these marks become a condition for Christian unity, similar to how the gospel and the sacraments are the important marks for Lutherans, or for others, the historical episcopate. These new marks can also become new forms of a non-inclusive spirit or a fundamentalism. But, the reality is that these churches and movements, which are among the fastest growing throughout the world, present a wide range and variety of practices and concepts that challenge how we have pursued ecumenical work in the past.

What challenges for ecumenical work do new churches and movements like these pose in your situation? What should be done?

We are at a crossroads: a traditional understanding of ecumenism is blending with new perspectives and challenges. Lutherans may remain indifferent to this, smugly resting on our confessional history or the prestige achieved by our present dialogues. Or, we can face this as a new ecumenical challenge of truly global proportions. Dialogue here is not merely for the purpose of achieving full visible unity, as currently understood. It is also a means of learning more about the Holy Spirit and the new realities the Spirit creates. Lutheran churches in the South may actually mediate a renewal of the Lutheran communion as they learn about the many gifts shared with them by many of these "new" churches. What is new to us is different and implies diversity in our quest for unity. Perhaps Lutheran churches will discover that many of their theological treasures and gifts acquire a new vitality as they participate in the new roads that the Spirit is opening in the world. Our churches are invited to a new and different journey on the same territory signaled by God's healing and unifying presence.

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Notes

[1] *In Christ—A New Community*, The Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1977), p. 200.

[2] *Cf.* Roman Catholic-Lutheran Joint Commission, *Facing Unity: Models, Forms and Phases of Catholic-Lutheran Church Fellowship* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1985), p. 23; *In Christ—Called to Witness: Assembly Study Book-Ninth Assembly, Hong Kong, 1997* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1997), p. 44; LWF Office for Ecumenical Affairs, *The Ecumenical Profile of Lutheran Churches Relating Simultaneously to Churches of Episcopal and Non-Episcopal Traditions: Presentation and Relevant Documents from a Consultation in Geneva, 24–25 August 2000* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2001) p. 15s.

[3] *The Ecumenical Profile …, ibid.*, p. 27.