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## *A Common Calling: Not Worth the Price*

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**N**O ONE CAN TRULY KNOW WHAT THE PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES WOULD BE OF the proposed agreement of the ELCA with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ. Our best guesses, therefore, should depend heavily on past experience, nationally and internationally. It has been disappointingly rare to see quantitative or qualitative studies of past experience brought to bear on proposals for new agreements or mergers. Perhaps that is because the experiences of the twentieth century have been almost uniformly disappointing. Lyle Schaller's dismal law of merger ( $A+B=A$ ;  $A+B+C=A$ , etc.) has proved regrettably accurate.

My reflections on the "Formula of Agreement" arise from experiences in an ecumenical seminary and close cooperation with other Christians during my years as layperson and as parish pastor in three different contexts. In some areas, the proposed agreement would make no difference at all; in others, only a minor difference; but in some crucial areas, the proposed agreement may well have large negative consequences.

The unity of the body of Christ will neither be furthered nor hindered by the agreement. Just as the unity of humanity is a biological reality unaffected by some people's denial of the humanity of others, so the unity of Christ's body is an eternal reality founded in the will and action of God independent of whether some Christians do or do not recognize others as part of the body. It is arrogant at best and blasphemous at worst to assert that the true unity of Christ's body will be altered by institutional agreements. Christ's body is Christ's body eternal and indivisible. It is not ours to divide or unite.

It is no small thing to help Christians discern the presence of Christ in sacrament or fellow believer. The most significant practical result of the ecumenical movement has been to help Christians recognize their eternal connection with all their brothers and sisters in Christ. Insofar as the agreement would further our recognition and love for fellow Christians, it would be a good thing.

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## *A Common Calling:* Worth the Risks

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THE ELCA AND REFORMED CHURCH BODIES HAVE BEEN DANCING AROUND THE ecumenical table for thirty-five years. The steps have been sometimes halting, sometimes firm, always intricate. With the votes coming in 1997 on “A Formula of Agreement,” based on *A Common Calling*, the dance will, perhaps, come to an end, and full blown relationships will be formed.

These documents developed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ hold promise for the unity of the church.

The proposed fellowship is understood by *A Common Calling* to mean, among other things, that the four churches:

- recognize each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments are rightly administered
- withdraw historic condemnations
- continue to recognize each other’s baptism and authorize and encourage sharing the Lord’s supper
- recognize each others’ various ministries and make provision for orderly exchange of clergy.

In this agreement the full integrity of each denomination is maintained. The proposed documents use the terms agreement, common calling, and full communion. Whichever term one chooses, this fellowship is not without risks. Our four denominations are different. We hold different polities, different practices in ministry, and different emphases in theology. The potential for internal strife, dilution of tradition, and political and theological confusion is real.

I believe that such risks are far outweighed by the benefits of fellowship, and that practical problems would be anecdotal rather than systemic.

*A Common Calling* shifts our internal focus and the focus of our witness to the power of the risen Christ through whom all things were created and in whom all things hold together (Col 1:16-17).

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*KATHERINE S. MICHAEL is associate pastor for pastoral care.*

This recognition of members of the body of Christ is essential to our ecumenical endeavors. Although in many cases the ground has been prepared by the dialogues and proposals of the last fifty years, I cannot think of one successful, mission-driven ecumenical venture in which I have been involved whose structure or success was conditional upon any formal interdenominational theological agreement. Whether it has been a food shelf, emergency response center, regional service project, countywide worship celebration, pastors' text study, chaplaincy group, Bread for the World letter writing group, Promise Keepers, or Billy Graham Crusade, the condition for cooperation has been recognition of the other as a fellow member of the body of Christ and a common enthusiasm for a task to be done in the name and spirit of Jesus. Many of these endeavors have been highly effective, efficient, and life-changing.

On the other hand I have seen large amounts of energy and money used for discussions and agreements which, as far as I can see, have not significantly violated Schaller's law or brought new disciples of Christ into effective service.

The proposed agreement has the scent of the old culture in which ecclesiastical diplomacy was a central function of denominations. In the present context these agreements are increasingly irrelevant to the congregation. Our significant ecumenical ventures tend to be episodic, mission-driven, lay led, and separately financed. They honor our differences and respect the significance of theological boundaries while celebrating our connection in Christ and our common purpose.

I recently asked a UCC pastor to substitute for me as sponsor for some friends going through a Lutheran Cursillo weekend. I was happy to entrust him with this responsibility because I admire him and know him to be a committed trinitarian Christian. However, I would not ask some of my UCC classmates from Yale Divinity School to do this because they are, by their own confession, not trinitarian Christians. Some are not even theists. Thus, the inclusion of the UCC in the agreement is, in my opinion, a fatal flaw.

Good fences make good neighbors. When the lines are clear and the commitments articulated, congregations and pastors gladly join in their shared mission. I am happy to connect with people of different faith or no faith to achieve shared goals. But when I am asked to get into theological bed with pastors who do not believe that Jesus is God incarnate and who may have little theological commitment at all, not to speak of confessing the *Augsburg Confession*, I must say no.

What may be at stake here is nothing less than trinitarian faith, Lutheran identity, and the central place of the *Augsburg Confession* in the ELCA. What evidence is there to suggest that this agreement will bring such new vitality to the ELCA's mission as to make that price worth paying?

The ecumenical task is essential and must not be neglected. However, old, tired, and discredited models of ecumenical agreement should be discarded. New, loose, informal, mission-driven, Christ-centered, pragmatic practices, which do not homogenize parts of the body but cherish them as parts of the indivisible Christ should be honored and encouraged. ⊕

The differences among us are real, but in unity we hold those differences in proper perspective. They do not supersede the centrality of Christ in our midst. As each of us reflects our inherited truth, together we become a fuller expression of truth in all its complexity.

Whereas conventional modes of thought have hidden the bases of unity behind statements of differences, the new concept insists that, while remaining differences must be acknowledged, even to the extent of their irreconcilability, it is the inherent unity in Christ that is determinative. (“A Formula of Agreement,” 5)

*A Common Calling* acknowledges that Christ is our unity. We do not create it. The agreement acknowledges that the church of Jesus Christ is not confined within any denomination but is greater than the sum of its parts and that we need each other.

When Lutherans finalize and reprimatinate the theology of the sixteenth century, they need the corrective witness of the Reformed tradition concerning the need for reformation and a fresh appropriation of the church’s faith. When Reformed Christians overemphasize the primacy of the contemporary situation, they need the corrective witness of the Lutheran focus on the authority of the ecumenical creeds and Reformation confessions. (*A Common Calling*, 30)

Lutherans preach the purity of the gospel message that is “for you.” Reformed Christians preach the appropriate response to that gospel which is gratitude. We cannot do without either proclamation.

Furthermore, the proposed fellowship may be a witness to healing the divisions within our denominations. If Lutheran and Reformed bodies can come together in spite of their differences, honoring the unity of the gospel, then surely within denominations we can learn to live together with mutual affirmation and admonition as well.

In a day when denominational identity is of great concern to churches and church leaders, we can yet join together in a common calling, not because we agree on every point of theology or because our practices can be homogenized, but because we are already one spiritual body in Jesus Christ.

Our common calling is to proclaim one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all. That proclamation must be with one voice if it is to be clearly heard. ⊕