



Unity and Difference

WHEN I ENTERED THE MASAI HOME, A POLE AND COW-DUNG HUT, THE TWO-YEAR-old daughter of the house began to cry uncontrollably. I was the first white person ever to enter her door. Even though I was a brother in Christ, an invited guest, and a recipient of gracious hospitality, I was unmistakably different. And while we eventually ate and laughed together, I still am. People who live closer to the edge recognize the supreme importance of hospitality and meal fellowship. It is often a matter of life and death. But it does not and need not erase difference.

Meal fellowship is a matter of life and death for the church, too. Division is a luxury we cannot afford, particularly as a church in mission. Thus, one would surely want to celebrate possibilities for greater hospitality between Lutherans and Episcopalians and between Lutheran and Reformed Christians. But on my recent return from Africa I did not discover a lot of cheering for the proposals for “full communion” that will come before these churches in 1997. It is not that my Lutheran friends and colleagues are opposed to sharing in ecumenical endeavors and mutual ministries with their Episcopal and Reformed brothers and sisters. (In fact, many—if not most—already do.) Few, if any, would exercise competitive mission campaigns or desire exclusive communion. But many are puzzled by the proposals. In reference to the “Concordat of Agreement” (with the Episcopalians) they do not understand why Lutheran ministry needs to be fixed if it is not broken (and they do not believe it is not being fixed). They do not know how structures can be binding and still adiaphoral. Most important, they fear that inordinate stress on external forms of apostolicity will damage the witness to the apostolicity that matters, proclaiming the apostolic gospel. In reference to the “Formula of Agreement” (with the Reformed) some, at least, are not certain of the need for shared official teaching ministries with people with whom they know they disagree in matters that both sides regard as important.

In all of this, the heart of the matter is not opposition to ecumenical witness. It is the fear that the proposals will weaken ecumenical ministry rather than strengthen it, by weakening the prophetic and kerygmatic clarity of particular Christian voices. Perhaps we would do better (on both sides) to hold onto those differences that we think serve the gospel, the church, and the world. Why soft-pedal things that we think are true? Let us listen to one another’s truth while sharing one another’s hospitality and celebrating the unity we are given in Christ. Because hospitality and mutuality are possible now and can be strengthened in ways that do not carry the risks inherent in the proposals, people do not understand why these potentially and actually divisive “agreements” are necessary.

People of good will have questions that have not been adequately addressed—which is a matter the whole ELCA must take with great seriousness.

Hospitality is essential; but differences, within hospitality, are inevitable and can even be life-giving. Can we not celebrate both our unity and our difference in ways that do not compromise the confessions and consciences of some of our most faithful people? I believe we can; but the proposals do not accomplish it. Perhaps they need not be defeated, but they should at least be returned. The discussion needs to continue, while the ministry goes on.

F.J.G.

Luther Seminary Colloquium on Communion

As part of the ongoing discussion of the place of holy communion in the life of the Christian church and its meaning for Christian theology, three members of the Luther Seminary faculty—Gerhard Forde, Jane Strohl, and Carl Volz—were asked to prepare oral presentations for a recent colloquium of faculty and doctoral students in history and theology. While the three teachers were free to develop their remarks in ways of their own choosing, each was asked to address in a general way the question “What is a Lutheran Theology of the Lord’s Supper?” The context for the discussion was marked particularly by the proposed sacramental practices statement in the ELCA and the ecumenical proposals now before that church body. The point was not that the doctoral students (who represent several Christian traditions) should be “fixed” by receiving *the* Lutheran answer, but that an attempt be made to provide meaningful contributions, each deriving from Lutheran tradition, to the internal and ecumenical discussions about the place and meaning of the sacrament.

Those who invited the speakers knew they would not always agree. Indeed, that was part of the point of the exercise: to model a way in which theological disagreement could be publicly admitted and constructively engaged. The speakers were later asked also to put their remarks in written form for this issue of *Word & World*. The first three essays are the result. The constructive engagement with their arguments continues with Mary Knutson’s response and assessment—the fourth essay in this issue. The publication of these four essays deliberately acknowledges differences in opinion and approach within the Lutheran tradition and even within the Luther Seminary community, though it does so without suggesting (or fearing) that finally there is no longer any such thing as a meaningful Lutheran contribution to the church’s understanding of the Lord’s supper. The publication of these essays will have served its purpose if the conversation is joined—publicly and constructively—by others.