



# FACE . . .

## *Formula and Concordat:* **Agreement and Disagreement**

RICK FOSS

*Eastern North Dakota Synod, ELCA  
Fargo, North Dakota*

I HAD NEVER THOUGHT TOO MUCH ABOUT THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TWO PRE-  
dominant symbols for the Holy Spirit: a dove, and tongues of flame. At least, I  
hadn't thought about them in the ways I have since the ELCA Churchwide Assem-  
bly in Philadelphia last August.

If a dove evokes images of gentleness and peace, fire calls forth feelings of in-  
tensity and pain. It seems to me that the Holy Spirit was fully present throughout  
this assembly. I don't remember as high a level of intensity nor such overt expres-  
sion of pain in previous gatherings. At the same time, I am hopeful that history will  
record this assembly as a crucial event in the progress toward peace and wholeness  
as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Much of the substance of the assembly was non-controversial and not widely  
publicized. Other issues seemed lost in the glare of the commentary and contro-  
versy over the ecumenical proposals. But they were real, and we can be glad for  
them:

1. The enthusiastic response to Bishop Anderson's "Seven Initiatives" offers  
opportunity for us in the ELCA to clarify the priorities of this church for the ensu-  
ing years. The list is not startling or new; it is a reasoned reminder and gentle com-  
pass for our ministry together. We intend to "Deepen Our Worship Life," "Teach  
the Faith," "Witness to God's Action in the World," "Strengthen One Another in  
Mission," "Help the Children," "Connect with Youth and Young Adults," and  
"Develop Leaders for the Next Century." Amen. May God grant us the will,  
strength, and compassion to carry out these initiatives wisely and well.

2. The election for ELCA Vice President revealed a number of excellent  
candidates. The eventual election of Dr. Addie Butler appeared to come about be-  
cause of her gifts and commitment to the church; the fact that she is an African-

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*RICK FOSS is bishop of the Eastern North Dakota Synod.*

# TO FACE

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PAUL J. BLOM

*Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod, ELCA  
Houston, Texas*

**T**HE 1997 ELCA CHURCHWIDE ASSEMBLY, RELATIVE TO THE ECUMENICAL PROPOSALS, tried to follow the advice of that great philosopher, Yogi Berra: “When you come to a fork in the road, take it!”

The ecumenical proposals put us up against the fork in the road in a way that left us divided and injured.

What happened? Some brief observations follow.

1. The ecumenical proposals and their substance did not become a “front burner issue” until about 12 to 18 months prior to the assembly. Although it had been announced at the beginning of the decade that 1997 would be the year of ecumenical decisions, there was little interest. That fact meant the proposals had to be examined, understood, digested, and responded to in a fairly short period of time.

2. I believe the reception process of the proposals was flawed in certain ways. I believe, now, it was a mistake to insist that the *Concordat* could not be amended *before any votes were taken by either the Episcopal Church or the ELCA*. I believe it would have been more productive to identify the salient points of concern, appoint a small group from both traditions to work out compromises, and establish a revised proposal. The Coordinating Committee tried to respond to recommendations of the ELCA Conference of Bishops by inserting footnotes to accomplish such a purpose.

3. The ELCA is a church with regional differences in terms of traditions, practices, and understandings. This fact affected our ability to communicate and fully understand each other. We do share unity in areas of faith. However, we differ in terms of how we practice and live out our ministries because of a diversity of traditions and pieties.

4. While this debate forced us to look at our confessional heritage and to begin

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*PAUL J. BLOM is bishop of the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod.*

American woman seemed to be more a reflection of this church than the reason for her election. If I perceive that accurately, it bodes well for the ELCA.

3. The new “sacramental practices” statement was thoroughly discussed and adopted by a strong consensus vote. While addressing a number of controversial areas, I think it is an excellent document that can guide us in our worship life together.

4. The “infrastructure” of the ELCA churchwide structure seems to be growing more solid. Finances are well tended to, even though we need to find a way to be better stewards for global and local mission. Presiding bishop H. George Anderson continues to demonstrate an array of God-given gifts for which I give thanks. His theological clarity, patient attention to his call, and remarkable calm energy should serve us well.

The most striking aspect of this assembly was, of course, the activity surrounding the three ecumenical proposals. We may have done as well as possible, given the set of circumstances the assembly faced. Bishop Anderson stated his position clearly (a position with which I disagree, but one he stated appropriately and persuasively), and then did a superb job of allowing as open a process of discussion and debate as one could possibly do.

It may be a bit regrettable that the assembly was emotionally exhausted by the time we considered the joint statement with the Roman Catholic Church, but the vote indicates that we want to at least consider each other as Christian brothers and sisters, and that is good.

The vote on the *Formula of Agreement* with our Reformed partners was hard to assess. On the one hand, a clear majority felt comfortable with it. On the other hand, it is certainly true that some voted for it because they were strong proponents of the *Concordat*, and may not have voted in favor if it had been considered alone. In any case, it furthers our ministry together with three Reformed churches and should further our common mission.

The excruciatingly close vote on the *Concordat* became the lightning rod for the assembly. It was painful but, I believe, the best result that could have happened, given the deep and broad differences regarding the *Concordat* in the ELCA. At least now the differences in perception, history, ecclesiology, theology, and other factors swirling around these issues are largely out in the open. We simply underestimated our differences, and that made it hard truly to hear one another.

I do not know whether we will find the grace and strength to explore our differences and commonalities in the months ahead or whether we will work harder to fortify our various positions. If we simply up the ante on our disagreements, we may enhance ecumenical relationships, but we will further fragment the ELCA. If we will allow God to lead us toward hearing one another and “testing the Spirit” together, I believe this 1997 ELCA assembly will have been a pivotal point in the maturing of a faithful church. ☩

to assess more widely how we will function and live together as the ELCA, we got focused on kingdom on the left issues rather than kingdom on the right issues.

5. A major concern relates to how our Episcopalian partners were depicted in this debate. A significant amount of misinformation was presented as fact during the debate leading up to the assembly and in the assembly itself.

Midge Roof, President of the Episcopal Diocesan Ecumenical Officers (EDEO) wrote to her colleagues, “Maybe there is some consolation in knowing that the church against which some members voted is not the church to which you and I belong. Misrepresentations of our church were legion.” An Episcopal bishop said that if the descriptions he had heard about his church by ELCA people were true, he wouldn’t want to be an Episcopalian either.

I feel badly about that. I am concerned that the eighth commandment was ignored and there seemed to be little calling to account over it.

6. Another major concern relates to the ongoing distrust and suspicion of the leadership of the ELCA. Bishops were attacked and called deceptive. Those who serve us on a churchwide level were called names and called untrustworthy. I find that harmful and out of order. Honestly to disagree is a healthy posture; but to demean and undermine, and to say things completely untrue is demonic—no matter who says it!

7. There was irony in the fact that the debate on the *Formula of Agreement* was considerably less volatile, in part because John Thomas, the UCC spokesperson was winsome and disarming. Had the Episcopalians had a similar spokesperson, would it have made a difference?

8. When the vote on the *Concordat* was revealed, an eerie silence fell over the assembly. It was as if we had wounded ourselves and we didn’t know what to do next. The grief of it all led to anger, tears, and blaming. There is a need for some healing still, and likely that will be so for some time in the future.

What next? The resolutions relating to the Episcopal Church which were subsequently adopted will test our resolve to fulfill our ecumenical vision statements because of the short time line. The work of implementing the *Formula of Agreement* can move forward in good order, but we’ll have to wait and see whether we can come to full communion with the Episcopalians. This may be lower on their list of priorities by the year 2000.

It is critical that a broad-based group be part of the next round and that there be representation from all the regions of the ELCA. To build a consensus needs to become a priority and to defuse the suspicion of any abuse of authority needs to be at the top of the list, too.

God has never left the world without a witness, in any age, of God’s gracious word, and that will be so in days ahead. I have long affirmed that we never get to Easter without going first through Good Friday. Our recent experience had some elements of the death and rising process. And I trust the Spirit is working in *all* of the baptized people of God, and we are called, still, to discern and be patient for the outcomes the Spirit seeks for us and our mission together. ⊕