



FACE . . .

Called to Common Mission: Our Best Opportunity

J. ROBERT WRIGHT

*General Theological Seminary
New York, New York*

I WAS PRIVILEGED TO BE AN EPISCOPALIAN PARTICIPANT IN THE DRAFTING TEAM that prepared *Called to Common Mission* (hereafter *CCM*), which, in November of 1998, was voted by the Church Council of the ELCA to be released for discussion and transmission to the next ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Denver.

There have been many changes from the earlier versions of the *Concordat* and intervening texts. I believe twelve of these changes are key. All of them, I think, will be welcome to the minority of Lutherans who were previously opposed, and at least minimally acceptable to Episcopalians.

1. All footnotes have been removed and nearly all non-English terms have been eliminated or translated, and the entire document made more compact. (I never thought I would see the day when Lutherans, not Anglicans, would be demanding greater brevity, no foreign terms, and no footnotes, in a theological text!)

2. Full communion is conceived more clearly as being for the sake of common mission, and greater emphasis is given to both common mission and the ministry of the laity, over which our churches have never disagreed. (Par. 2, 5, 6, 8, 23, 29)

3. The so-called threefold ministry is no longer stipulated, and the ordination of deacons is not required. (Par. 8, 9)

4. The episcopal succession for the ELCA would come from other Lutheran churches that already stand within it, and not primarily from the Episcopal Church, now making it a succession that can be called both evangelical and his-

(continued on pages 182-183)

J. ROBERT WRIGHT is St. Mark's Professor of Ecclesiastical History and also serves as theological consultant to the Ecumenical Office of the Episcopal Church.

Face to Face takes a different format for this issue, reproducing statements which, in a different form, were presented on January 7, 1999, at the Luther Seminary Mid-Winter Convocation.

TO FACE

Called to Common Mission: An Unsatisfactory Compromise

LEE E. SNOOK

*Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota*

UNLIKE OTHERS ON THE LUTHER SEMINARY FACULTY, I HAVE NEVER SERVED ON an ecumenical team. Unlike them, I do not know how to swim in the currents of ecclesiastical diplomacy. Still, I make the following assessment of the draft proposal* entitled *Called to Common Mission (CCM)* in the devout hope that we Lutherans and Episcopalians will find a way, as soon as possible, to acknowledge fully our commonality of faith in Christ and our call to common mission.

Called to Common Mission—it's a great title. Who among us would disagree with that as the end, goal, purpose, and *telos* of all who name the name of Jesus Christ? We are already of one mind and spirit as to our common calling to a common mission. The vocation or calling of all baptized Christians is that we be engaged in God's mission in the world. My worry is that unquestioned enthusiasm for the goal or end—our common mission—will make many people unwilling to raise any serious questions about the means set forth in the proposal. After all is said and done, the historic episcopate is set forth as a necessary and fitting means to the end of common mission.

Canon Wright's earlier work (see "An Episcopalian View of the Historic Episcopate," *dialog* 38/1 [1999] 53-62) has helped me to understand why the historic episcopate is so central for Episcopalians, why it is essential to the faith and life of his communion, and why it is "the basis" for ecumenical discussions.

Everyone here must surely know that Lutherans have their own basis, namely that it is enough that the word be rightly taught and the sacraments rightly administered. It is not too much of a stretch to say that, for Lutherans, the word implies both scripture as the written word of God and doctrine as the faithful explication of scripture and sacraments as commanded by Christ. Thus there are three: scripture,

(continued on pages 184-186)

*These comments are based upon the April 1998 version of *CCM*; I did not have access to the November 1998 version.

LEE E. SNOOK is professor (now emeritus) of systematic theology.

toric. (Par. 19) This is my own preference and, I think, that of most of the Episcopalians in the earlier dialogues, in order to avoid the impression, against which Professor Michael Rogness understandably protested at the last ELCA Churchwide Assembly, that Lutherans were being asked to become part of the Episcopal Church. It was the majority of the duly appointed Lutheran representatives who had urged that succession be received from the Episcopalians if the two churches together were to be in full communion in this country. Now, in the revised text, Lutherans are clearly free to develop an evangelical expression of succession, in full communion not only with Episcopalians but also with the other Lutheran churches of the *Augsburg Confession* who already stand in that succession and whom the ELCA does not condemn as contradicting *Augustana* 7.

5. This succession of bishops is clearly acknowledged (as earlier LED dialogues had in fact indicated) to be but *one* of the ways, albeit important, in which the apostolic succession of the whole church is expressed, the other ways being the use of the apostolic scriptures, the confession of the ancient creeds, and the celebration of the sacraments instituted by the Lord. It is, as the *BEM* statement from the World Council of Churches had indicated, “a sign though not a guarantee” of the unity and apostolic continuity of the whole church. (Par. 8, 12) Entry into this historic succession of bishops (Par. 18) remains the major alteration that the *CCM* would ask of the ELCA, just as recognition of the *Augsburg Confession* (Par. 4) and suspension of the preface to our ordinal for the sake of immediate recognition of ELCA clergy (Par. 16) remain the major alterations demanded by the *CCM* of the Episcopal Church.

6. Neither the *CCM* nor its predecessors ever said that the historic episcopate is of the *esse* of the church, and now the *CCM* is nuanced and contextualized and even defined as providing an *evangelical* and historic episcopate, thus allowing for a more authentically Lutheran understanding of the concept and one that does not contradict the provisions for the unity of the church specified in article 7 of the *Augsburg Confession*. (Par. 8, 12, 13, 18)

7. The ministry of bishops is defined, along lines suggested by Professor Wolfhart Pannenberg, as one that provides an oversight wider than that of the pastor of a local congregation, thus linking the synods or dioceses in the service of the gospel through ties of collegiality and consultation that strengthen their links for mission with the universal church. This in turn suggests a reason why bishops should preside at the ordinations of all clergy. (Par. 10, 12, 20)

8. The so-called “life tenure” of bishops is left unstated and no longer specified, and it is stipulated that their tenure in office may be terminated by retirement, resignation, disciplinary action, or conclusion of term. (Par. 18)

9. Provision is made for the periodic review of the ministry of bishops. Episcopalian bishops, and maybe even some Lutheran bishops, will have even *less* “absolute” power under this agreement, not more. (Par. 17)

10. The dispensation from the *Augsburg Confession* for Episcopal clergy serving occasionally or temporarily in the ELCA has been eliminated. Now clergy of either church seeking service or invited to serve in the other must undergo the appropriate acceptance procedures required by the other church, much as has now been agreed by the ELCA with the Reformed. (Par. 22)

11. The joint commission, to facilitate joint planning for common mission where appropriate, is defined as being only consultative and fully accountable to the decision-making bodies of both churches. (Par. 23)

12. Overall, the document now defines clearly when full communion would begin for both churches. (Par. 14) It is the conviction of this document that if our two churches move beyond the interim relationship they already share to one of “full communion” (Par. 2), they will be given the momentum to do more and better mission together: if they know that they really are agreed in the essentials of the Christian faith, if they have full interchangeability of ordained ministries, if they have full sharing of the Lord’s supper (not just “partial” or “interim”), if their leaders understand and recognize each other in sufficiently compatible doctrinal terms that they trust one another theologically and are confident in working together. Only in such a “full communion” will our churches be given the momentum to do full and common mission together. Officially the ELCA is committed to the ecumenical goal of “full communion” in both Protestant and Catholic directions, and I am convinced that, especially with these changes, the *CCM* is the best opportunity anywhere for the church that is the “highest” of the Protestant tradition, the ELCA, to embrace fully that church which is the “lowest” of the Catholic tradition, the Episcopal Church.

Let me add that many of these changes, although voiced at the ELCA Church-wide Assembly in Philadelphia summer before last, have been given fuller expression and in some cases have borne fruition in the revised document of November 1998 as a result of the initiatives taken by the president and some members of the Luther Seminary faculty. For this I am grateful. Professor James Nestingen has observed that there are two competing trends in American Lutheranism, one emphasizing “Lutheranism’s catholic roots” and the other emphasizing “Luther’s contemporary theological contribution” (“Authority and Resistance in the ELCA,” *Lutheran Forum* 32/2 [1998] 28-33). If this be true, then, in my opinion, the Episcopal Church desires to be in full communion with *both* these trends, not just one of them. As *CCM* Par. 17 now says, “The Episcopal Church acknowledges and seeks to receive the gifts of the Lutheran tradition which has consistently emphasized the primacy of the Word.” I believe that we in the Episcopal Church would want to embrace these two emphases as complementary, not as competing. They are both parts of the fullness of the church and neither must be lost. The gift of full communion will be to hold them together, for which to God I make my prayer. ⊕

creeds, and sacraments. In the proposed document, it is noted that both our churches agree on these three. (Par. 4-5)

What is not so clear in the proposal is the status of the so-called Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, which adds to scripture, creeds, and sacraments a fourth principle (hence quadrilateral), namely, historic episcopacy. There are not three, but four, matters of faith. The first three—scripture, creeds, sacraments—are grounded in the apostolic teaching from the earliest age of Christian mission, and the fourth is the public ministry whose function is to “promote, safeguard and serve apostolic teaching.” Scripture, creeds, and sacraments are essential for faith but are not sufficient for the unity or the mission of the church, according to the quadrilateral principle. Lutherans have to understand this, appreciate it, and acknowledge that the quadrilateral is absolutely essential for what it means to be Episcopalian. Without the episcopate, no Episcopalian. It is a matter of definition.

All of this should not be all that hard for Lutherans to understand because in practice Lutherans also have a quadrilateral. Scripture, creeds, and sacraments are necessary for faith but are not sufficient for Lutherans either, because all three can be notoriously misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misused. For Lutherans, the fourth principle, without which scripture, creeds, and sacraments are not sufficient, is the confessional principle. The Lutheran Confessions are a proposal for rightly interpreting the word of God in its scriptural form, in its sacramental form, and in its creedal form. For Episcopalians, the historic episcopate is necessary to safeguard the apostolic witness set forth in scripture, sacraments, and creeds; for Lutherans the confessions are necessary to safeguard that same witness. Without the Lutheran Confessions, no Lutherans. It is a matter of definition.

Do Episcopalians all agree on what historic episcopacy means? Not at all, according to Robert Wright, but they do agree that it is essential for full communion. Do Lutherans all agree on what the confessions mean? Get real. No, they don't. And yet, in practice, both Lutherans and Episcopalians have a deep commitment to their own quadrilateral about which there is deep resistance to compromise.

So what is my take on the proposed revisions of the *Concordat*? In simplest terms it is a legalistic compromise for both Lutherans and Episcopalians. Lutherans will be expected to follow the procedures leading to full communion but are not expected to believe that historic episcopacy is either necessary or essential. According to paragraph 11, “The Episcopal Church remains free to maintain its conviction that sharing in the historic episcopate, while not necessary to being the church, is essential to full communion; the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America remains free to maintain that the historic episcopate is not necessary for full communion.” The Lutheran compromise is to go along with something that we do not believe in. Some may argue that this compromise entails another, to compromise on the principle of justification by faith. We can agree that the *CCM* is a compromise, but what kind of compromise is it? Only a legal one? Or does it compromise what it means to be a Lutheran Christian?

Here I risk intruding into the internal affairs of the Episcopal Church. But it seems to me that the revised proposal expects Episcopalians to make a more serious compromise, that is, to compromise an article of faith—at least temporarily—namely, the historic episcopate. I don't understand how the historic episcopate can on the one hand function as the Episcopal equivalent of the Lutherans' confessional principle (this is the fourth element in the quadrilateral) and on the other hand be temporarily suspended until such a time that all ELCA bishops are in the historic episcopacy. That seems to imply that for a certain time, Episcopalians are not really going to believe in the quadrilateral, and then later they will believe in it again. It leads me to wonder if the episcopacy is, after all, a matter of faith or a matter of convenience. I prefer to think that it is what the quadrilateral says it is, a matter of faith. Is it really appropriate for Episcopalians to suspend what, for them, is the functional equivalent of the Lutheran Confessions? Much like the confessions function for Lutherans, the historic episcopate functions to safeguard the apostolic witness, and it does seem inappropriate for Episcopalians to make that temporary compromise. That is a matter for them to decide, but we have to acknowledge what they are doing.

From my non-specialist perspective, what issues remain? In the introductory paragraph, the proposal states, "Unity and mission are at the heart of the church's life." Both unity and mission are ill-defined in the document, and so further discussion of each is what remains.

As to unity, we will need to talk more about what images of unity are implied by the apostolic message. How can we re-imagine the gift of unity in Christ with images that are not so legalistic, mechanical, and organizational, not so dependent on those notions of power that owe more to the imperial legacy of Rome? How can we recover biblical images of unity that engender freedom, equality, friendship, mutuality, creativity, flexibility, diversity and unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace, and the courage to cross boundaries for the sake of mission? In my judgment, the *CCM* would restrict freedom and flexibility, would not engender a sense of equality and mutuality, would not respect difference in the unity of the Spirit, and would make it more difficult for our churches to cross over the boundaries that isolate, separate, and generate suspicion.

As to mission, we need to talk more about what we mean, lest mission be a mantra that no one can reject but is left without content. Last summer Luther Seminary sponsored and hosted an international congress on mission. Its focus was not—shall we say—preoccupied with the church but concerned for the world of God's making and God's redemptive will. The proposal which has the title *Called to Common Mission* is not only overly churchy, but it is fundamentally flawed—I would say wrong-headed—because it begins with concern for church unity presumably for the sake of greater efficacy in mission. It leads to proposals that are utterly church-centered, as if the mission of the church is to capture a greater market share of the religious adherents in the world. To speak of mission is

to speak of God's world. What God wills for the world is not to get the world into the church. The task of mission is for the community of faith to equip its people so that they can live in the world as the salt and the yeast and the seed that lose themselves in the world for the sake of the world of God's own making and God's will that the world be shaped after the form of Christ.

Finally, the *CCM* has taken on a life of its own. Suppose the *CCM* is approved at the Denver assembly. It clearly will not mean the sky is falling. It will not be an apocalyptic disaster prior to the millennium year. Nor will its approval mean that the kingdom of God has—at long last—come in its fullest. It will not even be a great ecumenical achievement, as if somehow a terrible schism has been overcome. However, whether it passes or not, the division and the anger will continue among Lutherans. It does not seem possible for the Assembly to achieve a win-win solution. There will continue to be opposition into the next century. The test for the ELCA is how it will handle opposition, or opposing views on the office of ministry. The differences cannot be smoothed over or swept out of sight or even healed by pastoral care. It will be a very practical test of just how much Lutherans have learned about democratic process. Will opponents ridicule, trivialize, even demonize one another, or can the ELCA find its own way of being both evangelical and democratic. In America we have learned some secular wisdom about how opponents treat one another in a civil society. Can the ELCA also learn from that secular wisdom, so that opponents on this matter can recognize the others as the loyal opposition (faithful in their calling to mission) and not as betrayers of the faith? ⊕