



LUTHERAN THEOLOGICAL
SOUTHERN
SEMINARY

On the Pastoral Implementation of **Called to Common Mission**

A statement of the Faculty of
Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary

April 14, 2000

Like most ELCA Lutherans, we have watched with great concern and sadness the bitter controversy that has continued in our church since the approval of *Called to Common Mission (CCM)* by the Churchwide Assembly at Denver last summer. We have been troubled to see individuals and groups within our church advocate resistance to *CCM* by extra-constitutional means. We have been saddened to see the bonds of our own communion stretched so thin.

In the midst of this controversy, we believe that it is necessary to maintain the constitutional order of our church. *CCM* has been approved by the Churchwide Assembly, which is the highest authority in our church order. A similar proposal received very nearly a two-thirds majority two years before. These votes were surrounded by a full and free discussion during the course of which every pastor in the ELCA was exposed to the arguments of the opposition. There are no grounds for doubting that the decision made at Denver was a legitimate corporate act of the ELCA.

Nevertheless, we respect the concerns of those who advocate that *CCM* be implemented with the greatest possible pastoral sensitivity toward those who are angry or uncertain about its meaning and implications. We support the effort of our Presiding Bishop to hold fast to the course

set by the Assembly at Denver, while nonetheless inviting all viewpoints in the church to join in continuing dialogue.

However, a pastoral implementation of *CCM* must be thoughtful and take care to avoid steps which might seem to alleviate controversy in the short run, but in the long run would damage our own communion, as well as our communion with the Episcopal Church, in serious and lasting ways.

Such a proposal, we believe, is the suggestion that the implementation of *CCM* allow for "planned exceptions" to the rule of episcopal ordination; such "planned exceptions" were clearly ruled out by the Assembly at Denver but could be made possible by constitutional amendment. This would in effect allow individual ordinands under some circumstances to decide whether or not they would be ordained by a bishop. We can, to be sure, understand the attractiveness of such a suggestion. In a consumer society which exalts individual choice it almost seems an obvious course of action. Nevertheless, we believe that for many different reasons this would be a destructive path for our church to take. Contrary to those who believe that "planned exceptions" offer a way both to uphold *CCM* and to preserve the unity

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of the ELCA, we would hold that such a course would undermine both full communion with the Episcopal Church and the communion we prize within the ELCA.

1. To allow planned exceptions to *CCM* would call into question the right and competence of the ELCA as a corporate body to order its ecumenical relations in a normative way. In effect, it would suggest that we cannot enter corporately into communion with another church but may only do so on a pastor-by-pastor basis. Whether congregations of the ELCA were in full communion with the Episcopal Church would then change according to which pastors they called. The outcome would be atomistic congregationalism based on clerical individualism. The damage to our corporate existence as a communion of faith and life would be significant and perhaps irreparable.
2. To allow planned exceptions to *CCM* would establish a precedent that persons who meet a minimum doctrinal standard but will not agree to follow the policies and practices of this church nevertheless have an entitlement to ordination. The implications of such a precedent could be far-reaching. It is not difficult to foresee demands for the creation of other ministry-enclaves for opponents of other ELCA policies and practices from across the theological and ideological spectrum. Again, the tendency of the proposal is not to preserve the unity of the ELCA in any meaningful way but rather to undermine it.
3. To allow planned exceptions to *CCM* would mean renunciation of the goal of full communion with the Episcopal Church. To take this path would be to create an alternate path of entry into ordained ministry in the ELCA with the sole purpose of allowing some ordinands to avoid a sign of unity with the Episcopal Church, and in the full knowledge that pastors ordained in this way would not be interchangeable with the Episcopal Church. We would therefore not have one ministry in two churches, but two ministries, one of which overlapped the ELCA and one of which was exclusive to the ELCA. Moreover this would not be an anomalous boundary-case, an exception to the rule, but a matter of deliberate ELCA

policy. By no credible definition could this be called a relationship of full communion. While we honor the motives of those who believe that support for planned exceptions is compatible with full support for *CCM*, we respectfully suggest that they have not thought the matter through to the end.

4. To allow planned exceptions to *CCM* would not only preclude the formation of one ministry common to the ELCA and the Episcopal Church, it would divide the ministry within the ELCA as well. We would have a two-sector or a two-tiered ministry based on mutually opposed theological judgments. It is naive to suppose that these two ministries would be fully interchangeable even within the ELCA. Doubtless the majority of congregations, at least initially, would not care how their pastor had been ordained. But from the beginning there would be congregations – those with close relationships to Episcopal parishes – in which only episcopally ordained pastors would be acceptable, and other congregations which would accept only those free of the taint of episcopacy. The tendency of a policy of planned exceptions would therefore be to erode full communion within the ELCA itself.
5. To allow planned exceptions to *CCM* would inevitably give the appearance of acknowledging that the most vocal Lutheran opponents of *CCM* present a credible interpretation of the agreement and its theological implications. These opponents charge that *CCM* makes the historic episcopate instead of the gospel the ground of unity between our churches, and that it represents the historic episcopate as a guarantee that the gospel will be rightly preached and celebrated. They further insist that the Episcopal Church has made the ELCA's entry into the historic episcopate a condition of recognizing the ELCA as an apostolic church.

No Lutheran church body could responsibly enter into an agreement which rested on such foundations. However, no one in either church besides these Lutheran opponents accepts the validity of this interpretation. Both Lutheran and Episcopal leaders and theologians have clearly and publicly and repeatedly interpreted the document in far different terms, nor does the text of *CCM* itself support these charges.

To allow planned exceptions to *CCM* would be to grant standing to an interpretation of the document and its theological significance which ought to be consistently and firmly rejected as erroneous. The truly pastoral way to implement *CCM* is to offer every possible assurance to concerned ordinands that neither the ELCA nor the Episcopal Church draws from it the unacceptable implications with which the vocal opposition charges it.

Therefore we propose the following as the proper form which a pastoral implementation of *CCM* should take. If *CCM* is approved by the Episcopal Church, the ELCA should seek from the Joint Commission of the two churches a brief theological commentary on *CCM* which could be approved as official by the Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA and by the General Convention of the Episcopal Church. Such a commentary should state in the plainest manner possible:

- a. that the sufficient ground of the unity of the two churches is the apostolic gospel in word and sacrament;
- b. that the historic episcopate is understood by both churches to be a sign both of our dependence on what we have received from the apostles and of our acknowledgment of one another as apostolic churches, but not as a basis for unity additional or alternative to the apostolic gospel, in the sense in which the Lutheran tradition has understood the notion of a “basis for unity”;
- c. that such a sign, by God’s mercy, may strengthen us in fidelity to what we have received from the apostles but does not guarantee such fidelity.

Though these points are already sufficiently clear in the text of *CCM*, we anticipate that our Episcopal partners would cooperate with us in producing such a commentary to reassure Lutherans who have been troubled by angry accusations and charges of betrayal. Such an official commentary, approved by both churches, should provide a basis for a pastoral response to the concern of some Lutherans that ordination by a bishop under *CCM* would be contrary to the Lutheran Confessions.

Finally, we would appeal to all our brothers and sisters in the ELCA to take with due seriousness the deep fractures which this controversy has revealed in our own unity as a Lutheran church body. These fault lines were not created by *CCM*, and they will not go away should *CCM* drop out of the picture altogether. They would simply reemerge in some other guise at some other difficult juncture of our life together. Let us all beware of healing the hurts of God’s people lightly (Jeremiah 6:14); let us beware of easy fixes that leave the fundamental causes of conflict unresolved. We need long and patient theological dialogue on crucial issues of faith on which we presently have no consensus. Such dialogue must begin with honest confession that also within our own church we have no power or wisdom to produce or guarantee unity – we can only pray that God’s Holy Spirit will unite us “in the same mind and the same purpose,” as the Apostle Paul exhorts us (1 Corinthians 1:10).

This statement was unanimously approved by the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary Faculty:

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