

A catholic vision: At the ELCA assembly

by [Richard E. Koenig](#) in the [September 8, 1999](#) issue

"It's not the whole show," cried Presiding Bishop H. George Anderson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America prior to the denomination's Churchwide Assembly in Denver. By "it" the bishop was referring to the question of full communion with the Episcopal Church. But his words did nothing to deflect fixation on the issue on the part of voting members, visitors and the media.

Full communion does not mean merger, but rather a relationship in which each church recognizes the other's teaching and sacraments as genuine expressions of the faith of the church, welcomes each other's members and ministers, and commits to united witness and service wherever possible and practical while retaining its organizational autonomy.

A proposal with the Episcopal Church went down to defeat two years ago, falling just six votes short of the required two-thirds. The vote shocked both the ELCA and the Episcopal Church, the latter having already accepted the proposal. The ELCA assembly then authorized the presiding bishop to appoint a committee to attempt a revision of the Concordat of Agreement in the hope of a more positive result in 1999. Appointed to the committee to revise the document were Martin E. Marty, an ELCA pastor recently retired as professor of church history at the University of Chicago; Michael Root of Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio; and Todd Nichol of Luther Seminary in St. Paul. Marty was named committee chair.

Some opposition to the agreement appeared in almost every quarter of the ELCA, but it was especially strong in the Upper Midwest. The opponents trained their sights on the revision both as a work in progress and in its final form, released in November as "Called to Common Mission: A Lutheran Proposal for a Revision of the Concordat of Agreement" (CCM).

According to Marty, the drafting team benefited greatly from suggestions by friends and foes. The result, he said, was clearer and less complicated than the original, and

it placed mission more at the center of the proposal, while lifting up the church as the priesthood of all believers. Nevertheless, CCM retained the one element in the earlier document that Episcopalians considered essential but Lutheran opponents found unacceptable—provision for Lutherans to accept from Episcopalians the historic episcopate.

The historic episcopate is a form of episcopal polity in which bishops of the church are set apart for their ministry with the laying on of hands by bishops who were set apart in like manner in a succession that reaches back to the earliest days of Christianity. The symbolism is powerful. It links the church of the present with the church of the past and provides Christians with a sign (but not a guarantee, both Lutherans and Episcopalians agree) of the church's unity. Under the historic episcopate, the bishop is the one who ordains the church's ministers, thus extending the symbolism of continuity to those who are called to serve the gathered people of God with word and sacrament.

For opponents of full communion, the historic episcopate seemed to violate the Lutheran understanding of the ministry of the church as a single entity with no grades or levels. Worse, acceptance of the historic episcopate, according to the opponents' reading, abridged the Augsburg Confession's Article 7, which says that "it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine word." Proponents responded by pointing out that the Lutheran Confessions favor an episcopal polity where possible. In any case, church polity is, according to Lutheran teaching, a matter of indifference, meaning that it was neither commanded nor forbidden. Lutherans are free to accept the episcopate for the well-being of the church, as they have in other parts of the world.

Opponents of CCM charged that Lutherans were being forced to accept the historic episcopate while Episcopalians were yielding nothing in exchange—brushing aside the fact that in CCM Episcopalians recognize the Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism as true witnesses to the one catholic and apostolic faith. In addition, CCM includes the substantial doctrinal consensus reached in previous conversations between Lutherans and Anglicans. Both provisions represent something of a novelty for the Episcopal Church, which traditionally has eschewed statements of faith beyond the ecumenical creeds and the Book of Common Prayer.

In a meeting attended by two influential former bishops of predecessor bodies of the ELCA, David Preus (formerly of the American Lutheran Church) and Robert Marshall (formerly of the Lutheran Church in America), in Mahtomedi, Minnesota, opponents prepared a counterproposal to CCM. Plans were developed to press the Mahtomedi resolution, as it came to be called, at the 1999 synod assemblies. (Synods are the regional judicatories that make up the ELCA.) The Mahtomedi resolution recommends cooperative work with the Episcopalians in mission and ministry but refuses to accept the historic episcopate. If accepted by the assembly, its effect would have been to nullify any agreement with the Episcopal Church now and in the future.

Some 19 of the 65 regional synods adopted measures in support of Mahtomedi or against CCM, in some cases over the strong objection of their bishops. Opponents of CCM launched a direct mail campaign to assembly members. CCM's proponents responded with a mailing that included letters in support from former LCA Bishop James Crumley Jr. and the ELCA's first presiding bishop, Herbert Chilstrom.

When Bishop Anderson called for the vote after a final two-hour debate it took but one minute for the giant screens to display the results in bar graph and numbers—716 or 69.3 percent in favor, 317 or 30.7 percent against. The motion was approved.

The outcome took both opponents and supporters by surprise. The assembly greeted the results with sustained but subdued applause, with little backslapping or cheering in evidence. For perhaps the only time in his term as presiding bishop, Anderson, who had come out forthrightly for CCM in his official report at the beginning of the assembly, had to struggle to maintain his composure. He asked for one and all to rise and sing Georg Neumark's sober Lutheran chorale of comfort in times of trial, "If You But Trust in God to Guide You"—hardly a paean of joy, but rather an evangelical and pastoral gesture in the direction of the minority that had opposed the agreement.

After hearing words of appreciation from Episcopal representatives Canon David Perry and Bishop Christopher Epting of Iowa, and the bishop's thanks to those who served in the arduous task of preparing CCM, the assembly gave vent to its emotions with a sustained standing ovation for Anderson for his patient and equitable handling of the debate, which had stretched over four days. The session then closed with a rousing singing of "In Christ There Is No East or West."

The ELCA vote constitutes a genuine breakthrough in ecumenical relations. For the first time a nonepiscopal church has opened the door to achieving full communion with a church holding the historic episcopate, while remaining in full communion with other nonepiscopal churches. The historic episcopate has been a principal fault line dividing Christians ever since the Reformation. Patient work by representatives of the ELCA and the Episcopal Church over 30 years resulted in the carefully crafted formula that brought their churches together. Under the agreement, full communion can be implemented without Lutheran clergy being required to be reordained or Episcopal clergy to make any supplemental confessional pledge to their ordination vow. With its favorable vote, the ELCA has placed itself in the unique position to be a bridge for churches on both sides of the divide.

But it should be noted that CCM comes now as a proposal to the Episcopal Church. The outcome cannot be taken for granted.

What made the difference in the ELCA vote this year? Timothy Lull, president of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, said that what prevailed in Denver was no person, organization or strategy, but a catholic vision for the church to which a majority of voting members instinctively responded and clung in spite of all counterarguments. That vision was spelled out by Anderson with grace and clarity in his report:

At this assembly we will have the chance to launch out on new relationships. We have established our kinship with one branch of the reformation family. By approving full communion relationships with the Moravian and Episcopal churches, we will expand the family circle to recognize more clearly our other historic roots in pre-reformation Christianity. No other church body ever had this possibility to link together so many branches of Christendom. What a bridge we could be!

The catholic vision received powerful, uplifting expression in the magnificent worship services with hymns that ranged from Lutheran chorales to African chants. Marty's moving conclusion to his address introducing CCM gave a strong second to the vision spelled out by Bishop Anderson. If CCM were adopted, said Marty, "in a warring world baptized Christians could provide a fresh and startling sign to place against conflict and for communion." The manifest desire on the part of the assembly was for the widest and deepest possible visible expression of fellowship,

witness, and service for Christ under agreement in the doctrine of the gospel.

Aware that the vote for full communion had left many members grieving and in not a few cases angry, a "background session" was called for the ELCA's 66 bishops and the 37-member church council to consider steps toward healing. Even before the vote, there was speculation as to whether some pastors and congregations would leave the ELCA if CCM were approved. The greater danger, however, is that a portion of ELCA members and congregations will remain alienated. At the close of the assembly Bishop Anderson once again reached out to those who had opposed CCM, commending them for the principles they had fought to uphold and pledging to do all in his power to see to it that such concerns would not be shoved aside or forgotten.

Full communion with the Episcopal Church was indeed not "the whole show." The assembly approved the recommendation favoring full communion with the Moravian Church. Moravians trace their origin back before the Lutheran Reformation to the Bohemian reformer John Hus, who was burned at the stake by order of the Council of Constance in 1415. The Moravians stress Christian discipleship and mission work and are noted for raising congregational singing and music to nearly sacramental status. As is true of some small church bodies, Moravian influence far exceeds their numbers (approximately 50,000 worldwide). Many Protestant ministers in Europe (Dietrich Bonhoeffer was an example) use the Moravian's daily Bible texts and prayers, called *Losungen* in German. The booklet has been published annually for more than 200 years.

Following the near unanimous vote for full communion, the assembly rose and joined in singing "Beautiful Savior" in a translation by a Lutheran pastor who learned the hymn from his Moravian upbringing. As the hymn was sung, mostly by heart and in harmony, representatives of the two churches exchanged embraces of welcome on the podium. A family reunion, Bishop Anderson termed the outcome. This writer shudders to think of what rejection of full communion with the Episcopalians would have looked like to observers after the effusion of goodwill and celebration that marked the Moravian vote.

Voting members emerged from the cavernous reaches of the Colorado Convention Center carrying sacks of weighty reports to share with their constituencies. They may not have noticed one of the most startling. Reporting on the work of the Division for Outreach, executive director Richard A. Magnus announced plans for the

division to assist in establishing 2,000 new ELCA congregations over the next 20 years. ELCA church membership has hovered at about 5.2 million baptized members over the past decade. Given that fact, which received scant attention at this assembly, the division's plans for such an increase should have jarred members to sit bolt upright.

Critics often charge that mainline churches concerned for ecumenical enterprises and social justice can't evangelize. Numbers are no infallible indicators of faithfulness, but it would be heartening to observe the ELCA proving critics wrong. Achieving goals in outreach and church growth will require the same measure of faith, energy and sacrifice that has powered this church in its ecumenical and social-justice enterprises.