

ELCA adopts accord with Methodists, stance on Israel, new hymnal: Lutherans and Methodists to share communion

News in the [September 6, 2005](#) issue

In what one official called the “penultimate” step toward full communion with the United Methodist Church, delegates at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s biennial assembly overwhelmingly approved an interim agreement to permit the sharing of the rite of communion.

The step followed years of theological dialogue. One delegate said he could think of no church that was less offensive to Lutherans than the UMC. The Methodist bishops earlier this year endorsed the pact.

The ultimate goal, leaders said, is an arrangement in which clergy could move freely between both churches, especially in areas where small congregations struggle to afford full-time pastors. “We are committed to working for the goal of full communion, but there is no timetable for that at this time,” said Randy Lee, the ELCA ecumenical director.

The Lutherans already have full communion agreements with the Episcopal Church, the Moravian Church, the United Church of Christ, the Reformed Church in America and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The Methodists, in turn, share full communion with three historically black churches, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

In terms of the actual communion rite of bread and wine, the United Methodists have commonly used grape juice instead of wine, but ecumenical officials say that is not a problem since Lutheran services typically offer unfermented grape juice as an

alternative for those not wanting to consume any alcoholic beverage.

Leaders from both churches said they share “almost identical” theological understandings of the Eucharist, specifically about the “real presence” of Jesus in the bread and wine used in the sacrament. ELCA officials said UMC documents use a kind of language that satisfied them.

William Oden, who oversees ecumenical affairs for United Methodist bishops, said Methodists accept “on faith” the presence of Jesus in the elements of communion but typically shy away from trying to define it.

In another assembly vote, the Lutherans decided to increase advocacy on behalf of Palestinians, but sidestepped a spreading movement to divest from Israel that has angered many Jewish groups.

The ELCA, which has deep ties with the dwindling Palestinian Christian community, said it would push Israel to dismantle its controversial separation barrier that critics say runs roughshod over Palestinian lands. But the church declined to follow Presbyterians and Anglicans who want to pull investments from companies doing business with Israel to protest the plight of the Palestinians.

Instead, the Lutherans voted 668-269 to pursue “positive economic development” in the region as part of an eight-page “strategy.” Part of that plan calls for “managing collective or personal investments” in order to pursue peace, but does not mention divestment.

Lutherans are particularly concerned about the future of Augusta Victoria Hospital, a facility operated by the Lutheran World Federation that primarily serves Palestinians in East Jerusalem. Lutherans say Palestinian access has been cut off by Israel. “Our church believes in bridges, not walls; trust, not fear,” Bishop Munib Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land told delegates by phone from Jerusalem.

Jewish groups say the wall is needed to protect Israelis from suicide bombers, and have criticized a similar call to dismantle the wall recently issued by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the leader of the Union for Reform Judaism, urged delegates in earlier remarks not to “demonize or isolate Israel.”

In another vote, delegates approved an updated worship book that offers more options for contemporary worship and less emphasis on exclusively masculine images of God. They endorsed the proposed prayer book and hymnal by a 740-250 margin on the third day of the biennial meeting. The action allows church officials to make final revisions to the new volume, scheduled for publication in October 2006.

Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson, in his report to the church August 9, endorsed what he called an unpublished proposal by a Lutheran seminary president to convene a high-level ecumenical council on the Christian interpretation of scripture. Hanson said the idea came from Wartburg Seminary president Duane Larson, who suggested that the council should include Pope Benedict, the Ecumenical Patriarch (Orthodox) in Istanbul and leaders of the Lutheran and Anglican communions.

Hanson quoted Larson as saying that Christianity has a global identity crisis because the authority and interpretation of the Bible has not been addressed ecumenically. "The crisis is almost entirely due to the dominance of a fundamentalist-millennialist-apocalypticist reading of scripture," writes Larson, according to Hanson. *-compiled from Religion News Service reports*