

# **Lutherans OK communion pact with Methodists: Many practical benefits**

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Though they're not merging, the nation's two largest mainline Protestant denominations have agreed to share ministers and resources. The full-communion agreement, which was approved at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's biennial assembly in Minneapolis, connects the 4.6 million-member ELCA with the United Methodist Church, which has 11 million members.

Church leaders said the measure is more than a matter of feel-good ecumenism. By enabling the sharing of ministers, missions and resources, the accord may toss a lifeline to the two denominations, both of which have steadily lost members for decades.

ELCA delegates voted 958 to 51 in favor of the accord and stood to applaud the measure. The UMC approved the agreement overwhelmingly at its General Conference last year.

It is the first full-communion accord for the UMC, though parts of the church overseas have reached similar agreements with other churches. The ELCA has five other full-communion partners.

Thirty years in the making, the August 20 accord means that the two churches recognize the validity of each other's ministers, baptisms and eucharistic services and pledge to work closely together.

ELCA presiding bishop Mark Hanson said that having a full-communion partner means that Lutherans no longer have to worry about planting congregations in every community, posting ministers to every college campus and sending missionaries to every country, and that they can speak with a louder voice on pressing political issues in Washington.

Bishop Gregory Palmer, president of the UMC's Council of Bishops, also praised the agreement's practical benefits. "The interchangeability of ordained clergy could be

very important in sustaining ministry presence in places where it's hard to have full-time ordained clergy," particularly in hard-hit urban areas and far-flung rural congregations, he said. *-Religion News Service*