

ELCA tinkers with ecumenism: Jeopardizing a pact

by [Jean Caffey Lyles](#) in the [September 12, 2001](#) issue

Acting unilaterally, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has placed in jeopardy its relationship of “full communion” with the Episcopal Church. At its August biennial session in Indianapolis, the Lutheran body’s churchwide assembly narrowly approved a church bylaw that contravenes an element of “Called to Common Mission,” the ecumenical concord that was given final approval by the two denominations’ top governing bodies in 1999 and 2000. The new bylaw, which required a two-thirds majority for adoption, squeaked by, 683 to 330—an eight-vote margin.

The bylaw will allow an ELCA pastor, if authorized by a synod bishop, to ordain an approved pastoral candidate “for pastoral reasons in unusual circumstances.” Lutherans have historically allowed pastors to preside at ordinations when authorized by the candidate’s synod bishop. Episcopalians have never had such a practice.

At issue is the objection, by a minority of ELCA clergy and laity, to a provision in the concord stipulating that all ELCA pastors ordained after January 1, 2001, must receive the laying-on-of-hands by one or more bishops. It allows for an exception “only in emergency situations” to the regular practice of requiring a bishop to ordain a pastor.

Not wishing to leave the interpretation of “emergency” to the whims of bishops, vocal opponents to full communion with Episcopalians (mostly Lutherans residing in the Upper Midwest) agitated for retaining the Lutheran practice of allowing pastors to preside over ordinations. A Twin Cities-based caucus called Word Alone fought an organized campaign to secure a more permissive policy.

Episcopal, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian bishops (and bishops in certain Lutheran bodies outside the United States) are in the historic succession of bishops. That line is traditionally said to stretch from Jesus’ disciples through the ages to the

present. Passing on the historic episcopate is ensured as bishops in historic succession exercise the “laying-on-of-hands” when a new bishop is “ordained,” “consecrated” or “installed.”

Those who oppose the historic episcopate for Lutherans say they fear that it will give bishops too much power, and that future pastoral candidates will be “tainted” by such an ordination. “At this rate, we’ll all be Episcopalians in 20 years,” one Word Alone leader complained. Fearing discord—even schism—in the church, the ELCA’s church council asked the secretary of the church to draft a proposed bylaw to ease the consciences of dissenters. Both the council and the ELCA conference of bishops passed a final proposal on to the assembly.

To the relief of many ecumenists, the new bylaw does include two provisions to discourage pastoral candidates from running amok. It says that before authorizing an ordination performed by a pastor, the synod bishop must consult with the presiding bishop “as this church’s chief ecumenical officer” and “shall seek the advice of the synod council.” And with some synod bishops, a dissenting candidate may have to make a convincing case to qualify for an “exceptional” ordination. “I don’t think you’re going to see many of these,” predicted one ELCA official.

Undoubtedly, many synod bishops had no appetite for the unilateral move. But a source present at the bishops’ meeting said the measure was approved with almost no debate, on a voice vote with a lusty chorus of ayes. If there were nays, they were not audible. Any arm-twisting or gentle persuasion presumably took place in corridor huddles or late-night conversations. The bishops discarded the idea of a “sunset clause” to specify a date beyond which planned exceptions would not be allowed. There are times when a church’s bishops, whatever their internal tensions, agree to speak with one voice to the church at large, for unity’s sake. Still, one wonders whether a secret ballot would have yielded a different outcome.

One influence on the assembly vote was surely the freely expressed opinion of retiring ELCA Presiding Bishop H. George Anderson. At a preassembly press conference, and again in his final report to the assembly, Anderson endorsed the bylaw. “I’m not comfortable about making unilateral changes, especially when Episcopal leaders have expressed dismay at such a move,” Anderson told the assembly. “Nevertheless, in my opinion, the proposal of the conference of bishops that we allow for pastoral judgment in this matter is both consistent with our understanding of the ministry and necessary for the support of a united mission

within this church.” Anderson said he wanted to avoid leaving a situation of continuing turmoil for his successor, but many Lutherans believe even more uproar will result from unilaterally fiddling with the agreement.

The new bylaw was adopted only seven months after the two church bodies celebrated their new ecumenical relationship at a festive service at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. The historic accord was reached after more than 25 years of formal ecumenical dialogues, informal conversations between church leaders and ecumenists and uncounted compromises, martinis, gin-and-tonics, prayers, drafts, seminars, presentations, reactions, bottom-line demands, amendments, redrafts and votes.

“Full communion” in practice will mean that Lutheran and Episcopal clergy may serve either church’s parishes and interchangeably celebrate communion in the churches of both denominations. The accord also makes possible joint missions or congregations in urban or rural situations where neither denomination can support a full-time priest or pastor.

But the Episcopal Church will not accept a Lutheran pastor ordained by anyone other than a bishop “for the purpose of interchangeability or reciprocity,” warned Episcopal Presiding Bishop Frank Tracy Griswold III in a March letter to Anderson. The unilateral alteration by one partner of a full-communication accord appears to be not only a breach of trust, but unprecedented in ecumenical history.

Anglicans are disinclined to be blunt or rude. A seasoned ecumenist explained, in a telephone interview, that when an Episcopal leader acknowledges that he or she is “concerned,” “distressed” or “dismayed,” you can safely assume that the speaker or letter writer is mad as hell. Lutherans tend to be more earthy and plainspoken, so it may be that top ELCA leaders really did not recognize the fury of their ecumenical partners.

Assembly floor debate was lively. “What if the church took back the ordination of women?” asked Glenn D. Miller, a Pennsylvania pastor. “No, the church stayed the course [on that decision], though probably some bishops were opposed in good conscience.” He commented, “This [bylaw] has the feel of a newly married couple who have begun to get cold feet before they’re out the narthex door.”

David Tiede, president of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, argued that the new bylaw would allow “wiggle room” for “people of conscience” and would be a

“very modest” change. One woman asked: If the assembly gave in to the opponents of full communion on this bylaw, what would they want next? How many unilateral Lutheran changes would it take to satisfy the dissidents?

Speaking for the bylaw, Timothy Lull, president of Pacific Lutheran Seminary, advised that it’s best to “bring along as many people as we can when we make changes in the church. . . . If [Episcopalians] are as great as I think they are, they’ll understand.” Other speakers argued that if the bylaw passed, the Episcopal Church—not to mention other ecumenical partners—would never again completely trust the ELCA’s word in any ecumenical venture.

Bishop Christopher Epting, Episcopal Church ecumenical staff officer, arrived at the Lutheran assembly with two statements in his breast pocket. Both carried Griswold’s signature. Epting knew that which one was read would depend on the outcome of the vote. In his brief message Griswold said the ELCA move “appears to be a unilateral alteration of the mutual commitment that both our churches have solemnly made to enter into full communion. . . . We are mindful of the pastoral realities within the ELCA, . . . but we are concerned that [the bylaw] has seemingly created, or may create, two classes of clergy within the ELCA and that it seems to ensure that argument over ‘Called to Common Mission’ will continue.”

He added, “It appears to us to jeopardize the role of bishop as a focus of unity . . . [and] could complicate the hopes of many in the ELCA for closer relations and full communion with the majority of other churches that already perform ordinations in the historic catholic tradition and so do not recognize ordinations by pastors.” Griswold pledged “our ongoing partnership with the ELCA in the gospel.” Episcopalians still “hope and pray” that the full realizations of the provisions of “Called to Common Mission” will be fully realized, he said. What official action the Episcopal General Convention may take awaits that governing body’s regular meeting in 2003.

Assemblygoers learned that decision-making bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Anglican Church in Canada recently adopted a full-communion agreement by overwhelming majorities. These neighbors to the north seem to have reached that goal with far less agonizing than their U.S. counterparts.

Lutheran Presiding Bishop-elect Mark S. Hanson will receive the historic episcopate at his October installation at Rockefeller Chapel in Chicago. At least three bishops

from Lutheran bodies outside the U.S. that are in the historic succession will perform the laying-on-of-hands, along with one or more invited Episcopal bishops. Clergy elected as synod bishops in spring or summer but not yet in office are invited to be installed at Hanson's installation service. (Synod bishops-elect may also choose to be installed at services within their own geographical synods. In any case, three bishops in the historic succession must take part in the laying-on-of-hands.)

Clearly, many Lutherans see full communion with the Episcopal Church as a costly decision that threatens Lutheran identity. Full-communion agreements with the Moravian Church, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., the Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ are widely seen as costing the Lutherans little. Said one pastor, "Sure, it's not costly, unless people have a hard time accepting that those churches don't teach the real presence of Christ in communion." Another pastor referred to these "easier" pacts as "cheap ecumenism."

As if to atone for saying "but-we-had-our-fingers-crossed" ecumenically, the assembly agreed by a vote of 892 to 25 to enter into a relationship with the nine-denomination Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC), previously known as the Consultation on Church Union (COCU). The member denominations include Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Disciples, United and Community churches. The CUIC general secretary, Michael Kinnamon, a Disciples of Christ minister, made a persuasive case for CUIC both in an open hearing and in plenary. The ELCA (which has previously had observer or "participant-consultant" status) is not being invited into full membership. After all, the multilateral dialogue has been going on since the 1960s—more than 40 years. (The length of that discussion explains why CUIC is pronounced "quick," Kinnamon joked.) The Lutheran body will be part of a "second circle" of invited "partners in mission and dialogue."

CUIC will not be "costly ecumenism" for the Lutherans—at least, not yet. But participation should help cement Lutheran full-communion relations with those of its ecumenical partners that are fully engaged in CUIC. Many listeners in the open hearing voiced high enthusiasm. Some, speaking as though they had never before heard of COCU or CUIC, thought it a grand idea.

On January 18, 2002, in Memphis, the churches of CUIC will "inaugurate" their growing relationship of "covenant communion" and "living together." The nine partners could be years from declaring full communion—owing largely to a recurrent disagreement between Presbyterians and Episcopalians on polity and

understandings of ministry. The original 1960s plan envisioned a future organic union. But the winds of ecumenical change shifted, and the goal of “merger” was dropped from COCU’s vocabulary years ago.

As Kinnamon noted, the long-running dialogue has always emphasized combating racism—three of the nine member groups are black Methodist denominations. CUIC intends to foster local ecumenical contacts. “With 40 years of dialogue behind us, God has already bound us together in unity—on that we do not get to vote,” Kinnamon said.

Of course, no mainline Protestant national legislative convention would be complete these days without a discussion or vote on some aspect of homosexuality. After much debate, the ELCA assembly voted to commit the church to a thorough four-year study of homosexuality. The study’s aim is to help the church reach some conclusions about homosexuals in the church’s life. The study asks for a plan to decide by 2005 on the gay ordination question. The writing of a social statement on human sexuality is also in the offing. The church’s division for ministry, headed by Joseph Wagner, will have primary responsibility for the study. He called it a “daunting assignment” and said “balanced views” would be one criterion in putting together a study team.

The decision to study the issues in depth could conceivably lead to changes in the ELCA rules that bar noncelibate homosexuals from ordination and admission to the clergy roster. Some ELCA members (like some members of other denominations) believe that the gay ordination issue is potentially schismatic. One Lutheran journalist, pointing to pro-gay protesters across the street from the main entrance, declared of all promoters of gay-lesbian causes, “That’s the only interest group in the ELCA that refuses to compromise to avoid splitting the church.”