

Full communion

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 3, 2001](#) issue

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:16-17).

Now that the “ecumenical century” has ended, Christians must ask, “How are the people of ‘one baptism’ and ‘one bread’ doing?” Pick your vantage point; mine is from within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

My denomination’s goal is achieving “full communion” with other Christians, not uniting with them in “one organization.” It recognizes and regrets that Christian churches visibly violate the charge, charter and character of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church when they set up many tables and exclude others of the baptized from their own. Having no desire to be under papal rule, I’d demand a recount if all the churches, including mine, voted to “go to Rome.” And at the same time, having every desire for communion, I’d leap to the table at St. Peter’s, as well as at the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Of course, individually one can always present oneself, especially anonymously, at almost any church. But that is not the same as demonstrating and enjoying participation as a member of a communion at communion elsewhere. Private, individualistic “crossing of boundaries” and crashing of tables is not what Christians at their best mean by communion.

Each body erects barriers. For many, they are based on polity. Here is where I would argue that I’m lucky to be in the ELCA, where polity is essentially adiaphoral—something indifferent. The ELCA now enjoys “full communion” with the United Church of Christ. Given the congregational roots of one of the church bodies that joined to form that denomination, it might say, “We’re congregational.” We Lutherans say, “So are we.”

The same goes for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which says, “We’re presbyterian in organization, with presbyters (elders) sharing in rule.” So are we. (The first published guide to American faiths, by Robert Baird, said the Lutheran governance in the U.S. is “essentially Presbyterian.”)

The Reformed Church in America says, “We are synodical.” So are we, says the ELCA, which has 65 synods.

The Episcopal Church naturally says, “We are episcopal,” meaning “We have bishops.” So have we. “But ours,” they say, are “in the episcopate.” The ELCA says, “If that helps us realize 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, we’ll adapt to one more polity.” The Moravian Church in America calls itself “conferential,” which means, “We have conferences and we confer.” So have we, so do we. Let’s commune together as bodies, in bodies.

Talks now are proceeding on full communion with the United Methodist Church, which is connectional. “Fine with us,” the ELCA will say. “We connect and are connectional too.”

On Epiphany morning, the Lutheran-Episcopal full communion will be rendered official and celebrated at Washington’s National Cathedral. Having had a part in drafting the enabling document and now serving as interim president at St. Olaf College, whose choir will sing, I so wish I could be there. Happenstance has me being appraised and honored at the American Society of Church History. It’s a long-scheduled, unmovable feast—not among adiaphora, “things indifferent.” So I’ll think a *Te Deum* from a distance, and join those newly united for Christian mission in the new millennium.