Methodists OK sharing communion with ELCA and Episcopal Church: First step toward full communion

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United Methodists have taken the first step toward full communion with Episcopalians and most Lutherans after their bishops approved an agreement to share the Eucharist, with members of the two other denominations.

The United Methodist bishops, meeting in Arlington, Virginia, approved the pact May 5. Church officials expect similar agreements to be approved by the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America within a year.

The three-way agreement officially permits the trio of denominations— with more than 15 million members altogether—to share communion and join in ministry together. It also moves the churches one step closer to full communion, in which the three churches can swap clergy and recognize one another's sacraments.

"This is highly significant," said Bishop William B. Oden, ecumenical officer for the Methodist bishops' council. He said it would be the first time his denomination has had such a shared communion with any group outside the Methodist tradition, which includes the African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion and Christian Methodist Episcopal churches.

The Episcopal Church and the Chicago-based ELCA already have a full-communion agreement that was formally launched in 2001. The Methodists hope to enter into full communion with the Lutherans by 2008 and the Episcopalians by 2012.

"Our oneness is in Christ," said Methodist bishop Peter Weaver of Boston, president of the Council of Bishops. "So these agreements are not just about sharing communion with each other; they're about recognizing that we are part of one body of Christ and thus one mission for Christ in the world."

In other action, the Methodists agreed to join a new ecumenical body, Christian Churches Together in the USA, as provisional members. The new organization will bring Catholics, evangelicals, mainline Protestants and Orthodox and Pentecostal churches together for the first time. It is expected to be formally launched in September. -*Religion News Service*