

The History of WELS Fellowship Relations Since 1963

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The following is our synod's stand taken on Church Fellowship as presented and accepted at the 1961 Synod Convention:

Preliminary clarifications:

Church Fellowship is a term that has been used to designate both a status and an activity. Both usages lie very close together and one flows out of the other....

Church Fellowship can be defined as the status in which individuals or groups on the 'basis of a common confession of faith have mutually recognized one another as Christian brethren and now consider it God-pleasing to express, manifest, and demonstrate their common faith jointly,

Church Fellowship can also be defined as the activity which includes every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians (individuals or groups) on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another. (Mutual recognition of one another as Christian brethren is itself one such "joint expression" of common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another.)

For very practical reasons we have preferred to treat Church Fellowship in our Theses as a term designating an activity since the inter-synodical tensions have to do more with Church Fellowship as an activity than as a status....

CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another.

A. How Scripture leads us to this concept of church fellowship.

1. Through faith in Christ the Holy Spirit unites us with our God and Savior. Gal 3:26; 4:6; 1 John 3:1,

2. This Spirit-wrought faith at the same time unites us in an intimate bond with all other believers, 1 John 183; Eph. 4:4-6; John 17:20,21. Compare also the many striking metaphors emphasizing the unity of the Church, e. g., the body of Christ, the temple of God.

3. Faith as spiritual life invariably expresses itself in activity which is spiritual in nature, yet outwardly manifest, e.g., in the use of the means of grace, in prayer, in praise and worship, in appreciative use of the "gifts" of the Lord to the Church, in Christian testimony, in furthering the cause of the Gospel, in deeds of Christian love. Jn. 8:47; Ga. 4:6; Eph 4:11-14; Ac. 4:20; 2 Cor. 4:13; 1 Pe. 2:9; Ga. 2:9, 5:6.

4. It is God the Holy Ghost who leads us to express & manifest in activity the faith which He works & sustains in our hearts through the Gospel. Ga. 4:6; Jn. 15:26,27; Jn 7:38,39; Ac. 1:8; Eph 2:10.

5. Through the bond of faith in which He unites us with all Christians: the Holy Spirit also leads us to express & manifest our faith jointly with fellow Christians according to opportunity: as smaller & larger groups, Ac. 1:14,15; 2:41-47; Ga. 2:9 as congregations with other congregations, Ac. 15; 1 Th 4:9; 2 Cor 8:1,2,18,19; 2 Cor. 9:2. (Before God every activity

of our faith is at the same time fellowship activity in the communion of saints: 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:1-16; Ro 12:1-8; 2 Tm 2:19.)

6. We may classify those joint expressions of faith in various ways according to the particular realm of activity in which they occur, e.g., pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship, prayer fellowship, fellowship in worship, fellowship in church work, in missions, in Christian education, in Christian charity. Yet insofar as they are joint expressions of faith they are all essentially one & the same thing, & are all properly covered by a common designation, namely, church fellowship.* Church fellowship, should therefore be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, & demonstration of a common faith. Hence Scripture can give the general admonition “avoid them” when church fell, is to cease, Ro. 16:17. Hence Scripture sees an expression of church fellowship, also in giving the right hand of fellowship, Ga. 2:9, & in greeting one another with the fraternal kiss, Ro. 16:16; on the other hand, it points out that a withholding of church fellowship may also be indicated by not extending a fraternal welcome to errorists & by not bidding them Godspeed, 2 Jn 10,11. Cf. Jn. 5-8.

*(Full attention needs to be given in this statement to the limiting terms: “insofar” & “joint.” The “insofar” is to point out that it is indeed only in their function as joint expressions of faith that the use of the Means of Grace & such other things mentioned as Christian prayer, Christian education, & Christian charity all lie on the same plane. In other respects the Means of Grace & their use are indeed unique. Only through the Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word & Sacrament, does the Holy Spirit awaken, nourish, & sustain faith. Again, only the right use of the Word & sacrament are (sic!) the true marks of the Church, the marks by which the Lord points us to those with whom He would have us express our faith jointly.

For anything to be a “joint” expression of faith presupposes that those involved are really expressing their faith together. This distinguishes a joint expression of faith from individual expressions of faith which happen to be made at the same time & at the same place. Certain things like the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, the Proclamation of the Gospel, & also prayer are by their very nature expressions of faith & are an abomination in God’s sight when not intended to be that. When done together they are therefore invariably joint expressions of faith. Other things like giving a greeting, a kiss, a handshake, extending hospitality or physical help to others are in themselves not of necessity expressions of Christian faith. Hence doing these things together with others does not necessarily make them joint expressions of faith, even though a Christian will for his own person also thereby be expressing his faith (cf. 2 Cor 10:31). These things done together with others become joint expressions of faith only when those involved intend them to be that, understand them in this way, & want them to be understood thus, as in the case of the apostolic collection for the poor Christians at Jerusalem, the fraternal kiss of the apostolic church, our handshake at ordination & confirmation,)

B. What principles Scripture teaches for the exercise of such church fellowship

1. In selecting specific individuals or groups for a joint expression of faith, we can do this only on the basis of their confession. It would be presumptuous on our part to attempt to recognize Christians on the basis of the personal faith in their hearts. 2 Tm. 2:19; Ro. 10:10; 1 Jn. 4:1-3; 1 Sm. 16:7.

2. A Christian confession of faith is in principle always a confession to the entire Word of God. The denial, adulteration, or suppression of any word of God does not stem from faith but from unbelief. Jn. 8:31; Matt. 5:19; 1 Pe. 4:11; Jn. 23:28,31; Deut. 4:2; Rv. 22:18,19. We recognize & acknowledge as Christian brethren those who profess faith in Christ as their Savior & with this profession embrace & accept His entire Word. Compare Walther’s “Theses on Open

Questions,” Thesis 7: “No man has the privilege, & to no man may the privilege be granted, to believe & to teach otherwise than God has revealed in His Word, no matter whether it pertains to primary or secondary fundamental articles of faith, to fundamental or non-fundamental doctrines, to matters of faith or of practice, to historical items or other matters subject to the light of reason, to important or seemingly unimportant matters.”

3. Actually, however, the faith of Christians & its manifestations are marked by many imperfections, either in the grasp & understanding of Scriptural truths, or in the matter of turning these truths to full account in their lives. We are all weak in one way or another. Php. 3:12; Eph. 4:14; 3:16-18; 1 Th. 5:14; He. 5:12; 1 Pe. 2:2. Compare Walther’s Thesis 5: “The Church militant must indeed aim at & strive for absolute unity of faith & doctrine, but it never will attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one.” Cf. Thesis 10.

4. Weakness of faith is in itself not a reason for terminating church fellowship, but rather an inducement for practicing it vigorously to help one another in overcoming our individual weaknesses. In precept and example Scripture abounds with exhortations to pay our full debt of love toward the weak.

a. General exhortations. Ga. 6:1-3; Eph. 4:1-16; Matt. 18:15-17.

b. Weakness in laying hold of God’s promises in a firm trust. Matt. 6:25-34.

c. Weakness with reference to adiaphora in enjoying fully the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. Ro. 14; 1 Cor. 8 & 9. The public confession of any church must establish, however, which things are adiaphora so that it may be evident who are the weak & who are the strong, Ro. 14:17-23; 1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23,24.

d. Weakness in understanding God’s truth and involvement in error. Ac 1:6; Galatians (Judaizing error); Colossians (Jewish-Gnostic error); 1 Cor. 15; 1 Th. 4:10-12,14; 2 Th. 3:6,14,15; Ac. 15:5, 6, 22, 25. Note how in all these cases Paul Patiently built up the weak faith of these Christians with the Gospel to give them strength to overcome the error that had affected them. Compare Walther’s Theses 2,3,4, & 8.

5. Persistent adherence to false doctrine & practice calls for termination of church fellowship.

a. We cannot continue to recognize & treat anyone as a Christian brother who in spite of all brotherly admonition impenitently clings to a sin. His & our own Spiritual welfare calls for termination of church fellowship. Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-6.
(Excommunication)

b. We can no longer recognize & treat as Christian brethren those who in spite of patient admonition persistently adhere to an error, and make propaganda for it. Ga. 1:8,9; 5:9; Mt. 7:15-19; 16:6; 2 Tim. 2:17-19; 2 Jn. 9-11; Rom. 16:17,18. If the error does not overthrow the foundation of saving faith, the termination of fellowship is not to be construed as an excommunication. Moreover an excommunication can only apply to an individual, not to a congregation or larger church group. The “avoid them” of Ro. 16:17,18 excludes any contact that would be an acknowledgment & manifestation of church fellowship; it calls for a cessation of every further joint expression of faith. Cf. 1 Cor. 5:9-11. Compare Walther’s Theses 9 & 10.

c. Those who practice church fellowship with persistent errorists are partners of their evil deeds. 2 Jn. 11.

From all of this we see that in the matter of the outward expression of Christian fellowship, the exercise of church fellowship, particularly two Christian principles need to direct us, the great debt of love which the Lord would have us pay to the weak brother & His clear injunction (also flowing out of love avoid those who adhere to false doctrine & practice & all who make themselves partakers of their evil deeds. Conscientious recognition of both principles will lead to an evangelical practice also in facing many difficult situations that confront us, situations which properly lie in the field of casuistry.

On the basis of the foregoing, we find it to be an untenable position

I. To distinguish between joint prayer which is acknowledged to be an expression of church fellowship & an occasional joint prayer which purports to be something short of church fellowship.

II. To designate certain non-fundamental doctrines as not being divisive of church fellowship in their very nature.

III. To envision fellowship relations (in a congregation, in a church body, in a church federation, in a church agency, in a cooperative church activity) like so many steps of a ladder, each requiring a gradually increasing—or decreasing measure of unity in doctrine & practice.

(Proceedings, 1961, p.187ff)

Why begin a paper with another paper? Because in order to understand the history of our WELS fellowship relations since 1963, we need to fully declare to what principles of church fellowship we hold. Then, and only then, will our fellowship practices in the past 20 years and earlier be seen to be consistent with our teachings and Scripture. Some would say that we err when we speak of “prayer fellowship;” others would say we err when we speak of “persistent errorists” as compared to “weak brothers.” Our position concerning both terms has remained the same because the Biblical reasons, as stated in the paper above, have not changed. But what about our practice of those Biblical principles? Has the Wisconsin Synod been consistent? Have we been too quick to judge and condemn as some say? Or have we in the name of “love” been too slow to recognize, publicly declare and officially renounce a church body as persistent errorists with whom we cannot practice church fellowship? History bears the answers.

I. The 1960s – Attempts to Retain or Regain Synodical Conference Fellowship.

(Including churches elsewhere in the world in fellowship with the former Synodical Conference)

The year 1963 for Roman Catholics meant the death of their pope, for United States citizens meant the death of their president, for Wisconsin Synod Lutherans meant the “death” of the Ev. Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America, at least as a Confessional Organization which we could support. And while it is true that the Synodical Conference, as such, did not end for a few more years (1967), as far as WELS was concerned, we had asked for its dissolution the year before, in 1962.

The Wisconsin Synod officially withdrew from it in 1963, the Ev. Lutheran Synod in 1965 leaving; only the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod (LC-MS) and the Synod of Ev. Lutheran Churches (Slovak, SELC) which merged with the LC-MS in 1971.

Leaving the Synodical Conference did not remove all fellowship problems for the WELS; it created more. Within the Synodical Conference circles many federations of congregations been formed, controlling grade schools, high schools, colleges, homes for the aged and the retarded. Our Synod in convention in 1963 resolved to urge immediate steps be taken to separate all of these joint ventures (Proceedings, 1963 p. 222) -- something that has been carried out for the most part.

Then there was the other problem—our synod had discontinued fellowship with the LC-MS, but we were officially still in fellowship with the other Synodical Conference synods and churches elsewhere around the world which in turn were all still in fellowship with the LC-MS. In 1963 our “triangular fellowships” involved the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), SELC, Ev. Lutheran Church of Australia, Ev. Luth. Free Synod of South Africa, Church of the Ev. Lutheran Confessions in Germany (our German mission, the Bekenntniskirche), Ev. Luth. Free Church of England, Luth. Church in Brazil, Luth. Free Church of France and Belgium, Ev. Luth. (Old Lutheran) Church of Germany (Breslau Synod), Ev. Luth. Free Church of Germany (Saxon Free Ch.), Free Ev. Luth. Church in Finland, Ev. Lutheran Church of Nigeria, and a church body already in question, a branch of the LC-MS, the India Ev. Luth. Church that was already involved with a merger with more unionistic Lutheran churches in India.

To add to this problem, many of these church bodies were unaware of the doctrinal errors within the Missouri Synod and had little or no idea as to why our synod split fellowship with our former sister synod.

As we were soon to find out, many of these church bodies were unfortunately losing members due to their confessional position and were considering backing down “somewhat” on their Scriptural stand in order to merge with other church bodies to keep their churches financially stable. For this reason from the beginning many seemed to lean toward the larger LC-MS -- representing the majority of the Synodical Conference -- rather than to side with the smaller WELS. Others chose to try to stay in the middle, to compromise, to stay in fellowship with LC-MS and WELS in an effort which they seemed to think would draw our two church bodies back together. (Perhaps some felt that if they waited long enough the Americans -- the LC-MS and the WELS would fellowship together again and then they would not have to choose between us.)

These were the problems which the Wisconsin Synod now resolved to correct.

Soma of the problems were resolved without any action on our part. The India Ev. Lutheran Church did merge with more unionistic churches, ending our fellowship. The Ev. Lutheran Free Church of England and the Lutheran Church of Brazil never renewed fellowship ties with us after we split fellowship with the LC-MS.

On a happier note, the ELS, the CELC in Germany (Bekenntniskirche), the ELFS of South Africa, the LFC-S of France and Belgium, the FELC of Finland all came out with statements throughout the 1960s firmly backing our synod as having the correct Biblical position. We note with reservation, however, the fact that of all of these, only the ELS officially withdrew church fellowship from the LC-MS (1953); the others for the most part either needed more time to discover for themselves that the LC-MS was truly involved in persistent error or officially proclaimed themselves to be in a “state of confession over against the LC-MS” much as the WELS had done in the late 1950s. So even with most of these seemingly strong confessional churches, our synod was involved with unwanted, ambiguous triangular fellowship with the LC-MS.

By 1967 it had become quite evident that the Slovak Synod (SELC) was completely aware of our doctrinal reasons for leaving our former sister synod. It was also obvious that the SELC had a “different spirit” from ours -- in October, 1965 the SELC resolved at its synod convention to become a part of the newly-forming Lutheran Council in the United States of America with the LC-MS, the ALC, and the LCA. Though SELC expressed its desire to remain in fellowship with us, the WELS in its 1967 convention resolved to suspend fellowship with SELC since the confessional unity we once had no longer existed.

Our relations with the Ev. Luth. Church of Australia turned out to be a situation similar to that of the India Ev. Lutheran Church. Less than one month after our WELS convention in 1963, representatives of the ELC of Australia participated in a special meeting concerning our doctrine and practice held at Mankato, Minnesota August 19-23, 1963, and sponsored by the ELS and WELS. (Others in attendance were representatives from our Bekenntniskirche, from Finland and from the SELC). While the Australians later (in 1965) expressed their views holding to the autonomy of local congregations and that prayer with others is not necessarily fellowship, even then, they officially stated that they accepted completely the definition of fellowship of the 163 Mankato Conferences:

Church fellowship in the external sense ... essentially consists in the mutual acknowledgment and recognition of Christians (individuals, congregations & church bodies) as brethren in the faith. This mutual acknowledgment, and recognition may designate a status (i.e. as being in church fellowships, pulpits, prayer fellowship, joint mission work etc.). True God pleasing church fellowship is present or practiced only when those involved are in doctrinal and confessional agreement leaving no room for any deviation from the pure Word of God. (Book of Reports and Memorials, 1965, pp. 117ff.)

However, even as the ELS of Australia stated continued agreement with this statement, they were planning a merger with the United ELC of Australia, a church body in fellowship with the American Lutheran Church. This merger took place in October, 1966. The new church body has had many internal problems from

its beginning (as we could imagine it would—outwardly uniting opposite theologies) and never pursued church fellowship with any other church body until the early 1980s.

Doctrine and fellowship also came into question with regard to our sister synods in the Land of the Reformation during the 1960s. Financial problems and dwindling numbers made several small church bodies desire to unite. Two church bodies, the Ev. Lutheran Free Church of Germany (Saxon Free Ch.), and the Ev. Luth. (Old Luth.) Church in Germany (Breslau Synod) were in fellowship with us. The third church body involved, the Independent Ev, Luth, Free Church of Germany, was not. All three were also in church fellowship with the LC-MS. And to add to the confusion, the Saxon Free Church and the Breslau Synod declared fellowship with the Independent ELFC of Germany, though we had not even had an opportunity to discuss doctrine with that church.

Already in 1964 at a meeting in Heidelberg, it became apparent that among these churches of Germany there was a confusion as to the doctrines of church and church fellowship (BoRaM, 1965. p. 120). Two years later our Commission on Doctrine was glad to report that progress had been made, and that the German churches apparently had “gained a clearer understanding and appreciation of our Synod’s doctrinal position on church fellowship, church, and ministry.” (Proceedings, 1967, p. 269). Yet our same 1967 Synod Convention expressed meat misgivings about a new confessionally weak statement drawn up for approval by the three German church bodies working for merger.

At the October, 1966 convention of the Breslau Synod, a resolution was passed which denounced the 1947 Statement of Agreement (Einigungssätze) between our synods as not binding. The new statement that was drawn up allowed for a right or wrong stand on Scriptural inerrancy, depending on the sense in which one read the statements. Our Synod took action similar to a “state of confession over against the Breslau Synod” by resolving: “In view of the October, 1966 resolution of the FL (Old Lutheran) Church in Germany which annulled the binding; nature of the 1947 Einigungssätze as we understood it, we must regretfully recognize that the basis of our Synod’s fellowship with the EL (Old Lutheran) Church in Germany has been removed.” (This actually sounds like a resolution to suspend fellowship entirely, but does not say that specifically; it protests continued fellowship, but leaves room for continued fellowship if we were reading too much out of their synod’s resolution.)

As it turned out the Saxon Free Church did not approve of the proposed new statement on the Scriptures, so another new statement had to be prepared anyway. The new statement, approved by both the Saxon Free Church and the Breslau (Old Lutheran) Church, the Joint Declaration stated:

“...The mutually expressed assent of 1947 to the Einigungssätze that they are in agreement with the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, is to be adhered to everything is to be avoided which calls its validity into question. For prevailing reasons it is emphasized, however, that the Einigungssätze as doctrinal declarations for a specific situation are not being put on a par with the Confessions of the church, and are not to become the object of a pledge at ordination... questions treated demand further study.... With this readiness that which has been attained is not to be made doubtful.

Concerning this Joint Declaration our synod determined that if this replaced the Breslau Synod’s 1966 resolution, then our 1967 convention resolution did not apply and we would continue our fellowship together (Proceedings, 1969, p.154). The Independent ELFC of Germany had not signed this Joint Declaration, but it expressed its desire to initiate doctrinal discussions with our synod. So as the 1960s came to a close, there were some unanswered questions in regard to the churches in Germany with which we were in fellowship, but on a whole, things were looking pretty good there. (It is true that these church bodies were still in fellowship with the LC-MS, but they had had very little time to consider that question since much of their concern was turned toward their own German churches.) There were reasons for concern on our part, but no pressing reason to break fellowship with them.

One other church body with which we were in fellowship before the split was the Ev. Lutheran Church of Nigeria. As we have already seen our synod did not act swiftly to suspend fellowship with any church body where there was a genuine possibility that we were fellowshiping, with weak brothers rather than persistent errorists. The same basic slowness was used in regard to the ELC of Nigeria.

Then we left the Synodical Conference, the ELC of Nigeria, started by the Synodical Conference, remained with it. But many of the Nigerians felt that they should be served by the Wisconsin Synod, especially since our synod had been instrumental, in starting the mission there. Our representatives met with the Nigerians in 1964, also speaking at their convention on August 25, 1964. "Our representatives reminded the assembly that they had not come to press for any hasty or sudden decision on the part of the ELCN but the Nigerian church body was urged to consider how all that they possessed as Christians was finally tied up with faithful adherence to God's precious Word and vigilant observance of God-pleasing, fellowship principles." (BoRaM, 1965 p. 123) Within one month, some 5470 souls appealed to President Naumann to be served by our synod, wishing to withdraw from the ELCN. We replied by telling them that we did not think it proper to by pass their called pastors and officials to serve individuals, congregations, and districts. We encouraged them to bring their concerns to their church body in an orderly manner. No doubt our desire was to see the entire ELCN renew church fellowship with us, rather than for us to have been responsible for splitting the Nigerian church body.

Throughout the rest of the 1960s many still asked us to serve them in Nigeria. We continued to encourage the ELCN to take a stand with us. They continued to refrain from such action. Such were our attempts at retaining fellowship with various Lutherans throughout the world in the 1960s after we suspended fellowship with the LC-MS and the Synodical Conference.

Before proceeding to the 1970s, however, we should consider the various attempts of our synod to regain Synodical Conference fellowship with those with whom we had been in fellowship.

As to our former sister synod, the LC-MS, it seemed as though we had been a chain around its neck, and as soon as we proclaimed that our synod was no longer able to fellowship with them, they went free and wild. They adopted a new, weaker statement on the Scriptures ("Theology of Fellowship, Part Two"). They helped create the Lutheran Council in the United States of America. And they resolved to have pulpit and altar fellowship with the American Lutheran Church. Their intentions were not all bad; they intended to influence all of American Lutheranism from giving up the Scriptures entirely, However, they had to compromise their former confessional stand in order to try to fulfill these intentions.

We continued to send observers to the LC-MS conventions and to pray for their return to confessional Lutheranism. Unfortunately, the 1960s presented little hope of that return.

Half way around the world we did regain church fellowship. In 1965 upon the request of the Christian Chinese Lutheran Mission of Hong Kong, we declared fellowship with them upon finding them in doctrinal, agreement with us.

At this time we should also consider too other smaller church bodies with which we were also trying to regain fellowship, the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation and the Church of the Lutheran Confession.

The Lutheran Churches of the Reformation (LCR) held their constituting convention April 28-29, 1964. At that assembly the LCR also declared fellowship with the WELS, recognizing in our synod common doctrinal reasons for suspending fellowship with the LC-MS (The LCR consists of former LC-MS congregations for the most part). Unfortunately as representatives from both synods met for the next few years, adamant opposing views on church and ministry surfaced and kept the synods from truly enjoying church fellowship. By the 1969 convention our Commission on Doctrine suggested that no further meetings were warranted since the talks were getting nowhere, and that our synod should wait to see what the LCR did in their next convention. In July, 1970, the LCR withdrew fellowship from us.

Of particular concern to our synod was the last synod we consider of the 1960s and into the early 1970s, the Church of the Lutheran Confession, since the members of that church body had been members of our church body at an earlier date.

From the very first meetings held with the CLC Board of Doctrine it became clear that the CLC was not as interested in the WELS principles of fellowship as in the WELS practice of fellowship during the years 1955-61. They spoke of the “seeming inability to reduce the Wisconsin position on termination of church fellowship to a clearly expressed statement of principle,” (BoRaM, 1965, pp. 126-7) and that the only way to approach the subject was by considering the Wisconsin Synod resolutions, actions, and official interpretations during the period 1955-61. Our Doctrinal Commission felt to do so, without making sure that we agreed first in principle “would serve no wholesome purpose.”

Our commission assured the CLC that we wished to enter doctrinal discussions, but only with the following assurances from the CLC Board of Doctrine before initiating such talks:

- 1) that your body acknowledge that in entering upon such discussions it is dealing with representatives of a church body which was and is willing to submit to the authority of the Word of God;
- 2) that your Board also understands that the need for an objective discussion of the basic principles in question renders premature any discussion of grievances, inasmuch as that might becloud the issues;
- 3) that it is agreed that in all instances individual cases must be handled by those in whose jurisdiction their evaluation and adjudication properly belong;
- 4) that during the course of such discussions the participants publish only such reports of these discussions as have been approved as factual by both parties. (BoRaM, 1965, p.127)

In December, 1966 another meeting of the CLC Board of Doctrine and the WELS Doctrinal Commission was held. This time they used as discussion tools the WELS “Statement on Church Fellowship” (with which this paper began) and the CLC “An Appraisal of the Wisconsin Synod’s Presentation: ‘Church Fellowship’” as well as the CLC “Concerning Church Fellowship.” The CLC Board of Doctrine well summarized the meeting:

....The WELS Commission offered some interpretations of the sections challenged (sections specifically dealing with “persistent errorists” and “patient admonition”) that did not conflict with corresponding paragraphs of CCF (“Concerning Church Fellowship”). It was specifically affirmed 1) that admonition is not a prerequisite for or a determining factor in terminating fellowship, 2) that admonition is helpful in identifying an errorist, and 3) that in cases of error arising within a fellowship admonition is the normal procedure indicated by Scripture. However, the CLC Board of Doctrine contended that the “Theses,” as they stand, leave room for errors that the CLC finds in previous official pronouncements.

The CLC Board of Doctrine contended that an examination of past official statements is necessary to justify its understanding of the “Theses,”* The WELS Commission responded by agreeing to receive the illustrations offered for their private consideration. But the WELS Commission still maintained that if no agreement in principle is achieved on the basis of the two published documents alone, proceeding to a thorough discussion of past official pronouncements and actions mould not serve any wholesome purpose. (Proceedings, 1967, p. 280)

*(We note with despair that the CLC seemed more concerned with their understanding of our position than with our understanding of our position. This same comment was later expressed by President Naumann in correspondence with CLC President Reim.)

In 1963 our commission asked for a “written and precise definition of our alleged doctrinal deviation on the principles of church fellowship.” After studying the CLC reply, our commission advised the CLC Board of Doctrine that its “communication of April, 1968 ascribes a position to our Synod which we have heretofore

clearly repudiated, and that the communication therefore does not define a doctrinal deviation which we can recognize.”

Two years later President Reim of the CLC wrote of the concern expressed by the CLC that if only principles of fellowship were discussed, our two church bodies might well find agreement in principle which would not be agreement in fact. He continued, “Unless such agreement would very clearly remove everything that lay between us prior to 1961, we might well have a formula of agreement that would quickly break down if we were found again with a situation that distressed us during those difficult years.”

In March 1971 President Naumann replied that we too would not be satisfied with less than complete agreement not only in principle but in practice. He also made perfectly clear that we had not said that we were unwilling to review and evaluate the period 1955-61 with them, but that such a review could only be made after we find that we agree in the principles of church fellowship and termination of such. He continued:

If the latter became evident (that we weed in principle), a review of the period in questioncould be undertaken, if still desired. At the present time, however, our commission does not even know how the CLC understands the term “persistent errorist” or what role it ascribes to admonition in the matter of church fellowship, to mention but two examples...”

The other issue on which Naumann addressed the CLC concerned the CLC position of supposedly being willing to conduct doctrinal discussions with our Doctrinal Commission yet in the CLC convention already citing us as being doctrinally wrong in teaching and practice, without first showing us where we are supposedly wrong in doctrine. Naumann wrote:

As long as this remains your (Board of Doctrine’s) purpose in any discussions with us, namely, “to testify to the WELS concerning its errors in doctrine and practice,” granted no possibility of misunderstanding on your part or of imprecise expression on our part, you have removed for us the legitimate basis for any further discussion. We regret that you have done this. For we sincerely believe that you still misunderstand our 1961 resolution and our printed pamphlet *Church Fellowship* and ascribe to us a position which we do not hold and which we emphatically disavowed. . .” (BoRaM, 1971, p.121)

He closed his letter by reiterating that we stand ready to clarify these matters.

The final meeting worth noting of our commission with the CLC Board of Doctrine took place in July, 1972. The two groups met to discuss the term “state of confession” (*status confessionis*) and its use. The CLC saw no Scriptural warrant for a state of concession in dealing with such situations. We note our views as expressed in the 1973 Synod Proceedings, p. 96:

Our Commission held that a state of confession is frequently called for before terminating fellowship with a group that has become infected with error for the following reasons:

- a) In order to offer opportunity for determining what the confessional position of the group for which it must be held responsible really is (this may become necessary because of mutually exclusive statements, pronouncements, resolutions made in such a group; because of conflicting positions contending for mastery in this group, one or the other of which may for good reasons be considered to be only temporarily in control);
- b) To offer opportunity to bring Scriptural testimony against the error infecting the group to those brethren who are not themselves advocating and propagandizing the errors—before treating such brethren as responsible partakers of the error or false practice infecting their group.

The Commission also held that... there is Scriptural warrant for the use of the term “state of confession,” in view of the many Scriptural injunctions quoted in the Synod’s *Church Fellowship* Statement, bidding us to exercise and make earnest effort to preserve the bond of confessional fellowship, to help the weak and the confused.

The CLC representatives expressed their concern that one of the main passages we use in this context is Romans 16:17 and they saw no justification for a “state of confession” in connection with that verse. We replied that a state of confession is only an attempt to determine whether or not a church is persistently adhering to false teachings or practice, and not to be considered a judgment tantamount to the “mark” of Romans 16:17.

There being no real progress shown again in this meeting, it was decided by both synods’ representatives that further discussions would serve no purpose. So ended our attempts to regain fellowship with them. No more discussions have been held.

II. The 1970s—Attempts to Continue Fellowship -- The Triangular Fellowships – New Fellowships

Throughout the 1970s our fellowship bonds with the Evangelical Lutheran Synod continued to grow deeper. Especially through the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Forum (a small “Synodical Conference”), meetings and doctrinal discussions continued between our two synods. The ELS had some doctrinal questions and problems which arose within their circles, specifically with regard to the Lord’s Supper and the doctrines of Church and Ministry. We assisted them as much as we could and by the grace of God these problems were worked out. Through the Forum we determined not to call pastors from one synod to the other under normal circumstances, and in regard to establishing or severing fellowship with a third church body, we mutually decided to keep each other informed of any coming change in fellowship relations so that the other synod may try to come to a similar decision as soon as possible. If misgivings or unfavorable reactions do occur, immediate steps can then be taken to gain consensus.

For the decade of the 1970s nothing so good could be said of our fellowship with the various West German churches—even of our own former mission, the Ev. Lutheran Confessional Church of Germany.

As the decade began, we sent a letter of concern to all of them. In it we questioned their intended merger with the Independent Ev. Lutheran Free Church, since doctrinal differences between our church bodies still remained. We questioned their continued fellowship with the LC-MS, despite the fact that nine years had gone by since we had broken fellowship relations with them, and despite the fact that in those years the LC-MS had joined LCUSA and had begun fellowship with the ALC. We also questioned their decision to call a professor to their seminary at Oberursel who was not of our fellowship and not in doctrinal unity with us. Finally, we also questioned them on declaring fellowship with certain conservative pastors of the Lutheran Territorial Churches of Bavaria., despite the fact that these conservative ministers remained in the Lutheran Territorial Churches (BoRaM, 1971, pp. 114-116),

The Ev. Lutheran (Saxon) Free Church replied that they officially rejected ALC-LC-MS fellowship (yet they took no stand of withdrawing fellowship). And as to the Bavarian pastors, the ELFC also conceded that doctrinal agreement should precede fellowship and that they would set up such necessary doctrinal meetings. Yet they continued joint communion with them even after stating this.

Meanwhile, the planned merger of the IELFC, the ELFC and the EL (Old Lutheran) Church in Germany (Breslau Synod) continued, even though the IELFC failed to commit itself to the absolute inerrancy of the Scriptures.

What came as an even greater shock in our circles was the report that as of 1971 our own German mission, the ELCC, was now operating a joint parish with the IELFC!

One wonders why at this point our synod had not at least taken a stand of a “state of confession” or “protesting fellowship” with these church bodies. Yet no such action was taken on our part, even though our

commission advised the synod that if such a merger took place, we could not fellowship with the new church. (BoRaM, 1971, p.118).

We remained in a triangular fellowship (with the LC-MS) through the Ev. Luth. Free Church of France and Belgium as well. This church body had, however, taken the first step toward suspending fellowship by declaring themselves in a “state of protesting fellowship with the LC-MS.” Unfortunately, as the years passed and the LC-MS started to show signs of improvement by the grace of God, no further action was ever taken by the ELFC of France and Belgium; they remained in fellowship with the LC-MS and the WELS.

The merger of the West German churches which we had denounced and feared did take place, of course. Meetings with the new church, the Selbststaendige Ev. Lutherische Kirche (SELK), the Independent Ev. Lutheran Church of Germany, started immediately, SELK representatives met in Mequon together with representatives of the WELS, the ELCC of Germany, and the ELC-S of France and Belgium on July 17-20, 1973. All representatives present were in full doctrinal agreement—so much so in fact that a joyous joint communion was celebrated. The only shortcoming of the entire meeting was that all groups but the WELS stated they would wait to see what the LC-MS did in its next convention (1973) before suspending fellowship faith them. (Our former mission, the ELCC, had joined the ELFC-S of France and Belgium the year before in also entering a “state of confession over against the LC-MS.”) Our 1973 Synod Convention determined that if the Administrative Council of SELK endorsed the SELK representatives’ acceptance of the doctrines discussed, our Synod Praesidium should initiate church fellowship with SELK (providing other churches of our fellowship agreed). (Proceedings, 1973, pp. 91-92).

During the following years our synod continued to get mixed statements from SELK. One time SELK would wholeheartedly agree with us, while with the next letter they would confess that they were not united on the firm stand taken in the previous correspondence. Through contact with SELK it became more and more obvious that some in SELK did not believe in the days of creation, and the many in SELK rejected the idea of prayer fellowship only with those in doctrinal agreement. Worse yet, SELK was not disciplining those who did not stand firmly on the Scriptures.

On January 1, 1976 the ELCC of Germany merged with SELK. At our next synod convention we concluded that this action of the ELCC had severed confessional fellowship with us. (Proceedings, 1977, p.105).

The 1970s brought opportunities for new fellowship. Already in 1966 the Free Protestant Episcopal Mission in the Diocese of West Africa, Liberia, Ghana, and Nigeria applied for fellowship and affiliation with the WELS. Unfortunately, time passed, our Commission on Inter-Church Relations was never able to arrange for a meeting with them, we finally sent them 100 copies of “This We Believe” and 25 Catechisms and hoped for personal contact soon afterward. The church body was no longer interested by the early 1970s.

Requests for confessional support and guidance came from churches in India and Indonesia in the early 1970s, leading to our involvement in both of those countries.

These years also brought word from another part of the world. The Confessional Lutheran Church of Finland terminated fellowship with the LC-MS and was interested in church fellowship with WELS. Subsequent correspondence revealed that they were critical of our position on Church and Ministry.

Across the sea from Finland, another confessional church was founded, the Lutheran Confessional Church of Sweden (LCCS, later changed to simply the LCC since Christians in Norway and Finland are also served now). Being in full doctrinal agreement with this new church body, we immediately declared church fellowship with them, (Proceedings, 1975 p. 93).

Here at home we also declared fellowship with a short-lived sister synod, the Federation for Authentic Lutheranism (FAL). This group of Christians felt compelled to leave the LC-MS and to start a synod for former LC-MS congregations. The plan did not succeed as well as they had hoped; the FAL disbanded in 1975 and most of its congregations joined the WELS.

Disturbed by the continued delay of the ELC of Nigeria to decide whether to remain in fellowship with the LC-MS or to re-establish church fellowship with our synod, Christ the Kind Lutheran Church of Nigeria,

composed of several congregations, left the ELC. Within two years the ELC not only retained fellowship with the LC-MS, but also joined the Lutheran World Federation. After several delays in plans for our synod representatives to personally visit Nigeria, our representatives finally met with the Nigerians in the late 1970s and the WELS was able to declare fellowship with Christ the King Lutheran Church in 1981.

Through our Swedish brothers contact was also made in 1976 with confessional Pastors and congregations in East Germany. Before World War II these Lutherans had been part of the Breslau (Old Lutheran) Synod, the Saxon Free Church, and our WELS mission in Poland. After the war, these congregations fellowshiped together in a loosely-bound group. They planned to merge in 1978 and to immediately declare fellowship with SELK (as their individual congregations were already), but the group was interested in knowing why we did not have fellowship with SELK. A meeting was planned for early 1978 involving representatives from WELS, SELK, ELS, ELC-S of France and Belgium, ELFS in South Africa, and the East Germans. But the plans could not be carried out and have never been carried out since then. The merger, however, of the East German churches has been delayed.

As the 1970s came to a close, we found ourselves still bound in ambiguous triangular fellowship relationships. The WELS was in fellowship with the ELC-S of France and Belgium, Free ELC of S. Africa, ELFC of E. Germany, and the Breslau (Old Lutheran) Church of E. Germany, which church bodies in turn were in fellowship with SELK and LC-MS.

Lutherans in the Cameroons and Brazil also appealed to the WELS to come and serve, them, expressing full doctrinal agreement with us. While we are in a position to fellowship with them, we have not been able to serve them. Hopefully arrangements can soon be made to express our fellowship more fully with them.

III. The 1980s

Obviously, as our present decade began our first concern was to end the triangular fellowship situations -- 20 years of it would seem to show more than enough love and patience! One would think that except in very rare cases, all church bodies involved would have had ample time to study and act on their ambiguous fellowship stands.

In the case of the ELC-S of France and Belgium, our synod in convention came to that very conclusion. In the 1981 convention, we concluded that it was obvious that this church "continues to be and wants to be in protesting fellowship with the LC-MS and fellowship with SELK." It was therefore resolved that we no longer be in fellowship with this church of France and Belgium, but that we would certainly be willing to discuss this further with them. The situation presently remains unchanged.

As for South Africa, the church there has expressed disagreement with our position on church fellowship, with our refusal to declare fellowship with SELF, and with our termination of fellowship with the ELC-S of France and Belgium. At the same time they resolved to do everything possible to continue discussions between our church bodies, including instructing their doctrinal commission to send a delegation to the U.S. for discussions with our Commission on Inter-Church Relations. Such a meeting, though arranged more than once, has always had to be postponed. It is hoped that such a meeting may still occur, and presumed that after such a meeting the position of the South Africans and our fellowship with them will be clarified.

Our other triangular fellowship relations involve the EL (Saxon) FC and the Breslau (Old) LC, both of East Germany. The ELFC is presently no longer seeking a merger with the Breslau Church because of doctrinal differences. Though they still remain in fellowship with the Breslau Church, SELK, and the LC-MS, their Theological Commission has expressed agreement with our CI-CR that church fellowship should not be limited to "pulpit and altar" or to mere formal relations between congregations and church bodies. They seek further clarifications from our synod, but mail between the USA and the DDR does not always arrive. Efforts are being made to help this church. And meanwhile the ELFC is leaning toward severing fellowship with the Breslau Church, which we would hope, would also lead them to sever church fellowship with SELK and the LC-MS. (Puzzling though it be, we are currently still in fellowship with the Breslau Church of the DDR as well—a situation we hope will be clarified soon with a meeting of our church representatives.)

Correspondence has in recent years also begun again with churches in Australia and Finland, though we are not in fellowship with either church at present. We also would hope and pray that the day would come when we could once again fellowship with the LC-MS, though it would seem that day is still far in the future even with the great progress the Lord has worked in that church body during the past 10 years.

We certainly thank the Lord for this progress, and also thank him for the fellowship relations we have enjoyed with various church bodies during the past 20 years and more.

Have we been too quick to judge, as some say? Have we been too slow to recognize, publicly declare and officially renounce a church body as persistent errorists, as others say? Perhaps we have been slow—certainly not too quick—to recognize a church body as erroristic and to suspend fellowship with them. But we have been consistent with our practice before 1963. And we have been consistent with the Scriptures which would certainly have us see we are to take “words and actions in the kindest possible way” as Luther put it, and not to be quick to judge only to discover we had judged wrongly. Our position on fellowship has been to remain in fellowship with a church body until it shows it no longer holds to the truth of God’s Word. Likewise it has been our position not to enter into fellowship with a church until it has shown us that it does hold to the truth of God’s Word.

May that continue to be our position and practice.

(All information for this paper was gleaned from WELS BoRaM & Proceedings booklets, years 1961-1983.)