

The Lutheran Dialogue with Mennonites: An Example of a Dialogue with a Free Church (With a Postscript on Visions of Unity)

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Abstract: After sketching the background that prompted a series of ecumenical dialogues between Lutherans and Mennonites, this essay traces the progression of steps that unfolded as the dialogues progressed, culminating in a service of formal reconciliation in 2010. The essay then outlines a series of “essential marks” of dialogue from a Free Church perspective, and concludes with a vision of how Christian unity might take on a more visible form in the future.

Theological dialogue between Lutherans and Mennonites first took place in the early sixteenth century, before the lines between “free churches” and “state churches” were definitively drawn. In the 1520s and the 1530s the city of Strasbourg was an especially important location for conversations between the “reformers” and the “radical reformers.” Some of the participants in those conversations maintained warm and respectful relationships with one another even though they were engaged in high-stakes theological disputes. This was the case, for example, of Martin Bucer and, especially, Wolfgang Capito, as they intensely debated issues of (infant) baptism and political responsibility with the Anabaptist leader Michael Sattler.¹ In the end, however, the challenges to dialogue in that historical context were too great to overcome. The result was not ecclesial communion between free churches and state churches, but rather separation, condemnation, and sometimes death.

Still, even then, a sense of belonging to the same body of Christ sometimes persisted. In December 1526, several months after Sattler participated in a series of exchanges with Capito and Bucer in Strasbourg, the Austrian authorities tried, convicted, and brutally executed him for heresy. When Capito and Bucer received the shocking

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1. Cf. Hans-Werner Müsing, “The Anabaptist movement in Strasbourg from early 1526 to July 1527,” 51 *MQR* (April, 1977), 91-126.

news, they acclaimed Sattler as a “martyr of Christ” even though they believed he was seriously mistaken on fundamental doctrinal issues. “Saint Cyprian, likewise also Tertullian and many others have always been held by everyone to have been holy martyrs,” they explained, “and have nevertheless held to serious errors.”² While dialogue between Bucer, Capito, and Sattler did not produce a communion of churches, it did seem to have nourished the communion of saints.

LUTHERAN/MENNONITE DIALOGUE

From Condemnation to Dialogue

The path to Lutheran and Mennonite dialogue did not reopen significantly until 1980. That year Lutherans in both Germany and France invited Mennonite representatives to participate in ecumenical festivities in their countries marking the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession (*Confessio Augustana*). German Mennonite representatives, however, aware of the condemnations pronounced in that confession against Anabaptists, hesitated before accepting the invitation? How, they wondered, could they celebrate their own condemnation. German Lutheran leaders, most of whom had little awareness of the condemnations of Anabaptists and their painful consequences over centuries for Mennonites, were deeply moved.

Almost immediately, this moment of Mennonite pathos and Lutheran empathy received international attention. At its meeting in Augsburg on July 11, 1980, the Lutheran World Federation (L.W.F.) Executive Committee adopted a “Statement on the *Confessio Augustana*”:

It is with sorrow that we recognize the fact that the specific condemnations of the Confession against certain opinions that were held at the time of the Reformation have caused pain and suffering for some. We realize that some of these opinions are no longer held in the same way in these churches, and we express our hope that the remaining differences may be overcome. We worship Jesus Christ who liberates and call on our member churches to celebrate our common Lutheran heritage with a spirit both of gratitude and penitence.³

2. John H. Yoder, trans. and ed. *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1966), 19.

3. *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ. Report of the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission* (Geneva and Strasbourg: The Lutheran World Federation and The Mennonite World Conference, 2010), 11.

Four years later, in July 1984, the Lutheran World Federation, meeting as a global assembly in Budapest, sent an official greeting to the Mennonite World Conference (M.W.C.), whose own global assembly was convening at almost the same time in Strasbourg. Though very brief, the greeting marked a significant step beyond the Lutheran statement of four years earlier in the direction of international dialogue. Among other things, the Lutheran World Federation noted that “in spite of our theological differences concerning holy baptism, we wish to express our willingness to overcome the condemnations of the past, and, through a process of dialogue, to find ways of recognizing each other freely as sisters and brothers in the one body of Christ.”⁴

Still, it was at the national level where growing awareness of the problematic nature of the condemnations of Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession and the abiding doctrinal conflicts led first to official dialogue: in France (1981-1984); in Germany (1989-1992); and in the U.S. (2001-2004). Not only did these national dialogues address the issues from within their specific and theologically different contexts, but they also pointed to the need for Lutheran and Mennonite dialogue at the global level and provided motivation for it.

In the late 1990s, Lutheran World Federation and Mennonite World Conference agreed to move forward toward a process of official international dialogue. The decision to proceed occurred, symbolically enough, in December 1999, the last month of the millennium, while leaders of both groups were attending a special millennium gathering of the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions in the “holy land.” The decisive conversation took place at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute, on the road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem—an appropriate place for the birth of a journey toward a new life together in Christ!

In 2002, eighteen years after the Lutheran World Federation had first called for dialogue, the project at last was realized when the federation’s Standing Committee for Ecumenical Affairs and the Mennonite World Conference Executive Committee each approved a joint recommendation to establish an international study commission with the following mandate:

Drawing upon the result of previous national dialogues in Germany, France, and the United States, the commission shall (a) Consider whether the condemnations of Anabaptists articulated by

4. *Ibid.*, 12.

the Augsburg Confession (1530) apply to Mennonite World Conference member churches and related churches; and (b) submit a report of the commission's conclusions to the governing bodies of Mennonite World Conference and the Lutheran World Federation for further action and with a view toward a possible official statement.

In keeping with this mandate, the L.W.F. and the M.W.C. appointed representatives of each of the national dialogues together with several additional persons to form the international study commission. The group met annually for one week, from 2005 through 2008, at the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg. In 2009 and early 2010 a smaller drafting group brought the commission's report to completion.

From Dialogue to Reconciliation

When the Lutheran World Federation and the Mennonite World Conference initiated the international dialogue, we assumed that the International Study Commission might have little more to do than review the results of the three national dialogues and declare them valid globally. But a careful analysis of the national reports in the first commission meeting revealed differences in approaches, emphases, and outcomes.

A primary example of one important difference concerns two key articles in the Augsburg Confession, which contain "condemnations" of Anabaptists: Article 9 on baptism and Article 16 on civil authority. On the one hand, the French and American reports state that substantial doctrinal differences between Lutherans and Mennonites existed in the sixteenth century and still exist today on these points; further dialogue is needed, they said. On the other hand, the German report concluded that these two articles do not apply to Mennonites today.

In light of this and other differences, the study commission decided to undertake a careful reassessment of all the condemnations, asking first whether they accurately described sixteenth-century Anabaptists and, second, whether they apply to M.W.C. member churches today. The commission was also attentive to changes in Lutheran and Mennonite theology and practice between 1530 and the present.

As with the national dialogues, commission members concluded that most of the condemnations of Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession were based on inaccurate understandings of Anabaptist positions. In some articles, the authors of the Confession were simply misinformed

about Anabaptist teachings.⁵ In others, they described and condemned a teaching that a few isolated Anabaptists may have held early in the movement but never became part of the enduring Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.⁶ In regard to Articles 9 (baptism) and 16 (civil authority), however, the commission agreed that real differences existed between the two groups in the sixteenth century and that real differences remained in the twenty-first century. In light of this should contemporary Mennonites continue to stand under the condemnations of the Augsburg Confession? In other words, how should the Augsburg Confession's condemnations of the Anabaptists be interpreted and applied today?

Initially, some members on both sides of the commission were quick to propose solutions that demonstrated a lack of understanding of the other church. On the one hand, some Mennonites thought that if articles in the Augsburg Confession were factually wrong or no longer applicable, Lutherans should simply change the wording of the confession. For the Lutherans, of course, this was unthinkable: the Augsburg Confession is a foundational and authoritative document, central to the unity of the Lutheran church in all times and places. On the other hand, some Lutherans thought that the problems would be solved if Mennonites would simply distance themselves from the "Anabaptists" condemned in the document. For the Mennonites, this was equally unthinkable: Mennonites today continue to think of themselves as being in direct theological continuity with sixteenth-century Anabaptism; and Anabaptist martyr stories are an important source of their contemporary spiritual and ecclesial identity.

Thus, the commission had to find a way forward that "both honoured the enduring authority of the Augsburg Confession within the Lutheran tradition while recognizing the historical continuity that joins Anabaptists condemned by the confession with contemporary Mennonites."⁷ Commission members also believed that this way forward had to recognize the fact that the two churches were born in a context of conflict and that because of these origins "we have developed patterns of memory that have helped to reinforce our convictions that we [are] on the right side of history. . . ."⁸

5. Articles V, XII, XVII. — *Ibid.*, 75-77.

6. E.g., Articles VIII and XXVII. — *Ibid.*, 77.

7. John Roth, manuscript for "Beyond Augsburg" column, *Lutheran Forum*, 2009, p. 5.

8. *Ibid.*

The way forward, the commission decided, was to write a new joint history of Anabaptist and Lutheran relations in the sixteenth century, paying particular attention to those encounters or issues about which Lutherans and Mennonites have disagreed in the past. In other words, rather than attempting first to reconcile conflicting theological convictions, the study commission set itself the prior task of reconciling conflicting memories by writing a joint history of Lutheran and Mennonite beginnings. Key here is the word "joint." The historical account had to be one in which "your story" and "my story" became "our story" — "our story" told in a way that both churches recognize as being accurate and "true."

This exercise is sometimes referred to as "right remembering." In the words of the Study Commission, remembering rightly together implies

a mutual commitment to recount the historical details as honestly and accurately as possible, in such a way that each of us could recognize ourselves in the story that emerges. "Right remembering" also calls us to a commitment to allow our stories to be judged by the larger drama of God's movement in history, alert to the ways in which God's gift of grace that we rightfully celebrate within our traditions cannot be separated from confession [of the sins in those same traditions].⁹

What would be the next step in the dialogue as a result of "right remembering"? Should Lutherans and Mennonites proceed directly into a second phase focused on the issues identified as church-dividing not only in the sixteenth century but still today?

Especially difficult is the matter of a mutual recognition of baptism, since Lutherans practice infant baptism while Mennonites do not. Indeed, according to the commission's report, both Lutherans and Mennonites feel misunderstood when the other group assesses its practices according to their own frame of reference.

Clearly, both sides experience great anguish in this conflict since the deepest convictions of their faith seem to be at stake and each side can easily feel misunderstood by the other. The members of this study commission hope that neither the Anabaptist-Mennonite rejection of infant baptism nor the condemnation of Anabaptists in Article IX will remain a church-dividing issue. Nevertheless, we have not found a way to bridge the divide between the two

9. *Ibid.*, 6.

churches regarding their teaching and practice. Further conversations are needed. . . .¹⁰

So should the next step be dialogue on baptism? The study commission answered that question negatively—the next step is not more dialogue but ecclesial reconciliation based on repentance and forgiveness. As a result of the common telling of our story, the Lutheran delegation wrote,

Lutherans now understand more fully the history of persecution and to what extent it was based on the Augsburg Confession and its teachings and was approved by some of its most prominent theologians. As a result, the churches of the Lutheran World Federation need to consider how best to acknowledge their historic complicity in this persecution perpetuated upon the spiritual forebears of the churches of the Mennonite World Conference, and how best to ask for forgiveness for these actions. We ask the Lutheran World Federation to take appropriate action in these matters.¹¹

If the L.W.F. should move toward issuing a statement asking forgiveness for the Lutheran persecution of Anabaptists, the Mennonite delegation responded, M.W.C. should in turn “initiate a process to acknowledge that request, with the goal of a mutual granting of forgiveness in a spirit of reconciliation and humility.”¹² And so the direction of the next step was set.

From Reconciliation to Commitment

The Lutheran World Federation and the Mennonite World Conference received the work and the recommendations of the dialogue participants with profound gratitude and utmost seriousness. As a result, on July 22, 2010, the L.W.F. in its general assembly at Stuttgart, Germany, formally asked for forgiveness. Representatives of M.W.C. responded by granting forgiveness.¹³ The reconciliation took place in the form of an official L.W.F. action and M.W.C. response in a plenary session of the L.W.F.

10. *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ. Report of the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission* (Geneva and Strasbourg: The Lutheran World Federation and The Mennonite World Conference, 2010), 89.

11. *Ibid.*, 104.

12. *Ibid.*, 108.

13. On “ecclesial repentance,” see Jeremy Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront their Sinful Pasts* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

assembly that merged seamlessly with a joint worship service. As Bishop Mark Hansen, L.W.F. president, said in an interview following the service, these were not just words about reconciliation; this was an experience of reconciliation.¹⁴

Two dimensions of this event deserve particular emphasis: the service of reconciliation was broadly ecumenical and it was intentionally public. The Lutheran and Mennonite reconciliation took place in the context of Ecumenical Day at the Lutheran assembly and therefore in the context of the wider church. Leaders of other Christian world communions as well as of the World Council of Churches participated in both the plenary session and the worship service. Most of them referred to the Lutheran/Mennonite reconciliation in their greetings to the assembly,¹⁵ thus appropriating and extending the significance of this reconciliation within the wider body of Christ.

In his keynote address that day, Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, said,

It is in relation to [the Anabaptist-Mennonite] tradition that all the “historic” confessional churches have perhaps most to repent, given the commitment of the Mennonite communities to non-violence. For these churches to receive the penitence of our communities is a particularly grace-filled acknowledgement that they still believe in the Body of Christ, that they have need of us; and we have good reason to see how much need we have of them, as we look at a world in which centuries of Christian collusion with violence has left so much unchallenged in the practices of power. Neither family

14. “Literally we can experience reconciliation; it is not something we just talk about, but it is something we do. To embrace Mennonite leaders and to be embraced by them was to be embraced by God’s grace.” The full video interview, titled “More than just talking,” can be found at www.lwf-assembly.org/resources/multimedia/lutheran-mennonite-reconciliation/.

15. For example, Cardinal Kasper, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, representing the Catholic Church, said: “We have to reflect on how to heal memories of the past. For example with our Mennonite brothers and sisters, we have to pray for forgiveness and become peacemakers.” Olav Fykse Tveit, general secretary of the World Council of Churches, said: “Here in Stuttgart, there will be a historic moment of reconciliation between two families of churches that have been separated by the most painful of divisions—that of persecution. The Lutheran and Mennonite churches have been quietly fostering a dialogue that is rooted in the vision of transforming relations through the love of Christ, the source of our salvation and the promise of forgiveness. The World Council of Churches share in celebrating this act of reconciliation; it is an inspiration to the whole church.” In personal conversation following the service of repentance, Tveit said that he believed that the Lutheran and Mennonite process offered a new paradigm for interchurch relationships—one in which repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation are possible before agreement has been reached on doctrinal matters.

of believers will be simply capitulating to the other; no one is saying we should forget our history or abandon our confession. . . . Mutual reconciliation is one of the marks of the work of the Spirit, a radically new possibility opened up through the Body of Christ: it is itself a sign of God's future at work. . . .

Not only was the Lutheran and Mennonite reconciliation broadly ecumenical; it was also intentionally public. The first paragraph of the L.W.F. "Action on the Legacy of Lutheran Persecution of 'Anabaptists'" concludes with this sentence: "The Lutheran World Federation, A Communion of Churches wishes to express publicly its deep regret and sorrow." Thanks to the efforts of the L.W.F., the reconciliation event attracted international media attention, effectively making it a public event. The import of this is at least threefold.

1. Public acknowledgement of past wrongs contributes to the healing of present relationships.
2. Public apology makes one visibly accountable in keeping commitments. In the case of the L.W.F. action, this may be particularly significant in relation to the third commitment, which is not only fundamentally religious but also eminently political.
3. By publicly embodying the reconciliation it has received from Christ, the church carries out its ministry of reconciliation, giving witness to the Gospel and offering a gift of hope to the watching world.

Even more significant in the context of reflection about the link between dialogue and communion were the commitments made as part of the reconciliation event. Not only did the Lutheran World Federation ask forgiveness for the past; it also made important commitments to Mennonites for the future. Similarly, not only did the Mennonite World Conference extend forgiveness for what took place over the centuries; it also made significant commitments to Lutherans for the period ahead.

Specifically, the L.W.F. made the following commitments:

1. To interpret the Lutheran Confessions in light of the jointly described history between Lutherans and Anabaptists;
2. To take care that this action of the L.W.F. will bear fruit in the teaching of the Lutheran confessions in the seminaries and other educational activities of our member churches;
3. To continue the exploration of unresolved issues between our two traditions, in particular baptism and relations of Christians and of

the Church to the state, in an atmosphere of mutual openness and the willingness to learn from each other;

4. To affirm the present consensus, gained by the experience of our churches over the centuries, in repudiating the use of the state's power either to exclude or enforce particular religious beliefs; and to work towards upholding and maintaining freedom of religion and conscience in political orders and societies, and

5. To urge our international bodies, member churches, and, in particular, our congregations, to seek ways to continue and deepen relations with the Mennonite World Conference and with local Mennonite communities through common prayer and Bible study, shared humanitarian engagement, and common work for peace.

The M.W.C. commitments in response were as follows:

1. To promote interpretations of the Lutheran-Anabaptist story that take seriously the jointly described history found in the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission Report;

2. To take care that this initiative for reconciliation is known and honored in Anabaptist-Mennonite teaching about Lutherans;

3. To continue deliberating on the unresolved issues between our two traditions, in a spirit of mutual vulnerability and openness to the movement of the Spirit;

4. To encourage our member churches, their local congregations, and their institutions to seek fuller relations and greater cooperation with Lutherans in service to the world.

Why do these reciprocal commitments matter—beyond the hard work they require on the part of the L.W.F. and the M.W.C.? On the one hand, it cannot be said that they constitute a declaration of communion. At the same time, however, they clearly represent a declaration of deeper relationship made visible in specific and concrete ways. Taken together, these commitments can be understood as constituting an implicit covenant of relationship to be realized in the years ahead. And together with the reconciliation already realized, they lead back to dialogue on “a new and healthier basis,” just as the International Study Commission had hoped.¹⁶

16. *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ*, 91.

From Commitment to Dialogue

Included in the L.W.F. and M.W.C. reconciliation process was a mutual commitment to return to dialogue for exploration of issues unresolved between the two communions. The communions further committed themselves to pursue that dialogue in mutual openness, with a willingness to learn from each other in a spirit of vulnerability and a receptivity to the movement of the Spirit. The next step in keeping these commitments was an agreement to now take up the matter of baptism—that most difficult of issues that had been put on hold pending reconciliation.

Here the movement of the Spirit has taken the dialogue on baptism in an unexpected direction even before it began. Prior to the reconciliation events in Stuttgart in July 2010, the Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity had proposed dialogue with the Mennonite World Conference on the theme of baptism. Since the same subject had emerged as foundational for further Mennonite/Lutheran work, Mennonite World Conference suggested a trilateral dialogue.

In his report to the L.W.F. Council, Martin Junge, the L.W.F. general secretary, explained this development in these terms:

Our dialogue with the Mennonite World Conference identified continuing differences around baptism as an area for further conversation. Thus, when the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity approached the Mennonites for a dialogue on this subject, they proposed that it be a three-way conversation, with the LWF included also. . . . For all of us, this is unexplored territory. We are well familiar with the methods and rewards of bilateral dialogues. This triangular table has some unpredictability, of course—but it also has the promise of surprising and strengthening all of our communities of faith in the ways in which we proclaim God's grace and form discipleship. Emboldened by the impact so far of our Mennonite action, which has burst the bounds of ordinary reception processes on both sides, we believe that this is the moment to take the risk of something new—trusting that something fruitful can come.

Indeed, overcoming the challenges of ecumenical dialogues in order to produce new fruit always entails risks. But in this case, what are the chances that doing so will lead toward communion or even fuller visible unity? Lutheran churches and the Catholic Church mutually recognize each other's baptism; they also recognize Mennonite baptism. But most

Mennonites, by contrast, do not recognize the baptism of infants, including those performed in Lutheran churches or the Catholic Church. For this reason the trilateral preparatory group, meeting in March of this year at the Institute for Ecumenical Research, agreed that full mutual recognition of baptism is not a realistic goal at this time. Instead, the group proposed two other purposes for the next phase of dialogue on baptism.

The first is quite typical of ecumenical dialogues: “to continue on the paths of increased understanding and cooperation on which these communions have advanced in recent years by focusing on foundational matters concerning the understanding and practice of baptism.” The second purpose, however, is more innovative: “to help one another grow in faithfulness to Jesus Christ as we face the pastoral and missional challenges to the practice and understanding of baptism in our time.” This purpose was further elucidated in the following terms:

Under the eyes of the others each communion will reflect on its own theology and practice of baptism, especially as entrance into the Church and into a life of discipleship. This will allow an exchange of gifts, with the challenges posed by the other communities helping all of them to nurture faithful discipleship. Communions will assist one another to express the transformative power of the Christian faith in ways responsive to contemporary questions and problems.

In other words, the stated goal of the trilateral conversation is not fuller visible unity through wider mutual recognition of baptism. Instead, its explicit purpose is growth in faithful discipleship for each communion through service and informal accountability to the others, whether or not they are in communion with one another. Still, mutual service and accountability—nonbinding though it may be—implies recognition of some kind of unity with one another and a desire to make that unity visible: if each communion grows in faithful discipleship to and unity with Jesus Christ through the trilateral relationship, will we not also grow in visible unity with one another?

DIALOGUE ABOUT DIALOGUE

The conclusion of the trilateral dialogue preparatory group that full mutual recognition of baptism is not yet on the ecclesial horizon reminds us of the distance that still separates free churches from mainstream Reformation churches and the Catholic Church in some aspects of faith and order. It also calls us by the grace of God to renew and redouble dialogue between these churches.

One preliminary step to accomplish this may be to encourage more dialogue about dialogue. For some free churches, participation in ecumenical dialogue is difficult not only because of its goals but also because of the nature, or the form, or the culture of the dialogue itself. To put it in its caricatured expression: not only the goals but also the mode of ecumenical dialogue sometimes feel more like the realization of a magisterial church ecclesiology than the implementation of Free Church practice.

What are essential marks of Christian dialogue in Free Church perspective? In anticipation of the trilateral Lutheran/Catholic/Mennonite conversation on baptism, the Mennonite delegation to the preparatory meeting offered a list for reflection and debate. This list of characteristics (here in a slightly revised form) is certainly not exhaustive and is still subject to sweeping revision. It may also reflect concerns that are more specific to the Anabaptist-Mennonite or "Peace Church" tradition than to the Free Church more generally.

Dialogue participants submit to the authority of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

For dialogue to lead to unity in the body of Christ, nothing may stand in the way of mutual submission to the authority of Jesus Christ—not ecclesial structures or tradition; not historic creed or confession; not doctrinal conviction or a particular way of interpreting the Bible. When participants submit to Jesus Christ as Lord, a community of disciples comes into existence within the dialogue and opens space for the Holy Spirit to restore the divine gift of ecclesial unity.

Participants engage in a "congregational" mode of discernment and decision-making.

Koinonia is not only the goal of dialogue but also the means to the end. Dialogue in *koinonia* mode takes place through fraternal discernment and consensus decision-making in the assembled group, guided by the Holy Spirit. The fourth chapter of the book of Ephesians describes dialogue as proceeding in this way. There, in the context of a call to oneness (4:1-6) and with the reminder that "each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift" (4:7), the apostle draws attention to the necessity of "speaking the truth in love" (4:15).

This kind of discernment takes place when all persons in the gathered group listen and speak through the inspiration of the Spirit. While it is typically in the local church, a "congregational" style of discernment can

also take place in gatherings at any ecclesiological level, from the local congregation to the global assembly—including gatherings of delegations meeting in interchurch dialogue.

Participants accept the Scriptures as the primary point of reference.

The Christian churches worldwide accept the Scriptures as the primary written authority for faith, life, and witness. As dialogue proceeds, participants need constantly to remember their mutual point of reference. In the process of the search for truth, there is respect for each other's interpretations as well as openness to the leading of the one Spirit. Each church carries respect also for its own tradition into the dialogue. This sometimes makes it difficult to search the Scriptures together. But to do so, and to find our oneness in Christ there, holds the promise of a unity that is deeper and more enduring than what an accumulation of convergences can offer. The dialogue context itself creates new hermeneutical opportunities for the interpretation of Scripture.

Participants posit common discipleship as a primary form of Christian unity.

Churches in dialogue will seek engagement together in discipleship (*Nachfolge Christi*) as an essential sign and expression of Christian unity. According to the Gospel of John, among the prerequisites of discipleship are believing in Jesus Christ (Jn. 8:32), loving one another (13:35), and following the teachings of Jesus in life (15:10).

Participants pursue reconciliation, peace, and justice, beginning in the body of Christ.

Reconciliation and peace are central to unity in Jesus Christ. Justice is an indispensable companion of peace. The letter to the Ephesians extols Christ Jesus as "our peace," explaining that "in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (Eph. 2:14). Yet, church history is strewn with the fallout from broken relationships. Where churches who enter into dialogue with one another have a history of schism, the healing of memories must be an essential step in the process of dialogue.

Participants promote radical catholicity.

Catholicity is realized in part “whenever and wherever everyone concerned converses about everything they do, and should believe and do, as they respond to the Lord who sent them to all nations with all that he had taught them.”¹⁷ As a presupposition of dialogue, no issue, no doctrine, and no practice is excluded from the process of mutual discernment and decision-making in the quest for truth in unity. No consensus reached in the dialogue group, convened under the Lordship of Christ and enabled by the power of the Spirit, is without potential for authority as participants carry out their responsibilities on behalf of their communions.

But every conclusion reached and every recommendation made by delegations in dialogue will be offered to the church, both local and global, for further discernment and consensus. The process of widening participation and ownership involves the discernment not only of those entrusted with church leadership, but of the entire “assembly” of the people of God, who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, bear communal responsibility before God for the faith and work of the church. As consensus in accordance with the will of God grows, both from the “top down” and from the “ground up,” the church becomes more radically catholic both in geographical breadth and in the fullness of the faith.

In sum, to meet the challenges of dialogue as we move towards the half-millennial anniversaries of the Reformation (1517) and the Radical Reformation (1525) it may be as important to give attention to the manner of our engagement in dialogue with one another as to ponder its outcome. Still, seeking a common mind on the vision and goal of Christian unity is of vital ecclesial significance—and global Christianity may be no closer to reaching it than it was fifty years ago.

VISIONS OF UNITY

The Ninth Forum on Bilateral Dialogues, meeting in March 2008, reported a growing consensus in regard to the vision and goal of unity.

Increasingly, both multilateral and bilateral dialogues understand the unity of the Body of Christ as *koinonia*, the gift of the Triune God, and believe that it is towards this ultimate goal that all ecumenical activity is directed. . . . There is a growing consensus that *koinonia* . . . is manifested in three inter-related ways: unity in

17. John H. Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 319.

faith, unity in sacramental life and unity in service (in all its forms, including ministry and mission).¹⁸

But we must ask how much of global Christianity actually participates in this consensus. The situation in the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions, the group that officially sponsors the Forum on Bilateral Dialogues, is revelatory.

How Broad the Consensus?

The Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions brings together in annual consultation the general secretaries and other representatives of most of Christianity. It includes leadership of all the communions engaged in the ecumenical movement—Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic—as well as of Evangelical, Pentecostal, and African Instituted Churches. It also includes representatives of communions that stand somewhere between or outside of the dominant streams of contemporary Christianity.

When the Conference of Secretaries met in Rome in 2006, the primary theme was “visions of unity.” Indeed, in this very small but very broadly representative group of world church leaders the visions of unity—and the words used to describe the unity we should seek—are plural: spiritual unity; visible unity; unity in communion; organic unity; unity in structure; unity in reconciled diversity; conciliar unity; unity in Eucharistic sharing; unity in Scripture and salvation; unity in mission; unity in service; unity in evangelism; unity in discipleship. Sometimes these visions are overlapping and complementary. Sometimes they are distinct and nearly incompatible. Some view the World Council of Churches as the privileged instrument in the search for unity through the “one ecumenical movement.” At least a few ask if the World Council of Churches must die in order for a more comprehensive organization to arise.

The challenge of achieving consensus or moving toward the kind of unity articulated by the Forum on Bilateral Dialogues within the enormous and growing global Christian church is clearer still in the picture painted by the influential and evangelical-based *Atlas of Global*

18. “Bilateral Dialogue Statement and Recommendations,” *The Ecumenical Review* 61/3 (Oct. 2009), 343.

Christianity: 2009-2010.¹⁹ Its article on the “Future of Global Christianity” says this:

Christianity has become too fragmented. . . . The question for global Christianity over the next century is how to restore the theological and ecclesial unity within the Christian faith and the spirit of love and tolerance in Christ. The churches are intolerant towards each other and become exclusive and divisive over small differences. . . . [G]lobal Christianity will face internal battles. . . . Global Christianity will suffer from internal bleeding due to continued “regional battles” over the purity of Christian faith. . . . [T]he major split between ecumenical and evangelical groups will be more difficult to reconcile, though it has significant bearing on the future of global Christianity. The ugly ditch between these two camps seems deep and wide. . . . A dialogue between these two groups will be more imperative and urgent than the inter-religious or inter-faith dialogues that the ecumenical churches have promoted. The polarization of the Christian world between evangelical and ecumenical groups will not be easily healed, and the battle between these two sides over the integrity of the Christian faith will continue and will damage global Christianity, draining much of the energy and resources of the global churches.²⁰

But the unity deficit is evident and consequential not only between ecumenical churches on the one side and evangelical or Pentecostal churches on the other. As the outgoing general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, Ishmael Noko, has observed, even among those churches of the Global South which belong to ecumenically-related world communions, the visions of unity and the searches for unity often take a different shape and direction than do those of the Global North churches in the same communions. All things considered, it may not be an exaggeration to say that the current ecumenical consensus on the vision of and goal for Christian unity does not represent more than half of world Christianity.

“Pilgrimages” to Visible Unity

19. *Atlas of Global Christianity 1910-2010*, ed. Todd M. Johnson, Kenneth Ross, Sandra S. K. Lee (Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

20. Moonjang Lee, “Future of Global Christianity,” in *Atlas of Global Christianity 1910-2010*, 104-105.

So what shall we do? One way to respond to the challenge may be to multiply “pilgrimages” toward unity in every sphere of church life—local, global, and each place in between. By “pilgrimage” I do not mean a literal journey from Erfurt to Rome, for example, as Martin Luther did in 1510. I am thinking rather of churches setting out intentionally on a journey of ecclesial relationship with one another. The point of departure of their journey may simply be a willingness to learn to know one another better, or a joint study of the history that separates them, or common prayer, or dialogue about expressions of the faith, or cooperation in *diakonia* and evangelism, or something else altogether that arises naturally from the context of the intersection of their lives.

Participants in these pilgrimages—doubtlessly exhausting and sometimes seemingly without end—will take time for conversation, prayer, and worship. They will tell their stories to one another. They will rewrite their separate stories into one common story. They will repent, forgive, and reconcile. They will seek consensus on everything that matters. They will make commitments to one another—the fullest commitments possible at each particular point of the pilgrimage, which may lead to more and still fuller commitments further along. They will keep commitments to one another. When they break commitments, they will repent again, forgive again, and renew and extend commitments again. And all along the way, they will make their unity as fully visible as possible at each particular moment, in the spirit of the Incarnation, whether the unity at that time is small or great or somewhere in between.

As they go, the “pilgrims” will formulate and reformulate their evolving visions of unity in order to stay together more easily on the path and to invite others to join them. To begin the pilgrimage, however—and perhaps all the way to the end of it—they will need no common vision of unity other than the one offered to the church two millennia ago by the apostle Paul. In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul revealed a vast vision of unity and provided a succinct summary of how the vision is being realized. It is a vision of God gathering up “all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth” (cf. Eph. 1:3-14). This cosmic vision is being realized initially by God’s reconciling work in the body of Christ (cf. Eph. 2:11-22) and then also through those who have been reconciled ceaselessly “making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (cf. 4:1-16).

Which churches are called to undertake together a pilgrimage to unity? In the light of the Pauline vision of unity, it is the vocation of *all* churches to do so. All churches, whether or not they are in conflict with

one another, participate in the sin of perpetuating division of what God has joined together, thus wounding the body of Christ and countering the “gathering up of all things in Christ.”

Still, considering not only the explanation in Ephesians of how the Pauline vision of unity is realized but also taking into account the Lutheran and Mennonite experience thus far, churches would do well to accord priority to undertaking pilgrimages with those churches from whom they are most seriously estranged. In the logic and language of Ephesians, priority should go to walking with those from whom one is separated by a wall of hostility and with whom one stands in need of reconciliation.

Perhaps we could introduce here the concept of “full visible disunity.” The most urgent and potentially the most transformative pilgrimage to unity may be the one undertaken by those who live presently before the watching world in full visible disunity. For example, what would be necessary for ecumenical Christians, on the one hand, and evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, on the other hand, to undertake together a pilgrimage toward unity through mutual repentance and forgiveness?

To be sure, joint pilgrimages to unity of those who have never been significantly estranged or of those who have already experienced reconciliation will also remain indispensable until, through the sharing of gifts, “all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). Extending these joint pilgrimages to unity will be necessary until all joined together by God through Jesus Christ have “grown up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 4:15). An example of this kind of pilgrimage is that of the Reformation churches (Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Methodist) who have already reached the point in their pilgrimage of declaring church communion and whose current task, according to André Birmelé, is the realization of that communion.²¹

We could lift up many other pilgrimages already under way, each one at a different stage in the journey to unity and each one with different next steps to take. The global pilgrimages of Lutheran and Catholic communions—symbolized by the Joint Declaration and later joined by Methodists—is one highlight thus far. The multiple bilateral journeys of the Catholic Church with the main Reformation churches, brought together now in a multilateral “Harvesting the Fruits” conversation, is

21. André Birmelé, “The Reformation Churches and their Ecumenical Task Today,” *The Ecumenical Review* 61/3 (Oct. 2009), 279-288.

another. So too are the journeys that have brought the churches of the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission into significant convergence on foundational ecclesial issues, most notably in the “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” process, or the journeys of Pentecostals in dialogue with other Christian world communions (as well as with the World Council of Churches), or the journey toward reconciliation of Lutherans and Mennonites, who are now joining with Catholics in discernment about baptism.

Many other joint pilgrimages of unity are under way both within the ecumenical movement and outside it, among Evangelicals, Pentecostals and other free churches, both in the Global North and in the Global South. If the rumors of the “global ecumenical winter” have indeed been overstated, perhaps we come to the point where we should begin to speak of a “global warming” of relations in the body of Christ. In any case, many more pilgrimages toward unity are needed, and this at all levels of the church.

“Stations” on the Way: Nourishing Global Unity and Making it Visible

Pilgrimages usually take place in relative solitude and almost invisibly. This is true also of ecclesial pilgrimages toward Christian unity. Yet even though solitude and invisibility are vital for spiritually grounding a journey to unity, they are insufficient conditions for increasing unity and making it visible. There need to be “stations” on the way where all the “pilgrims” can gather face-to-face in common worship, articulation of the faith, mutual care and accountability, and solidarity in service and witness—that is, places where the unity of the whole body of pilgrims can be felt and seen, where the gathered body in some measure embodies and reveals the one holy catholic and apostolic church.

At the global level today, there are two primary “stations” on the way to visible unity: the Christian World Communions (C.W.C.) and interchurch or inter-Christian fellowships, namely the World Council of Churches and the World Evangelical Alliance.

“Christian World Communions” is the term commonly used to describe the globally organized churches or families of churches with common roots, confessions, or structure.²² The members of each

22. “Christian World Communions,” in *A Handbook of Churches and Councils: Profiles of Ecumenical Relationships*, comp. Huibert van Beek (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2006), 17-19. See also Harding Meyer, “Christian World Communions,” in *A History of the*

communion are conscious of living in the same global fellowship. Each C.W.C. promotes unity within its fellowship and tries to give it some structured visibility. Further, when these communions enter into communion with one another, and when they engage in common dialogue or action, and when they send representatives to each other's global assemblies, they contribute to the visible unity of the church. Nevertheless, by their separate existences, the communions also continue to make visible the fragmentation of the church. This underlines the importance of communions undertaking or continuing joint pilgrimages to unity and making this unity visible as they go. It also points to the need for places where the churches belong together to something more universal than any one Christian World Communion in order to increase Christian unity and its visibility.

The World Council of Churches and the World Evangelical Alliance are the primary global interchurch membership bodies in the world today. According to the W.C.C., its 349 member churches from 110 countries with 560 million members form "a community of churches on the way to visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ. It seeks to advance towards this unity, as Jesus prayed for his followers, 'so that the world may believe.' (John 17:21)"²³ The W.E.A. identifies itself as a "global structure for unity and action that embraces 600 million evangelicals in 128 countries. It is a unity based on the historic Christian faith expressed in the evangelical tradition. And it looks to the future with vision to accomplish God's purposes in discipling the nations for Jesus Christ."²⁴

While both the W.C.C. and the W.E.A. have participated in the annual Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communion for many years, it is only recently that their leaders have appeared together in public and undertaken any common initiatives. The most recent and probably the most significant venture is a document launched in 2011 in Geneva by the two bodies together with the Catholic Church. That statement, "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World," is reportedly the first joint document of its kind in church history and as such is an important sign of growing unity. Still, there is almost no overlap in the communities the W.C.C. and the W.E.A. incorporate and represent—not to mention the obvious fact that the Catholic Church belongs to neither.

Ecumenical Movement, Vol. 3, 1968-2000, ed. John Briggs, Mercy Oduyoye, Georges Tsetis (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2004), 103-122.

23. From the W.C.C. website (www.oikoumene.org).

24. From the W.E.A. website (worldangelicals.org).

Their separate existences continue to make visible the division of the church, especially the polarization between ecumenical and evangelical Christians. It also points to the need for something more universal than either the W.C.C. or the W.E.A.

A MORE UNIVERSAL PILGRIMAGE

When the heads of the W.C.C. and the W.E.A. met in Geneva in March 2010, they publicly affirmed their continued support for and participation in the Global Christian Forum as an instrument to help overcome the divide among ecumenical, evangelical, and Pentecostal Christians. The Global Christian Forum is the most comprehensive global gathering of churches and Christians in existence today.²⁵ Not only the W.C.C. and the W.E.A. but also the Christian World Communions, including the Catholic Church and Orthodox churches, participate actively. Not only churches of the Global North but also churches of the Global South engage vigorously. However, the Global Christian Forum is not a membership body, with enduring mutual commitments made by those who participate. And leaders of the Forum have viewed it “as having a finite period of usefulness.” (Could one not say the same thing of any form of church this side of the end of history?) What is the future of the Forum? What will it do next and how will it do it? We will know more in coming years as conversations with the participants, the Christian World Communions, the W.C.C., and the W.E.A. continue to unfold.

The W.C.C. general secretary, Olav Fykse Tveit, has noted that William Visser t’Hooft described the beginnings of the W.C.C. as “a provisional solution to an abnormal situation.” This sounds almost exactly like Global Christian Forum leadership statements about the Forum today. Assuming that they are right, the Global Christian Forum may be more of an interim “pilgrimage” than abiding “station.” Still, whatever its future, in its striking fragility and paradoxical weakness, the Forum may be one of the most powerful gifts we have today—and perhaps still tomorrow—for proclaiming “peace to those who are far off and peace to those who are near” in the broken body of Christ where, more or less visibly, all of us “have access in one Spirit to the Father” and are being “built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God” (Eph. 2:11-22).

25. On the Global Christian Forum, see *Revisioning Christian Unity: The Global Christian Forum*, ed. Huibert van Beek (Oxford, England: Regnum Books, 2009).