

Proposal to Resume the Bilateral Dialogue between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada

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BACKGROUND

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada (the Disciples) have been committed to the one ecumenical movement in North America and globally for decades. We have cooperated through the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches, Christian Churches Together in the USA, and until 2019, Churches Uniting in Christ.¹ We also participate together in several inter-religious dialogues, initiatives, and organizations. In the early 2000s, our churches took action to enter into formal dialogue seeking full communion.

The two churches agree that seeking unity is not the goal, as that has already been accomplished in Christ. Rather, we seek to manifest our unity so that “the world may believe” (John 17), and God’s kingdom of just peace may be experienced more fully by all people and creation. Our unity is for the sake of the world, not for ourselves. While both churches believe that the Church will be fully united with God in wholeness, we also affirm that we are called to live out oneness in Christ here and now.

The ELCA seeks full communion as the fullest or most complete actualization of unity this side of the *parousia*, expressed through common mission, confession, sharing of the Lord’s supper and exchangeability of members and clergy (c.f. *A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment: A Policy Statement of the ELCA*, 1991). The Disciples of Christ have sought unity especially at the Lord’s Table, where the Disciples believe unity begins, and from which “we are called to witness to the message of reconciliation, welcome and hospitality that we have experienced in our being welcomed” (CUIM, *Basic Understandings of the Disciples of Christ about the Unity We Seek*, Indianapolis; 2015). The Disciples affirm that a full communion relationship is a way to express our God-given unity and to gather us around the Eucharistic Table. It was with the shared goal of full communion that our formal dialogue was undertaken.

A pre-dialogue conversation in 2003 resulted in five recommendations that were subsequently approved through the ecumenical processes of each church (see attached report). The inaugural round of dialogue which occurred in 2004 focused on “the role, place, and power of the sacraments and the Confessions in shaping our identities as church.” Subsequent rounds of dialogue were delayed due to staffing transitions and changes in leadership. The dialogue was never resumed, and thus did not yield any fruit.

Even though there exists no formal church-to-church partnership agreement between the ELCA and the Disciples, the two churches have continued to build and publicly affirm our relations at the national, regional, and local levels. In 2017, in the context of Churches Uniting in Christ, we publicly acknowledged and celebrated our mutual recognition of ministries. We have invited each other to attend our respective church-wide gatherings, have been working together for natural disaster recovery efforts, and have sent

representatives to different occasions. At the local or mid-judicatory level, the collaborations and cooperation have occurred in more organic ways. There have been efforts to seek partnership on practical matters such as sharing facilities, nesting each other's congregations, and filling in pulpits on a temporary basis. There has also been cooperation in, and an expressed desire for, long-term mission in congregational and community life, raising once again questions such as the exchangeability of clergy that are best considered in the context of church-to-church relations.

A lot has changed since the dialogue between our churches was initiated 17 years ago. In the current ecclesiastical or ecumenical context, the traditional full communion model has become even more complicated. The necessary time and resources required to understand theological differences and to reconcile the offices of the ministry are in tension with the rapidly changing ecumenical landscape in which our churches live out Christ's mission. Furthermore, the maturity of the full communion relationship both of our churches share with the United Church of Christ also adds an important layer that was present, but perhaps not as fully, when our dialogue began.

While we affirm that the goal of full communion is and should be before us, we also believe that it is time to discern, once again, the Holy Spirit's call in our midst. With full communion as the goal, the ELCA has also affirmed that it is "free to seek such forms of structure, ministry, and common action as will provide true witness to Christian faith and effective expression to God's love in Christ" (A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment). The Disciples certainly welcome the invitation to resume a conversation for a full communion relationship. At the same time, in reflection on the current ecumenical and interfaith landscape, and the yearning to respond to God's call for us in the present time rather swiftly, the Disciples affirm that "a new vision of the Church is needed for effective witness today" in and to the world (Commission on Theology and Christian Unity, Report to the General Assembly, 1981).

In light of all this, we must ask: what would be the best way to strengthen the relationship between the ELCA and the Disciples in partnering in mission and ministry? Is it possible to explore a new form of ecumenical relationship that requires full mutual commitment and accountability? We propose to resume the bilateral dialogue between the two churches in order to address these and other questions.

GOAL OF RESUMED BILATERAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN TWO CHURCHES

1. Defining a new ecumenical relationship: What form of ecumenical relationship will enable the two churches to affirm their common confession of the Christian faith and to witness to the good news of Christ together more fully in local, mid-judicatory, national, and global expressions of the church?
2. This would be sought by:
 1. Studying together each other's understanding of the mission and responsibility of the church: How do we understand mission and ministry theologically and missiologically?
 2. Collecting examples of current collaborations between both churches as well as examples of where deeper relations are desired: Where have the two church been working together? What are the hopes for deepening mission and ministry?
 3. Identifying and formalizing the areas in mission and ministry for the further partnership: How can the partnership be formalized? What are the mechanisms needed? What are the marks of mutual commitment and mutual accountability?
 4. Establishing formal communication channels to foster collaborations and witnessing to the Gospel together:

NEXT STEPS

1. Affirmation of this proposal by the two heads of churches, Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton (Presiding Bishop, ELCA) and Rev. Teresa Hord Owens (General Minister and President, CC(DOC)).
2. Affirmation of this proposal by the ELCA Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations Committee of the Conference of Bishops in March 2020. (The Board of Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry board has already affirmed taking next steps in this relationship.)
3. A preliminary meeting in the summer of 2020 between the two churches that would include heads of churches, ecumenical staff officers, the chair of the ELCA Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations Committee of the Conference of Bishops, and an appointee of the Board of the Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry.
4. Planning for resumed bilateral dialogue meetings in consultation with each church's respective leadership and structures.

ⁱ In 2019 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America decided to discontinue its participation as a partner in mission and dialogue of Churches Uniting in Christ in order to focus on bilateral relations with CUIC churches and to bolster partnerships with CUIC churches in other ecumenical spaces that are actively engaging in racial justice, such as the National Council of Churches and the cross-racial dialogue of the Conference of National Black Churches.