

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 1

C. CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

Fellowship and declared fellowships

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The Document of Union (1965) in the section entitled 'Church Fellowship and Cooperation' makes two statements which are basic for the questions concerning the necessity and purpose of declared fellowship. These are

- a. We believe that the One, Holy, Christian Church is present in those visible Churches where the marks of the Church are to be found, that is, where the Gospel of Christ is purely taught and the Sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution (paragraph 4); and
- b. We believe that true Christians are found in every denomination in which to a greater or lesser degree the marks of the One, Holy, Christian Church are present, in spite of existing errors, and we rejoice in the unity of the Spirit that binds all true believers to their one Lord (paragraph 5).

There is a fellowship in Christ, the *communio sanctorum*, which is God-given, but which is also hidden, and which we accordingly believe; and there is a fellowship in the marks of the Church, the Word and the Sacraments, which can be recognised and affirmed. Of this the Document of Union declares (paragraph 9):

We acknowledge ourselves to be in church fellowship with all Lutheran Churches which subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions in their constitutions and adhere to them in their public teaching and practice.

The purposes for making a public declaration of the fellowship in Word and Sacraments or of the situation described in Paragraph 9 of the Document of Union can be stated generally as follows:

1. to show clearly where the Church of the true Word and Sacraments exists in a world marked by a confusion of many Churches; and thereby
2. to help travellers and visitors in foreign countries to know where they may commune and worship.
(This purpose may conceivably be met by other arrangements, but such arrangements would in any case have something of the nature of declared fellowship about them.)

An absolute necessity for public declarations of fellowship may be hard to demonstrate, but something approaching necessity at least is indicated by the following observations:

1. the early Church indicated its unity over similar and larger geographical areas in various ways: by correspondence, visitations in Samaria and further north by leaders of the Jerusalem church, the Church Council in Jerusalem, the collection made from Gentile Christians for the church in Jerusalem;
2. the purpose of declared fellowships (see above) and
3. the promise given in the Document of Union, paragraph 12.

The premises on which the establishment of altar and pulpit fellowship should be based (establishment in the double sense of recognition and declaration of fellowship) are clearly stated in paragraph 9 of the Document of Union, and they are two in number.

The first is that the Church with which fellowship is to be established subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions. This is in effect demanding that there be agreement in Word and Sacrament, which, according to Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, is sufficient for the true unity of the Church.

The second is that there be some real consonance between the formal acceptance of the Confessions as documented in the Church's constitution and the actual teaching and ecclesiastical life of the Church concerned. A basic discrepancy at this point would mean that the Church was not actually what it claimed to be. The LCA does not intend to take God's place and judge other Churches. At the same time it cannot close its eyes to an obvious hiatus between saying and doing which in effect cancels out the formal confession and veils the truth of the Gospel (cf Peter in Galatians 2). Here judgment in truth and love is demanded.