



# LERNing

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A newsletter of the Lutheran Ecumenical Representatives Network

## In This Issue

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which occurs in mid-January, is easily overlooked, given that it follows on the heels of the busy holiday season. One way to ensure that the week gets proper attention is to incorporate planning for the week well in advance – ideally as part of a congregation’s worship planning for the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany period. For Lutherans, the week is an appropriate time to arrange for guests from our full communion partners to preach or preside at Sunday services, take part in education programs, or otherwise participate in special events to mark the unity we share in Christ.

Several of the contributors for this issue are from church bodies with which the ELCA is in full communion or interim Eucharistic sharing. Their reflections bear witness to how we are enriched by those gifts that the Holy Spirit nurtures among various Christian traditions.

*Rocky Piro, editor*

## Celebrating Christian Unity

*The Reverend Sandy Brown*

One of the great ecumenical spirits of Seattle is Father Mike Ryan, pastor at St. James (Roman Catholic) Cathedral in Seattle. Father Mike finds himself host of many ecumenical events, and host of many Catholic events at which an ecumenical audience is in attendance. In these settings, as he prepares to celebrate the Mass in particular, I know he grieves about our lack of formal Christian unity.

Some months ago I participated in a beautiful celebration of the “Seattle Statement,” at St. James in which Roman Catholic and Anglican leaders from around the world celebrated a common theological formulation about the role of Mary in church life. The congregation was full of

Roman Catholic and Episcopal clergy, but conspicuous in its absence was a celebration of the Eucharist. Agree as we might about theology, we are still a long way from the unity around the table that Saint Paul dreamed of when he wrote I Corinthians 11:17-34. He upbraided the Corinthians for their partisanship around communion, but isn’t that just where we are, two thousand years later?

I’m sure it grieved Father Ryan again this year when, along with Bishop Chris Boerger (Northwest Washington Synod, ELCA) and other leaders, the worshipping community at Saint James gathered and remembered the life and ministry of Pope John Paul II. Roman Catholics in attendance received communion, but we Protestants – even our respective bishops – could only sit and watch.

We are making headway toward full communion among major denominations. It is a sign of our progress that ELCA Lutherans and United Methodists can now share a common table, along with many other Protestant denominations. Both national and international Lutheran/Catholic dialogues continue at a good pace, but everyone recognizes it will be decades before full communion can become a reality. Father Ryan solves the problem of ecumenical worship by having many events during the cathedral’s Friday evening Taize service, in which communion is not served. At least no one feels excluded then, but the empty altar still reminds us of a vision for what the future might become.

While we lament our lack of a common table, it is good to note that our social action ministries are more unified than ever. Here in Washington state, the Lutheran Public Policy Office, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference, the Church Council, the Washington Association of Churches and local congregations of every denomination work very closely together on our local and regional social justice agenda. We may not all be able to have

communion together, but we do cooperate in very important ways toward building a fair society.

*The Reverend Sandy Brown (United Methodist)*

*Executive Director, Church Council of Greater Seattle*

## Holy Chaos

*The Reverend Becky Robbins-Penniman*

After a complacent Episcopalian childhood, in high school I was startled – no, I was *floored* – to find out that some of my classmates were adamant that I was not a good enough Christian, and perhaps not really a Christian at all. Some said I had not had the necessary spiritual awakenings. Others said I needed to belong to a church that held a particular set of beliefs, opinions and even prayer styles. At the time I dealt with the problem by walking away from the whole chaotic mess of organized religion, and stayed away for a good long while.

Fast forward over 30 years, and the realities of religious life in America have not changed much, except that the playground is even larger now; at times it seems like the entire globe has become a giant version of my high school, with various groups deciding amongst themselves who is in, who is out, who is a real Christian, who is in the right church, and who is doomed. If that were all there was to it, I guess I would still be walking away.

But there is, indeed, more to it. I first began walking back to the church because I needed Jesus and it was the only place I knew to look. Not only did I find Jesus, but ironically he was right in the middle of this chaotic church mess. I now stand in the thick of things as an Episcopal priest.

Jesus' prayer that "they may all be one" in John 17 provides me with the necessary personal vision and motive for church unity, and Paul has taught me patience with his portrayal of the Body of Christ in I Corinthians 12. But it is in the commotion of daily living that I see the Holy Spirit at work in our joint Lutheran-Episcopal congregation. I see people with different backgrounds, histories, cultures and, certainly, scriptural interpretations who work, pray, argue, serve and worship side-by-

side. As our relationship matures, topics that at one time accentuated our differences have led to shared discoveries, such as the importance of the centrality of the Eucharist and the integrity of a clear statement of belief. A living, ecumenical community is often untidy, but it is always enriching.

*The Reverend Becky Robbins-Penniman*  
*Pastor, Lamb of God Church*  
*A Lutheran-Episcopal Congregation*  
*Fort Myers, Florida*

## Lutherans Relations with Other Christians in Eastern Europe

*The Reverend Donald Meier*

In two-and-a-half years of consulting with Lutheran Church bodies in post-communist Eastern Europe and Central Asia, I observed little intentional ecumenism on the part of Lutherans, apart from intra-Lutheran contacts of global reach. Many of the reemerging Lutheran churches are small minorities existing in the shadow of semi-established majority church bodies—Roman Catholics in Central Europe and Lithuania, Orthodox churches in Russia, Romania and Serbia, Islam in Central Asia. Such majority groups are seeking to reestablish their pre-communist position and have little interest in ecumenical conversation, except of a patronizing sort.

There are notable exceptions to the general situation described above. In Estonia, the Lutheran archbishop, along with the government Minister of Cultural Affairs, co-chairs a consultation of churches. The Lutherans collaborate with other Protestants in social ministry and educational areas; neo-Pentecostals do not participate. In Latvia, where Lutherans and Roman Catholics are of fairly equal numbers and dominate the religious scene, the two parties work in close consultation and often engage in shared worship at the episcopal level. In Kazakhstan, government takes an active role in religious affairs, promoting contact and openness between Muslim and Christian groups. The same government has sponsored two international con-

sultations on religion, gathering world luminaries from disparate faith groups into dialogue; Lutherans have participated through the presence of the LWF General Secretary.

*The Reverend Donald Meier, retired  
former ELCA Liaison to Eastern Europe and Central Asia  
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### **LERNing Editors**

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## **Recent interfaith activities**

*The Reverend Franklin Sherman*

One of the most prominent aspects of the ELCA's interfaith outreach in the recent past has been our ongoing dialogue with Reform Judaism. Initiated with a visit by Bishop Hanson to the headquarters of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations – since renamed the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) – the dialogue has had two major sessions, one at the Lutheran Church Center in Chicago and the other at URJ headquarters in New York City. A third session will be held March 26-27, 2006, at Luther Seminary.

The aim of these dialogues is not, of course, as with our bilateral dialogues with other Christians, anything like a basic change in relationships such as full communion, but simply a greater mutual understanding. Papers have been read about the history, teachings, and practices of each group, and participants have shared in study of texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament, and the Talmud, as well as discussion of issues of current national and international concern. The appearance at the 2005 Churchwide Assembly of Rabbi Eric Yoffie, URJ president, can be seen as an outgrowth of this dialogue. This was the first time a representative of a non-Christian faith community has addressed a Churchwide Assembly.

After many years as chair of the Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations, Frank Sherman stepped down from this position in Feb-

ruary, 2005, while continuing for the time being with his other duties as Associate for Interfaith Relations. His successor as panel chair is Darrell Jodock, former professor at Muhlenberg College and now the Drell and Adeline Bernhardson Distinguished Professor of Religion at Gustavus Adolphus College. The panel's main current project is preparing a study book to accompany "Talking Points: Topics in Christian-Jewish Relations," the set of discussion materials issued by the Department of Ecumenical Affairs in 2002. The book is intended as an aid to pastors and others who may lead a study on the Talking Points, but is designed also to be read independently as a primer on basic theological questions raised by Christian-Jewish dialogue. It will be published by Augsburg Fortress.

The ELCA also participates in broader interfaith dialogues, largely through our participation in the Interfaith Relations Commission of the National Council of Churches. At its February, 2005, meeting in St. Petersburg, Florida, the commission met with leaders of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) as well as the Discover Islam Foundation. The NCC is undertaking a project collaboratively with the latter group to train congregational leaders to lead discussion and study groups on Islam. Called the "God is One Project," it will work initially with 40 selected congregations in states in the Northeast.

*The Reverend Franklin Sherman  
Department of Ecumenical Affairs*

## **WCC-US Conference Annual Meeting: Living Letters from Young Adults - A Message of Equal Partnership**

*Motoe Yamada*

Seminarians, students and youth delegates expressed their energy and determination to carry forward the ecumenical vision in the US, and challenged church leaders to take their contribution seriously, in a preparatory gathering for the World Council of Churches' (WCC) 9<sup>th</sup> assembly in 2006.

The young adults, many of whom will attend the WCC assembly, formulated “living letters” to bring back to their churches during a special event “Shift your space – transform the world” held in Chicago, 8-9 October 2005.

For two days, the young people and students “shifted their spaces”, ideas and perspectives through conversations that crossed boundaries and covered the whole globe. The diverse group represented most of the WCC member communions in the US as well as international guests from eight countries.

“We ask the church leaders to step out in faith and act in partnership,” said Michael Neuroth, coordinator of the youth event, in a presentation during the US conference annual meeting of WCC member churches which followed the youth event.

“We recognize that greater youth participation is a reality which all of us must faithfully work toward. Our message is one of thankfulness, equal partnership, and desire to contribute our talents toward the future work of the WCC US conference,” he said

“As young adults people often tell us that we are the future of the church. The future is now. We share your passion, energy, faith and hope,” underlined Ray Ranker, (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America). “We want to be equal partners at the board tables, where decisions are made, at the round tables, where we deliberate, and at the communion table, where we join in fellowship.”

Jay Williams (United Methodist Church) added, “we stand as young people already engaged in ministries of peacemaking and justice in our local communities, in our schools, on our campuses, at our jobs, and in our churches. And as young people, we yearn for spaces where we can regularly connect our faith and our service through our communions and ecumenical connections. We seek

to channel our peacemaking efforts through the church, and not solely secular civic organizations.”

During the two-day meeting, which included worship, fellowship, presentations and discussion on ecumenical and social issues, the young adults identified close links between their peace and justice work and that of the WCC. They upheld in particular the vision for a culture of peace promoted by the WCC’s global initiative, “Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation & Peace 2001-2010”.

## **Churches Uniting in Christ**

*The Reverend Rebecca J. Tollefson*

*Churches Uniting in Christ* is a relationship among 9 denominations: African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Christian Methodist Episcopal, Episcopal Church, International Council of Community Churches, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church. On January 20, 2002, these 9 entered into a new phase of living their unity in Christ more fully, known as Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC). CUIC is not a new structure; but rather an intention to live with one another differently, after some 40 years of conversation and study, formerly known as COCU (Consultation on Church Union.)

Each retains its own identity and decision-making structures, but they have also pledged before God to draw closer in sacred things - including regular sharing of the Lord’s Supper, common mission, and combating racism.

Currently there is a draft of a Ministry Proposal document. Each communion has been asked to have discussions and then give feedback to the Ministry Task Force. They will then take the feedback, creating a final document that goes before all 9 national bodies beginning in 2007.