

Statement in Support of Resolution Regarding Interchurch Families

In 1995, Bishops Lowell Erdahl and David Olson of the ELCA, together with Roman Catholic Archbishop Roach jointly issued a "Guide for a Lutheran-Catholic Marriage".¹ This document was largely pastoral in character--ministering to the spiritual needs of the spouses, sometimes known as interchurch families.²

In addition to the document's pastoral focus, there is also an acknowledgment that "those in ecumenical marriages bring to the Church, by the testimony of their love and their vows, a call to all of us to continue to respond to the Holy Spirit's present gift of unity and to collaborate with the Spirit and one another in the journey to full unity of the Church."

The importance of the 1995 joint guide cannot be underestimated. "Mixed marriages" between Catholic and protestant Christians are increasingly common both locally and globally. And there is often little practical guidance available to the spouses or to their clergy as to the practical pastoral needs of these persons. Even though it is only applicable locally, the St. Paul-Minneapolis Guide has been consulted globally by clergy and laity, both Catholic and protestant. The bishops who collaborated on the 1995 Guide are to be commended for their foresight.

But at the same time, we believe that this time would be a fruitful one to initiate further dialog between our faith traditions to build upon the foresight of Bishops Erdahl, Olson, and Roach. This dialog would not only be fruitful in the area of pastoral care, but also in the opportunities it presents for further Christian unity between our faith traditions.

One shortcoming of the Guide is that in 1995 the adopting bishops were unable, given the circumstances of the time, to resolve the pastoral issue of the Lord's Table: "Though there is major agreement about the meaning of Holy Communion, there has not been an official joint declaration of Eucharistic hospitality. For that reason sharing the eucharist is not yet accepted between our two communities. We pray for that reality to be changed in the future."

There is hope that now is the future in which this reality might change. Under certain exceptional circumstances, a protestant spouse might be admitted to the Eucharist within the Catholic Church. These circumstances are limited, but they do provide a hope and a reality of eucharistic sharing. The exceptional circumstances where this might take place are of great concern to the pastoral care of the spouses involved. But they also provide a glimpse of the eucharistic sharing for which the bishops prayed in 1995.

An important development in this regard came in 1999 when the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops promulgated a policy on sacramental sharing, which explicitly discussed the cases in which a non-Catholic spouse could be admitted to the Sacrament in the Catholic Church.³ Similar policies were promulgated by bishops and conferences of bishops in France (1995), Australia (1995 and 1998), Germany (1997), Austria (1997), Southern Africa (1998), and Great Britain and Ireland (1998).

These policies are not identical, and in some cases, they were not adopted by all of the bishops within the particular conference. And while the bishops who promulgated these policies might not have even been familiar with the 1995 work of Bishops Erdahl, Olson, and Roach, it is clear that these policies are a logical extension of the pioneering 1995 work of our bishops. Thus, we in the Catholic Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis, and the Minneapolis and Saint Paul Area ELCA Synods are positioned to carry this important work even further. This is of great importance to the pastoral care of the thousands of affected persons.

The issues of pastoral care of interchurch families must be addressed in a deliberate manner before the fact, because when those issues present themselves, it is usually in a crisis situation where due deliberation is impossible. These are occasions such as the illness or death of a spouse or family member, when the family most needs the pastoral

¹ Available online at <http://www.archspm.org/html/ecumem2.html>

² While the term "interchurch family" is not used in this document, the term has been embraced by many united in what are sometimes known as "mixed marriages". The term "interchurch family" has been defined as a husband and wife from separate Christian traditions who both desire to remain active in their respective churches. <http://www.aifusa.org/>

³ See, for example, the Pastoral Directives for Sacramental Sharing of the Diocese of Saskatoon, available online at: http://ecumenism.net/archive/stoon_sacramental_sharing_directives_feb_13_2007.pdf

care of the churches involved. Unfortunately, in these crisis situations, there is often little or no practical guidance available to the clergy. The politics of the churches, in the abstract, provide means by which these crises may be addressed. But when it comes time to convert those abstract principles into concrete practice, the crisis does not allow time for due consideration of how to do so. Given the policies subsequently promulgated by the bishops in Canada and elsewhere successfully addressing these pastoral concerns, the time seems ripe to address them locally as well.

The time is also ripe for both faith traditions to build upon what the 1995 bishops called the "gift of unity" presented by interchurch families, and we as Lutherans are especially in position to do so.

For in 2006, Pope Benedict, speaking at a Lutheran church in Warsaw, called upon the respective faith traditions to take advantage of the opportunities presented by interchurch families since they "can lead to the formation of a practical laboratory of unity. For this to happen there is need for mutual goodwill, understanding and maturity of faith in both partners, and also in the communities from which they come. ... My wish is that in this delicate area, reciprocal trust and cooperation between the churches may grow, fully respecting the rights and responsibilities of the spouses for the faith formation of their own family and the education of their children."⁴

What Pope Benedict called the "practical laboratory of unity" of interchurch families is indistinguishable from what our own bishops earlier called "the Holy Spirit's present gift of unity" within those families.

In September, 2008, Cardinal Walter Kasper, head of the Vatican's Council for Promoting Christian Unity, in an interview in a German newspaper, encouraged Catholics to read Luther's commentaries on the Bible, and his "hymns full of spiritual power".⁵ According to Cardinal Kasper: "One will then discover a Luther who is full of the power of faith, whom one cannot simply make Catholic, whom we find provoking and even alien in many respects, but from whom even Catholics can learn." Cardinal Kasper even calls the protestant faithful to embrace the principles of the reformation of Luther. In other words, in the scholarship of Luther, Cardinal Kasper sees a common source from which both Catholics and protestants can benefit.

Finally, in November, 2008, Pope Benedict affirmed the truth of Luther's expression "by faith alone," "if faith is not opposed to charity, to love. Faith is to look at Christ, to entrust oneself to Christ, to be united to Christ, to be conformed to Christ, to his life. And the form, the life of Christ, is love; hence, to believe is to be conformed to Christ and to enter into his love." "Paul knows," he added, "that in the double love of God and neighbor the whole law is fulfilled. Thus the whole law is observed in communion with Christ, in faith that creates charity. We are just when we enter into communion with Christ, who is love."⁶

Thus, we, as Lutherans and Catholics in the Twin Cities, are in a position to promote unity within the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church which we all profess. We are in this position because of the pioneering work done by Bishops Erdahl, Olson, and Roach in 1995. And the recent pronouncements of Pope Benedict and Cardinal Kasper make clear that we are called today to continue this work.

Pope Benedict's 2006 remarks – spoken at a Lutheran church -- are an invitation for the greater church to learn from the example of what Catholic theology refers to as the "domestic church" -- the family. These domestic churches have achieved what the greater church has failed to achieve -- unity in word and sacrament which goes beyond denominational lines. Millions of Christians share unity within this domestic church. The "practical laboratory of

⁴ Pastoral Visit of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI in Poland, Address of the Holy Father, Ecumenical Encounter, Warsaw, 25 May 2006, available online at:

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060525_incontro-ecumenico_en.html

⁵ Cardinal Walter Kasper interview, "Die Zukunft der Ökumene", Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung newspaper, 16 Sept. 2008. Partial translation available online at:

<http://cumecclesia.blogspot.com/2008/10/what-kasper-said-about-luther.html>

⁶ See, "Pope Clarifies Luther's Idea of Justification," available online at:

<http://www.zenit.org/article-24309?l=english>

unity" of this domestic church can be the example which guides the greater church toward the unity we as families already experience. And the Pontiff's 2008 embrace of the doctrine of *Sola Fide* makes clear that a door to dialog between Lutherans and Catholics has been opened.

As Lutherans, we are recipients of an invitation to unity. Cardinal Kasper explicitly told our Catholic brethren that there is much to be learned from the theology and hymnody of Luther. At the same time, he called upon the churches of the reformation embrace the values of the Lutheran reformation. Kasper uses the person of Luther as a point at which we might begin a dialog, and that dialog has the great potential to be one of unity. Obviously, as Lutherans, we bring great gifts to this dialog.

We propose that we, as Lutherans, accept this invitation. Specifically, we can do so by beginning a dialog locally with our Catholic brothers and sisters, with the goal of further strengthening the principles expressed in the 1995 Guide. This strengthening would have two aspects. First of all, we should explore how we can provide the best possible pastoral care to interchurch families within our respective judicatories. This discussion would include discussion of the circumstances in which sharing of the Eucharist might be appropriate, and would include study and consideration of the policies subsequently promulgated by the Councils of Bishops in Canada and elsewhere.

But more importantly, this dialog would seek the ways in which the unity already present within the domestic church of interchurch families can be further extended to the entirety of the one holy catholic and apostolic church.

We therefore ask our Bishop to approach his counterparts within the Roman Catholic Church to resume the dialog of which the 1995 Guide was such a fruitful beginning.

Submitted by Richard and Yippy Clem
Christ Lutheran Church on Capitol Hill
651-489-0238
clem.law@usa.net yip31@yahoo.com