

"Full" Communion?

The days ahead are fateful for the ELCA. The Boards, Commissions, and Offices of the Church are busy writing policy statements, position papers, and working documents, some of which will be presented to the first "Churchwide Assembly" later this summer. They are likely to affect the life of the church for years to come. So we need to look at them carefully, especially those of us who may be called to serve as delegates. We could pay dearly for negligence and/or even for relatively innocent or unthinking mistakes. As a "new church" we ought to set our policy clearly and forthrightly, and to know what we are doing.

The statement on ecumenical policy is one such instance, indeed an exceedingly important one, since the movement towards closer unity seems to have the ideological self-evidence forceful enough to brush aside some of our most basic convictions virtually without question. If it is ecumenical, it must be right! Now we are to have a new policy statement. What does it say to us?

Basically the new statement proposed is a revised version of the LCA and ALC statements of 1982 and 1985, updated to fit the constitution and story of the ELCA. Like its predecessors it has a hard time deciding whether it is a solid statement of policy or an outline of strategy and/or tactics. What is new, however, is the contention that the goal of the ELCA in its ecumenical activity is something called "full communion." The document proceeds to outline a series of stages on the way to "full communion" through which we are ostensibly to pass on the way from disunity to unity. Is the suggestion of such stages a matter of policy or tactics? We need not argue that here. The question is, what is being proposed to us in this "full" communion?

Somehow, just hearing the term arouses my antipathy. Why is that? Am I frightfully unecumenical? I don't think so. I expect rather that my revulsion has something to do with the fact that the only adjective I am used to as a fitting modifier for communion is "Holy." The suggestion that the Holy Communion we participate in now or have so in the past is something less than "full" is either ludicrous or blasphemous. Perhaps a bit of both. As an ecumenical goal, "full communion" is offensive to piety. The idea that communion is somehow to be made more "full" by our devices, say, by the "exchangeability" of members and clergy as the document suggests, is just an affront.

But this is more than just a game with adjectives once again. Holy Communion is a gift of God in Jesus Christ. Making "full communion" the goal of our ecumenical activity seems to take a gift of God and make it the prize of our human devices. My impression is that the ecumenical movement was supposed to have renounced that game long ago. Yet here it seems to be back again under a different guise. Communion is once again bent in the direction of our communion with one another rather than first and foremost with our Lord and only in him with one another. This reflects not just a confusion in tactics, but a fundamental confusion in policy. We don't need this. The old LCA statement of 1982, by the way, recognized the usefulness of the distinction between "unity" (in the gospel, pulpit and altar), and "union" (organizational unification). This seems to have disappeared from the new document. Why? Have some fundamental policy decisions been made somewhere unannounced? The old ALC statement held that "No

expression of fellowship...should be understood as a stage on the way to organizational unification of the churches involved." How does that square with the fact that now we are presented with a set of stages through which we are to pass on the way to "full" communion? Is this a basic shift in policy or merely a change in strategy? Are they talking about different things? It is not particularly reassuring to be informed that "full" communion is something less than "full" organizational union. That seems to imply that "full" communion is somehow a consolation prize, something like "interim eucharistic sharing." One begins to wonder in this dizzying chase just what is being talked about. At the very least, the issues are not clear. And how do they get decided? Do they just "go out of style" like fads in the secular world? Do they just get brushed aside by the onward march of "the movement?"

But what is it, really, that makes our communion less than full in the eyes of our ecumenists? We should make no mistake about it. The real obstacle is the ministry. If only we had properly ordained (i.e., by bishops) priests we could have "full communion." And once we do that, ostensibly, all doctrinal questions are moot.

So it all boils down to serious matters of policy. We must come clean at last. An ecumenical statement for the new church must do that for us. Throughout its history the Lutheran Church has, in theory if not in practice, had one of the most generous of ecumenical principles: that for the true unity of the church it is enough (satis est) to agree on the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in accord with the gospel. Are we now to be asked to compromise that by admitting that something more is necessary for "full" communion? Is the satis est to be taken as a minimal requirement: as long as there is at least formal agreement on the gospel we can make whatever further concessions we wish for the sake of unity? Or is it a statement of the maximum permissible: that we will allow nothing more to be required, that enough is enough?

We need to achieve some clarity on these issues. What we need now is clear policy, not just ad hoc tactical suggestions. Does the fact that we have willy-nilly moved from the "hard line" of no communion without doctrinal agreement mean that doctrinal discussion is suddenly pointless? There seems to have been a tendency in ecumenical circles to regard doctrinal difference as mostly divisive. But surely that is myopic. Why then do we continue to pay lip service to diversity? Must not the dialogue go on regardless? Do we not have some things to say and contribute even if the fullest degree of union is reached? We need a policy that will allow for that instead of one which seems to want to down-play differences and stifle dialogue lest the apple cart be upset.

The ELCA has the opportunity as a new body to forge new policy not only for itself, but also for the well-being and future of the ecumenical movement. If we cannot come clean in our policy for this first assembly then we should take our time and do something significant rather than pushing something through that we will be sorry for.

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