

German Lutherans Break Free

What *The Lutheran* Isn't Telling You. In a bold move that has stunned the international ecumenical community, the Evangelical Lutheran/Reformed/United Church in Germany (EKD) (27.4 million, which includes 11 million Lutherans) has rejected the Anglo-Catholic historic episcopate as a basis and sign of unity.

This is a major international news story. It happened last October 2001, but there hasn't been one word about it in *The Lutheran* even though an ELCA pastor alerted Editor David Miller and translated the story from German to English. Still, *The Lutheran* did not report this news. It's very relevant to the ELCA, which adopted the Anglican-Catholic episcopate in 1999 as a condition for full communion with The Episcopal Church USA.

New Model: Church Fellowship. The document, "An Evangelical Understanding of Church Fellowship," was adopted by the EKD on October 31, 2001. It states that any future dialogues must begin with churches mutually recognizing each another as sister churches. (In September 2000 Rome issued a document, *Dominus Jesus*, in which it refuses to recognize Protestant churches as "sister churches" and regards them merely as "ecclesial communities.") The EKD document also calls upon Rome to recognize Lutheran-Catholic marriages without any further qualification from the Roman side.

The EKD document also answers the claimed consensus between Lutherans and Catholics entitled, "The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" (JDDJ) released in 1997. JDDJ was sharply criticized from both sides: 300 (out of about 600) German theological professors signed a critical analysis, and the Vatican listed claims unacceptable from its side. An Annex to JDDJ was quickly drafted, still claiming basic agreement and signed with great hoopla by Lutheran and Catholic officials at the October 1999 Reformation Festival. But the Annex, which again papered over serious differences on faith alone, *simul*, and justification as the criterion for judging doctrine, has not carried the day.

Catholics Not Used To Criticism. Roman Catholic Cardinal Walter Kasper found the EKD document "abrasive," especially its criticism of "the necessity and

form of the See of Peter and the primacy of the pope."

When asked about this Catholic charge, a leading Lutheran theologian, Dorothea Wendebourg, responded:

The Roman Catholic Church is no longer used to – and we ourselves are hardly still used to – Protestants expressing themselves confessionally in a clear and forthright manner and critiquing the teachings and practices of other churches, especially the Roman Catholics. That has now occurred in "An Evangelical Understanding of Church Fellowship." In it we state what the goal of all ecumenical dialogues is to be and reject the Roman Catholic model and goal. We criticize the Roman Catholic Church on various points -- the papacy, the nature of the office of ministry, the ordination of women, canon law. We criticize them just as they have criticized us. However, in contrast to them, we do not withhold from them the recognition of them as church. So I find the assessment of "abrasive" from a Roman mouth to be astounding.

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The Anglo-Catholic model of unity requiring structural uniformity has now been shelved. As one German theologian from Ravensburg stated, "Well, that pretty much leaves the ELCA hanging out there on a branch by itself."

Reality Check for the ELCA. Back in August 1997 ELCA leaders were gung-ho for JDDJ. Only 2 of 8 seminaries called into question the many problems with it. The ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted it **without any debate** by a vote of **958-25**. Edgar Trexler, Editor of *The Lutheran*, called the vote on JDDJ the "most significant act of Philadelphia" (*The Lutheran*, 10/97, p.58). At the signing of the Annex in 1999 Anderson said, "Our two churches have bridged a theological divide that has separated us for nearly 500 years" (*The Lutheran*, 8/99, p.50).

Hype and Its Consequences. ELCA leaders led the church astray about JDDJ and global Lutheran convictions about the Anglican-Catholic historic episcopate. Sadly, the ELCA is no longer free to change to other models of unity. It is **permanently bound** to the sacramental historic episcopate.