

Interdenominational Cooperation Fund

ELCA-UMC Frequently Asked Questions

The following Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) are provided by members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and The United Methodist Church (UMC) bilateral dialogue team; additional information is available from staff of the ELCA and UMC respective offices for ecumenical and interfaith relations.

1. Q: What is the history of Lutherans and United Methodists in a bilateral dialogue?

A: Lutherans and United Methodists have engaged in formal conversations over the last three decades. The First Round of dialogues (1977-79) explored the Sacrament of Baptism. The Second Round of dialogues (1985-87) explored issues of Episcopacy. Significant convergence around these topics pointed toward a Third Round in order to explore the two communion's understandings of Eucharist. Third Round dialogue teams first met in September 2001. The resolution on Full Communion is the culmination of the entire bilateral dialogue process.

2. Q: Does a relationship of Full Communion between the ELCA and the UMC mean that the two communions will merge?

A: No, these two communions will not merge. The ecumenical model of Full Communion means that these communions recognize: a) in each other "the one, holy, catholic and apostolic faith" as expressed in the Scriptures, confessed in the Church's historic creeds, and attested to in the Lutheran Confessions and the doctrinal standards of the UMC, b) the authenticity of each other's Baptism and Eucharist and extend sacramental hospitality to one another's members, c) the validity of each communion's respective ministries, d) the full interchangeability and reciprocity of all ordained ministers, subject to approved invitation for ministry in each communion, and e) a relationship of working together toward greater visible unity and structural cooperation between these communions.

3. Q: What are the major implications of full communion?

A: A relationship of Full Communion between the ELCA and the UMC is part of a long journey (from bilateral dialogue to Interim Eucharistic Sharing) that culminates but does not end in a vote for Full Communion. Even though Lutherans and United Methodists have met since 1977, in Full Communion we begin a new life together. Full Communion is not imposed on these communions, but is a relationship long underway. The question of the shape and form of Full Communion is addressed practically in theological and missiological terms regarding what will best further the mission of the church in individual cases (consistent with the basis of the unity of the church in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession). Along with point 2 above, in a relationship of Full Communion both the ELCA and the UMC will recognize the following in one another: a) a common confessing of the Christian faith; b) a common commitment to evangelism, witness and service; and c) a means of common decision making on critical common issues of faith and life.

In our local churches, synodical offices, and at the churchwide office, full communion is fundamentally about strengthening relationships and allowing for new opportunities which already exist in many areas across the ELCA and the UMC. Opportunities for exchanging clergy, greater structural unity throughout the church, missionary training, young adult formation, and responsibly sharing key resources are but some ways in which these two communions will work together for greater unity in mission and ministry, and in more refined stewardship of the gifts God has given to both.

4. Q: How can Full Communion be realized when there are theological differences?

A: A relationship of Full Communion does not preclude theological distinctions and differences; however, a relationship of Full Communion does mean that these differences are not church dividing. For instance, both the UMC and ELCA theologies are grace centered and Christ centered. Rather than division, theological distinctions and differences between United Methodists and Lutherans complement and enrich theological awareness and discourse. The Lutheran understanding of human incapacity and the United Methodist view of the transformative power of God's grace inform and encourage greater clarity and discernment. In spite of different emphases, these are not church dividing issues, due to each tradition's strong Trinitarian theology and confidence in the grace of God for our salvation.

5. Q: What do the ELCA and the UMC believe about Baptism?

A: Both the ELCA and the UMC accept as valid all acts of Baptism in the name of the Trinity using water according to Christ's command and promise. Baptism is the sacrament of entrance into the holy catholic Church, not simply a rite of entrance into a particular communion. Baptism is therefore a sacrament that proclaims the profound unity of the church. Baptism is a gift of God for building up the Christian community. Baptism is intended for all persons, including infants. No person should be excluded from Baptism for reasons of age or mental capacity. God gives the Holy Spirit in Baptism to unite us with Jesus Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection; to effect new birth, new creation, and newness of life; to offer, give, and assure us of the forgiveness of sins in both cleansing and life-giving aspects; to enable our continual repentance, daily reception of forgiveness, and our growing in grace; to create unity and equality in Christ; to make us participants in the new age initiated by the saving act of God in Jesus Christ; and to place us into the Body of Christ where the benefits of the Holy Spirit are shared within a visible community of faith. Both communions believe that every celebration of Baptism is a reminder of our responsibility to one another. Baptism is connected intrinsically to mission. The Sacrament not only proclaims who we are, it frees us for our primary vocation in life, to love God and neighbor as agents of God's reign of peace, justice, and abundant life for all.

6. Q: How do United Methodists and Lutherans understand the Lord's Supper?

A: Both communions understand that the Lord's Supper is one of the fundamental means of grace. Christ himself instituted this meal and commanded us to continue to celebrate it until he comes again. Christ himself promised to be present in this meal, and through the Holy Spirit he establishes and strengthens our faith there. The Lord's Supper is a sign of God's grace. This means that Holy Communion is not only a visible sign that points to God's presence in the world, but it includes and gives real participation in Christ. In this sharing (koinonia), Christ offers his life-giving body and blood through bread and wine to all who take part in the celebration of this meal. In the words of Christ that institute this meal stands a promise that he himself is truly present for us. These words in the Supper call us to faith. Together, both communions affirm the special emphasis that the UMC has placed on confessing that the Holy Spirit conveys Christ's presence in communion (This Holy Mystery, 11-13). The ELCA also confesses that the fullness of God is given through the real presence of Jesus Christ in the sacraments (The Use of the Means of Grace 33, Augsburg Confession, Article x).

Both communions confess that, according to Christ's promise, all receive his body and blood in the elements of communion, without attempting to simplify this sacramental mystery. In both traditions communicants receive bread and the cup. The elements that are used may vary, such as: red or white wine, or grape juice; or leavened and unleavened bread. Both United Methodists and Lutherans affirm the real presence of Christ. Both communions agree that Christ is truly present, that he is shared and received in the Eucharist, and that the blessings of this Supper are received by faith alone. Consider the words of Great Thanksgiving from the United Methodist Hymnal, spoken in preparation for Holy Communion: "Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood."

7. Q: Do Lutherans and United Methodists hold the same view of ordination?

A: Yes. The UMC provides for two forms of ordained ministry: deacons are called to ministries of Word and service, and elders are called to ministries of service, Word, sacrament, and order. The ELCA has established one office of ordained ministry of Word and sacrament. In both communions persons who are ordained are called to an exemplary life in Christ as a gift from and a witness to the community of faith. In ordination, the church publicly affirms an inward call of God and continues the apostolic ministry through persons empowered by the Holy Spirit. Both communions authorize (or have authorized in the past) other specific forms of ministry as well. Whether described as “deaconesses,” “diaconal ministers,” “home missionaries,” or “associates in ministry,” these lay offices are established by both bodies through either “consecration” or “commissioning.” Both communions also vest bishops with the authority to “license” lay candidates to serve with full ministerial privileges in local congregations. Whether called “probationary members,” “local pastors,” “authorized” or “licensed ministers,” the bishop is responsible for the supervision of those who serve in these pastoral roles. Both communions are called to work together in equipping the whole people of God for our common vocation in the world.

8. Q: What do Lutherans and United Methodists believe about Justification, Sanctification, and Perfection?

A: Lutherans and United Methodists proclaim the grace of God without limitation; God is not limited but human beings are. The ELCA confesses that the Christian is at the same time righteous and sinner (simul iustus et peccator). This means that believers are declared totally righteous by God due to Christ’s righteousness alone, which is received through faith. At the same time, Lutherans recognize that they remain sinners. Thus, Christians depend at every moment in their lives upon God’s justifying grace and forgiveness. Although Lutherans do not customarily use the language of perfection, the Augsburg Confession (XXVII.49) defines Christian perfection as fearing God earnestly with the whole heart, having confidence in God’s grace because of Christ, expecting help from God in all affliction, and diligently doing good in our various callings.

United Methodists set no limit on God’s grace in this present life. Thus, especially according to John Wesley, Christians may earnestly hope to receive perfect love of God and neighbor in this life, not according to their works or merit but by God’s grace alone. This optimism concerning the Holy Spirit’s work is always held in tension with a deep theological suspicion of a human being’s best efforts and a genuine awareness of the depths of human sin.

The ELCA also confesses the power and activity of the Holy Spirit in this present life and understands that the Christian life flows from baptism as daily dying and rising (recognizing and confessing sin and calling upon God’s forgiving grace) and as faithful following of Christ in joyful obedience. The law still orders and restrains daily life and judges sin, driving believers to a renewed trust.

In July 2006 the World Methodist Council affiliated with and affirmed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. Around justification, Roman Catholics, Lutherans and United Methodists commit themselves to strive together for the deepening of their common understanding of justification in theological study, teaching and preaching, and to the pursuit of full communion and common witness to the world.