

The present statement is the outcome of a consultation of Lutheran members of international ecumenical dialogues involving the LWF.

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The Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church

A Lutheran Statement 2002

I. Introduction

For over 30 years, the Lutheran World Federation has been a partner in international ecumenical dialogues. In these dialogues we have sought both to witness to the gospel we have heard within our own tradition and to learn from others who have heard that same gospel in different ways and forms. True dialogue, pursued faithfully, should not leave its participants unchanged.

One subject of the dialogues has been episcopal ministry and the apostolicity of the church. These dialogues have been conducted on various levels. On this topic, Lutherans have been able to reach increasing agreement with other churches. Some of these agreements have led to binding forms of communion¹. This development has importance for the common life of the LWF as a communion of churches. It calls for ongoing attention to the coherence and accountability of the LWF as an ecumenical partner at the international level.

The present statement summarizes main aspects of the theme of the episcopal ministry within the apostolicity of the church that have been affirmed by Lutherans in these dialogues, as well as in LWF studies². It is hoped that these basic perspectives serve as an encouragement to further and necessary reflection on episcopal ministry within the Lutheran communion and in ecumenical relations where the LWF and its member churches are involved.

II. Mission and Apostolicity of the Church

As the church participates in Christ and receives the blessings of his righteousness, it also participates in the mission of Christ, who is sent by the Father in the Holy Spirit. Christ sends his disciples as he is sent (John 20:21); "So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (II Cor. 5:20). The church is called to proclaim reconciliation and the healing love of God in a world wounded by persecution, oppression and injustice, making manifest the mystery of God's love, God's presence and God's Kingdom. The ministry of oversight (*episkopé*) should be set in the context of this mission of the church as the whole people of God.

The apostles are sent "to make disciples of all nations." The Risen Christ promises to be with them in this mission "to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20). The mission to which the apostles

were called remains the mission of the whole church throughout history. As this mission shapes the church, so the church is rightly called apostolic.

The handing on (*traditio*) of this mission, in which the Holy Spirit makes Christ present as the Word of God, is the primary meaning of apostolic tradition. Apostolic tradition in the church means continuity in the permanent characteristics of the church of the apostles: witness to the apostolic faith, proclamation of the Gospel and faithful interpretation of the Scriptures, celebration of baptism and the eucharist, the exercise and transmission of ministerial responsibilities, communion in prayer, love, joy and suffering, service to the sick and needy, unity among the local churches and sharing the gifts which the Lord has given to each. Continuity in this tradition is apostolic succession.

In baptism, every Christian is called and empowered for participation in this mission. God the Holy Spirit pours out his gifts upon the whole church (Eph. 4: 11-13; I Cor. 12: 4-11), and raises up men and women to contribute to the nurture of the community. Thus the whole church, and every member, participates in the communication of the gospel through word and life and so participates in the apostolic succession of the church.

As God's gift in Christ through the Holy Spirit, apostolicity is a many-faceted reality expressed broadly in the church's teaching, mission and ministry. Apostolic teaching is expressed in the Scriptures and historic ecumenical creeds, in the tradition of liturgical worship, and in more recent texts, such as the Lutheran Confessions. The Spirit uses a variety of means to call and hold the church in the apostolic tradition that constitutes its identity.

As churches of Jesus Christ, the Lutheran churches claim this apostolic identity. The Lutheran Reformers saw the apostolic character of the western church's theology and pastoral practice threatened. The Reformation aimed at the renewal of the church catholic in its true continuity with the evangelical mission of the apostles.

The church's succession with the apostles has sometimes been identified with only certain isolated forms of continuity. "Apostolic succession" was thus sometimes reduced to specific forms of continuity in episcopal ministry. At the time of the Reformation, different Lutheran churches preserved different aspects of such continuity, but all Lutheran churches understood themselves to have maintained the one apostolic ministry instituted by God.

Recent ecumenical discussions have moved beyond limited views of apostolic succession to a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the apostolic character of the whole church as it continues in the Spirit to pursue the apostolic mission. This deepened understanding has enriched the theology and practice of various churches and has opened new ecumenical possibilities, as churches are more able to recognize each other's apostolic character. For this enrichment, Lutherans can only give thanks and seek to be more faithful themselves to the fullness of the apostolic tradition.

III. Ordained Ministry in Service to the Apostolic Mission of the Church

The Apostolicity of the Church and Ordained Ministry

Within the apostolic continuity of the whole church there is a continuity or succession in the ordained ministry. This succession serves the church's continuity in its life in Christ and its

faithfulness to the gospel transmitted by the apostles. The ordained ministry, the office of word and sacrament, has a particular responsibility for witnessing to the apostolic tradition and for proclaiming it afresh with authority in every generation.

Through baptism persons are initiated into the priesthood of Christ and thus into the mission of the whole church. All the baptized are called to participate in, and share responsibility for, worship (*leitourgia*), witness (*martyria*), and service (*diakonia*). Baptism itself, however, does not confer office in the church, the ordained ministry. “What is the common property of all, no individual may arrogate to himself, unless he is called.” (Luther’s Works 36, 116; WA 6, 566). Ordained servants of the church carry out a specific task in the service of the mission and ministry of the whole people of God.

The ordained ministry belongs to God’s gifts to the church, essential and necessary for the church to fulfill its mission. The public ministry of preaching in the church requires an authorized preacher and the administration of the sacraments requires an authorized presider. The special ministry conferred by ordination is constitutive for the church. It is a service necessary in order for the church to be what God calls it to be. Since this ministry is God’s gift, it is not the personal possession of any individual minister. While a permanent aspect of the church, this ministry must always remain open to new needs and possibilities, taking the shape called for by the missionary requirements of the time.

Ordination confers the mandate and authorization to proclaim the word of God publicly and to administer the holy sacraments. Some churches, faced with special circumstances, also bless or commission in various ways baptized Christians to carry out specific aspects of the ministerial office. Service in such a capacity is an expression of the church's ministry.

Ordained Ministry of Women and Men

For centuries Lutheran churches, like other churches, restricted ordination to men. Today the great majority of Lutherans belong to churches that ordain both women and men. This practice is an expression of the conviction that the mission of the church requires the gifts of both men and women in the ordained ministry and that limiting the ordained ministry to men obscures the nature of the church as a sign of God’s reconciled Kingdom (Gal. 3: 27-28).

The Lutheran World Federation as a global communion has a commitment pertaining to the ordination of women. The LWF Eighth Assembly stated: “We thank God for the great and enriching gift to the church discovered by many of our member churches in the ordination of women to the pastoral office, and we pray that all members of the LWF, as well as others throughout the ecumenical family, will come to recognize and embrace God’s gift of women in the ordained ministry and in other leadership responsibilities in Christ’s church.”

In many member churches of the LWF today, and in the majority of the larger Lutheran churches, women not only can be ordained as pastors but can also be elected to the ministry of oversight. This is consistent with the Lutheran emphasis on the one office of ministry.

The Ministry of Episkopé

The supra-congregational ministry of oversight must, as it fosters the one mission of the church, also seek to promote unity in faith, hope and love. Although every worshipping congregation gathered around word and sacrament is the church in the full ecclesiological

sense, all local congregations are by their very nature indissolubly connected across the boundaries of space and time with the one church, on earth and in heaven.

By being specially charged to care for the communion of all worshipping congregations with the universal church, the episcopal ministry has the specific task of safeguarding the true nature of the *una, sancta, catholica et apostolica ecclesia* that transcends the boundaries of both space and time. By definition, ordained ministry particularly includes ordered service to the catholicity and unity of the holy and apostolic church. The right and duty of the ministry of *episkopé* are implicit in this ministry. The task of supra-congregational oversight therefore is deliberately attached to members of the ordained ministry. In every case they are pastors with a supra-congregational leadership task, and it needs to be stressed that this task has to be exercised in an ongoing, structured way because every worshipping congregation is essentially linked with the universal church.

The unity of the faithful consists in their participation by faith in the communion of love between the Father and the Son in the unity of the Spirit in the one holy catholic church. This is the unity to which the apostles bear witness, a gift the faithful are given in Christ and which must therefore be received. Since the church as the body of Christ cannot be divided, unity with God in Christ in faith, made possible through the means of grace, is the strongest impetus to the search for communion with other Christians.

The communion we seek must include the sharing of the one baptism, the celebrating of the one eucharist and the service of a common ministry (including the exercise of a ministry of oversight, *episkopé*). This common participation in one baptism, one eucharist, and one ministry unites 'all in each place' within the whole universal church. In every local celebration of the eucharist the church represents and manifests the communion of the universal church. Through the visible communion the healing and uniting power of the Triune God is made evident amidst the divisions of humankind.

The ministry of oversight is a ministry of service, both to the church and to the ordered ministry that serves the church. The diversity of God's gifts requires coordination for the enrichment of the whole church. The communion of local churches requires oversight for the sake of the faithfulness of the church. *Episkopé* thus serves the purpose of caring for the life of a whole community. Its faithful exercise in the light of the Gospel is of fundamental importance to its life. Most Lutheran churches have a regional minister of oversight, most often named "bishop." The bishop shares in the one office of word and sacrament. Unlike the parish pastor, however, the bishop's ministry is regional and oversees a group of local churches.

The New Testament bears witness to the fact that the church never was without persons holding specific responsibilities and authority, but it reflects a tentative phase when different ecclesial patterns developed, coexisted and interacted. Titles were not yet clearly defined or commonly accepted, but especially in the Pastoral Letters the "*episkopos*" figures prominently among those overseeing the household of God.

In the 2nd and 3rd century the congregation, which celebrated the eucharist under the presidency of the bishop, was understood as the local church. From the beginning of the 4th century, the bishop came to oversee, not just one eucharistic congregation, but a group of congregations headed by presbyters (although the regions of oversight were often small by modern standards). The local church came to be identified with the church headed by the bishop and not with the eucharistic congregation. Insofar as bishops today also often have

their own church in which they serve as chief pastor, something of the early tradition remains alive.

The theological understanding and organization of episcopacy have varied greatly in the history of the church. Nevertheless, its exercise by a single bishop, united in collegial communion with other such bishops, came to be the virtually universal form of church leadership. It is still the most widely utilized form of pastoral oversight within the Christian churches.

The Augsburg Confession (AC) assumes the continuation of the office of the bishop in the church. Its assumption is that the true proclamation of the gospel is helped and not hindered by this office. For historical and not theological reasons, the title "bishop" disappeared from significant parts of Lutheranism.

The ministry of oversight is exercised personally, collegially and communally. Oversight is never a merely administrative or institutional matter, but is always personal. Those set apart for the ministry of oversight are thus set apart *as persons*. As a service within the *ministerium ecclesiasticum* (AC 5), mandated and exercised at the regional level of the church, it is performed *in persona Christi* and stands simultaneously within and over against the community in service to continuity in the apostolic faith.

The ministry of bishops is understood to be a distinct form of the one pastoral office, not a separate office. Bishops are themselves pastoral ministers of word and sacrament, representing the ministry of Christ toward the church. It is in this perspective that AC 28 states that “according to the gospel, the power of the keys or the power of bishops is the power of God’s mandate to preach the gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer the sacraments. For Christ sent out the apostles with this command [John 20:21-23]: ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you ... Receive the Holy Spirit [...].’”

The episcopal ministry, however, carries responsibility for larger geographic areas of the church than individual congregations or parishes. Therefore, the *ministerium ecclesiasticum* carried out by bishops has certain *propria*, which are not shared by pastors at the local level. Bishops are called to guide the life of the congregations in the region under their care, especially through visitation, and to support their life together. They are authorized to ordain pastors and to supervise their teaching and practices. In all of these *propria*, care for the unity of the church universal, and its apostolic faithfulness, is a responsibility to which bishops are especially committed.

The personal character of the ministry of oversight cannot be separated from its collegial aspect. As a collegium, the ministers of oversight represent and promote the unity and common life of the many local congregations within the church at large. They also represent their churches in the framework of the universal church. The episcopal ministry must also be exercised collegially in cooperation with other ministries of church leadership in the area under the bishop's care.

Lutherans do not use a uniform terminology for the ministry of oversight. However, in the course of the twentieth century, episcopacy, normally related to some form of synodical structure, has come to be the typical (though not universal) form of Lutheran church leadership. Further, persons who carry out this ministry of oversight should be understood as carrying out the episcopal office. The integrity of their ministry should be respected and it

should receive appropriate recognition. Ecumenical and popular understanding would be facilitated if such persons in episcopal ministries were uniformly called ‘bishop’.

Ordained Ministry and Synodical Structures of Church Governance

The ministry of oversight is not only personal and collegial but also communal. Bishops are called to a special role of oversight in the church, but the wider community also is called to participate in oversight and to judge the way in which episcopal ministry is being carried out. The development of various committees, synods, and institutions, including clergy and laypersons, which share tasks of oversight with the bishop, is consistent with Lutheran understandings of the church. The role of the episcopal ministry in the church is not, in the Lutheran understanding, equivalent to church governance exercised exclusively by bishops. In the vast majority of Lutheran churches, church governance is carried out through synodical structures, which include the participation of both lay and ordained persons, and in which the episcopal ministry has a clearly defined role.

In the church there is no absolute distinction between the directed and the directing, between the teaching and the taught, between those who decide and those who are the objects of decision. All stand under Scripture; all are anointed by the Spirit; all are fallible sinners. Mutual accountability binds together episcopal and other ministries with all baptized believers. It is through the *communio* of *charisms*, the total interplay of ministries within which episcopal ministry plays a leading role, that the church trusts that it will be led into the truth.

According to Lutheran understanding, the church exercises responsibility for its doctrine in a positive way by teaching according to the Scriptures and by watching over the purity of the proclamation of the gospel. The teaching ministry is exercised in a broad ecclesial process aiming at consensus, involving persons and church bodies with various responsibilities. It is the responsibility of bishops to judge doctrine and to reject teaching that is contradictory to the gospel. It is the responsibility of theological teachers in the church and pastors in the parishes also to test their teaching to ensure its accord with the gospel. It is the responsibility of persons in parish councils or in church synods to ensure that also decisions taken with regard to the institutional and practical life of the church are in good keeping with the message of the gospel and witnesses to it.

IV. Episcopal Ministry and the Unity of the Church

Apostolicity and Unity

Apostolicity and unity are inseparable aspects of the church. The church is confessed as *una, sancta, catholica et apostolica*. Hence, all that is said above about the apostolicity of the church also motivates concern for its unity.

Concern for the unity of the church belongs to the very nature of the episcopal office. The church is one in the common proclamation of the gospel and celebration of the sacraments (CA 7). Since episcopal oversight is concerned above all with the evangelical character of the total ministry carried out within its region, it is concerned with what makes the church one. Most Lutheran churches thus rightly see the bishop as having particular ecumenical

responsibilities. Bishops should be ministers of reconciliation both within and beyond their own churches.

The relation between the ministry of the bishop and the unity of the church makes it theologically and symbolically appropriate that those who carry out episcopal oversight preside at ordinations of those who will exercise the office of ministry. Ordination is into the ministry of the one church, not simply into the ministry of one denomination or national church or of one diocese or synod. The presiding minister at an ordination, acting on behalf of the whole people of God, is thus rightly the person who instrumentally and symbolically is concerned with the unity of the one church's ministry. In addition, the role of the bishop in ordination both realizes and symbolizes the ongoing relation between bishop and the clergy of a region.

Episcopal consecration (or installation) in the Lutheran tradition regularly includes the participation of one or more bishops of other churches in the laying on of hands as a sign of the unity and apostolic continuity of the whole church. With the laying on of hands by other bishops, such consecrations (installations) involve prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit. By such a liturgical statement Lutheran churches recognize that the bishop's service in this place is connected spiritually, in collegiality and consultation, with the universal church.

Episcopal Ministry, Succession, and the Identity of the Church

The continuity of the episcopal ministry in the apostolic mission is important for the church. This continuity in apostolic mission is the primary content of what is named "episcopal succession." This succession is realized in the handing on of the faithful oversight of the apostolic mission. It is manifested or symbolized in a variety of ways, including lists of bishops who have succeeded one another in a particular place and the succession of consecrations by which each bishop is integrated into a network of shared apostolic ministry reaching across time. These are signs of continuity in apostolic mission, bearing witness to the church's trust that God will maintain the church in faithfulness. The laying on of hands is a prayer for the exercise of the office conferred, and the church is confident that God has answered that prayer continuously over the centuries and will continue to do so.

The continuity of the episcopal ministry is to be understood within, and in the service of, the continuity of the apostolic life and mission of the whole church. Continuity in episcopal ministry is misunderstood when it is taken as a guarantee of a church's faithfulness to its apostolic mission, or as a guarantee of the personal faithfulness of a particular bishop. However, the sign remains a permanent challenge to fidelity and to unity, a summons to witness to, and a commission to realize more fully, the permanent characteristics of the church of the apostles. The ultimate ground for the apostolic continuity and fidelity of the church is the promise of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in the whole church.

An important element in discussions about episcopacy is the relation between episcopal structures and succession on the one hand and the identity of the church on the other. Lutherans have insisted that the identity of the church is constituted by word and sacraments and the divinely instituted ministry, which serve these. An episcopal ministry of oversight in a succession of consecrations cannot be considered essential to the church's identity in the same sense, nor as essential to the identity of the office of ministry. No particular structure of church leadership is an infallible sign of the Spirit's guidance.

The unity and continuity of the church in the one apostolic gospel are gifts God has promised and given to the church. The Spirit works through many means to preserve the church in the gospel: the Scriptures, the sacraments, the classical creeds and confessions, the witness to the truth by the saints and prophets of past and present. A Lutheran concern with the nature of episcopal ministry is first and foremost an interest in its capacity to serve unity and continuity in the mission of the gospel.

V. Conclusion

The Reformation was fundamentally concerned with the apostolicity of the church in faithfulness to the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ, upheld by the proclamation of the Word and by the holy sacraments and received in faith. In relation to the episcopal ministry, the churches of the Lutheran communion around the world are maintaining and developing forms and practices to serve the divine mission of the church. In this statement, we have stated some convictions that we hold in common. As in all matters, our final trust is not, however, in the strength of our convictions, the clarity of our analysis, or the wisdom of our advice, but in the Lord whom all ministry is called to serve, Jesus Christ, who, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is worthy of eternal praise.

Notes

¹ *Ecumenical Documents*

The present statement is to a great extent developed using formulations from agreed texts that have been achieved multilaterally as well as between Lutherans and ecumenical partners in bilateral dialogues:

Several perspectives regarding the episcopal ministry in relation to the apostolic tradition of the church, which have subsequently found a place in ecumenical documents, were presented in the WCC/Faith and Order study document “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry,” in 1982.

Among reports from bilateral dialogues involving Lutherans at the international level, the following have considered the topic of the present statement most directly:

“The Ministry in the Church.” Report of the Lutheran/Roman Catholic Joint Commission, 1982.

The Niagara Report. Report of the Anglican-Lutheran Consultation on Episcopate, 1987.

“Church and Justification.” Report of the Lutheran/Roman Catholic Joint Commission, 1994.

“Called to Communion and Common Witness.” Report of the Lutheran-Reformed Joint Working Group, 2002.

“Growth in Communion.” Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Working Group, 2002.

Among reports from dialogues involving Lutherans at the regional level the following have considered the topic of this statement most directly:

The Meissen Common Statement, by the Church of England, the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Federation of the Evangelical Churches in the GDR, 1988.

The Porvoo Common Statement by the British and Irish Anglican Churches and Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches, 1993.

The Reuilly Common Statement by the British and Irish Anglican Churches and the French Lutheran and Reformed Churches, 1999.

“Called to Common Mission.” An Agreement of Full Communion between the Episcopal Church in the USA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1999.

“Called to Full Communion.” The Waterloo Declaration by the Anglican Church of Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, 1999.

“Communio Sanctorum. Die Kirche als Gemeinschaft der Heiligen,” by the Bilateral Working Group of the German Roman Catholic Bishops’ Conference and the Kirchenleitung of the United Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Germany.

² *Lutheran Study Documents*

LWF studies with direct relevance to the topic of the present statement have been conducted earlier. The reports from these studies also provide a significant part of the basis for the present statement. The documents are published in the study book “Ministry: Women, Bishops”, LWF Geneva 1993.

The individual documents in this publication are:

“The Lutheran Understanding of Ministry”, 1983.

“Lutheran Understanding of the Episcopal Office”, 1983.

“Women in the Ministries of the Church”, 1983.

Report from “Consultation on the Ordained Ministry of Women and Men”, 1992.

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