Almost Two Decades of Life Together: How Do We Encourage Next Steps?
Lutheran-Episcopal Coordinating Committee (LECC)
October 15-17, 2019
Lutheran Center, Chicago, Illinois

The Lutheran Episcopal Coordinating Committee met at the Lutheran Center in Chicago on October 15-17, 2019. This committee is charged with encouraging and assisting efforts in The Episcopal Church (TEC) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) as they live into their relationship of full communion provided for in “Called to Common Mission” (CCM). The meeting recognized that as we stand on the verge of 20 years of full communion experience, this relationship has grown and matured in many ways; At the same time, rapid change has come both to our church bodies and our religious landscape; thus many factors invite new ways of moving forward.

The committee welcomed new members from TEC: The Rev. Jane Johnson and the Rev. T. Stewart Lucas. It conveyed its thanks for the work of its former member the Rev. Canon Dr. David Perry, who sent a message of counsel and hope for further direction. Other TEC members are the Rt. Rev. Douglas Sparks, Co-Chair, and the Rev. Nancy McGrath Green. Present on the Lutheran side were co-chair Bishop Donald Kreiss and Dr. Mitzi Budde. ELCA members the Rev. Canon Natalie Hall and the Rev. Kari Jo Verhulst and Episcopal member the Rev. Nils Chittenden were unable to attend. Staff were the Rev. Margaret Rose and Richard Mammana (TEC) and Kristen Opalinski and Kathryn Johnson (ELCA).

Common prayers for the meeting were drawn again from the Episcopal resource, Daily Prayer for All Seasons, and from the new ELCA Hear My Prayer: A Prison Prayer Book, produced by an ecumenical writing team headed by LECC member Mitzi Budde and commended by both Presiding Bishops. The committee joined the Wednesday celebration of Holy Communion at the Lutheran Center, with Bishop Kreiss presiding, Bishop Sparks preaching, Nancy McGrath Green acting as lector and Mitzi Budde as assisting minister.

The first afternoon’s discussion was international. On behalf of the Joint Anglican-Lutheran Commission (JALC) in Canada, ecumenical officers the Rev. Paul Gehrs of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Rev. Dr. Scott Sharman from the Anglican Church of Canada participated in the conversation by video conference. They discussed their churches’ approvals this summer of the Memorandum of Mutual Recognition of full communion between their churches and the churches of CCM in the U.S. This Memorandum had been prepared at the 2018 joint JALC-LECC meeting in Niagara, Ontario. The committee especially appreciated the honing of language concerning ministry possibilities for Indigenous evident in the final form of the document. The ELCA Church Council will consider this memorandum at its fall meeting, following a constitutional change at the August Churchwide Assembly which provides the framework for such relationships; TEC is identifying its paths of decision-making on this matter.

In conversation with several staff, the committee looked at developments in common mission.

- Speaking from their Washington, D.C. offices, Rebecca Linder Blachly (TEC) and Amy Reumann (ELCA) described their collaborative and multi-faceted advocacy work on Capitol Hill and how their denominational support means that their work can be “messaging more calm” amid highly fraught and divisive times. The committee discussed with them ways of increasing involvement, especially in advocacy around international issues.
- Javier Goitia, ELCA program director for Theological Formation, Seminaries, and Lay Schools, initiated a discussion of shared challenges in theological education, where delivery systems are proliferating ahead of changes in pedagogy and expectations for ministry. He described Lutheran-Episcopal collaboration in Spanish-language programs for lay ministry, and the committee expressed the desire for consultations on further common work.
- Secretary-elect Sue Rothmeyer initiated a conversation about ELCA constitutional changes for the terminology of “federated” and “union” congregations with full communion partners; she concluded that it would be good to hit a “pause button” in implementation to allow further conversation about local implications of this change.
- John Weit, Interim Executive for Worship, distributed a near-complete draft of the ELCA rite for ordination to the ministry of word and service. Continuing its long-term interest in the diaconate, the committee emphasized that the two churches need to move quickly toward clarity on the possibility of orderly exchange of deacons; the
urgency of this question is undeniable now that there are ordained deacons in both churches. This committee has a responsibility to help the churches find their way forward on this issue.

The committee discussed resources needed to support shared ministries, particularly for congregations. Examining the range of practices that emerge from stories of shared congregational life, the committee identified multiple areas where different directions can be taken: governance, property, financial support for denominational structures, leadership transitions, denominational identification of members, and more. It wondered if there is more an organizational spectrum of Lutheran-Episcopal joint congregations, rather than a sharp distinction of “union” from “federated.”

In response to these clear needs, the committee began to plan its next meeting to include the presence of about 10 practitioners. The emphasis will be on listening to their stories and learning from their wisdom, with the goal of identifying where templates might be helpful and how they could be created to assist rather than constrain local expression. The goal would be resources marked by “elegance, simplicity, and adaptability.”

Looking forward, the committee identified these additional areas for work:

- Developing a rite for Renewal of Ordination Vows which Lutheran and Episcopal bishops could be encouraged to use together during Lent. There are examples to draw upon from places where this has become customary, but having a recommended rite could not only encourage this practice in new settings and also helpfully provide an example of a shared liturgical resource between the churches.

- Completing revision of the implementing document, “Orderly Exchange of Pastors and Priests” to reflect two decades of full communion experience, including for both churches the establishment of other such relationships. This more procedural text will be accompanied by invitational introduction to the possibilities offered by such ministries.

- Planning for the 20th anniversary of the commencement of the full communion relationship. Dates will be sought near January 6, 2021 at a time when the Presiding Bishops of both churches could participate, along with the ACC Primate and ELCIC National Bishop from Canada. While the National Cathedral had been mentioned earlier as a possible site, the committee decided to look instead for a location in the home of a shared ministry.

The committee also affirmed the value for Lutheran and Episcopal bishops to participate in one another’s installations or consecrations. This should now be understood less as “obligation” and more as opportunity to witness together to the signs of the unity and apostolicity of the church and to develop the personal relationships which build collaboration. In order to facilitate this mutual participation, national offices will exchange dates of foreseeable ordinations.

**Next meeting: September 21-23, 2020**, planned in conjunction with practitioners of joint ministry; possibly in Detroit (with Baltimore as another choice).