

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 2 C. CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

Guidelines for drawing up a statement of 'Recognition of Relationship' between the Lutheran Church of Australia and another Lutheran church body

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RATIONALE

From time to time we in the Lutheran Church of Australia may want to enter into an agreement with another Lutheran church body so that we can better fulfil our ministry and mission. The particular church with which we wish to have an agreement may be one with us in doctrine and practice, or it may differ on some matters.

We want to avoid inconsistencies in developing agreements with other churches. So we are establishing a process which we will work through each time we seek to draw up a relationship agreement with another church. In this process we remind ourselves that the Lutheran Church of Australia is obliged to abide by the official statements and documents that have a bearing on the question of relations and cooperation with others (Theses of Agreement I, 1-7; Theses of Agreement II, 9-10; Theses of Agreement, V.26-29; Document of Union, 4-11). The steps to be followed are described below. In every situation all steps need to be worked through.

Note:

1. An agreement between the Lutheran Church of Australia and another church body is subject to approval by the General Synod acting on the recommendation of the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations through the General Church Council.

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2. The steps that follow assume that there has been preliminary contact between the Lutheran Church of Australia and the other church, and that both churches have had the opportunity to explore each other's doctrinal position on the basis of their respective constitutions and other documents.

STEP 1: STATEMENT OF PURPOSE OR INTENT

Representatives of both church bodies explore the need for a statement of Recognition of Relationship between the two bodies, and define the broad areas that the statement should cover. This may be done in a discussion between leaders of the two churches, or by one party drawing up a draft agreement and submitting it to the other church for reaction.

STEP 2: INFORMATION ON THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA

The Lutheran Church of Australia identifies itself in a document in ways that are appropriate and relevant to the purpose of the agreement, for example: history; doctrinal position and attitude to the Lutheran Confessions; mission of the Lutheran Church of Australia.

STEP 3: INFORMATION ON THE OTHER CHURCH BODY

The Lutheran Church of Australia asks the other church body to supply information that is appropriate and relevant to the purpose of the agreement.

STEP 4: DESCRIPTION OF COMMONALITY

Both churches identify the specific areas of commonality which are the basis for the relationship between the two bodies.

These areas may include:

- a. The teaching of justification of the sinner before God by grace for Christ's sake through faith, as the central article of the Christian faith.
- b. Acceptance of the holy Scriptures as the infallible source, rule, and standard for all matters of faith and life.
- c. Subscription to the Lutheran Confessions.
- d. The mission of the church in the world.
- e. Specific challenges because of historical background, geography, language, culture, ethnicity, and so forth.

STEP 5: DEFINING THE PARAMETERS OF THE RELATIONSHIP

The Lutheran Church of Australia has already entered into agreements with some other Lutheran churches for specific purposes (for example, with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland or with the Lutheran Church Hong Kong Synod for cooperation in ethnic ministry and the vetting of pastors). However, clause 9 of the Document of Union indicates the readiness of the Lutheran Church of Australia to dialogue 'with all Lutheran churches

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which subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions in their constitutions and adhere to them in their public teaching and practice'.

The dialogue will discuss whether unity of doctrine and practice exists between that church and the Lutheran Church of Australia. If it does, then the two churches will acknowledge that church fellowship exists between them.

If the statement is to include the expression of church fellowship, the following specific areas should be covered:

- a. Recognition of the unity of the church as a gift of God and as an article of faith (Theses of Agreement, V.1-7).
- b. Distinction between the God-given unity of the church as the body of Christ, and expressions of church fellowship which require human decision-making (Theses of Agreement, V.18-21, 25-27).
- c. Definition of criteria for church fellowship according to the Augsburg Confession VII – the 'marks of the church' (Theses of Agreement, I, 1-7; V.22, 24).
- d. Evaluation of the public doctrine and practice of the two churches on the basis of the criteria for church fellowship.

If there is no real consistency between a church's formal acceptance of the Lutheran Confessions and the actual teaching and practice of that church, this must be acknowledged as a difficulty which limits the nature and extent of possible cooperation.

The document may acknowledge unity as God's gift despite the brokenness of the churches. It may also express the openness of the respective churches to the healing which comes from God. It may be considered appropriate to affirm that complete healing of brokenness must await the coming of Christ.

The document will define the relevant areas where cooperation is possible, the nature and extent of such cooperation, and the need for continuing theological dialogue with a view to establishing closer fellowship. Throughout the process respect for each church's autonomy will be maintained.

STEP 6: LIST OF COMMITMENTS

The Lutheran Church of Australia and the other church detail the commitments which both are prepared to make on the basis of the areas of commonality or agreement. The following may be considered:

- a. The nature and extent of continuing theological dialogue
- b. Cooperation in mission programs or projects
- c. Cooperation in theological education
- d. Exchange of pastors/lecturers
- e. Financial support
- f. The sharing of resources
- g. Joint projects
- h. Scholarship projects

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STEP 7: SCHEDULE

Any time constraints, or lack of them, should be clearly stated in the document (for example, the mutual intent may extend for only a limited period; the statement of agreement is to come under periodical review and modification when necessary, and so forth).

STEP 8: FUTURE PROCEDURES

A procedure or procedures for the termination, renegotiation, assessment, or modification of the agreement should be clearly set down.