

A Covenant between
the Montana Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and
the Roman Catholic Diocese of Helena and
the Roman Catholic Diocese of Great Falls-Billings.

Preamble

We affirm that Christian unity, grounded in the oneness of God and given to the Church (Ephesians 4:4-6), is also a task responsive to the prayer of Jesus Christ that his disciples “may become completely one so that the world may know that you have sent me” (John 17:23). We recognize that faithfulness to the Lord of the Church requires Christians to move out of their denominational isolation toward a oneness that is more visible and interactive. We affirm that this task is also one of high privilege and joy.

History

We recall that the division between Lutheran and Roman Catholics grew out of the Reformation of the 16th century. From the beginning, however, the desire of both churches was for oneness in the ecumenical faith. In the Augsburg Confession of 1530, the Lutheran reformers fervently desired that “our differences may be reconciled, and we may be centered in one, true religion, even as we are all under one Christ and should confess and contend for Christ” (100).

Following five centuries of separation, the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation began a series of dialogues July 6-7, 1965. This coincided with the closing year of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Dialogues on many subjects and in various forums have continued since then. In 1980 the importance of these dialogues was enhanced by the joint observance by Lutherans and Roman Catholics of the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. Meeting in Augsburg, Germany, that year a joint commission authorized by the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation produced a statement on the Augsburg Confession which read:

Reflecting on the Augsburg Confession, Roman Catholics and Lutherans had discovered that we have a common mind on basic doctrinal truths which point to Jesus Christ, THE LIVING CENTER OF OUR FAITH! Faced as we are with new questions, challenges and opportunities in our world today, we cannot rest with simply repeating and referring back to the Confession of 1530. What we have discovered as an expression of our common faith comes out of fresh articulation. It points the way to a conversion here and now, with Roman Catholics and Lutherans bearing witness together to the message of the world's salvation in Jesus Christ.

Most recently, the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity have authorized a statement intended to lift mutual condemnations regarding the teaching of justification, and embrace a new consensus. At Augsburg, Bavaria, on August 31, 1999, Roman Catholics and Lutherans officially signed this Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. In Montana the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is represented by the Montana Synod, and the Roman Catholic Church is represented by the Helena Diocese and the Great Falls-Billings Diocese. Our churches have cooperated locally in numerous ways, and have been strong partners in the Montana Association of Churches.

Affirmations

- The unity of the church has its source and model in the Trinity of one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- The living center of faith is the Word of God made flesh, Jesus Christ, who was crucified and then raised from the dead to deliver humanity and creation from sin and evil.
- The touchstone of the Christian relationship to God is the teaching of justification: "By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works" (Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, #15).
- In Christ, God is "reconciling to himself all things" (1 Corinthians 12:27, Ephesians 4:13), into the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:13).
- The Holy Spirit is calling us to be co-workers in Christ's Kingdom, empowering us to respond to Jesus' commands to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39).

Consequently, trusting in God's promises, we

Pledge

- To pray for each other, confessing our past and present prejudices and ignorances.
- To strive for greater understanding under the gospel.
- To strive for greater service to the world in evangelism and justice.
- To encourage clergy and lay leaders to promote appropriate worship and service,
- To give specific study to our historic teachings and the role of scripture, tradition and the public ministry.
- To give support to families which have a Lutheran-Catholic heritage.
- To establish a covenant committee to implement covenant and annually report on its activity.
- To annually evaluate and celebrate this covenant.

To this end, we commit ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and dedicate ourselves and our judicatories to the Covenant.

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(Absent information: Signing date – June 1, 2000)