

# “The Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church”

## A Lutheran Response 2003

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## 1. Introduction

1.1. Last fall a consultation of international participants in Lutheran ecumenical dialogs sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation issued a Statement entitled “The Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church,” calling on the various Lutheran member churches to discuss its Statement. Its Statement is offered both as a summary of the Lutheran position formulated in the various Lutheran ecumenical dialogs of the past decades and—by implication—as faithful to the scriptural witness and the Lutheran Confessions. We appreciate the work done by its consultation because the question of how the church orders itself is important. In line with a call by the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA to engage in conversation about this Statement, we offer the following “Lutheran Response” to our sisters and brothers in the ELCA and other member churches of the Lutheran World Federation for prayerful consideration. Our response is based on our understanding of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

1.2. The ecumenical dialogs of our time have been an important development in the post-reformation history of the Christian church. They have helped remove

misunderstandings, often affirmed a common witness, and aided Christian communions in attaining a better understanding of one another. Lutheran churches have been important participants in these dialogs. Because Lutheran churches are confessional, however, they must remain committed to the way the Lutheran Confessions reflect the Scriptural witness—unless they are shown to be improper reflections of the Scriptural witness to the Word of God. Because, and insofar as, they are based on Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions define both the possibilities and limits of the Lutheran participation in the ecumenical dialogs. Only on that basis can Lutheran churches affirm or reject the various affirmations of the Statement on “The Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church.”

1.3. Sadly, we must observe that, while the Statement covers a great deal of ground dealing with issues of apostolicity and unity, overall it conveys a lack of theological and confessional clarity. What is particularly disappointing in a document that calls itself a “Lutheran Statement” is the constant reference to various ecumenical documents as if those hold official standing in Lutheran churches; in actual fact several have not been received by Lutheran churches. Thus, what many perceive as the disturbing habit of the ecumenical movement is repeated by the consultation’s quoting its own documents to substantiate its own position instead of relying on the confessional standards of the

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Lutheran churches. At the same time, the Statement does not take into consideration the experiences and central insights of the Reformation regarding episcopacy.

- 1.4. For example, in speaking of the reality and depth of sin, the Statement is noticeably devoid of Scriptural and Lutheran insights. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the justification of the ungodly through faith alone has no significant role in the Statement. Consequently, the understanding of the church as the communion of justified believers has no significant role either. Instead the Statement relies heavily upon unclear or dubious ontological concepts such as how the church “participates in Christ,” (Par. 4), how the larger community “participates” in the “personal and collegial” oversight of the bishop (Par. 33), the characterization of “universal church,” and the unique “instrumental” responsibility of the bishops to “realize” or “manifest” succession (Par. 40). Overall, a theological pattern emerges in the Statement whereby structures of church order assume the place that belongs solely to the proclaimed word of God in preaching and sacraments.

### **2. The true apostolicity and unity of the church**

- 2.1. According to the Lutheran Confessions, the church is the communion of believers, created and upheld by God through the gospel in the two forms of preaching and sacraments. This is

the clear teaching of the Lutheran confessions from the Schwabach Articles (art. XII), to the Augsburg Confession to the Formula of Concord, “For wherever the gospel is preached and the sacrament rightly used, there is the holy, Christian church and it is not bound with laws and external pomp to a place or a time, or person or rite.” Accordingly, our own Admonition sought to be faithful to this tradition by confessing: “The church of Christ is the communion of saints, that is, the communion of believers, the communion of those who are justified sinners. This means that the church comes into being in the same way and at the same time with faith and justification: through the Holy Spirit by the proclamation of the gospel and the distribution of the sacraments.”[\[1\]](#)

- 2.2. This same gospel that creates the church also makes it one and apostolic: “These two forms of the gospel [word and sacrament], and only these, are the means through which the church is created and sustained; they and only they make the church apostolic; they and only they make the church catholic; they and only they make the church holy; they and only they make the church one. By them, and only by them, the church, its apostolicity, its catholicity, its holiness, and its unity is unequivocally made manifest.”[\[2\]](#)

- 2.3. Therefore for the true unity of the church what is necessary and enough is the agreement in the true preaching and the right administration of the sacraments. (Augsburg Confession 7).

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### 3. Ministry and Episcopacy

3.1. This central insight of the Lutheran tradition, as expressed in the Augsburg Confession, does not deny the importance of ministry and episcopacy. These, however, are seen as subservient to the gospel which makes the church one and apostolic. They are not in themselves what makes the church one and apostolic. The Statement is at odds with the Lutheran confession of the uniqueness of word and sacrament for the being, apostolicity and oneness of the church. It places word and sacraments on a par with other factors like these: “creeds and confessions, the witness to the truth by the saints and prophets of past and present” (Par. 43); “historic ecumenical creeds, ...the tradition of liturgical worship, and ...more recent texts such as the Lutheran Confessions” (Par. 8); “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” (Par. 6). Needless to say, all of these are important aspects of the lived faith of the Christian community. None, however, can be on par with Word and Sacrament.

3.2. Moreover, the Statement introduces inaccurate notions of “apostolic mission” and “apostolic tradition.” When aligned with the teaching of the Reformation, these terms can only refer to the gospel of Jesus Christ itself. Consequently, the Statement does not understand the church as the creature of the word.

3.3. According to the Lutheran Confessions, episcopacy is an appropriate structure or ordering of the church above the level of the congregation. In this capacity it can be a useful tool for assisting the church to remain faithful to the true proclamation and right administration of the sacraments. It was, however, the fundamental experience of the Reformation that bishops themselves were the main obstacles to the apostolic witness and therefore to the church’s apostolicity and true unity. In fact, the history of the church evinces numerous instances where bishops showed themselves unfaithful to the apostolic witness. This was particularly the case in the early centuries of Christianity, where bishops frequently were the foremost advocates of heresy. It is surely a romanticized view of the history of the church from apostolic days to the present not to identify how much bishops, along with clergy and laity, were prone to personal shortcomings and theological error, a reality early acknowledged by none other than St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo. This historical reality reveals not only the deep condition of sin but also the insight of the reformers that it is God himself who, through word and sacraments, keeps the true unity, continuity, and apostolicity of the church even against human failure. To be faithful to this truth, the reformers supported the installation of new bishops without episcopal succession, the abolition of the episcopacy in the traditional form altogether, or the establishment of new structures of

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oversight. Thus it was the very *break* with continuity (conceived as personal, organizational succession) that enabled the reformers to recover the true apostolic continuity because it enabled them to recover the gospel as the only guarantee of the church’s apostolicity.

3.4. Throughout, the Statement contradicts these insights by unqualifiedly viewing the episcopacy as beneficial and even necessary for the church. Although the document includes the statement “continuity in episcopal ministry is misunderstood when it is taken as a guarantee of a church’s faithfulness to its apostolic mission” (Par. 41), this sentence makes no impact on the overall intention of the Statement. The Statement characterizes episcopacy and its relation to the church in such a way that apostolicity and unity depend upon the church’s having the episcopal office. Although the Statement admits that “an episcopal ministry of oversight...cannot be considered essential to the church’s identity in the same sense...nor as essential to the office of ministry,” it effectively describes the relationship of ministry and episcopacy so that there can, as a matter of fact, be no ministry without episcopacy, given the Statement’s understanding of oversight. This conclusion is inevitable even though the Statement refuses to clarify in what sense ministry is “essential to the church’s identity” (Par. 42), or how it is “constitutive for the church” (Par. 14).

3.5. According to the Lutheran Confessions, the ordinations of pastors and installations of bishops are done by other holders of the ministerial office—be they bishops or pastors (Apology 14 and The Treatise, 65). That, indeed, has been the practice in the Lutheran tradition since the sixteenth century. There are good reasons in many cases that bishops ordain, and there are good reasons in other cases that pastors ordain. The Statement makes ordination by bishops an inescapable theological conclusion-- a biblical and confessional mandate, which for the Lutheran Confessions it is not at all. It does this by personifying the bishop as the representative of unity in such a way as to obscure the gospel as *the* source and foundation for true unity of the church.

3.6. This latter is particularly obvious in the way the Statement speaks of installation of bishops through the laying on of hands, purposely called “consecration.” The Statement assumes that such installations use a liturgical action that encompasses both the act of laying on of hands and an act of prayer for the Holy Spirit. It joins these two acts by saying initially that they are somehow “involved” with each other (Par. 39), and then finally identifies them straight out, “the laying on of hands is a prayer,” (Par. 40), implying thereby the fulfillment of the prayer by this liturgical act of the laying on of hands. Consequently, the Statement assumes that a discrete charisma is imparted to future bishops through the episcopal laying on of hands,

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which is contrary to the Lutheran Confessions. Thus it is difficult to escape the conclusion that, according to the Statement, the importance for the church of the continuity of the episcopal ministry (Par. 40) is one of necessity. Episcopal succession as a “sign of continuity” (Par. 40) seems to become an effective sign. The insight that the non-use of certain forms of continuity might be as important a sign for the apostolic truthfulness of the church and as important a “challenge,” “summons” and “commission” to help the church to realize more fully the characteristic of the church (Par. 41) is lost.

Prepared by the Theological Advisory Board of the WordAlone Network

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[1] *Admonition for the Sake of the True Peace and Unity of the Church*. Theological Advisory Board for the WordAlone Network, November 18, 2002.

[2] Ibid.

#### 4. Conclusion

Within the context of useful reflection, which all readers will appreciate, the Statement nonetheless falls woefully short of proclaiming the basic Christian insight of the authentic Lutheran confession. It is the specific charisma and responsibility of the Lutheran church unceasingly to confess the sole sovereignty of Jesus Christ over and in the church (“Christ alone”). This is reflected in the time-honored Lutheran watchwords: “Grace alone, word alone, faith alone.” We offer this critique of the Statement not without pain but feel compelled to do so because of our conviction that the true proclamation of the Word and right administration of the sacraments is inextricably related to the proper understanding of *episkope*. Much is at stake. It is our hope and prayer that any further consideration of the Statement will make these Lutheran insights central and determinative concerning the doctrine and practice of episcopacy.