

ADMONITION FOR THE SAKE OF THE TRUE PEACE AND UNITY OF THE CHURCH

A Leader's Study Guide by Pastors Mark Chavez and Carl Shankweiler

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BACKGROUND

On Aug. 19, 1999, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) approved *Called to Common Mission (CCM)*, a “full communion” agreement with The Episcopal Church USA. When the Episcopal Church also approved *CCM* the following year, the two church bodies entered into a deeper relationship. Among other things, the relationship allows for the interchangeability of pastors.

For the Episcopal Church, pastors need to be ordained by the laying on of hands by bishops who are said to be in an unbroken line from the time of the early church. This succession of bishops (or historic episcopate) is, for them, one of the four essential marks of the church. Although the ELCA and the Episcopal Church had been working together in many common ministries for years, the Episcopal Church requires the existence of the historic episcopate in the ELCA for the final step of full communion to occur.

The ELCA, in accepting the introduction of this historic succession for its own bishops, has said that while there is no theological necessity for the historic episcopate, it is organizationally necessary for the sake of advancing the mission of the two churches. A panel of distinguished Lutheran theologians has taken exception with this view and responded in late 2002

with a document titled, *Admonition for the Sake of the True Peace and Unity of the Church*. One of the authors of this document, the Rev. Dr. George W. Forell, has written a “Commentary on the *Admonition*.”

This study guide was prepared to assist a leader present a multiple session discussion of these two documents, such as in an adult forum on Sunday mornings.

As a result of taking part in this study, participants should understand the requirement of the historic episcopate in *CCM*, be able to critique this requirement based on the *Admonition's* explanations of historic Lutheran doctrines, and be prepared to engage in informed dialogue with Lutherans who support *CCM*.

WELCOME

Welcome the persons who come to the discussion. Are introductions necessary? They are if there are any people unfamiliar with everyone else present. Open each session with a prayer for guidance, understanding, and the well-being of the church of Christ. In all sessions after the first, begin with a brief review of what was discussed at the previous sessions.

Ask the participants to rank on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 10 (very) how familiar they are with each of these terms: *CCM*,

historic episcopate, adiaphoron, Lutheran Confessions. The purpose of this exercise is not to focus on these words; it is simply to help you gauge how well informed your audience is. Some participants may be well versed on these words and issues from attending synodical assemblies, by reading, or through other congregational discussions. Other participants may know nothing about *CCM* and its related issues. On an issue this technical, you will need to proceed based on the level of understanding of those present.

If your group is quite familiar with *CCM*, you can jump right into the *Admonition*. If not, spend some time familiarizing them with *CCM's* text (posted on www.elca.org) so that you do not critique a caricature of *CCM*. At the very least, you should look at *CCM* paragraphs A.10 to A.14 and C.18 to C.21. This guide assumes your group is familiar with *CCM*.

THE ADMONITION

You should have sufficient copies of both the *Admonition*, Dr. Forell's commentary and the discussion questions for all participants. (It would also be good to have copies of *CCM* for everyone.) You may allow people to read the *Admonition* and commentary silently, or you may take turns reading them aloud section-by-section. The process that follows focuses on the *Admonition* and discusses it paragraph by paragraph. You may want to read it that way.

I. THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

First paragraph

Point out that the theologians who wrote the *Admonition* intentionally made a common confession (statement of belief) centered on Jesus Christ and the justification of sinners.

The *Admonition* begins with the doctrine on which Luther based the Reformation: justification by grace through faith alone. This doctrine expresses Jesus' uniqueness. For a biblical example, we hear about Jesus and his name in Acts 4:12: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (NRSV). Jesus himself says in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (NRSV).

In spite of this New Testament stress on Jesus as savior, surveys of American Christians over the past few decades consistently show that most, including a majority of Lutherans, believe that people earn their salvation by doing good works.

As Dr. Forell writes in his commentary, many Christians are embarrassed by the centrality of Christ and his exclusive claim. Does it really matter if Christians confess, believe and trust that Jesus is the only way by which sinners are saved?

Lutherans have always come together on the basis of common confessions—the Augsburg Confession, Luther's Small Catechism, and other Lutheran confessional writings in the *Book of Concord*.

What freedom does having a confession of Jesus as the center of the church give the church? In what ways does this confession distinguish Lutheran churches from other Christian churches that you may know?

What else have churches united around? What differences are there between uniting around a confession of faith and uniting around a specific church structure or ritual? Are those differences significant, especially in the long term?

Second paragraph

The *Admonition* and the commentary clearly state that the Holy Spirit uses only “the proclamation of the gospel and the distribution of the sacraments” to create and sustain the church.

The *Admonition* asserts that these “two forms of the gospel” not only create and sustain the church, they also make the church “apostolic,” “catholic,” “holy,” and “one.” What do these terms mean?

Some claim that one church organization is more “apostolic” than another based on its history. Evaluate the claim. Are churches that claim to have organizational roots in the earliest centuries of the Christian movement more authentic and more in line with the apostles’ work and teachings than other churches?

Third paragraph.

Lay people often make statements to their pastors such as: “Pray for me because you have a more direct connection with God than I do,” or “You pastors are closer to God than we laity.” This view is at odds with this assertion from the *Admonition*: “Ordination does not confer any quality or special ability higher than that bestowed in baptism.”

Which do you believe? Do ordained people receive special grace, or don’t they?

The *Admonition* and the Commentary state that all baptized believers are called to proclaim the gospel. What are some specific ways that all believers can do this?

Fourth paragraph

An adiaphoron—and its plural form, adiaphora—means something that is neither commanded nor prohibited by Scripture. Therefore, an adiaphoron can be

called “something indifferent.” An example of an adiaphoron is the wearing of robes by a choir. Another example is the use of the title “bishop” or some other title like “president.”

What are other examples of adiaphora in the church? How do you determine if something is an adiaphoron? Are such things automatically unimportant and, therefore, to be casually chosen or rejected; or should they be carefully considered?

A new archbishop of Canterbury is “enthroned” when he assumes his office. When Anglican and Episcopal bishops are ordained, they are given symbols of their office: a large cross to wear on the chest, a ring, a chasuble (large outer cape), a miter (a large pointed hat) and a crosier (a staff shaped like a shepherd’s crook). Some Lutheran bishops now use these symbols, too.

Do adiaphora like these interfere with, or assist, the proclamation of the gospel in the American setting? What image do they convey of the church? What does dressing like a nobleman of an earlier time and place say about the nature of the church?

Fifth paragraph

The *Admonition* states that adiaphora cannot be made necessary for the unity of the church. It brings up some dangers of making indifferent things necessary.

What is so serious about making adiaphora mandatory practices? Is “coercive force” as mentioned in the *Admonition* being used in the ELCA to impose Episcopal ordination practices on new pastors and bishops? Are there risks or problems in requiring Lutherans to practice something that Lutherans do not believe?

II. ECCLESIAL CONSEQUENCES

The *Admonition* cites an ELCA 2001 Churchwide Assembly bylaw change as an indication that the ELCA has taken a step away from making the historic episcopate into a necessity. The bylaw amendment states:

7.31.17. Ordination in Unusual Circumstances. *For pastoral reasons in unusual circumstances, a synodical bishop may provide for the ordination by another pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America of an approved candidate who has received and accepted a properly issued, duly attested letter of call for the office of ordained ministry. Prior to authorization of such an ordination, the bishop of the synod of the candidate's first call shall consult with the presiding bishop as this church's chief ecumenical officer and shall seek the advice of the Synod Council. The pastoral decision of the synodical bishop shall be in accordance with policy developed by the Division for Ministry, reviewed by the Conference of Bishops, and adopted by the Church Council.*

Presently, the synodical bishop decides if a new pastor must conform to the Episcopal ordination practice. New pastors have the right only to *request* a non-episcopal ordination.

If the ELCA made the changes called for by the *Admonition*, what decision must each new pastor and bishop make? What does the *Admonition* mean when it calls for “options of equal standing”?

The *Admonition* expresses the concern that the church may be on the path to idolatry. In Martin Luther's understanding of idolatry, an idol is something or someone in whom we place the trust that should be

placed only in God. In other words, an idol is something or someone that we expect to do what only God can do. When human traditions and ceremonies are made necessary in the church, do they pave “the way to idolatry”? How? What are examples of this in church history?

CONCLUSION

You have now led the discussion group through the *Admonition*. This may be the time to ask some very broad questions and to encourage the participants to ask their final questions.

The panel of theologians has dealt with the issue of *CCM* from a theological perspective. Some people may argue this is not an issue of theology but of ecumenism and the need to join together for mission. Is a theological perspective no longer a primary concern?

The *Admonition's* authors recognize that amending the ELCA's constitution and bylaws to accommodate their viewpoint “might be a difficult process.” Is this entire discussion too late and now irrelevant? If not, what should your discussion group or congregation do to take action on these issues?

Thank everyone for taking part. Offer to hold follow-up sessions if needed. Give the mailing addresses and web addresses for the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 8765 West Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631; www.elca.org) so that persons wanting more information can find it from both the ELCA and from WordAlone, a voluntary movement that is dedicated to the renewal of the church.

Conclude with another word of prayer for growth in understanding, for the ongoing reform of Christ's church, and for the safe return home of your participants.