

Seeking Christian Unity

Kristopher W. Seaman

Developing a relationship takes time. When individuals seek to get to know one another, they converse to discover shared values. Faith communities, too, spend time talking as they seek to get to become acquainted and find commonalities.

For the last fifty years, Catholics and Lutherans have met for dialogue and study, both in the United States and globally. Through discussion and prayer, they have found many places of agreement. By 1999, they released the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. After more prayer and discussion, in 2015, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America came out with the document *Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry and Eucharist*. This document provides thirty-two statements on which Lutherans and Roman Catholics agree.

From this prayer and dialogue has come an understanding of the need for Catholics and Lutherans to gather in prayer during the next year to observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Nearly a year prior to the October 31, 2016, prayer service observing the Reformation in Lund, Sweden, Pope Francis was scheduled to copreside with leaders of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). For this service the *Common Prayer* was prepared by the LWF and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

The service was designed to be the beginning of a year-long global commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Participants at local ecumenical services also will use the *Common Prayer* (available at www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/dtpw-lrc-liturgy-2016_en.pdf) to pray for the Holy Spirit to continue to build deeper unity among Christians. As the *Common Prayer* states, those gathered will have “an opportunity to look back in thanksgiving and confession and look ahead, committing ourselves to common witness and continuing our journey together.”

The text of the *Common Prayer* acknowledges the question of disunity as it arose in the past, and continues in the present, while voicing the hope that the future might strengthen bonds of unity. Some will adapt the prayer for use during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in January, but congregations may gather at any time to pray.

Preparing the service and praying together could be a fruitful beginning of a relationship for congregations. The document notes that praying and working together for unity is part of the mission of the Church: “In this particular and unique ecumenical commemoration, thanksgiving and lament, joy and repentance, mark the singing and the praying



An ecumenical prayer service will allow Christians to observe the Reformation while continuing to seek unity.

as we commemorate the gifts of the Reformation and ask forgiveness for the division that we have perpetuated. Thanksgiving and lament, however, do not stand alone: they lead us to common witness and commitment to each other and for the world.”

The prayer service is marked by a sense of humility, a recognition of past misperceptions, actions, and pain inflicted on one another. Within the service is a call for Catholics and Lutherans to witness God’s mercy and proclaim the Gospel together, to continue to work for unity, and to allow one another to be transformed by joint prayer and witness. Such prayer can only deepen Christian bonds.

For the relationship that Catholics and Lutherans have developed to be felt on the local level, parishes need to make a commitment to it. What can you, your parish, and other Christian parishes do to build deeper bonds? Study Scripture together? Share faith (catechisms) together to see how much is held in common? Pray together? Help those in need within the community by witnessing together? Study church history through recent scholarship, perhaps by inviting a church historian to speak to you?