

*"Watchman,
what of the night?"*

*"The hour has come, the hour is striking, and striking at you,
the hour and the end!"* *Eze. 7:6 (Moffat)*

THE JOINT DECLARATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

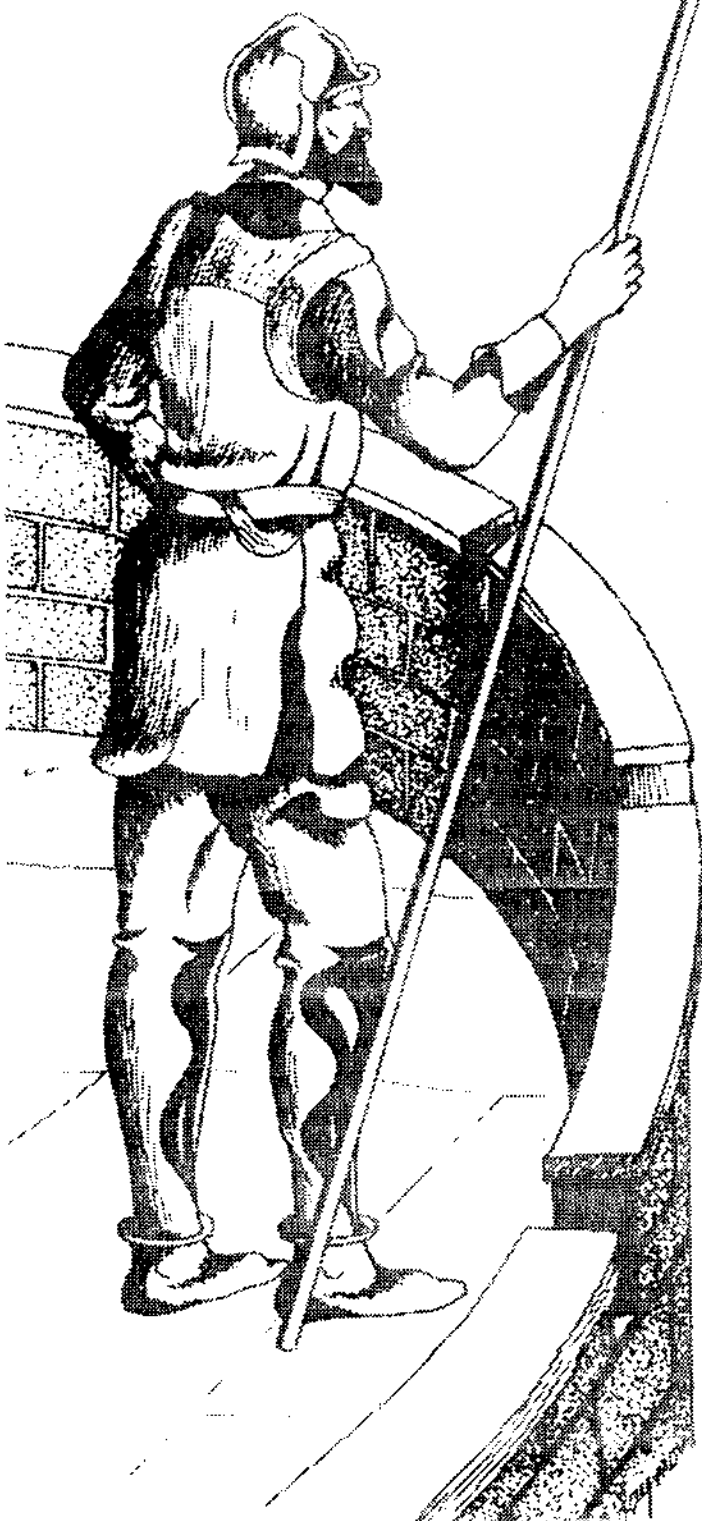
To Be Signed Between the Papacy and the LWF
on October 31, 1999

Editor's Preface

This special issue of *WJN* brings to you an analysis and background of an event of major ecumenical importance which is to take place on the last day of this month. As is noted in this paper, the Papacy was and is not only a political power, but also a religious entity. Prophecy indicated that it was to receive "the stroke of death." (Rev. 13:3, Gr.). We have no difficulty with the "political" wounding in 1798, but the Reformation also inflicted a wound on the Papacy. Luther described it as "taking the goose by the neck." In this document to be signed on October 31, 1999, there is a "healing" of that wound involving the central doctrine of the Reformation - Justification by Faith. It is also of interest - a mere coincidence? - that the steps of this "healing" began in 1967, and an important commemoration of an event in the history of the Reformation coincided with 1980.

When the announcement was made on June 11 at a press conference in Geneva, Switzerland, that this "Joint Declaration on Justification" would be signed in Augsburg, Germany on October 31, Dr. Ismael Noko, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, indicated that the question had been raised as to who had given up most in this Declaration, the Lutherans or the Roman Catholics. His answer was: "These days we appear not to be able to understand that a victory can be won without one of the parties ceding to the other. The process of the joint declaration has not had this competitive character. Rather, it has been a process of reconciliation based on a common heritage we share: the biblical witness of God's righteousness, in other words, his free grace to us in Christ." (*Origins*, Vol. 29, #6, pp.90-91)

We will let you decide who gave up what in this joint adventure over the key doctrine of the Reformation, this healing of the Papal wound. Within the write-up we have made our observations. You can concur or disagree as you like, but the pace of unity is accelerating as the news item on page 6 indicates. And interestingly, the Lutherans are in the forefront. What would Martin Luther say if he could know it!



A Joint Declaration on Justification

On October 31, 1999 in Augsburg, Germany, there will be signed *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), which represents the vast majority of the world's Lutherans, and the Papacy. The announcement was made at a joint press conference in Geneva, Switzerland, on June 11 by Cardinal Edward Cassidy, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and Dr. Ishmael Noko, LWF general secretary.

At the same time, two new documents were released: 1) an Official Common Statement, and 2) An Annex. The latter document affirmed *The Joint Declaration* and responded to certain concerns expressed by the Churches when *The Joint Declaration* was first released. The official Papal response said that several points needed further clarification which led some Lutheran leaders to ask if enough agreement actually existed to justify a formal signing. During the year, Catholic and Lutheran representatives went back to the "bargaining table" and drafted the new documents. The Papal concerns involved the place of good works in the life of faith; whether a Christian can at once be righteous and a sinner; and the place of the doctrine of justification in the "overall context of the church's fundamental Trinitarian confession of faith."

"The Common Statement" confirmed that *The Joint Declaration's* understanding of justification by faith does show that a consensus in the basic truths of the doctrine exists between Lutherans and Roman Catholics so that mutual condemnations of former times do not apply to the understanding of justification expressed in the declaration. Noko of the LWF Council expressed it this way: "Now it can be declared without reservation that the doctrinal condemnations which were set forth mutually by the Lutheran and Catholic sides at the time of the Reformation do not apply to the teaching on justification by faith expressed in the *Joint Declaration*." (*The Lutheran*, July 1999, p. 52)

It should be obvious, even to a surface reader, that something had to give. The condemnation by the Council of Trent in regard to the teaching of justification by faith is clear and plain. It reads:

If anyone saith, that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ's sake; or, that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified: let him be anathema. (Canon XII on Justification)

On October 31, 1517, at noon, Martin Luther walked boldly to the Castle church at Wittenberg and posted upon the door his "Ninety-Five Theses" against the indulgences which were being offered by the Church to cover sins. This was the day before the festival of All Saints, and a very important day for Wittenberg. The church had been built by the elector, which he had filled with relics. "On that day the priests used to bring out these relics, ornamented with gold, silver, and precious stones, and exhibit them before the people, who were dazzled by such magnificence. Whoever visited the church on that festival and made confession, obtained a rich indulgence. Accordingly, on this great anniversary, pilgrims came to Wittenberg in crowds." (D'Aubigne: *History of the Reformation*, Vol. 1, pp. 280-281)

"The germs of the Reformation were contained in these propositions of Luther. The abuses of the indulgences were attacked therein, and this was their most striking feature; but beneath these attacks was a principle which, although attracting the attention of the multitude in a less degree, was one day to overthrow the edifice of popery. The evangelical doctrine of a free and gratuitous remission of sins was there for the first time publicly professed. ... A clear knowledge of this truth is what preceding reformers had wanted; and hence the unfruitfulness of their exertions. Luther himself acknowledged afterwards, that in proclaiming justification by faith, he laid the axe at the root of the tree. 'It is doctrine we attack in the adherents of the Papacy,' said he, 'Huss and Wickliffe only attacked their lives; but in attacking their doctrine, we take the goose by the neck. Every thing depends on the Word, which the Pope has taken from us and falsified. I have vanquished the pope, because my doctrine is of God, and his is of the devil.'" (*ibid.*, pp. 285-286)

World Protestantism celebrated its 450th anniversary in 1967. Most Protestants consider October 31, 1517, as the symbolic beginning of the Reformation, the day which Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses "criticizing the Roman Catholic Church and pointing toward a fresh understanding of God's grace. In October, 1967, Protestants gathered - quite often with

Roman Catholics - in countries throughout the world, to recall that event." (*World Book Encyclopedia, 1968 Yearbook*, p. 468) It was in 1967 that a joint Roman Catholic-Lutheran Commission began its dialogue that has led up to the present *Joint Declaration*.

It needs to be kept in mind that the Papacy is not only a political power but it is also a religious power. It is true that a "deadly wound" was administered to the Papacy in 1798 which brought the political power of Rome to an end for a period of time. However, Luther's 95 Theses gave a "deadly wound" to the spiritual power of the Papacy which divided the Christian Church in the West. In 1967, the healing of that wound began.

It was not the intent of Luther or those associated with him to separate from the Church of Rome, but to reform it. It was not until after 1580 that the followers of Luther's teaching referred to themselves as Lutherans. Up to that point in time they called themselves, *ecclesia apostolica catholica*, or the Apostolic Catholic Church. The real break occurred in 1530 as a result of the Diet of Augsburg. This Diet had as its objective the restoration of the unity of the Church. Charles V, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, promised a fair hearing to all, inviting the Protestants to present in writing their views.

The Lutherans submitted what is known as the Augsburg Confession which was written by Melancthon and approved by Luther. "This document consisted of twenty-eight articles, of which twenty-one clearly defined the tenets of the Lutherans, while seven pointed out the errors and abuses which had been abolished by the Lutherans. It was written in a conciliatory spirit and presented in the hope that it might be accepted as satisfactory by the emperor and the other Romanists, but this hope was not fulfilled. The Catholics presented a refutation known as the Confutation to the Diet. ...

"The Diet voted that the Augsburg Confession had been refuted by the Confutation and that the Protestants were bound to recant. The old ecclesiastical institutions were to be restored, and if the Lutherans had not come into submission to the Catholic Church by April 15, 1531, they were to be suppressed by force. This effected the Protestant-Romish schism." (Qualben, *A History of the Christian Church*, pp. 235-236)

The Augsburg Confession still remains the funda-

mental position of Lutherans in all lands. Forthrightly the Confession declares:

We teach, moreover, that we cannot be justified before God by our own strength, our merits, or our works; but that we are justified freely for Christ's sake through faith, when we believe that our sins are forgiven in virtue of Christ, who by His death has made satisfaction for our sins; this faith is the righteousness that God imputeth to the sinner.

But we teach at the same time, that this faith ought to bear good fruits, and that we must do all the good works commanded by God, for the love of God, and not by their means to gain the grace of God. (Quoted from D'Aubigne, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 195)

The second section of the Confession pointed out the errors and abuses of the Papal system including the compulsory celibacy of the priests. The last article treated with the authority of the bishops, protesting against the confusion of church and state which had characterized the middle ages, and called for a distinction and independence of the two societies. It read:

Many have unskillfully confounded the episcopal and the temporal power; and from this confusion have resulted great wars, revolts, and seditions. It is for this reason, and to reassure men's consciences, that we find ourselves constrained to establish the difference which exists between the power of the church and the power of the sword. ...

[The Confession confines the "power of the Church" to the preaching of the gospel, and the focus on "eternal goods," not troubling itself with "political administration." "The political administration, on the other hand, is busied with everything else but the gospel."]

For this reason we must take particular care not to mingle the power of the church and the power of the state. The power of the church ought never to invade an office that is foreign to it; for Christ himself said, "My kingdom is not of this world." And again, "Who made me a judge over you?" St. Paul said to the Philippians, "Our citizenship is in heaven," Phil. 3:20; and to the Corinthians, "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God."

It is thus that we distinguish the two governments and the two powers, and that we honor both as the most excellent gifts that God has given here on earth. (ibid., pp.

199-200) (While the Reformation did not achieve in practice this ideal, the separation of church and state, it did formulate a concept which became a reality in the establishment of the American nation centuries later.)

Four hundred and fifty years later in 1980, the Joint Roman Catholic-Lutheran Commission of the LWF and the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, which had been in dialogue since 1967, issued a joint statement on the Augsburg Confession. The preface to this statement declared that it was the hope of the Commission "that the unanimity expressed in it may hasten the hoped-for unity of our churches." (*Origins*, April 10, 1980, p. 685) They indicated that the members of the joint Commission looked back on the times of the Confession which differ considerably from the present. In 1530, this Statement noted that "the unity of the Western church had not yet been shattered," but subsequent events led to a sharpening of the differences between them both in doctrine, religious practices, and church structures. But now since the Second Vatican Council, the many differences are "beginning to loose their divisive edge. ... After centuries of an ever deeper estrangement, there is a new sense among us that we are 'all under one Christ.'" (*ibid.*)

This "climate of real fellowship" led the conferees back to the Augsburg Confession for several reasons: 1) It expresses as no other confession does, "the ecumenical purpose and catholic intention of the Reformation." 2) The Confession "is still the doctrinal basis of the Lutheran Churches and still has binding authority for them even today. 3) This factor is important because that which began in 1967 as a private and unofficial dialogue is now conducted on "official instructions" of the two churches. And 4) "The express purpose of the Augsburg Confession is to bear witness to the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Its concern is not with peculiar doctrines nor indeed with the establishment of a new church, but with the preservation and renewal of the Christian faith in its purity - in harmony with the ancient church, and 'the church of Rome,' and in agreement with the witness of holy scripture." (*ibid.*, p. 687)

Aspects of these reasons are true. The Reformers endeavoured to be conciliatory. They had not at that time organized themselves into a separate church. They truly desired a reformation within Roman Catholicism, and sought to point out the way. This document did become the basic doctrine for Luther-

anism. Rome now uses this document as the basis to "heal" the wound inflicted upon it. The Statement declared that "a broad consensus emerges in the doctrine of justification which was decisively important for the Reformation" (#14). Thus the next move was to develop an accord which removed the condemnations coming out of the Reformation and the Council of Trent centered in the core teaching of Justification by Faith. This is what the signing to take place in Augsburg, Germany, October 31, 1999 is all about.

When this Joint Declaration was first released in January 1995, to the Lutheran Churches associated in the LWF, it was hoped that their approval could be secured for the signing of the document in 1997. This would have been a symbolic date for a joint declaration on justification because it would mark both the 50th anniversary of the LWF and the 450th anniversary of the 1547 decree on justification of the Council of Trent in which the Roman Catholic Church condemned what it believed the Lutheran doctrine on justification to be. However, opposition was voiced by several LWF member churches calling for a revised text before they would assent. More than 140 Lutheran theologians signed a statement early in 1998 calling for the rejection of the document. In June the Vatican issued an official statement which listed a series of clarifications needed to make the Declaration acceptable to it. In July, Cassidy in a letter to Noko reaffirmed that the Vatican was ready to sign and stressed that the "clarifications" were not reservations. However, "he failed to state unambiguously that the Vatican was ready to lift the doctrinal condemnation of Lutheran teaching on the matter." (ENI, #18, 98-0416)

Before discussing the contents of what will be signed, we need to understand that in reality, there are three documents involved: 1) *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*; 2) *Official Common Statement*; and 3) *An Annex*. The last two seek to cover the objections and/or clarifications raised by the first document.

The Joint Declaration is prefaced with a "Preamble." which reads in part:

1. *The doctrine of justification was of central importance for the Lutheran Reformation of the 16th Century. It was held to be the "first and chief article" and at the same time the "ruler and judge over all other Christian doctrines." The doctrine of justification was particularly asserted and defended in its Reformation shape and spe-*

cial valuation over against the Roman Catholic Church and theology of that time, which in turn asserted and defended a doctrine of justification of a different character. From the Reformation perspective, justification was the crux of all disputes. Doctrinal condemnations were put forward both in the Lutheran confessions and by the Roman Catholic Church's Council of Trent. These condemnations are still valid today and thus have a church dividing effect.

2. For the Lutheran tradition, the doctrine of justification has retained its special status. Consequently it has also from the beginning occupied an important role in the official Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue.

Number 3 concerns itself with an itemization of previous papers and reports on the issue addressed by this Joint Declaration; and Number 4 indicates that with the "high degree of agreement" evidenced in these papers and reports "the time has therefore come to take stock and to summarize the results of these dialogues on justification by faith."

5. The present joint declaration has this intention: namely, to show that on the basis of their dialogue the subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ. It does not cover all that either church teaches about justification; it does encompass a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations.

Two other paragraphs close the "Preamble." No 7 draws an interesting conclusion. "The churches neither take the condemnations lightly nor do they disavow their own past. On the contrary, this declaration is shaped by the conviction that in their respective histories [the churches] have come to new insights."

The body of the Joint Declaration consisted of five divisions: 1) Biblical Message of Justification; 2) The Doctrine of Justification as [an] Ecumenical Problem; 3) The Common Understanding of Justification; 4) Explicating the Common Understanding of Justification; and 5) The Significance and Scope of the Consensus Reached. While it is totally impossible in this single issue of WWN to discuss in detail these five sections, two statements made, one from #3, and another from #5 need to be noted. The declaration in #3 reads:

15. Together we confess: 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.

The paragraph from #5 reads as follows:

41. Thus the doctrinal condemnations of the 16th Century, insofar as they relate to the doctrine of justification, appear in a new light: The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the Council of Trent. The condemnations in the Lutheran confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this declaration.

This Joint Declaration from the Lutheran viewpoint "establishes a new ecumenical path" for other churches to follow. Dr. Noko in his report to the LWF Council in Bratislava, Slovakia on June 22, stated that he hoped that "the insights gained in the long and sometimes arduous process will help smooth the way for other churches of the Reformation to a closer ecumenical rapprochement with the Roman Catholic Church." (ENI, 99-0256) At the press conference, when the signing of this Joint Declaration along with its Annex was announced on June 11, Noko had noted that the stated aim of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue was "to reach full church communion, a unity in diversity, in which remaining differences would be 'reconciled' and no longer a divisive force. This recognition of our common aim is itself significant in ecumenical terms." (Origins, Vol. 29, #6, p. 90) Any analysis of the Joint Declaration or the Annex must be done against this backdrop.

The Preamble, noted above, requires some critical evaluations. It is admitted that the doctrine of justification as taught by Rome was of "a different character" from that which was set forth by Luther. It must be kept in mind that the doctrine as taught by Luther is the teaching which was condemned in the canons of the Council of Trent. Thus the inescapable conclusion is that the present Lutheran position had to be a modification of the original teaching of Martin Luther for there to be a lifting of its condemnation. The Preamble admits that the Joint Declaration "does not cover all that either church teaches about justification," but is rather a consensus of "basic truths of the doctrine of justification" so that the doctrinal condemnations are no longer applicable. Further in the body of the Joint Declaration it is

declared that the teaching of the Lutheran Churches "presented in this declaration does not fall under the condemnation of the Council of Trent." Was the key doctrine of Luther that was condemned in the Council, then omitted so that this paper could be signed? Hardly so, when #15 (p. 4) is so explicit, unless, the omission of *sola fide* and *sola Christi* was sufficient for Rome. Has Rome then changed? The evidence does not so indicate. Or is this what Rome means by "unity in diversity"?

The question arises, can a mere signing of a document erase condemnations of a Roman Catholic Council? Would not another Church Council have to annul or modify a previous action? The Augsburg Confession condemned practices, actions and activities of the Roman Church, while the Council of Trent condemned individuals who held to certain specific beliefs contrary to Rome. The question then for the Lutherans is - Have these previous practices, actions and activities of the Church of Rome changed? This factor is not discussed.

The justification for the position taken appears to be the explanation given in #7 of the Preamble. There it declares that the Joint Statement "is shaped by the conviction that in their respective histories [the churches] have come to new insights." Has Rome come to a new insight? It must be kept in mind that at the same time the Joint Roman Catholic-Lutheran Commission was preparing this joint statement, the Vatican was putting the final touches on the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* released in 1994. In fact it was the same year that "a group of theologians, appointed respectively by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation, produced a first version of a joint declaration on the doctrine of justification." (*Origins*, Vol, 28, #8, p. 128)

The section in the Catechism on justification defines its meaning, quoting from the Council of Trent. It reads: "Justification is not only the remission of sins, but is also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man" (#1989). It is stated that "Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith. It conforms us to the righteousness of God who makes us inwardly just by the power of his mercy" (#1992). Justification in relationship to baptism is defined further - "The grace of Christ is the gratuitous gift that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it from sin and to sanctify it. It is the *sanctifying* or *deifying* grace received in Baptism" (#1999; emphasis theirs). To Rome, there

are two kinds of "graces" - one called, "habitual grace" and the other "actual grace." These they relate thus - "The *preparation of man* for the reception grace is already a work of grace. This latter is needed to arouse and sustain our collaboration in justification through faith, ..." (#2001). It should be clear to all that Rome's concept of justification is indeed of "a different character."

Rome's questions over the original document - "Joint Declaration on Justification" - are clarified in an Annex which will be included with the original at the time of the signing on October 31, 1999. Two points troubled them: one was Luther's position in regard to the Christian - *simul justus et peccator* (at the same time both righteous and sinful). In fact, Cassidy in a letter to Noko July 30, 1998, noting the reasons for the hesitation of Rome, wrote:

It is difficult to see how in the present presentation the doctrine on simul justus et peccator is not touched by the anathemas of the Tridentine decree on original sin and justification. (Origins, Vol. 28, #17, p 287)

Then he asked a question - "Could this important point not be resolved by a Lutheran presentation that explains the unusual use of sin in this context by which the word loses its normal character of being a willed and voluntary opposition to God?" This goes to the very heart of the question of justification. In accepting the "redemption that is in Christ Jesus" am I made righteous, or am I declared righteous, and then by the power of the Holy Spirit grow in grace?

The second point was perceiving the doctrine of justification as distinct rather than through the sacraments of the Church. The Roman Church wants all things mediated through the priest, while Luther set forth the priesthood of all believers. On this point, Cassidy had written:

The Catholic understanding [is] that justification has to be organically integrated into the fundamental criterion of the regula fidei, that is, confession of the one God in three persons, Christologically centered, and rooted in the living church and its sacramental life. (ibid.)

This point is vitally important. To illustrate its force, the Roman Catholic cannot sing - "Without one plea but that Thy blood was shed for me, O Lamb of God, I come, I come." His approach to God and Christ must be through the mediation of an earthly priest via the sacraments from birth (infant baptism) to death. The Gospel, reborn in the Reformation, calls

men to "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." They look, and they hear that Lamb say, "Come unto me, and I will give you rest." How there can be any consensus between these two approaches to God and Christ without compromise is impossible. Instead of heeding the counsel of the 140 Lutheran theologians who signed a statement calling for the rejection of the document, the signing is scheduled for October 31, 1999 in Augsburg, Germany.

A preface preceding the Annex, captioned, "Official Common Statement" reads:

The two partners in dialogue are committed to continued and deepened study of the biblical foundations of the doctrine of justification. They will also seek further common understanding of the doctrine of justification also beyond what is dealt with in the joint declaration and the annexed substantiating statement. Based on the consensus reached, continued dialogue is required specifically on the issues mentioned in the joint declaration itself (JD, 43) as requiring further clarification, in order to reach full church communion, a unity in diversity, in which remaining differences would be "reconciled" and no longer have a divisive force. Lutherans and Catholics will continue their efforts ecumenically in their common witness to interpret the message of justification in language relevant for human beings today, and with reference both to individual and social concerns of our times. (Origins, Vol. 29, #6, p. 87)*

* #43 - "These include... the relationship between the Word of God and church doctrine, as well as, ecclesiology, authority in the church, ministry, the sacraments, and the relationship between justification and social ethics."

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US Lutherans Approve Plan for "Full Communion" with Episcopal Church

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has given its backing to establish "full communion" with the (Anglican) Episcopal Church in the United States. The church-wide assembly of the ELCA, meeting in Denver gave the document, "Called to Common Mission," the necessary two-thirds vote required for passage. This document must be agreed upon next year by the Episcopal Church before becoming effective.

The document does not call for a merger of the two denominations, but they will fully recognize each other's members, ministries and sacraments, and will be able to exchange clergy. At the same assembly in Denver the ELCA also voted for full communion with the Moravian Church, a Protestant church which traces its roots back to the early 15th-century Czech reformer, John Huss. The presiding bishop of the ELCA described the vote for this "full communion" with these two other churches as "a great step forward in our ecumenical understanding."

One of the most controversial aspects of the agreement with the Episcopal church was the issue of bishops and the acceptance by the ELCA of the "historic episcopate," the tradition that only bishops tracing their succession back to Jesus' apostles can ordain new bishops. In 1997, the ELCA agreed to full communion with three Reformed Churches - the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Church of Christ and the Reformed Church in America. With the acceptance by the Episcopal Church of the document, "Called to Common Mission," the three major divisions of the Protestant churches of the Reformation will be in accord. Noko, the LWF's general secretary described the ecumenical dialogue of the ELCA as being of great value for the world-wide fellowship of the Lutheran churches. (ENI, #15, 99-0299)

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"Say ye not, A confederacy to all them to whom this people shall say, A confederacy; neither fear ye their fear, nor be afraid. Sanctify the Lord of hosts himself, and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread." (Isa. 8:12-13)

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"Watchman, What of the Night?" is published monthly by the Adventist Laymen's Foundation of Mississippi, Inc., P. O. Box 69, Ozone, AR 72854, USA.

Editor, Publications & Research

Elder Wm. H. Grotheer

Regional Contacts:

Australia - P. O. Box 5023, Wodonga Plaza, VIC 3690

Canada - P. O. Box 117, Thorne, ON POH 2J0

The Caribbean - P. O. Box GM 537, Castries, St. Lucia

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800-4-LAYMEN (800-452-9636)

FAX - (501) 292-3745; Regular Calls - (501) 292-3721