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'Declaration on the Way' from a Catholic Perspective

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Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden of Baltimore holds a Catholic-Lutheran document titled "Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry and Eucharist". The document marks the progress in Catholic-Lutheran relations over the past 50 years and maps the remaining steps needed to achieve full unity. (CNS photo/Tyler Orsburn)

The Catholic members of the task force that produced the ["Declaration on the Way"](#) were privileged to be present for its overwhelming reception at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) Churchwide Assembly in August. Before the vote, the task force was available to answer questions in two listening sessions. These sessions spontaneously turned into a litany of testimony on behalf of church unity by people who had experienced the pain of disunity in inter-church marriages, who had collaborated with Catholics in social justice projects, and who had shared faith and resources in pastoral settings.

The personal stories shared at the listening sessions and the more than 99 percent vote in favor of the "Statement of Agreements" of the Churchwide assembly are evidence of a groundswell of support for closer ecclesial relations between Lutherans and Catholics. This comes at a historic time in our relationship on the eve of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. It was quite a journey to get to this point.

The "Declaration on the Way" is a unique kind of document. Not yet another statement from the U.S. Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, it is rather a compilation of thirty-two statements of agreement on the topics of church, ministry, and Eucharist culled from previous dialogue statements. Its three parts — the "Statement of Agreements," the documentation and elaboration of the agreements, and the section on some remaining differences and reconciling considerations — are not of equal weight or importance. Only the "Statements of Agreement" are the subject of any official act of reception or ratification. The second section merely gives a fuller context in terms of the dialogue that resulted in these agreements. The most tentative and incomplete section sketches out some of the remaining differences and reconciling considerations with respect to them.

Because this declaration does not represent the end of our shared journey to unity, but rather is “on the way,” it was important not only to list shared agreements, but also to indicate at least some issues needing resolution on the road ahead. Thus, the “Statements of Agreement” should receive the greatest attention and alone are the subject of any church action of reception. They are narrower and more focused than the rest of the document.

Even though Americans produced this document under the sponsorship of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and the ELCA, it was intended to be an international document, although the path to international reception is far from clear at this point. Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU), originated the idea for such a document. He proposed a new genre of ecumenical writing, a “declaration on the way” with the suggestion that this approach specifically be used on the vital and difficult issues of church, ministry and Eucharist. Such a Declaration would be an “in between” sort of document, not as definitive as the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (1999), but one that would identify and claim, more forcefully than a series of separate dialogue statements, the real if incomplete agreement already reached through ecumenical dialogue. The ELCA then proposed the project to the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at the USCCB. A task force, distinct from the current Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, despite some overlapping membership, was appointed to produce the document.

Neither a consensus document like the declaration on justification, nor simply another dialogue statement from the national bilateral dialogue, the “Declaration on the Way” represents a new genre of ecumenical statements as a sort of interim document. It is “on the way” because it marks the progress achieved in 50 years of dialogue by identifying statements of consensus at the same time it acknowledges that full agreement has not yet been reached on all aspects pertaining to these topics. The document is “on the way” because the final destination of full agreement and full, visible communion still lies ahead.

The Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Religious Affairs unanimously received the 32 agreements and commended the declaration to Cardinal Koch for his consideration and action. In this way, the process has moved full circle, since the idea for the document originated with Cardinal Koch and the results of the study are now returned to him. Any action on the recommendations for “Next Steps on the Way” will, of course, be taken with the appropriate endorsement by church authorities.

Catholics have been working with Lutherans for the past 50 years to mend the rift that occurred with the Reformation 500 years ago. Today more than ever, in the midst of ever-increasing secularity in a global, multi-religious world, a unified Christian witness is sorely needed. It is time to claim a common discipleship and to affirm a common witness to a common faith.