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**Luther
Northwestern**
Theological Seminary

January 13, 1989

Rev. Dr. William G. Rusch
Executive Director
The Office for Ecumenical Affairs
ELCA
8765 Higgins Road
Chicago, IL 60631-4199

Dear Bill,

I am sending herewith my response to the proposed statement on ecumenism requested by your committee. I hope it will be of service to them in their work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gerhard".

Gerhard O. Forde

P.S. Since the faculty here is also asked to make a reply, I have shared it with some of my colleagues and with the administration here.

G.F.

TO: ELCA Standing Committee of the Office for Ecumenical Affairs.

FROM: Gerhard O. Forde, LNTS.

RE: Reaction and Comment on the Proposed Statement for the First Assembly: "Ecumenism: The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America."

1. First some general observations.

The statement seems to me to be an apt and admirable statement of where we have been and where we are in our ecumenical journey. It contains many of the components necessary to such a statement. The Standing Committee and the staff are to be commended for doing so well what is, I am sure a difficult and painstaking job. I trust that what critical remarks I make and questions I pose will not be taken to mean I am unappreciative of the statement's genuine achievements.

The first general impression I get upon reading the statement is that even though the statement conveys well where we have been and where we are, it does not convey as clear a sense for where we are going and why or by what route as I would hope for from a statement which intends to set a course and lend a "vision" for the new ELCA in its coming years. It seems to me to be more a strategy statement than a policy statement, or at least that it is uncertain of itself as to just what it is supposed to be.

Let me try to explain. I believe it was Heiko Oberman who once said in a lecture (I do not have a reference) that there two ways to go about the ecumenical task. One way is simply to try leaping over the walls that separate churches by arriving at some sort of compromise, accomodation or contrived "consensus." But that attempt tends to breed potential discontent and repetition of past discord because it leaves the old walls still standing. The second way is to burrow under the walls by the relentless pursuit of truth until the walls collapse of themselves. It is this second way alone which can lead to lasting and satisfying results. If there is to be unity, it must be unity in the truth.

If that kind of distinction is at all helpful, I think the problem I have with the proposed statement is that it is not clear to me which way it intends to point us. It outlines at the end a kind of strategy for moving towards unity, but does not, it seems to me outline a clear policy. It does not seem much interested in what the new ELCA a vital Lutheran body might have to contribute to the oekumene but seems more interested in what it will be necessary for us to surrender. To be sure it does talk about the gospel (II,A) and about commitment to truth (II.D.4) on occasion, but such references seem more or less incidental. The over-all impression is that the statement is more interested in ecumenism by a strategy of accomodation rather than developing a policy interested in the relentless quest for truth. I am of the opinion that this is in the main simply a carry-over from the ecumenical policies of

the predecessor bodies which developed more or less in ad hoc fashion. In one sense the debate surfacing in the latter days of those bodies could be seen as a debate about whom we ought to accommodate, with whom we ought to compromise, or to whom we ought to sell the farm, some preferring the "Reformed" side and other preferring the "Catholic." The strategy of accommodation and compromise seems to me to permeate this new policy statement too much. If anything it is even more bland now because its espousal of one side or the other is more muted and disguised (though its tendenz for the more "Catholic" side of things is quite obvious). The point is that there is no agenda here for the new church except perhaps to preside over its own demise. There is no sense of mission, no real passion for the gospel or the on-going reformation it is supposed to work in the oekumene and the service this is to render in the world.

It is time, it seems to me, to ask some serious questions about the next phases in the ecumenical movement and what we might contribute to it. The problem is that the drive to and insistence upon "visible unity" and such things is becoming a virtual institutionalized ideology which as such attempts to brush aside all question without argument. Subtle exercise of power replaces the honest search for truth. One who raises the question of truth is looked on as an obstructionist or a nuisance. The unity question gets reduced to the question of organization and institution. The world, which now recognizes the virtues of diversity and plurality, even the value of smaller and more efficient organizations has passed us by. Confessional bodies are enjoined to unite in some compromise for the sake of whatever advantage "visible unity" may afford in this age rather than to seek the truth in such fashion that they might find themselves united in that truth. The ecumenical movement which, unfortunately, already began more with an eye on what the world might think than on the question of truth can no longer, I think, afford this route. It is anyway about bankrupt. It simply hasn't worked. Where the concern seems to be that the church can parlay visible unity into public clout, where it is more concerned about the supposed "scandal of disunity" than the scandal of the cross, where it thinks about efficiency, or busies itself with its image, or its own internal structures and magisteriums and discipline in order to make itself more powerful and presentable in this age, there ecumenism becomes dominated by the ideology of unity rather than by the earnest and sincere quest for the truth. What the ecumenical movement needs to hear from this new church is a clear call to such a quest for truth under the gospel and for a mission in the world in the light of that quest. In other words, we need you to set an agenda for the future, not to preside over our demise. The statement does indeed speak of this now and then, about being open to the future, not too tied to the past, etc., but it ventures little by way of policy which might contribute to or shape that future. It generally seems to mistake a strategy for unification for an ecumenical policy. But that only means that we shall succumb to whatever is strongest or most popular at the time.

2. Some particulars. It is, of course, not possible to comment extensively on all the particulars so I will just select some which might illustrate the general remarks.

I. A. Scriptural witness. There is a tendency here, it seems to me,

to use the scriptural witness too much in the service the ideology of visible unity rather than the quest for truth. After all, our Lord's prayer "that they may all be one" was for a oneness in truth like unto the oneness of the Son with the Father, a oneness not readily visible to the world and certainly not one usable by the world in the quest for power and clout. The cause of disruption in Galatians 2:11-20, for a further instance, was that the very people who should have been pillars in the church "were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel." You might say they forgot their policy and succumbed to a strategy! The point is surely not just that Cephas et al were culpable for bringing disunity but rather for betraying the truth of the gospel for the sake of expediency or even a species of "visible unity." The question of who or what is the cause of disunity here is, of course, very interesting and complex and would need to be carefully sorted out. Was it Paul or Peter? Is this a preview of things to come? There are deep issues of policy here that ask for judgment and decision. At any rate the passages should not be prematurely pressed into the service of a strategy for "visible unity." Then they get used as ideological levers. I think a policy statement should be more careful than this.

I.A. Lutheran Confessions. Again, the general impression one gets from reading the section is that the Confessors were interested in unity more than in the truth of the gospel. What needs to be reflected more is precisely their contention that agreement under the truth of the gospel is the catholic faith and that that is all that is necessary for the true unity of the church. In other words, the church is one, holy and catholic, when it lives under, from, and by the gospel, and it will be and remain--even visibly--so when nothing more is insisted on. That kind of statement is a policy statement which will then in turn have profound effect on strategy.

II.A. I find the statement on what it means to be evangelical rather bland. It could, it seems to me, reflect a little more of the fire and the passion for the mission of the church under the gospel. "To be centered in the Gospel" is, after all, rather passive. If the statement is to help to set the tone for the new church, there ought to be more fire!

The section on what it means to be catholic seems ambivalent and in some senses unclear. On the one hand it starts out with the old canard about "fulness." Most everyone who has been around a bit knows where that comes from and how it is loaded! We don't really need that. Why not just talk of the integrity of the apostolic faith? But then the statement seems to drop that subject and turn to the idea of community. The idea is, of course, nice, but it is not entirely obvious to me that that is what the word "catholic" means or declares. I had thought that ideas of community, etc., attached more to the word "church." (Incidentally, I am not quite sure as to the antecedent of the the pronoun "It" in both occurrences in the third sentence of this paragraph). I do not intend this to be mere quibbling about editorial detail. I am more and more convinced in ecumenical dialogue that the word "catholic" needs to be given more careful scrutiny and specific definition. It tends, in the course of time to take on more and more freight until it represents a virtual synthesis between this age and the next which undercuts all eschatology. We ought to be very careful and very specific about how we use it. A policy statement like this should spell out very clearly what it means. This is especially true given the

furor brewing in the church about "evangelical catholicity." It is simply not possible now to throw these two modifiers together without carefully defining what one intends. If we are going to speak of catholicity and reclaim it by the evangel, then we are, in effect putting a number of strictures on what the word has been taken to mean in the past, and we had better be precise about it. These are policy issues of supreme importance.

The section on what it means to be ecumenical seems overanxious in its drive toward unity at virtually any cost. Too much so for a policy statement. One gets the impression that we are to create unity by jettisoning the past (what of the apostolic or the confessional tradition?) as much as possible (leap over the walls?), sacrifice all non-essentials (What are they? Have we not sacrificed as much as possible if we say that the gospel alone is sufficient? Precisely some guidance on such questions is what one ought to expect from a policy statement!), and be open to whatever the future may bring, etc., etc. In its concluding theses particularly (No. 6, for instance), the statement appears almost to indulge in a bit of ideological arm-twisting by contending that the "burden of proof is on those who resist unity in spite of agreement on the gospel." In the first place the statement is hardly true. The Lutheran/Catholic dialogues especially have demonstrated that bare agreement in the gospel is not the end of the story, but rather only the beginning. Given agreement in the gospel, the question immediately moves to that of the criteriological function of the gospel. What does it mean to agree on the gospel? E.g., once we have agreed on the gospel, what would it mean to have a papacy reformed "according to the gospel?" What does it mean that the Roman Catholic theologians on the USA national dialogue have agreed that justification by faith alone is at least a criterion--not the only one perhaps, but at least one "gate" through which all church doctrine and practice must pass? The Roman hierarchy has yet to respond carefully to this, though it seems that preliminary opinion is not encouraging. But what if, in spite of supposed "agreement on the gospel" the criteriological function is rejected? Then, it would seem, the ball game is over. But that, of course, has something to say about policy. Agreement on the gospel is by no means the end of the matter, but rather a new beginning. We have not even begun to grasp or spell out completely what it means. The assumption that it means now suddenly we have reached the end of the road and everything is OK just as it is fails to grasp either the significance or the opportunity in these agreements. If they are treated merely as ramps over the walls rather than careful advances in the quest for truth in the gospel, a persistent burrowing under the walls, one seriously mistakes what is going on.

Secondly, the assertion is quite ambiguous in that it does not indicate very clearly upon whom the burden of proof in this case rests, or why. What is one supposed to prove? That there is not, as a matter of fact, agreement on the gospel? Or would the burden rather be on those who want to insist, in spite of agreement on the gospel, that something more than the gospel is necessary? In other words, is it agreement on the gospel or the satis est that is at stake here? If one is to be true to the Lutheran Confessional stance, one would, I expect, be inclined to say that the burden of proof rests on those who insist on something more than the gospel. But the whole development of the series of points in the paragraph gives the rather definite impression that the

intent is to bring pressure to bear on recalcitrant Lutherans. As such it reinforces the tendency to put anyone who wants to press the question of truth at a disadvantage. These tendencies ought to be avoided in a policy statement of the Church. Theses such as No. 6 should either be made much more clear or be deleted altogether--preferably the latter. The whole series, I think, needs careful reworking to spell out a policy for an ecumenical quest for truth in the gospel rather than just unity by accommodation. That would make a much stronger statement and provide some direction for the ecumenical movement as well.

Finally, I would like to make some comment on the question of the goal of it all, stated as "full communion." I am more and more puzzled by this goal. It seems to me to be the end product of a confusion that has been brewing all along in the statement, the confusion between the unity which is given only as a gift through Christ and the gospel, the communio sanctorum, and more visible and structural union. Here both get thrown together prematurely and rather speciously, I think, called "full communion." "Full communion" is and remains a gift of God in Christ. As a matter of fact, there can really be no such thing as "partial communion" in this regard. Indeed, that is what makes even "interim eucharistic sharing" such a affront to pious sensibilities. When one speaks so grandly about "full communion" as the goal one runs the risk once again of transcending the eschatological barriers. No ecumenical strategy can create "full communion." More eschatological modesty is needed. It would seem more appropriate to say that the goal of the ecumenical movement in this age is more complete visible union and to leave "full communion" to the Lord who alone can and does freely give it. Again, there is more than just quibbling here. The temptation all along in the insistence on visible unity is to obscure the eschatological limit to our claims and structures. It is precisely to think we can achieve institutionally something more than the gospel grants. The confusion of a more complete visible union with "full communion" threatens then to be the final step in the whole movement. "Full Communion" is defined doctrinally and structurally in terms of agreements and exchangeability of members and ministers and all the organizational trappings of this age. Were that to succeed it would be a new Babylonian Captivity of the Church! I believe quite strongly that we simply cannot state our policy in this fashion. To do so is completely to confuse our strategies for union with the divine gift of communion. It is, therefore, highly questionable to say the least, to wind up the whole with the claim that this definition of "full communion" is in agreement with the satis est. The satis est is really nothing more than a statement about the eschatological limit to our ecclesiologies. The gospel is the end, the "full communion." There is nothing more. Whatever comes before is variable human convention. We can, in our strategies, and for various strategic reasons, seek as best we can to arrive at more perfect union in these ceremonies and conventions. But nothing reaches beyond the gospel. To make "full communion" as defined in this statement the goal one will, it seems, be called upon to make considerable additions beyond "mere agreement in the gospel." So I fail to see how this statement of the goal and its subsequent definition can be squared with the satis est. It ought to be reformulated more modestly and carefully in the light of the eschatological limit to all our claims. I fear that a strategy here has eclipsed our policy. For we must insist not just on agreement in the

gospel but also that nothing supersedes the gospel. Where we cannot do that, the gospel is of no effect.

SOME REMARKS ON THE STUDY GUIDE.

Given my criticisms of the statement itself, it is obvious that the study guide also could bear some revamping. In general, I believe our people should be invited to some serious discussion about the ecumenical future of the ELCA in relation to our past as Lutheran bodies. There is, I expect a certain anxiety level in many circles about just such matters. The people need to be brought in on the discussion of policy. The study guide is too much of a very bland midrash on the statement which makes it only a ratification of the ideology of visible unity. It becomes more or less a propaganda piece rather than a genuine guide to the study of issues.

It strikes me, in conclusion, that we may not be ready for a statement which is going to set the ecumenical policy of the ELCA in stone for years to come. Certainly the outcome of the study on ministry will have much to say about such a policy. The reactions by all the predecessor bodies to BEM was not very favorable. I expect we need to do a lot more chipping away at the foundations of the walls before we can confidently set our course.