

Lutherans, Catholics, Methodists in accord: Sign joint declaration on doctrine of justification

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A top Lutheran leader has hailed a decision by the world's Methodist churches to sign on to an agreement that brought Catholics and Lutherans closer together on a key issue that rent them apart at the time of the Protestant Reformation.

"We have overcome a theological difference which has divided Western Christianity since the time of the Reformation," Ishmael Noko, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation told the world Methodist conference in Seoul, South Korea.

The Lutheran official spoke July 23 at an event at which the World Methodist Council, an umbrella body for churches in 132 nations, endorsed the joint declaration on the doctrine of justification, signed by the Geneva-based LWF and the Roman Catholic Church in 1999.

"The act of endorsement we are celebrating today will be an encouragement for new and broader forms of ecumenical cooperation among our respective communions," said Noko. John Wesley, the 18th-century founder of Methodism, was influenced by the writings of Martin Luther.

"Today is one of the most significant dates in the history of our churches," Cardinal Walter Kasper, the Vatican's top official for promoting Christian unity, said in Seoul before the signing event.

The doctrine of justification, or how human beings reach salvation, was one of the reasons for the breach between Luther and the papacy in the 16th century.

Luther's followers called unbiblical what they believed to be the Catholic teaching about the role of good works in winning salvation. According to Lutherans, human beings are justified through faith by the grace of God, and not because of good works. The joint declaration states that salvation is achieved through God's grace,

which then encourages Christians to undertake good works.

“It is our deep hope that in the near future we shall also be able to enter into closer relationships with Lutherans and the Roman Catholic Church,” the Methodist group representing nearly 70 million said in a statement.

Earlier, World Council of Churches general secretary Samuel Kobia, a Kenyan Methodist, praised the Methodist tradition of linking a commitment to social justice with prayer and spirituality. “They were not only interested in welfare, they were concerned to remedy social injustice,” Kobia said. “The Methodist movement changed the ecclesial and the social landscape of the time.” *-Ecumenical News International*