

'Justification' pact marked with eye on new divisions: An ecumenical milestone

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With embraces, hymns and common prayer, Catholic, Lutheran and Methodist leaders recalled joyfully the pact made a decade ago that ended a centuries-old division over a key church doctrine. Vows were made at a Chicago service to seek greater unity—even as a Catholic archbishop noted a new challenge to unity posed by diverging views on sexuality.

The celebration of the historic agreement on justification by faith, or how individuals are brought into a right relationship with God, began October 1 with a colorful procession of robed leaders. It ended with spontaneous applause from some 300 people at Chicago's Old St. Patrick's Church.

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification was signed by Lutheran and Roman Catholic officials ten years ago in Germany after decades of theological dialogue. Their consensus, succinctly put, says: "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 us and calling us to good works."

African-born Ishmael Noko, the top staff executive of the Geneva-based Lutheran World Federation, said during the service that the agreement was "one of the major ecumenical milestones in the life of the church."

The World Methodist Council, which includes the United Methodist Church, accepted a later invitation to join in the agreement. The council declared in 2006 its fundamental doctrinal agreement with the Catholic-Lutheran pact.

Noko praised the Methodists' action "for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ." In turn, Gregory Palmer, president of the United Methodist Council of Bishops, said

that, for Methodists, working across barriers and partitions “is a part of our DNA.”

Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, who is also president of the Lutheran World Federation, cohosted the service with Cardinal Francis George of Chicago.

Atlanta archbishop Wilton Gregory, who heads the U.S. Catholic bishops’ committee for ecumenical affairs, said in his homily that the recent decision by the ELCA to open its professional ministry to qualified gays and lesbians “poses a serious challenge to our relationship.”

Gregory said that the ELCA and Roman Catholicism have reached a point at which both read scripture and interpret moral law “so differently on the matter of human sexuality.”

At their August churchwide assembly, ELCA delegates adopted a social statement on sexuality and approved changes to permit Lutherans in lifelong, publicly accountable, monogamous same-gender relationships to serve as clergy and church professionals. As a result, Gregory said, further rounds of theological dialogue “must undertake a careful study of the foundation of moral discernment in our respective traditions.” Discussing human sexuality and the church, Gregory added, could also be an opportunity “for deeper and more energetic engagement in the work of reconciliation.”

While not mentioning Lutheran and Catholic views on the papacy and church authority, Gregory indicated that new studies “will seek to remove impediments to full eucharistic communion.” Rejoicing in their rare major achievement, Catholics and Lutherans will hold a second ecumenical service celebrating the justification pact on October 31 in Augsburg, Germany. *–Compiled from ELCA and United Methodist news services*