

ELCA affirms points of agreement with Catholics

by [Emily McFarlan Miller](#); added source in the [September 14, 2016](#) issue

Nearly 500 years after Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the Castle Church door, the largest Lutheran denomination in the United States has approved a declaration recognizing “there are no longer church-dividing issues” on many points with the Roman Catholic Church.

The “Declaration on the Way” was approved 931-9 by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s Churchwide Assembly held August 8-13 at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center in New Orleans.

Elizabeth A. Eaton, presiding bishop of the 3.7-million-member ELCA, called the declaration “historic” in a statement released by the denomination following the August 10 vote.

“Though we have not yet arrived, we have claimed that we are, in fact, on the way to unity,” Eaton said. “This ‘Declaration on the Way’ helps us to realize more fully our unity in Christ with our Catholic partners, but it also serves to embolden our commitment to unity with all Christians.”

Denis J. Madden, auxiliary bishop for the Catholic Archdiocese of Baltimore, cochaired the task force that created the declaration and spent several days at the assembly.

“I thank you for allowing me and my colleagues to join you in the Eucharist celebrations, which have been a great joy and always a remembrance that soon we will be celebrating these together as one body,” Madden said, according to ELCA News.

The declaration comes as churches prepare to begin a year of commemorations for the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation (see “Catholics at the gathering,” by Michael Root, also in September 14 issue).

Most notably, the “Declaration on the Way” includes 32 “Statements of Agreement” where Lutherans and Catholics no longer have church-dividing differences on issues

of church, ministry, and the Eucharist. Those statements previously had been affirmed by the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

It also lists remaining differences between the two churches and next steps on addressing them.

Eaton noted that the action took place after 50 years of international dialogue. She pointed to past agreements reached by the ELCA and the Catholic Church as well, including 1999's "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification."

The Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation released a joint document in 2013 titled *From Conflict to Communion* that focused on the progress made in Lutheran-Catholic dialogue.

Last November, Pope Francis sparked controversy when he seemed to suggest a Lutheran could receive communion in the Catholic Church, saying "life is greater than explanations and interpretations."

The pontiff is scheduled to co-preside at an ecumenical commemoration on October 31, 2016, in Lund, Sweden, where the LWF was founded, a year before the anniversary of Martin Luther's historic action in Wittenberg. Also leading the service will be Munib A. Younan, LWF president, and Martin Junge, LWF general secretary.

"The LWF is approaching the Reformation anniversary in a spirit of ecumenical accountability," Junge said in a statement about the October event. "I'm carried by the profound conviction that by working towards reconciliation between Lutherans and Catholics, we are working towards justice, peace, and reconciliation in a world torn apart by conflict and violence." —Religion News Service; added sources

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