



Building a Relationship

UMC-ELCA



Best Practices - A booklet for starting grass-roots conversation

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Introduction

Ecumenism is the practice of churches seeking visible Christian unity with one another. Through ecumenism, churches build relationships. Diplomatic ecumenism is focused on theological ideas and heritage, and is done through official dialogue. It answers the “why” of our many interpretations of Christianity. This kind of ecumenism begins with exploring statements of belief then tracing the roots of these ideas to a place of agreement (and of forgiveness). As the result of this difficult work, new statements of inter-denominational understanding evolve. In this fashion, shared statements about Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry, Sanctification, Mission, and many other theological issues evolve. These are great accomplishments in helping to heal the rifts of our divided Church. They pave the way for the relationship of interim Eucharistic sharing and even full communion between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the United Methodist Church (UMC).

Formal dialogue is necessary for our churches to move forward on the denominational level. But what about moving forward at the congregational level? Unlike the formal dialogue process, most of us in the pews tend to focus more upon the “how” first, and then ask “why”. This grass-roots, experience-based orientation is natural given that we learn about our religion first through doing -- how to behave at church, when to stand up or sit down, the ins and outs of receiving Communion. It is the style of music, whether or not there is a nursery available, the quality and choices of Sunday school, whether people wear jeans or suits, the tone of the preacher, the friendliness of those we meet -- in short, the “how” -- that tell us if we’ve found a worship home. Only later do most people ask, “What do you believe?”

Observations about the unfamiliarity of the “how” lead to questions about the “why.” “My church has Communion every week. Why does yours have it only once a month?” “I don’t see any children taking Communion at this church. At mine, anyone of any age can participate. Why is that?” Grass roots ecumenism is born from this curiosity, this prodding to find the familiar in the midst of difference. As members of the UMC and the ELCA, and people interested in nurturing this new relationship between our churches, you are invited to do some prodding of your own. Meet with your own congregational members, or invite ELCA/UMC members to join you. This booklet along with our web sites at www.elca.org/ecumenical and www.gccuic-umc.org are meant to launch you, and accompany you, while you ask both the “how” and “why” questions -- and allow others to ask you, “Why do you do that, and why does it matter?”

Not only is this booklet about best practices of ecumenical relationships, but models those practices in its structure: Begin with large topics, challenge current thinking, set up a paradigm shift, encourage personal story-telling, introduce specific examples to provide a sense of supportive infrastructure, then conclude with concrete behaviors to implement. Consequently, we begin much like the formal ecumenical dialogues, by discussing what ecumenism (or the quest for Christian unity) means to our two traditions, and then move on to clarifying our shared identity as baptized Christians. Each chapter concludes with a set of questions for personal reflection and/or discussion in order to both challenge old thinking and to encourage new. Take the time with these questions to stimulate memories and let images come to the surface. Telling and listening to stories of pine-scented Christmas services and flummoxed Sunday School teachers is a necessary step in processing new ideas and getting ready for new behaviors.

Next, the booklet moves to specific examples of members of the ELCA and UMC doing ecumenical work. In order for individuals and congregations to sustain new ecumenical practices (or indeed any kind of organizational change), they need to know that they have a support network. Not everyone wants to be a trail blazer. Finally, the booklet delineates best practices of building ecumenical relationships for the reader to apply. These are an amalgam of the best of ecumenical methodology and the best of organizational design theory, and can be applied in any ecumenical setting.

It is worthwhile to note that while the formal dialogue process between the UMC and the ELCA has brought us to the point of being able to produce this booklet, and for the churches to invite their members to join in the ecumenical conversation, for some of you, this may be an instance of the leaders finally catching up. Marriages between people of different faith traditions are more and more common. All of us are in relationships with people we love but disagree with. Our friends both comfort us and drive us crazy. The bottom line is that many of you already know how to build across boundaries, and how to keep those ties strong. The invitation for you, then, is to help the churches live what you manage to do at your kitchen table.

Living in a World of Differences

The extent to which the world is a complicated place can be trying. A simple yes or no, just tell me what to do, which box to check... a clear-cut choice would be a relief from time to time. But grown-up life isn't like that. The reality is things that seem to contradict one another can both be true. In fact, the heart of the Christian message is to give up our lives in order to save them. With such a profound complexity at our center, it should be no surprise that Christians understand and live this paradox in different ways.

There are in the United States alone 635 different denominations that identify themselves as Christian. [1] Beyond that, there are well over 9000 different denominations world-wide, all with faithful members trying to live good lives in response to the world in which we find ourselves. Religion that is lived in genuine love and response to God's call is on the right track no matter what the specific tradition. There is something in our genuine response from which all of us can learn.

Seeking Christian unity in this pluralistic world is not simple. ELCA and UMC theologies emphasize different ways of understanding sin and salvation, saints and sinners, or our calling from God into the world. Whenever our denominations promote themselves as the only way of salvation then we have missed an opportunity to become aware and even thrive where different opinions are present. The followers of Martin Luther and John Wesley are in fundamental agreement on the nature of being Christian, even if we present these with different emphases.

The differences within Christianity are a challenge to each of us. Often these differences have manifested themselves in divisions - lines drawn with competitors on either side. Each group believes itself to be a more correct manifestation of Christ's message than the other. Stepping away from a dichotomous ideology (us v. them) is difficult. Learning to hear the truth of the other, and allowing that truth to challenge our own understandings is hard, and can feel like disloyalty. But our sisters and brothers stand across that line.

Methodists and Lutherans come in different stripes. Our denominational names only begin to tell our particular stories. Not all Methodists belong to the UMC. The United Methodist Church itself is a worldwide denomination with members from different countries, cultures, languages, and ideas about what it means to live out a Christian life. Likewise, many Lutherans are not members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which is a young denomination born of mergers of Lutheran groups in the United States. The ELCA is a member of the Lutheran World Federation, a confederacy of many different Lutheran groups around the world, but the ELCA itself is rooted in North American history and culture.

Our expressions of faith cannot be homogeneous because we, the believers, are not. How we live Christianity is interwoven with our ethnic, lingual, and cultural identities. The challenge is to be able to distinguish what is at the core of Christianity from what is beloved and familiar to our cultures. Embracing diversity means that we question our own practices. This can be an unsettling experience, but it is a

And being found
in human form, he
humbled himself and
became obedient to
the point of death--
even death on a cross.
Philippians 2:7c-8

necessary starting point for letting new people into our lives. Ecumenism calls us to set aside our egos for the sake of the life of the Church. Ecumenism calls us to visible Christian unity that respects diversity.

Best Practice #1: Challenge your own perceptions

Think about and discuss the following:

What do you like most about your particular congregation or denomination? Tell about visiting another congregation – what was different that you liked?

Think about how your family celebrates Christmas and Easter. In what ways are those practices based in religious upbringing, ethnicity/culture, or your family's own tradition?

Why is it difficult to respect diversity when we seek unity in our lives?

Living As Christian Disciples

The Church is the body of Christ in the world. Baptism is incorporation into the Body of Christ, the point of entry for Christians into the Church. It is the ceremony and sacrament that marks our belonging to the Church, and in turn, the Church's obligation to support us in our attempt at living a Christian life. All Christians share this entrance in some form or another. Christians use water to symbolize death, life, cleansing, and readiness. But, what are we ready for? Just what does "living as Christian Disciples" mean in day-to-day life?

- First, as Christians we measure time differently than other people. Advent begins our year, four weeks before Christmas. We follow an annual cycle that plays out our story of faith, and follows Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and the early days of the Church. People of other religions follow a different story, and so have different points of celebration and remembrance.
- We measure the rhythm of the week differently. United Methodist and Evangelical Lutheran Christians start and shape our week by going to our local church on Sunday. There we touch base with the Body of Christ, the community into which we have been baptized, and by sharing in worship. By doing this, we are reminded that Christians aren't on the road alone.
- We look at the world differently. Through incorporation into the family of God, we are connected to everyone else who has ever been baptized, or ever will be baptized. We join a huge family in faith across time and geography. Because of this perspective, we pay attention to what's going on past the boundary of our own church's parking lot, and past the boundary of denomination. Both the UMC and the ELCA hold that the economic, political, and social well-being of others is now our concern because of our baptism. We care about clean drinking water, safe roads, air free from pollutants. We deliver food to refugees, serve as mentors to kids in need, provide a shoulder for a hurting friend, or give an umbrella to a stranger. We might even change how we drive. We are called to care because we are called by Christ to be signs of God's reconciliation on earth.
- We each have a role to play in the life of the Church. Christian discipleship asks that we use our gifts to help strengthen the Church. For a very few that means ordination into ministry. A strong Church is one that includes many voices, listens, learns, changes, and grows. This is tough work that many of us find uncomfortable. However, the role of change-maker is vital to any group that understands what it means to be driven by a sense of mission rather than the need to maintain a status quo.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.
Ephesians 4:4-6

Although we come from different Christian perspectives, we have all been adopted by grace and made a part of the community we call the church. By virtue of our incorporation into God's acts of salvation, we are called to a common shared experience of openness to one another. At the grocery store, with your next door neighbor, watching our kids at the playground, we have an opportunity to be open to one another. In our specific congregations we are also called to one another in a common baptismal heritage. It is important that we are open to one another; it is important to ask questions. We are all adopted as God's children, "and if a child then also an heir, through God."

Best Practices #2: Explore your own roots

Think about and discuss the following:

What does baptism mean to you? Share the story of your own or your child's baptism. Do you celebrate your baptism daily?

Have you ever compared notes with someone of another tradition about baptism or any particular church practice (e.g. weddings)? What did you learn?

Do you know of any church practice, idea, or tradition that your congregation doesn't do that you wish it did? Explain.

Living into an Ecumenical Future

A shared understanding of baptism is the beginning of our link across Christian denominations. We can start to live out our Christian lives together, but most of us stay within the confines of our own congregations. Each of us is proud of particular traditions and practices and we want to hold onto them. In fact, part of being a Christian is the responsibility to pass along the stories, traditions, and rituals of Christianity to the next generation. So how do we pass along a fuller picture of Christianity without leaving out something or creating an amorphous hodge-podge? This is where the idea of ‘reconciled diversity’ comes into play. Reconciled diversity is where we seek reconciliation but respect diverse traditions. We each tell our own stories, sing our own songs, and use our own imagery. We need to hear both ELCA and UMC voices (and the diversity within those traditions) to begin to get a clearer understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus together.

Living ecumenically requires that we think and act ecumenically. This is more than agreeing to take your turn at the local cooperative food bank. The fact of United Methodists and Evangelical Lutherans working shoulder-to-shoulder does not make the effort an ecumenical one. Proximity is not sufficient. It’s a vital start, but once we are in the same room together... then what? In the same room we see faces, learn names, and hear stories. The anonymous “them” becomes Fred, Alyssa, Yolanda, and Kwamie. We begin to get past what social scientists call the ecological fallacy; the mistake that assumes that what may be true for a group as a whole is also true for the individuals in the group. Not all members of the UMC or the ELCA are alike. In fact, often individual church members share more with people across denominations than they do with others within the same religious tradition.

The implications of this way of thinking, of living into an ecumenical Christianity, are just beginning to be seen. For members of First Lutheran Church and First United Methodist Church in urban Colorado Springs, living into ecumenical Christianity meant forming an alliance to bring mental health treatment to the homeless [www.ecusocmin.org]. For Norcross First United Methodist Church, John Wesley United Methodist Church, Mount Carmel United Methodist Church, and St. James Lutheran Church, outside of Atlanta, it meant joining efforts to make sure that families in crisis will have food, clothing, financial and job support [web: www.norcrosscoop.org]. For seven United Methodist congregations and three ELCA congregations of the Decatur/DeKalb area, having an ecumenical vision meant providing a safe haven for women and children [www.decaturooperativeministry.org]. These congregations chose to show unity. Living out an ecumenical awareness of what it means to be a member of the ELCA or the UMC allowed these congregations to roll up their sleeves, work together, and make significant impacts in the neighborhood.

For ELCA Trinity Lutheran Church and McMinnville UMC, in McMinnville, Oregon, living into an ecumenical partnership meant challenging old ways by seeking new forms of doing and being the body of Christ together [www.mac-coop.org/whoweare.php]. These communities developed a collective sense of congregational life, and since 2005 have worshipped and worked in McMinnville together. They are not restricted in their self-understanding to one way of being

Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.
John 17:11b

or witnessing. They have reached across denominational boundaries and by their example are telling the Christian story more fully.

For Evangelical Lutherans and United Methodists in McMinnville, working and worshiping together did not lead to merger. In the same way, the ELCA and the UMC do not lose their identities but gain in an ecumenical witness. Efforts at Christian unity should never take these concerns lightly. We understand our ELCA and UMC traditions to be helpful, truthful expressions of love and faith, where we are reconciled to one another in this life. It means that now we have more people with whom we share our story. We are not in competition for God's attention, to be the first to plant a church in a particular community, or to see who can convert the most members to "our" side. If we live into an ecumenical awareness of Christianity then it means we behave as though we really do believe that we are bound together across our denominations.

Best Practices #3 Exchange different perspectives

Think about and discuss the following:

How do you feel when the media pronounces a "Christian" perspective that you don't agree with, and you know is contrary to the stance of your denomination?

Where have you experienced local instances of Christian unity? Recount something about the faces, names and stories you've come to know in your Christian community.

How easy is it for the people in your congregation to discuss different points of view?

Living Our Christian Mission and Witness

Being a Christian is more than a Sunday activity and is something in which individuals form a community of faith. The UMC and ELCA understand Christian faith is a way of life that is to be lived in a larger context. Being Christian is not about belonging to a private club of like-minded people who get together on Sundays. Being Christian is about seeing the people of the world - all of the people-- as our brothers and sisters in Christ. United Methodists and Evangelical Lutherans share an awareness that we are called to be in service for others, and for the sake of the world.

Together with other Christian denominations, the ELCA and the UMC work together to address social and theological issues. As members together of the National Council of Churches USA, members of the two denominations work together on the Interfaith Commission, the Faith and Order Commission, and the Eco-Justice Task Force, among other committees. As member denominations of Church World Service, the ELCA and the UMC work together to assist communities responding to disasters, resettle refugees, promote fair national and international policies, and provide educational resources. Together the UMC and the ELCA has spoken up for peace in the Middle East, spoken out about global climate change, and spoken to God in prayer for Christian unity. Whether it be working together on the Special Commission for a Just Rebuilding of the Gulf Coast or addressing together the complex issues of immigration, our witness together is stronger than our witness alone.

Lutherans and United Methodists in the United States first met in 1977 to begin official dialogue. The first round of dialogues had produced a common statement between our churches on the Christian sacrament of Baptism, which affirmed the validity of baptism administered in accord with Scripture in our churches. A second round of dialogues concluded with a common statement on the role of bishops in each of our church bodies. The third round of dialogues, begun in 2001, developed a proposal for Interim Eucharistic Sharing between the two churches. In October of 2005, the dialogue team completed a statement of faith, "Confessing Our Faith Together," and produced a study guide to the statement. In partnership Evangelical Lutheran and United Methodist bishops in several annual conferences held study sessions and worship services celebrating this relationship. The 2008 General Conference of The United Methodist Church approved a resolution of full communion, which must be ratified by the ELCA church-wide assembly in 2009.

When people are hurting and lives have been turned upside down, the church responds. Disaster response is a job that requires the body of Christ to work together. The Lutheran Disaster Relief and the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) live this ecumenical cooperation out in very real ways.

In North Dakota, tornados have caused grave damage to the physical and emotional lives of residents. Northwood, ND was hit by an F4 tornado in August 2007. The damage was wide spread. Virtually every home was damaged. The school was eradicated. Church buildings were damaged. Help was needed.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body... *1 Corinthians 12:12-13a*

The Northwood Evangelical Church had an interim pastor who had only been there one month when the tornado hit. Although the United Methodist church is about 20 miles away, Rev. Mark Ellingson was in Northwood knocking on doors checking on residents within hours. Bonnie Turner, the Lutheran Disaster Relief director for North Dakota, arrived soon after. Together with other church people in the area the response and recovery work was in high gear. The Lutheran Disaster Relief and UMCOR worked closely together to coordinate the volunteer teams that were arriving to help.

For Christmas the same year, LDR and UMCOR put together Christmas totes for the disaster survivors. The Lutherans provided the tree and tree skirt and the United Methodists provided a plastic tote full of Christmas decorations, books, candles, a manger scene and letters from the United Methodist and Lutheran bishops. Survivors were invited to a Christmas party in early Advent to receive their Christmas totes. The party allowed people to check in with each other about six months after the disaster and make sure everyone was recovering. For their work together LDR and UMCOR received the 2007 Partnership Award by the National Organization of Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster.

Living our Christian mission ecumenically is certainly about building relationships between partner denominations or churches. Christian churches who seek unity are also a witness to the world. When the UMC and the ELCA actively work together as partners, brothers and sisters, the world sees a Christian witness. As Evangelical Lutherans and United Methodists we are claimed through Christ, gathered together in worship and faith, and sent into the world as witnesses to that faith. How we treat each other reflects our Christian mission and witness.

As ecumenical partners we make the most of our best efforts collectively. Agencies of the UMC and the ELCA learn to communicate cross-denominationally more effectively at all levels. Not only can local congregations carpool together to a CROP walk site, but also synods and conferences can share in state lobbying efforts over matters of common concern.

UMC and ELCA bishops, superintendents, and synod council members will meet together in order to construct a shared vision of how to reach out to the communities within our overlapping geographies. Working together makes sense. Christian mission and witness is our shared call.

Best Practices #4 Be aware of the larger context

Think about and discuss the following:

What do the terms “mission” and “witness” mean for you? How do these terms relate to the life of your congregation?

“As ecumenical partners we make the most of our best efforts collectively.” In what ways is this statement true.

What kind of programs does your synod or conference host? (e.g., leadership training, social ministry programs et. al.) How can these be shared with your Evangelical Lutheran or United Methodist friends?

Living In Relationship

Really living and working together is different than polite visitation. Most of us can manage to mind our manners and be considerate of others during joint choir concerts, prayer breakfasts, and our cooperative stints at the local clothing drive. However, when we move beyond episodic encounters and find ourselves up to our elbows in building new connections, we remember that relationships take hard work. Every family bond and friendship experience both difficult times and times for healing. Relationships within the Christian family can be particularly difficult because of inaccurate assumptions many people have about Christianity and ecumenism. Here are just a few of these inaccuracies:

1. Christians are nice people who do not have a history of disagreeing with one another over the centuries.
2. Ecumenism is a kind of watered-down 'live and let live,' where our confessions don't count for much.
3. Divisions have developed in order to protect true doctrine from false teaching.

In reality, Christians do have a long history of being kind to one another, but this by no means precludes disagreements. Dialogue toward greater awareness is the goal, rather than combative debate that results in division. Ecumenism is about celebrating both the unique in Christian self-understanding as well as what is shared in Christian community. Ecumenical relationships call us to challenge one another with what may be termed affirmation and admonition. That is, together we seek to affirm what is at the core of Christian claims to truth, and offer correctives where interpretations stray from the core of our Christian identity. Divisions without dialogue only divide. They act as walls. But honest differences encourage Christians to embrace distinctions without creating defensive perimeters.

Let's be honest. Real ecumenical relationships that last beyond the joint pot luck dinner with the congregation down the road will involve disagreements, frustrations and sometimes personality clashes. That's life. The tragedy is letting such difficulties become the catalyst to quit trying. The temptation to quit cheapens how we understand our unity by implying that brokenness is no match for the redeeming and sanctifying power of love and grace we know in Jesus Christ. Instead, let's enter new relationships equipped with the knowledge that there are best practices we can use and refine, and that we are up to the challenge of both.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God...
Ephesians 2:19

Best Practices of New Friendships

In any local context, the first stage in building UMC/ELCA relationships is to decide what we want to accomplish. If we are reaching out to new people to build personal relationships, then **best practices of new friendships** will serve well:

- Every person is a child of God. Always speak respectfully. One can disagree without being disagreeable.
- As you patiently listen and observe the behavior of others, be open to the possibility that God can change the views of any or all parties in the discussion.
- Listen patiently before formulating responses.
- Strive to understand the experience out of which others have arrived at their views.
- Be careful in how you express personal offense at differing opinions. Otherwise dialogue may be inhibited.
- Accurately reflect the views of others when speaking. This is especially important when you disagree with that position.
- Avoid using inflammatory words, derogatory names or an excited and angry voice.
- Avoid making generalizations about individuals and groups. Make your point with specific evidence and examples.
- Make use of facilitators, mediators and moderators where this will enhance conversation and awareness.
- Remember that people are defined, ultimately, by their relationship with God — not by the flaws we discover, or think we discover, in their views and actions.

Starting with these practices of respect and courtesy affirms the worth of the people involved as well as the growing bond itself, and signals that all are prepared to put in the effort that relationships require.

Best Practices of Effective Diverse Organizations

In attempting to build a joint ELCA/UMC committee or task group, **best practices of effective diverse organizations** should be the guide:

- Include many voices and opinions: Actively incorporating a variety of ideas into the conversation affirms the participants and requires being open to new perspectives. Using the best ideas of everyone also encourages more active and enthusiastic follow-through by group members.
- Assume that others have knowledge and resources that will enhance the success and longevity of the group.
- Be very clear about roles, deadlines, and accountability. Ambiguity in how things are to be done is one of the greatest stress factors for people in task groups. Establishing a clear framework of roles, time, and consequences allows people to move on to creative action with much less confusion and frustration.
- Practice effective communication skills: United Methodist and Evangelical Lutheran members share a common Christian vocabulary, but the experiences behind the words might be very different. Be certain to clarify even what seems to be obvious. Never assume.
- Effective communication also involves being savvy about the appropriateness of different methods. Telephone and snail mail are useful for important information that requires clarification and/or some measure of formality. Emails are fine for follow up, or setting an appointment, but avoid slang and humor. Jargon doesn't communicate well in the online environment, especially when you don't know the other person well. Texting abbreviations should be avoided unless you are actually friends with someone. That informal level of communication gives the impression that speed and convenience are more important than the content of the message -- not what you want to communicate in ecumenical relationships!
- Make sure that everyone involved can name and shares the same vision: Misaligned motivation can cloud and confound group action. All members may agree that the cause is important, but different motivators can cause people to function at cross purposes. Be very clear about why the group is being formed and what it is meant to accomplish. When everyone shares the same vision it is much easier to build momentum.
- Be aware that a sense of urgency is necessary for change to take place. If you are the only one who thinks the building is on fire, you'll fight it alone. Ecumenism is not a fire issue for many people because they believe that Christians have come to a live-and-let-live understanding. The bottom line is that the success of some earlier ecumenical efforts has changed this perspective. Much of the overt hostility and isolationism of the past centuries is gone. This leaves the more systemic and subtle obstacles of habit and history. The simple fact that the ELCA and UMC have not lived in close ecumenical relationship makes it difficult to do so now, even if we have permission. We need to work to build the habit of this new life together.

Four Best Practices of Faith Sharing

Remember **the four best practices of faith sharing**: (1) challenge your own perceptions, (2) explore your own roots, (3) exchange different perspectives, (4) be aware of the larger context. In light of these four best practices:

- Don't be afraid to ask questions especially to clarify vocabulary and compare notes.
- Be honest with yourself about your own faith life. Faith is at once fragile and resilient. If faith is alive, it changes and grows. Questioning and uncertainty reflect a growing, maturing faith.
- Remember you don't have to be a spokesperson for your denomination so you are free to not have to know everything about your tradition. Very few members of any tradition have theology degrees or substantial backgrounds in the field. More importantly, you are the only person who has had your particular experience, and your particular congregation is unique in precisely the same way. The personal and communal stories need to be shared, and here you are a guide.
- Be aware that events can be springboards for enduring collaborations. Build from one activity to another. Planning for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity can be followed by a rotation of "exchange worshipers" on a specific Sunday. Ask people to share their experiences, compare impressions. Likewise, listen to your visitors, involve them in a formal way in worship where possible.
- Recognize that conversations about religious identity can be threatening: All sorts of things are bound up in denominational affiliation - family traditions, a sense of belonging, ethnicity and culture, personal identity. People often choose where they go to church based upon how welcome they feel in that place. This means that we tend to bind ourselves to congregational groups. That's what makes it so difficult to talk about controversial topics at church. We don't want to rock the boat and offend anyone or jeopardize our own link with the group. Be gentle with others who appear hostile. They may feel threatened because they aren't quite sure just what it is that they believe, or how much in line they themselves are with their own denomination.

Ecumenical relationships don't happen without effort and commitment. Start with a simple invitation to build personal relationships. Pick up the phone and invite pastors, board members, women's groups, youth groups, or men's associations to meet together. Many ELCA/UMC congregations will find a counterpart for their ministry which make larger projects possible. Congregations might hold joint Vacation Bible School programs, cooperate on ongoing social ministry or even share personnel. Many opportunities arise when planning groups together broaden their imaginations.

Conclusion

In recent years, United Methodists and Evangelical Lutherans have come to know one another better. This isn't true everywhere, but opportunities arise wherever good will is present. Evangelical Lutherans and United Methodists are cousins more than strangers, not only because we see each other at the local coffee shop every morning, ride the same bus, work in the same building, and are parents of kids on the same soccer team but because we have been on the same journey of faith all along.

Best practices work for us when we are aware that our journey of faith is a shared one. There is a tremendous amount of good United Methodists and Evangelical Lutherans do, and will continue to do, together in the world. Your cousins in faith await you, and where they do not appear to be waiting, then the unexpected joy of meeting and sharing with one another is a gift to one another, and to visible Christian unity in the world.

[1] "World Christian Database, Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, <http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/about/denominationlist.asp> February 6, 2008.

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