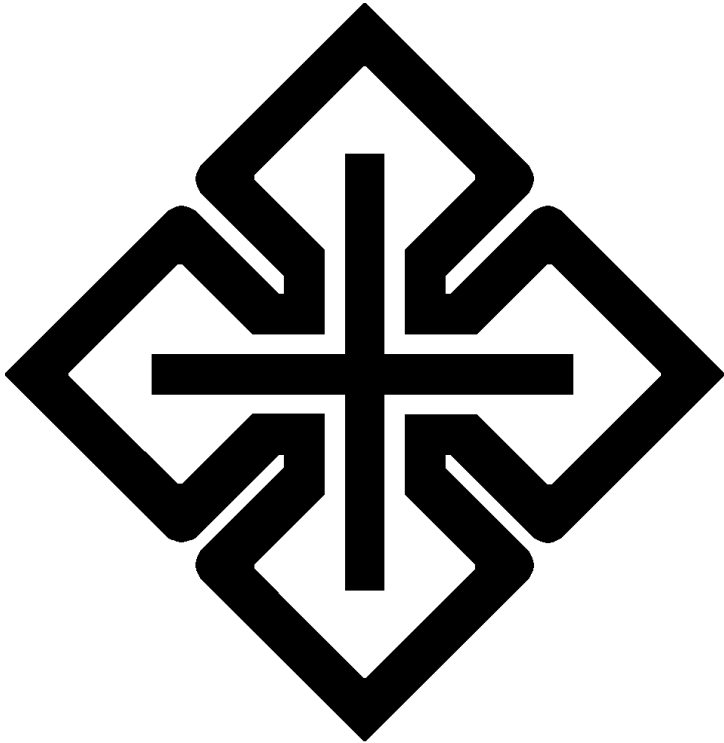


**Right Remembering in
Anabaptist-Lutheran Relations**



**Report of the
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America–
Mennonite Church USA Liaison Committee**

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INTRODUCTION

1. The process leading to this round of conversations of the Liaison Committee of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Mennonite Church USA (MCUSA) stretches back to informal conversations among denominational leaders since at least 1986. Subsequent resolutions adopted by two ELCA synods urging this church publicly to reject the invectives of Martin Luther and other Lutheran Reformers led the ELCA Church Council in April 1999 to direct the Department for Ecumenical Affairs to establish a liaison committee with the MCUSA.

2. In 2000-2001 the Mennonite Church appointed the Rev. Dr. Thomas N. Finger, Dr. James C. Juhnke, Dr. Gayle L. Gerber Koontz, and Dr. John D. Roth; the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America appointed the Rev. Dr. Janyce C. Jorgensen, the Rev. Russell L. Meyer, the Rev. Paul A. Schreck, and the Rev. Dr. David G. Truemper. The first meeting of the Liaison Committee was scheduled to begin September 13, 2001, but because of terrorist attacks that week was not convened until February 21-24, 2002, at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana, with subsequent meetings convened October 31-November 3, 2002, at the Lutheran Center in Chicago, Illinois, February 28-March 2, 2003 at Sarasota, Florida, October 16-19, 2003, at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas, and March 18-21, 2004, at Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, Indiana.

3. The Liaison Committee was charged with the task of reflecting upon ways to heal the memories of sixteenth century conflict, to examine the condemnations of Anabaptists found in the *Book of Concord* to determine if they apply to Mennonites today, to discuss baptism and church-state relationships, and to identify other theological issues that might divide these two church bodies.

4. A series of papers were prepared and discussed on the following topics: experiences of each church during the Lutheran Reformation; the experience of each church in the North American context; the role and authority of confessional writings; hermeneutics and biblical interpretation; Anabaptist and Lutheran understandings of the state; apostolicity, ecclesiology, and ministry; right remembering of the martyrs' tradition; Christians in the political realm; pacifism and the Gospel of peace; just war theory; baptism; catechism and the catechumenate; and affirmation of baptism (confirmation).

5. In addition to discussing these papers, meetings included visits to historical sites for first-hand experience of elements of each heritage, tours of congregations' social ministries, worship in each other's congregations, and an educational forum bringing together interested members of local Mennonite and Lutheran congregations to discuss the issues that separate the two church bodies and to interact with the members of this Liaison Committee.

6. These educational forums were a unique component for both Mennonites and Lutherans involved in inter-church conversations. Participants at these forums raised questions about the condemnations in the Lutheran confessions, expressed confusion about the divergent practices of baptism and holy communion, and conveyed a desire to cooperate more fully in social ministries. Many reported mutual participation in local ministerial associations and community worship services. In other instances, however, members of Mennonite and Lutheran congregations had never before met in spite of decades of active participation in their respective churches. There were requests for educational materials that could be used at future gatherings and expressions of appreciation for the divergent gifts each tradition could offer the other. One item raised at every forum was the strong desire for deepening levels of trust, respect, and cooperation among members of our two church bodies.

7. This common statement seeks to articulate in brief form a few of the significant insights that emerged from the conversation, and offers recommendations for consideration by each church body to further deepen this fledgling relationship.

RIGHT REMEMBERING

8. The Liaison Committee began with the stated goal of working toward the “Healing of Memories.” It became apparent in our first meeting that both churches would be better served by developing a deeper understanding expressed in the term “Right Remembering.” The limitation inherent in the concept of “healing memories” was that, as an end in itself, both churches ultimately could find satisfaction for the sins of the past without seeking to live as reconciled sisters and brothers in the future. Right remembering, however, provides an ongoing approach for examining potentially church-dividing issues within a framework of mutual respect and trust. It encourages more accurate understanding of each church’s history and teaching. In this sense, right remembering not only leads to the healing of painful memories but also contributes in an continuing way to a deepening relationship between our two church bodies.

9. Mennonite self-identity is so intimately connected with the remembrance of the Anabaptist martyrs of the sixteenth century (witness the presence of *The Martyrs’ Mirror*¹ in many Mennonite homes) that no significant conversation between Lutherans and Mennonites would be conceivable without addressing the implications of those memories. Nor is this merely an historical question, a matter of Mennonites recalling—and Lutherans admitting—that approximately one thousand Anabaptists were killed in lands governed by Lutheran princes in the sixteenth century. Rather, it also is a contemporary question: What does it mean for today’s Mennonites and Lutherans that there once was Anabaptist blood on Lutheran hands?

¹*The Martyrs’ Mirror* was first published in 1660 as a collection of martyr stories, beginning with Christ’s Apostles, naming confessors of Christ through the ages, and ending with stories of more than 800 Anabaptists martyred between 1524 and the early 17th century. The author intended to include only Anabaptists who gave testimony to biblical faith and held nonresistant principles. The second edition, published in 1685, included 104 illustrations and has been particularly prized by Mennonites through the centuries.

10. The following questions emerged (informally) for the Liaison Committee and received repeated attention in our discussions:

- I. What are the actual facts about these killings and Lutheran involvement in them? How shall we parse the question of the responsibility of present-day Lutherans for the actions of sixteenth-century princes? What connections exist between the condemnations of Anabaptists in the *Augsburg Confession* and the execution of Anabaptists in Lutheran lands in the sixteenth century?
- II. What consequences emerge for relationships between today's Mennonites and Lutherans if we remember rightly these relationships between our forebears in central Europe in the sixteenth century? Does the path to better mutual understanding and affirmation lead necessarily through sixteenth-century Europe? If so, how shall we proceed along that path?

11. Most Mennonites are aware at some level of their martyr heritage, but they remember that heritage in blurred and partial ways that make healing of memories very complex. Most Lutherans, however, are unaware of sixteenth century history, its condemnations and executions, but remember their own heritage as a persecuted and condemned, even outlawed, movement in ways that will make right remembering very complex indeed.

12. The temptation is strong on both sides to project contemporary norms and assumptions onto the sixteenth-century experience. Further, we repeatedly noted that many of our divergent theological perspectives have been shaped by our different historical locations in regard to political power.

13. Right remembering thus became a steady theme for the Liaison Committee. Mennonites pointed out the deep difference between the militant leaders of the “Kingdom of Münster” and the pacifism of earlier Anabaptists and of the subsequent movement under Menno Simons’ influence. Lutherans sought to make clear that the condemnations of Anabaptists in the *Augsburg Confession* were not motivated by a desire to eliminate “heretics” within Lutheran territories, but were due to pressures placed upon the Lutheran Reformers to

demonstrate their own catholicity demanded by the civil imperial laws of the day. Lutheran and Mennonite Liaison Committee participants struggled together to better understand the consequences of the law of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (the Code of Justinian), which prescribed the death penalty for people who either refused infant baptism or declared it to be invalid or wrong. It also was clear that at least some Lutheran princes attempted to avoid or curtail the prosecution of Anabaptists.

14. Since confessional statements function to inform our remembering and our sense of identity, the need became apparent to reflect on their role in our respective church bodies. Mennonites tend to be wary of confessional statements because these sometimes have been used by governments and churches in more powerful social positions (even at times by Mennonite leaders and groups) to critique, exclude, or condemn. Mennonites, however, have often written confessional statements to promote understanding and unity among themselves. Lutherans tend to place a high value on confessional statements, regarding in particular the documents in the *Book of Concord* as both a true witness to the Gospel (as that came to be understood in the Wittenberg Reformation in the sixteenth century), and as a reference point for the integrity and authenticity of Lutheran churches in subsequent centuries.

15. The question of contemporary response to sixteenth-century actions, however, remained unresolved. If the effect of martyr memories is to enforce a continuing separation of Mennonites from fellow Christians, is an adequate lesson learned from their sacrifice? If the effect of condemnations in the *Augsburg Confession* is that mistaken images of Anabaptists are perpetuated or violence against them justified, how can Lutherans understand that document to be a true witness to the Gospel? We were left with a complicated picture of a multilevel discussion that warrants continued conversation in order that right remembering may become a lens through which issues that continue to divide our two churches may be reconsidered. What follows is the attempt of the Liaison Committee to reflect upon baptism and the relationship between church and state through that lens.

BAPTISM

Points Of Agreement

16. Lutherans and Mennonites view baptism not only as a one-time event, but also as an ongoing process that plays a crucial role in the Christian life, both corporate and personal. For both, baptism is (1) a corporate act of the church, in which a congregation receives those who are baptized and commits itself to their ongoing nurture in the faith. Baptism is the sole sacrament or ordinance which initiates people into church membership.

17. For both denominations, (2) baptism's meaning is appropriated throughout the Christian life. Lutherans emphasize remembering one's baptism, dying and rising with Christ daily. Mennonites often mention three-fold baptism: baptism of the Holy Spirit precedes water baptism, and baptism of blood² follows it. The first and third, however, also are processes intertwined throughout the Christian life. Lutherans and Mennonites recognize the importance of nurturing mature, active, articulate Christians and churches in today's world.

18. For both Mennonites and Lutherans, (3) the baptismal act is performed with water and in the name of the Holy Trinity. For both, (4) faith is essential to baptism, and (5) baptism witnesses to salvation's origin in God's initiating grace.

19. Both traditions (6) baptize adult converts. Both utilize a formal period of preparation (known as the catechumenate for Lutherans and adult membership classes for Mennonites) to provide the candidates with instruction in the basics of Christian faith and life prior to baptism.

²For sixteenth-century Anabaptist-Mennonites, the baptism of blood often did include literal martyrdom or severe physical persecution. More broadly, it referred to what other traditions called "mortification," or the life-long process of putting to death behaviors and attitudes which oppose "vivification," or God's sanctifying bestowal of new life. Baptism of blood occurred inwardly, through repentance and renunciation; and outwardly, through both discipling in the congregation and social discrimination due to beliefs and practices.

Points of Divergence

20. For Lutherans baptism may, and most often does, mark the Christian journey's beginning in infancy or early childhood. In these cases, faith is exercised by the congregation and by the child, parents, and sponsors. The faith of those who are baptized continues to be nurtured through worship and learning, and through a period of formal learning (catechism) culminating in the Rite of Affirmation of Baptism (confirmation). Subsequent to confirmation the baptized are recognized as adult members of the congregation with the responsibility to participate in the decision making of the body. Other services for the renewal of baptism are used throughout the Christian life.

21. For Mennonites, infants and young children are welcomed into the church through dedication. The faith of parents, sponsors, and the congregation is exercised as they commit themselves to the nurture of these children. Children participate vitally in church life and salvation. Their growing faith is nurtured through worship, learning, ethical formation, and catechism. At the conclusion of catechism the church may confirm a request for baptism. Subsequent to baptism believers are recognized as members of the congregation with responsibilities for the life and mission of the church.

22. Additional differences may be linked to the respective understandings of human nature, faith, and the nature and purpose of the church. As noted in the above agreements, both church bodies affirm God's sovereign initiative in salvation, and also active human response. Lutherans, however, tend to prioritize the first, and to fear that Mennonite baptism, with its stress on voluntary response, might obscure this. Mennonites tend to prioritize the second, and fear that Lutheran infant baptism might obscure the active appropriation of grace and the importance of discipleship. It is not clear to what extent these differences are simply ones of emphasis, and to what extent they might be shaped by different anthropologies and/or ecclesiologies.

CHURCH AND STATE

23. Questions regarding the church and its witness to the world, the relationship of church and state, and the gospel of peace go to the root of our shared denominational histories during the early years of the Protestant Reformation. The Anabaptist-Mennonite commitment to voluntary membership in a church separated from a fallen world, and their general refusal to wield the sword or swear fealty oaths seemed to threaten the very fabric of European society. On the other hand, Lutherans did not seek to reform the existing medieval church-state relationship and often resorted to torture and execution of people who presented perceived and actual threats to social authority. These historical circumstances shaped our divergent understandings of the relationship of church and state, the role of Christians in preserving unity within the church and order within society, and the use of coercion based on lethal force. Mennonites today reject the violent apocalyptic predictions associated with some parts of the earliest Anabaptist movement, to which Lutherans of that day responded harshly. Lutherans today reject the violence inflicted on sixteenth-century Anabaptists.

Points of Agreement

24. Lutherans and Mennonites understand the church to be the messenger of the Kingdom of God in the world, clearly differentiated from the state and the broader society. Because we confess that Jesus Christ has been exalted as Lord of lords (Eph. 3:10), we acknowledge his ultimate authority over all human authorities (Eph. 1:20-23). The church therefore needs to maintain a critical stance in relation to the state in order to fulfill its prophetic witness and service in the world. As Christians, however, Lutherans and Mennonites acknowledge the legitimate, divinely sanctioned, role of the state to preserve order; we

are to respect those in authority and to pray for all people, including those in government (Rom. 16:6ff; 1 Tim. 2:1ff), even in those times when we must obey God rather than human authority (Acts 5:29).

25. Both churches teach that Jesus taught love for one's enemies; he reached out to the oppressed, downtrodden, and rejected of the earth; he prayed for his enemies even while being rejected on the cross. God has redeemed the world through Jesus' death ("for... while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son" [Rom. 5:10]). We bear witness to this free gift of God's forgiveness and grace when we extend that same love to others, especially to our enemies.

26. Lutherans and Mennonites recognize that we are inextricably woven into, and beneficiaries of, modern culture and society. Neither tradition proposes an isolationist relation between church and the world. Both traditions understand the deeply communal nature of human life and seek, in their divergent ways, to nurture communal practices that both reflect and represent the Gospel to the wider world. We embrace the biblical concepts of the church being an "already but not yet" sign of the reign of God, which includes "being leaven" in the world.

27. Although Mennonites have historically embraced Christian pacifism and Lutherans a just war theory, we share in an "unequivocal rejection of nuclear war."³

Points of Divergence

28. Mennonites regard participation in war and coercion based upon the use of lethal force as incompatible with the teachings of Jesus and therefore precluded for Christians. Lutherans also renounce a Christian's exercise of coercion based upon the use of lethal force in personal life, but further hold that Christians who serve in public offices or roles have ethical obligations for preserving order and may at times exercise lethal force justly and impartially.

³See "For Peace in God's World," a social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America adopted by its 1995 Churchwide Assembly. See also J. D. Roth, *Choosing Against War: A Christian View* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2002).

29. Lutherans and Mennonites use the metaphor of “two kingdoms” in very different ways. Lutherans use this metaphor to describe how Law and Gospel are experienced in the “Right Hand” (Gospel) and “Left Hand” (Law) work of God. They understand these polarities to pervade human society, both within the church and the state. Lutherans hold that a Christian can, in good conscience, serve the will of God in using lethal force when upholding the Law through the power of the state. Mennonites, when they speak of the two Kingdoms, more often associate the Kingdom of God with the church in distinction from the Kingdom of this world. While Mennonites cannot in good conscience exercise coercion based upon the use of lethal force they do ask the state to act according to higher values or to standards which, while less than what God expects of the church, may bring the state closer to doing the will of God.

RECOMMENDATIONS

30. The Liaison Committee of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Mennonite Church USA affirm the prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17 that his followers might all be one. Divisions in the church of Christ are not new; some even are recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. In the first century, however, divisions were considered abnormal and contrary to God’s will. In this twenty-first century divisions among Christians too often are considered normal and therefore go unquestioned and unhealed. The Liaison Committee witnessed time and again the ways in which the division between our two church bodies is a wound in the Body of Christ, and urge continued efforts toward healing. Specifically, we recommend:

A. that one representative of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and one representative of the Mennonite Church USA be appointed as a delegation from the United States to participate with delegations from Germany and France, coordinated by the Lutheran World Federation and the Mennonite World Conference, in a formal review of the sixteenth-century condemnations contained in the *Book of Concord* to determine if they still apply;

B. that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America request that the Lutheran World Federation, in consultation with the Mennonite World Conference, prepare a document that describes the hermeneutic for interpreting the historically-limited portions of the *Book of Concord* (such as fealty sworn to the emperor) that permits Lutherans to understand those confessional writings as “true witness[es] to the Gospel” and “further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church”;

C. that the ELCA Church Council adopt as a message of that church “Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Churches of the Anabaptist Tradition” attached as Appendix A;

D. that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Mennonite Church USA authorize continuing conversation on the divergent practices of baptism and confirmation identified in this common statement to determine whether they can be understood to be complementary. Additional topics worthy of consideration would include: the Lord's Supper, human nature, the relationship of church and state, the nature of faith, and ecclesiology;

E. that the use of educational forums in joint congregational settings be commended as an invaluable and formative model for future dialogues;

F. that appropriate staff members from each church body identify existing worship resources and collaborate in the preparation of new materials that may be used in joint settings;

G. that the Mennonite Church USA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America identify existing material and authorize the development of educational resources on right remembering of the persecution of martyrs in the sixteenth century, peace and justice issues, and other topics to be used in ongoing Mennonite-Lutheran educational forums sponsored by local congregations;

H. that specific Mennonite and Lutheran congregations be identified to serve as "pilot sites" to assist in the development and refinement of these study resources;

I. that congregations of the Mennonite Church USA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America be encouraged to develop joint social ministries to the communities they serve;

J. that the educational institutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Mennonite Church USA initiate faculty- and student-exchange opportunities so that each church body may learn first-hand from the another; and

K. that an official reception, symposium, or service of thanksgiving be convened to receive and discuss this common statement, its implications, and ways to implement these recommendations.

APPENDIX A

Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Churches of the Anabaptist Tradition

INTRODUCTION

During the sixteenth-century reformation in Central Europe, a variety of statements and pronouncements were made by representatives of the churches of the *Augsburg Confession* regarding the people called “Anabaptists.” In our own century, these statements and pronouncements have become highly problematic, not only for our relationships with the contemporary successors of those Anabaptists but also for our own self-understanding as members of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Particularly in the light of dialogues between Lutherans and Mennonites in Europe in the latter decades of the twentieth century, and in the light of our current exploratory conversations between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Mennonite Church USA (MCUSA), it is desirable to clarify those sixteenth-century statements, and it is necessary in most cases to repudiate them.

THE RECORD

The anti-Anabaptist statements made by Lutherans in the sixteenth century fall into several categories, with very different levels of authority for present-day Lutherans.

- Some are nothing more than the personal judgments of individual persons; however, because leaders like Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon are among those involved, many contemporary Lutherans and Mennonites may regard those statements as having a particular authority or influence. Such statements not only hereticize the Anabaptists of their day but also call upon the state to use its power to extirpate the heresy.

- A second group of statements appear in documents that attempted to resolve disputes among Lutherans, such as the *Formula of Concord* of 1577, where the signatories agree (FC SD XII) that the power of the state should be used to eradicate Anabaptist teachings from Lutheran territories. These statements are particularly problematic, because they suppose that secular authority ought be used to resolve religious differences—a position especially dangerous in the light of much popular discourse since the terrorist attacks in September of 2001.
- A third group of statements appear in the *Augsburg Confession* (V, VIII, IX, XII, XVI, XVII, XXVII), where sixteenth-century Anabaptists are singled out as the only contemporary group to be formally condemned in that confession and to be declared beyond the pale of the holy catholic Church. In the light of historical research and recent dialogue, it has become clear that most of these condemnations are in fact based upon erroneous judgments about what sixteenth-century Anabaptists believed and practiced. For the sake of the truth, it is important to repudiate such erroneous condemnations.
- At least two of those condemnations in the *Augsburg Confession* (IX, XVI), however, point to serious and abiding differences of teaching and practice between our two churches, and we would be true to neither tradition if we were to disregard these condemnations or to repudiate them. These have to do with the theology and practice of baptism, and with the propriety of Christian participation in the exercise of the police or military power of the government. The only way forward in these areas is to engage in open and forthright dialogue, in order to ascertain whether the differences to which they point are to be regarded as church-dividing or not.
- One additional consideration is important. In the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (the “government” of reformation Germany) it was the inherited law of the empire that anyone who repudiated the validity of infant baptism or insisted on re-baptism was guilty of a capital offense.

Accordingly, as the Anabaptist movement gained ground in Germany in the decades following 1525, various groups denounced as Anabaptists were in fact executed for a capital crime. It was an easy move for the drafters of the *Augsburg Confession* to repudiate the capital crimes of the Anabaptists as they sought to establish that the princes and city councils who submitted the *Augsburg Confession* were still catholic Christians. Since this point of imperial law is no longer at issue for today's Lutherans and Mennonites, Lutherans need to make a clear statement about how our differences in faith and practice shall be regarded and addressed.

OUR DECLARATION

- The ELCA repudiates any notion that would call upon the secular authorities to become involved in any way in the discussion and resolution of religious differences. We repudiate the comments of Luther and Melanchthon that called upon the state to punish Anabaptists. This includes our repudiation of the statements in the *Formula of Concord* to the same effect. The modern state is in no way to be made the instrument of any church in the matter of the resolution of differences in belief and practice.
- The ELCA declares that five of the seven condemnations of Anabaptists in the *Augsburg Confession* (v, IX, XII, XVII, XXVII) were either based on erroneous and mistaken judgments by the confessors or involved erroneous generalizations from some Anabaptists to all persons implied by that label; in both cases these condemnations are to be regarded as null and void as far as any application to today's Mennonites is concerned.
- The *Augsburg Confession's* condemnations of the Anabaptists in the matter of baptismal faith and practice (CA IX) and participation in the police power of the state (CA XVI) are properly the subject of free and open dialogue between our churches. We repudiate any call for the exercise

of the authority of the state in regard to the Mennonite Church in these matters, and we earnestly desire to ascertain, in free and open dialogue, whether the differences that remain between our two churches in these matters are in fact church-dividing. We have learned from our European sisters and brothers that it has indeed been possible for the Lutheran churches of France and Germany to adopt statements declaring these condemnations not to be church-dividing, and declaring further that these condemnations do not apply to today's Mennonites. We earnestly desire the dialogue requisite to coming to a similar conclusion.

APPENDIX B

Papers Prepared by Members of the Liaison Committee

Delivered at Goshen College, February 21-24, 2002

Finger, Thomas N., “Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist-Mennonite Tradition.”

Juhnke, James C., “Mennonite History in North America: Some Reflections for Dialogue with Lutherans.”

Jorgensen, Janyce C., “Characteristics of North American Lutheranism.”

Meyer, Russell L., “Turning Point: A Reflection on the Impact of the Peasant’s Revolt of 1525.”

Roth, John D., “A Historical Context for Anabaptist-Lutheran Conversation.”

Roth, John D., “Community as Conversation: A New Model of Anabaptist Hermeneutics.”

Truemper, David G., “The Role and Authority of the Lutheran Confessional Writings: Do Lutherans Really ‘Condemn the Anabaptists’?”

Delivered at Chicago, October 31-November 3, 2002

Finger, Thomas N., “Romans 5: Some Thoughts on Mennonite Biblical Interpretation.”

Jorgensen, Janyce C., “Study of Lutheran Hermeneutics”

Koontz, Gayle L. Gerber, “Apostolicity, Ecclesiology and Ministry: An Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspective.”

Meyer, Russell L., “Ministry: A Shared Apostolic Inheritance.”

Roth, John D., “Historical Overview of Anabaptist Understandings of the State.”

Delivered at Sarasota, Florida, February 28-March 2, 2003

Juhnke, James C., “Rightly Remembering a Martyr Heritage.”

Truemper, David G., “Keeping the Good News Good: Lutheran Reflections on ‘the Gospel of Peace.’”

Delivered at Bethel College, October 16-19, 2003

Finger, Thomas N., “A Mennonite Perspective on Baptism.”

Jorgensen, Janyce C., “A Catechism on the Catechumenate.”

Roth, John D., “Where Are We? How Might We Move Forward?”

