

Two religions, one goal — unity
Catholic and Lutheran bishops reaffirm covenant

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WINSTON-SALEM — Catholics and Lutherans of North Carolina recently took another step forward together.

Bishop Peter J. Jugis joined with Bishop Michael F. Burbidge of Raleigh and Bishop Leonard H. Bolick of the North Carolina Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church to re-affirm a covenant of unity, which was first set forth 16 years ago.

The three bishops signed the covenant during a formal ceremony at the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Epiphany in Winston-Salem Dec. 2.

Bishop Jugis had met with both bishops over the past few years to discuss their call to unity and looked forward to the signing.

“I have been bishop for four years now and have been waiting for this day since my ordination,” he said.

The covenant was created with the purpose of bonding Catholics and Lutherans in North Carolina in the spirit of ecumenism and cooperation. Then-Bishop John F. Donoghue of Charlotte, then-Bishop F. Joseph Gossman of Raleigh and Lutheran Bishop Michael McDaniel first signed the covenant on Pentecost Sunday, 1991.

At the time, the covenant was the third agreement of its kind in the United States between church officials on the diocesan/synodical level.

The covenant’s foundation rests on the shared Gospel beliefs that the Lord desires unity for his followers; that “we all may be one,” as stated in the document.

It outlined 16 objectives designed to encourage closer dialogue, cooperative ecumenical efforts and ministries between Lutherans and Catholics at the local and diocesan/synodical levels.

These objectives include praying for each other; praying together in joint services on the diocesan/synodical and local levels; observing together such occasions as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Jan. 18-25), which will celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2008; the World Day of Prayer; and Lenten devotions.

Other items encourage learning more about each other for better understanding and cooperation and the establishment of the ecumenical committee.

A reading of the two-page covenant document was part of the Dec. 2 ceremony. It states six points of affirmation, and begins “that inasmuch as all unity comes from the unity of

the Triune God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” and continues “we are called to make that given unity more visible among us.”

Approximately 50 people attended the affirmation ceremony.

“We are honored to host this gathering,” said Rev. Stephen Gerhard, pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Epiphany.

“This is a remarkable statement in the unity of the church and an expression that would please our Lord,” he said.

The ceremony included songs of welcome, thanksgiving and praise, psalms, Gospel readings and a homily by Father George Kloster, a member of the covenant committee since its inception.

Father Kloster is currently pastor of St. William Catholic Church in Murphy and Immaculate Heart of Mary Mission in Hayesville.

“Authentic ecumenism is very, very demanding,” said Father Kloster during the ceremony.

Spirit of ecumenism

Before the covenant, the two Catholic bishops and the Lutheran bishop in North Carolina shared a personal relationship, according to Father Kloster. They would meet twice a year for prayer, he said.

In the spirit of ecumenism and an awareness of numerous theological works published in the 1970s by Catholic and Lutheran officials, the idea of a covenant came into being. Bishop McDaniel was the main drafter of the document with input from Bishops Donoghue and Gossman.

The covenant was read one year prior to its signing. But, consensus among the bishops was to circulate the information around the state to increase awareness so the signing itself would include more involvement.

“We wanted to get as much input into the wording and we wanted others to be aware of the covenant ... and to let it begin with the parishes in preparation of the actual signing,” said Bishop Donoghue in a 1991 interview.

The “original vision of the covenant is still to be fulfilled,” said Father Kloster.

“I’m not so sure what unity will look like,” he said, but we must continue to be motivated and “never give up.”

“Ecumenism is the task of the church in the sense that Jesus prayed that we all might be one,” said Rev. Jim Lockley, pastor of Alamance Lutheran Church in Alamance and a member of the covenant committee for the past 12 years.

“Unfortunately ecumenism moves with glacial speed, but that is very characteristic of the church,” he said.

Accomplishments that have been made toward unity within the state include meetings between Catholic and Lutheran social services, media personnel and youth directors. Several joint youth conferences have been of particular success, according to Father Kloster.

The covenant also gave rise to the Luther-Aquinas Conference at Lenoir Rhyne College in Hickory, which just held its 16th installment this year, according to Rev. C. Pierson Shaw, Jr., the current ecumenical representative of the N.C. Synod who took part in the affirmation ceremony.

The covenant’s greatest accomplishment, according to Rev. Shaw, has been the establishment of local covenants throughout the state.

In Hickory, for example, local covenants have been drawn between St. Aloysius Catholic Church and Holy Trinity, St. Andrews and Mount Olive Lutheran churches. Other locations where local covenants have been drawn include Newton, Greenville and Winston-Salem.

The covenant was reaffirmed on its 10-year anniversary in 2001 by the three bishops at that time — Bishop William G. Curlin of Charlotte, Bishop Gossman and Bishop Bolick.

Rev. Shaw said it was important to acknowledge that members of both religions have studied together and discussed important works on ecumenism, including the Joint Declaration on the Document of Justification, an international statement formulated by some of the churches’ highest leaders; and “A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism” by Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Cardinal Kasper was one of the signers of the Joint Declaration on the Document of Justification in Augsburg, Germany in 1999 after several decades of Catholic-Lutheran dialogue.

The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity has its origins in a decree from the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s under Pope John XXIII that set into motion a shift toward ecumenism in the Catholic Church.

This opened the door to new insights into the study of justification and former differences in theology between the Catholic and Lutheran churches.

One of the key issues that led to the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century was a differing interpretation and application of the biblical message of justification, particularly the relation between faith and acts of good work.

Doctrinal condemnations were imprinted in the Council of Trent and in the Lutheran Confessionals. After the Second Vatican Council, relations have improved.

Hope for success

During the affirmation ceremony, the bishops expressed enthusiasm about fulfilling the covenant.

“Jesus Christ is the cornerstone, the foundation and the one who holds us up and sustains us forever,” said Bishop Burbidge. “That is the heart of the covenant ... to build up the body of Christ.”

“We’re going to share the two most important opportunities on earth, talking and listening to God,” said Bishop Bolick.

“We have more work to do ... and will be continuing ongoing dialogue and theological discussions,” said Bishop Jugis.

It “gives us hope that such progress toward full unity is possible,” he said.