

# **Bishop Madden praises Lutheran-Catholic relations during Reformation program**

WASHINGTON — Bishop Denis J. Madden of Baltimore offered an upbeat assessment that Catholic-Lutheran understanding in the United States is stronger than it has ever been and expressed hope that both churches will become closer after future dialogues.

Speaking during an interfaith program Oct. 31 near Capitol Hill marking the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, Bishop Madden said the task to achieve full unity will require hard work and will only come through the grace of God.

“I think the future is filled with hope and with opportunity. We must take full advantage of the opportunity we have before us,” said Bishop Madden, a retired auxiliary bishop who now serves as urban vicar for the Archdiocese of Baltimore. He spoke during a 25-minute discussion at the Lutheran Church of the Reformation with Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

“People are really hungering for sharing the Eucharist together,” said Bishop Madden, co-chairman of the U.S. Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue.

Bishop Madden said the positive discussions among the once-bitter faith communities serve as an example of what can happen when hearts and minds are open to God’s wishes for the faithful.

Bishop Eaton cited how the discussions have borne greater understanding, appreciation and love. The dialogue began in 1965, following the Second Vatican Council, among officials from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and what is now the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

Representatives of both churches adopted “Declaration on the Way: Church,

Ministry and Eucharist” in 2015 in advance of the Reformation’s milestone anniversary. The 120-page document was inspired by a December 2011 speech by Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and draws on the work of national and international Catholic-Lutheran dialogues for more than 50 years.

The document’s Statement of Agreements lies at its heart. It offers 32 consensus statements on church, ministry and the Eucharist, all areas in which Catholics and Lutherans already have said there are not church-dividing differences between them.

Fifteen other areas remain to be discussed, among them the ordination of women.

“We’ve decided we’re not going to go back and keep rehashing this, but we’re going to start from the point that there’s more that unites us than separates us,” said Bishop Eaton, who oversees 3.7 million members in 9,300 U.S. congregations.

“These are very important issues of how we understand ourselves as churches together and people of God in the world, we have complete agreement on these issues,” Bishop Eaton told the audience of about 300.

The collaboration, respect and even reverence for the beliefs among the participants in the U.S. dialogue is a sign of the Holy Spirit at work, Bishop Madden said, noting, “If you don’t have a reverence for the person’s belief, then you don’t have dialogue.”

The day’s program also focused on reconciliation and included segments on Lutheran-Jewish and Lutheran-Muslim relations and racial justice. A Litany of Confession asked for forgiveness for the Martin Luther’s anti-Jewish writings and the appropriation of his words by modern anti-Semites.

Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in Washington, thanked the congregation for the prayer and said the work of religious leaders to ferret out discrimination and religious hatred is more important than ever in U.S. history.

He praised ELCA’s 1994 Declaration to the Jewish People that rejected Luther’s tirades and the violence he recommended be exercised against the Jews, and

expressed sorrow over its appalling effects on subsequent generations including victims of the Holocaust.

Today, Rabbi Pesner continued, Lutherans, Jews and all people of faith must unite to promote “values of inclusive pluralism” to overcome rising discrimination against immigrants, refugees, people of color, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

In another segment, a Lutheran minister and a Muslim doctor in rural Minnesota discussed how they have worked to overcome anti-Muslim bigotry.

The Rev. Amanda France, pastor of Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in Bird Island, Minnesota, and Dr. Ayaz Virji, who runs a medical practice in Dawson, Minnesota, explained how they have visited churches and community groups in response to misperceptions about the Islamic faith being a religion of violence and hatred.

Rev. France said she has been accosted by people for working with Virji and that both had received hate-filled messages and death threats.

“As a Christian leader that has befriended a Muslim family, I was personally attacked by a clergy in the area regarding my faith in Jesus Christ,” she said. “They questioned my ability to be a pastor in a church, and publicly humiliated me on more than one occasion. But we persisted because we are called to respond when there is injustice.”

Virji, a graduate of the Georgetown University School of Medicine, acknowledged receiving threats and angry messages.

Pointing to the rise in anti-Muslim and hate incidents since the 2016 election, Virji said he welcomed the chance to teach people about Islam. His religion is not one guided by violence and hate, he said, and organizations such as the Islamic State, al-Qaida and the Taliban are “no more representative of Islam than Dylann Roof represents Christianity.”

Roof, an admitted self-styled supremacist, was convicted of killing nine African-Americans and injuring another during a church Bible study program June 17, 2015 in Charleston, South Carolina, in what he said was an attempt to start a race war.

He is serving a life term in prison.

A Lutheran bishop and the presiding bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church followed the pastor and the doctor, and pledged to work to eliminate the simmering racism that exists in many Christian worship communities.

Bishop W. Darin Moore, the presiding bishop, and Bishop William J. Gohl Jr., of ELCA's Delaware-Maryland Synod, called on the people of faith to reach out to others to combat racism.

"White folks have to hold one another responsible and challenge one another," Bishop Gohl said. "Waiting for people of color to teach us about our racism is not an effective or faithful strategy."

Bishop Moore urged the gathering to put energy into confronting widespread symptoms of racism including poor public education, the lack of economic development in minority communities and the criminal justice system that imposes harsher prison sentences for minority men and women than for whites.

Such work must begin in the neighborhoods in which people live, he said.

"Imagine how impactful it would be," Bishop Moore said, "if more of our members would make the drive across town to build meaningful relationships with one another with the same zeal as we make our mission trips around the world to build new churches."

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