

Two decades after the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

Five Christian World Communities in Consultation

Heike Vesper

Last October 31, 2019, marked twenty years since the signing of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)* in the evangelical church of Saint Anne in Augsburg, Germany. It was a solemn act signed by the then presidents of the Lutheran World Federation, Dr. Christian Krause, and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Cardinal Edward Cassidy.

Gathering the fruits of several decades of theological dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics, the *JDDJ* wonderfully resolved one of the principal conflicts that had led to mutual excommunications at the time of the Reformation. It is both interesting and significant that since then, three other Christian World Families adhered to the *Declaration*: The World Methodist Council (WMC), the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) and the Anglican Communion. Thus, there is now a fundamental theological document held in common by five global Christian Families. But that's not all. The *JDDJ* allows us to jointly proclaim our core belief in the triune God and the grace of salvation in and through Jesus Christ, even if various forms and expressions remain within each Church according to their own traditions.

To ensure the *JDDJ* will continue as more than just a historical document, representatives of the five world Communities came together in March 2019 for a consultation at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana (USA). It was a first step in seeing how relations between them had developed, how to make their friendship and mutual trust more visible, and what a message of reconciliation between Christians can offer to a divided world. Thus, a journey together towards deeper ecclesial communion and a more visible witness of collaboration began, one that encompasses and goes beyond initiatives for social action. In fact, among the meeting topics were mutual recognition of ministries; cooperation in pastoral ministry; catechetical tools; and deepening the bond of common baptism. Rather than a focus on past, present, and future divisions, there is the desire to give priority to traveling along a path of consensus in the basic truths, as found in the *Joint Declaration*, while allowing for legitimate differences in confessional expression.

Participants also upheld the first of the ecumenical imperatives agreed to by Pope Francis and Lutheran Bishop Yvan on 31 October 2016 in Lund (Sweden) during the 500th anniversary commemoration of the Protestant Reformation: namely, to always start from the perspective of unity rather than division. In fact, the Consultation's concluding, public panel discussion was called, *From Conflict to Communion: The Future of Christians Together in the World*, a title that proved deeply meaningful in this regard.