Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference in Hamburg

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'A Changing Church in an Age of Migration'

'Meissen and Augsburg Agreements : Towards Full Anglican-Lutheran Communion?'

A presentation made online
by the Rev Stefanie Reuther
which is recorded here
by Canon Dick Lewis, our Society's Secretary,
from the notes he made. He apologises if he has misunderstood or misrepresented anything

Stefanie Reuther began: As a Bavarian Pastor I am part of the Augsburg Agreement so, in theory at least, I am in full communion with an Anglican Church, whereas in the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD) as Secretary for North and Central Europe, and as Secretary of Meissen, I am not in full communion with the Church of England!

Introduction

The question mark at the end of my title, 'Towards Full Anglican-Lutheran Communion?', is really the point. The Meissen Document, "On the Way to Visible Unity", was established in 1988 and then reviewed in 1991. The Augsburg Agreement, "Sharing the Gifts of Communion", is much more recent having been signed on the Eve of Pentecost, 2025.

I want to talk about my perspectives on the two agreements. As a Bavarian Pastor, I have participated in the Augsburg Agreement in different ways, but my main experience with the Church of England was when I actually worked from 2009-2012 on the 'ticket' of the Meissen Agreement for three years in the Diocese of Hereford, in a Team Ministry where we looked after 24 country parishes together. It was very interesting to work as a Lutheran Pastor in the Church of England and to put the Meissen theory into practice.

Now, as Secretary of the Meissen Commission and the Theological Conference, I am responsible for dialogue with the Church of England. The Conference meets again in two weeks' time in Rochester where our British friends are responsible for the programme.

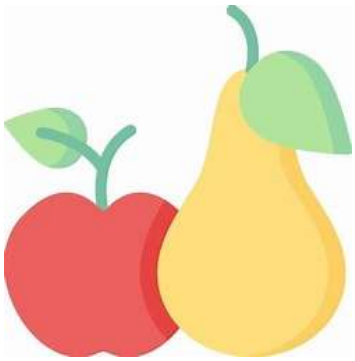
Meissen and Augsburg

When you hear the names Meissen and Augsburg it is very natural to reflect on them and to compare them because both belong in the history of Anglican and Lutheran ecumenism. They both speak about mutual recognition and about a closer relationship between Churches. Both face the question of common communion but, before we look at that question theologically, I would like to consider the context of the two agreements and what they set out to achieve.

You will all understand that on one side of the Meissen Agreement stands the Church of England while on the other side we don't only have Lutherans because the EKD is made up of 20 Churches, a large and confessionally diverse constituency. In Augsburg, in contrast, we have a relationship between two

specific Churches, The Episcopal Church, USA, on the one side and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria on the other,

There is a second difference: Augsburg tells the story of a relationship that had already grown over several decades – shared prayer, shared worship, shared work. The agreement, therefore, does not begin the relationship – it marks the next step in a relationship that has already been lived in practice.



So, in a way, we are comparing apples and pears, a very common saying in German, and if you compare Meissen and Augsburg you find the goals formulated somewhat differently. Meissen says the goal is 'To move together towards wholeness in unity.' In Augsburg, it is to 'Enter into a relationship of full communion.' These two ideas are related, but they are not two versions of the same process. So, whilst we can compare the two, we must not simply equate them structurally.

Meissen

Meissen begins with a question: 'How can Churches recognise one another as Churches with all their respective differences and move together towards full visible unity?' That question has gone on being asked for decades now. The Meissen Common Statement is remarkably concrete in describing this journey at the beginning. It does not remain at the level of theological discussions and declarations. It was 1988, and remember that was before the wall came down and reunification of Germany. Then in 1991 it talks among many other things about continuing worship and partnerships on many different levels, exchanges of clergy, theological work on common structures of oversight and a common Eucharistic practice.

If you look at Meissen simply from the point of view of what remains unsolved you might say, 'Well, it's not completely worked yet!' And, believe me, there have been many Commission and Conference meetings where we've reached just that conclusion! But it wouldn't be fair just to stop there because the essential point with Meissen is that it is a journey, and was intended as such right from the beginning. And that journey continues, even though those questions have not been resolved,

Meissen achieved something very significant. It committed the Churches to walking that journey together and it provided a concrete framework for doing so. That framework consists of the Meissen Commission, which meets once a year alternately in England and in Germany, and the Theological Conference that meets every three years. These are the permanent structures that support the process. And yet, full interchangeability of clergy and full Eucharistic unity have still not been achieved after 40 years, and we have to ask 'Why?'

That leads us to the "Meissen Paradox". This is possibly the most interesting thing about Meissen. We recognise each other's ministry but at the same time we don't yet reach any agreement about the significance of the historic episcopate for the full visible unity of the Church. That leads to a situation whereby on the German side there is a willingness to value the historic episcopal succession as a sign of the apostolicity of the whole Church, but a particular form of *episcope* is not regarded as a necessary condition for full visible unity. But the Anglican understanding is different, and so we arrive at this apparent paradox of recognition yes, but full interchangeability, not yet!

This is not accidental. It is a theological disagreement that Meissen consciously and continuously lives with. There are three aspects of *episcope*: first, it is a fountain of oversight, of responsibility for unity and continuity; second, *episcope* is a particular form of that oversight; and third, when we speak about the historic episcopate, we are also speaking about the historical continuity and its significance for the apostolicity of the Church. It is a function, a form that stands for continuity.

This distinction opens up an important possibility. This fountain is necessary for the Church yet, at the same time, this fountain can be reported in many historical forms. That tension will be crucial when we turn to Augsburg.

We stay a little longer with Meissen because there's another little peculiarity with the agreement between the Church of England and the EKD. When we speak of the EKD in this dialogue we are not speaking about one unified ecclesiology. The EKD contains different confessional traditions; Lutheran, Reformed and United Churches, all with their own ecclesiology. So, the EKD does not have any one understanding of *episcope*. Forms of Church leadership have developed differently within each tradition's historical context, both within the Church of England and within the EKD itself. So that makes the question of ministry in Meissen much more complex. This is another reason why comparison with Augsburg has to be made very carefully. Augsburg has a specifically Lutheran counterpoint while Meissen has a much more diverse understanding.

This leads me to think of Meissen as an ecumenical model because, if you look at it in the Meissen context, unity does not mean uniformity and recognition does not equal identity. Meissen shows us something that goes beyond the question of reciprocity. Church unity does not mean that all differences disappear. We can have consensus and, at the same time, have disagreement, and we can live in a union in which not every theological question has been finally resolved. Perhaps this is Meissen's real ecumenical achievement. Continuing disagreement does not become a reason to break off a relationship, but nor is the disagreement denied.

This takes us on to Augsburg because we can now ask what happens when a particular Lutheran Church has reached a different point in its ecumenical development.

Augsburg

Augsburg starts from a completely different position, because it makes visible something that has been going on for some time. The Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bavaria have had a concrete partnership since the 1970s. There has been shared worship, shared prayer and shared practice. Through this, a deeper understanding has grown about shared mission and the bonds between the two Churches.

Bishop Christian Kopp, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria, left, and Presiding Bishop Sean Rowe signed the Augsburg Agreement, June 2025 in Munich, Germany. Photo: ELKB/MCK

Augsburg says we already have a lived relationship, and through that relationship we have reached a theological agreement so that now that relationship can become full communion. Ecumenism does not work like a staircase. It's not that Meissen is step one and Augsburg step two, so that, after a few more steps, all differences are levelled out. No, this is not how ecumenism works. It is much more like a network. Meissen, Porvoo, Called to Common Mission and many other Anglican and Lutheran dialogues worldwide, with Augsburg, are all part of that network. The Augsburg Document specifically names these earlier agreements. Meissen has made mutual recognition and Eucharistic hospitality

possible, but it has not yet achieved full communion or interchangeability of ordained ministries. Augsburg says, 'On the basis of these experiences TEC and ELCB can now take another step.' So, Augsburg builds on Meissen, but it is not simply its continuation. What Augsburg makes possible theologically is simply to ask that, whereas Meissen has continued for 40 years with theological differences, can difference be understood in such a way that it is no longer Church dividing?

Here, I think, we find the theological heart of the matter. Meissen says we can live with a continuing difference and we want to find out where that leads us. Augsburg shows how, under certain conditions, that difference may be understood in new ways that no longer prevent full communion. That is a significant step.

The Augsburg commentary on the history of *episcope* asks, 'How did the ministry of oversight actually develop in Bavaria, and can this particular Lutheran development here be understood as a form of apostolic *episcope* and, consequently, can TEC as an Anglican Church recognise in the Bavarian Lutheran form of *episcope* a legitimate way of maintaining apostolic continuity? That is a very different question.

The crucial thing is to distinguish between the function and the particular historical form. If different forms of *episcope* have developed historically, and if they can be upheld with theological integrity, then the ecumenical question is no longer which form is the right one on which we all agree but, rather, how can different forms be recognised as expressions of the same apostolic calling? I think this is one of the most interesting shifts in thinking in that particular partnership.

The two texts

The Meissen and Augsburg texts belong together but are not structurally identical. Meissen is between the Church of England and the very diverse EKD. Augsburg is between TEC, an Anglican Church, and just one of the 20 Churches that make up the EKD, and that is is a Lutheran Church. Meissen is an over-arching relationship because it includes Lutheran, Reformed and United Churches in the EKD while Augsburg is clearly a bi-lateral relationship between two specific Churches. Meissen describes a journey towards full visible unity, while Augsburg creates a full communion agreement on the basis of an already established partnership.

Therefore, Augsburg can be very, very interesting for Meissen but at the same time cannot serve as a blueprint for Meissen.

So, we can't just copy Augsburg and change Meissen! But the important issue is, what can we learn from the fact that Augsburg has become possible? And perhaps the most important lesson is that a Lutheran Church does not first have to give up its confessional identity in order to enter into full communion with an Anglican Church. And perhaps the question of the historic episcopate can be framed differently, not as a test of whether a Church possesses the right historical form but as a question of whether its particular form of Church oversight can be recognised as an expression of apostolic continuity. And that's quite something!

Meanwhile, Meissen goes on and the Meissen work continues. So, for example, the last two theological conferences in 2021 dealt with the question of interchangeability and episcopacy, and in 2024 looked at both questions from legal and practical perspectives. If there is to be full interchangeability of priests

between the two Churches there are many practical issues to be resolved if they are to enjoy parity in each tradition. So, there are many more issues involved than might be apparent at first sight, not just agreeing interchangeability of ministries but how practically it can be achieved.

The next Theological conference in 2027 will consider how different forms of *episcope* can be recognised theologically as expressions of apostolic continuity.

Implications of Augsburg for Meissen

The question remains, What does Augsburg mean for Meissen? I believe there are at least three different possibilities. First, Meissen can remain as it is, a very intensive relationship continuing to live out the idea of being on the way, with an openness as to what and where the destination might be. In other words, everything stays as it is.

Second, individual bi-lateral relationships might be negotiated within the Meissen field to develop further what the Augsburg Agreement has done with an Anglican community outside the Meissen area, but without producing one common solution for everyone, and without putting pressure on other relationships.

Third, we might find a form of communion in which different ecclesial forms can genuinely co-exist, not despite their differences but with an understanding of difference which no longer divides.

Conclusion

Three central questions remain: What makes the Church the Church? What makes ministry within Churches apostolic? How much diversity can unity sustain? Or, to put it another way, how can Churches that take their identity seriously recognise one another so fully as Church that their differences no longer mean separation?

To end this presentation, I tried to find a way to avoid giving the impression that Meissen was the beginning and Augsburg the next step. It's not that simple. They are not two steps on a straight staircase as I said before. They belong to different constellations, they involve different partners, they begin from different situations and they each have several possible next steps.

I decided the solution was to design a garden in which Meissen is the garden and a signpost which opens the space. Within this garden Churches have gained decades of experience of mutual recognition, of eucharistic hospitality and of living with continued differences. Within this garden Augsburg is a particular flower that has grown in a particular place and under particular historical conditions out of a particular partnership between two particular Churches. This shows us that, under these conditions, something can actually grow that may previously have seemed impossible.

Augsburg is important for Meissen because it is a flower that has grown in a particular place. But it cannot simply be dug up and planted somewhere else. So, Augsburg is the precedent but not the blueprint, and the question is not, Why don't we simply do the same? It is, What can we learn, and is there a more appropriate way in which we might think in order to make progress?

We all know that ecumenism is not one straight path. It is more like a garden in which different plants can be grown and where, sometimes, we only recognise in retrospect that one particular experience has expanded the horizon of what might become possible. Meissen has opened up such an horizon and Augsburg shows us one concrete possibility within that horizon.

So, to return to where I began, the question mark in our title, 'Towards full Anglican-Lutheran Communion?' That question mark is entirely appropriate because we don't yet know what that communion in a wider context will actually and ultimately look like. But now we do know what *might* be possible if the momentum is there. Perhaps that is where the hope for ecumenical work lies, not in the expectation that all the Churches will eventually look the same, but in the hope that they might

increasingly recognise one another as fully Church, with all the differences that exist for good reasons. And for that, my personal view as a Bavarian Pastor is that Augsburg is a very, very significant development within the whole Meissen process. But what the future might hold, only God knows!