When we confess through the words of the Nicene Creed that “We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church,” we are not only stating a fact about the indivisible nature of the church. Even more, we are declaring our commitment to live in that unity in a spirit of truth and love. It is possible to sin against the unity of the church. Indeed, sometimes I wonder if sinning against the unity of the church isn’t what is meant by the “sin against the Holy Spirit”: especially, since the Spirit is the basis of our unity as it, through the gospel, “calls, gathers, enlightens and makes holy the whole Christian church” on earth, to quote Luther’s *Small Catechism* explanation of the Third Article of the Creed. Because, the ELCA, generally, and the Greater Milwaukee Synod in partnership with it, specifically, knows about the importance of the unity of the church -- and the possibility of sinning against that unity -- we have committed ourselves to participation in the Ecumenical Movement in variety of ways on a variety of levels. Let me count some of the ways we in the GMS have been ministering to the unity of the Church this past year.

On a State level, one of the most visible ways the GMS’s commitment to unity is demonstrated is by our participation in the Wisconsin Council of Churches (WiCC). We commit not only dollars through our budget but time and talent through our personnel—most specifically through Bishop Barrows as the constitutionally designated Ecumenical Officer of the Synod and through Steve Kuhl, who works with the WiCC as Synod Rep. The WiCC provides an indispensable way for its membership of 37 state-wide judicatory bodies from 14 different denominational traditions “to pray and work together for the unity and renewal of the Church and the healing and reconciliation of the world.” Through its programs it gives us the opportunity to join other Christians in study, worship, advocacy and public witness. Significantly, the diversity of that activity has expanded in the past two years because of the entrance of historic Black and Peace Churches into the Council and its work. One important initiative the WiCC has begun this year is the drafting of a common Christian statement on the relationship of the Christian Community to other religious traditions. Given the growing religious diversity in the State of Wisconsin and the misunderstanding that has surrounded this development, including violence (i.e., the Sikh Temple shooting), this initiate is both timely and necessary. We as a Synod are actively involved in this drafting process through Steve Kuhl’s participation in the Unity and Relations Committee of the Council. To learn more about the work of the WiCC in general go to [http://www.wichurches.org/programs-and-ministries/](http://www.wichurches.org/programs-and-ministries/). There you will see the plethora programs and ministries we are involved in through our partnership with the WiCC.

In the Greater Milwaukee Area, our commitment to the unity of the Church is seen in our continuing efforts to live out the LARC (Lutheran, Anglican, Roman Catholic) Covenant. This year the covenant is actually in the process of expanding with the stated intentions of the United Methodist Church (UMC) to join the arrangements, making it LARCUM. Two major events were co-hosted by these Milwaukee Area Christian communities in the past year. First, on November 3, 2013 the Lutheran, Anglican and Roman Catholic Communities of Milwaukee celebrated 35 years of covenanted relationship. Bishop Barrows was the featured preacher, Bishop Steven Miller (Episcopal) led the liturgy, and Archbishop Jerome Listecki (Roman Catholic) and Bishop Emeritus Richard Sklba (Roman Catholic) assisted. Second, on January 19, 2014, an Ecumenical Taize Prayer Service in celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity was held at the Cathedral of St. John
the Apostle with the Bishop Hee-Soo Jung (of the Wisconsin Conference of the UMC) as the preacher and the Bishops from the other traditions sharing in the leading of the liturgy. One of the goals of the Milwaukee Area LARCUM Committee is to envision what it might mean to make an Ecumenical outreach to the younger generation. This is seen as especially needful today given the suspicion that the younger generation holds with regard to the institutional church and denominational divisions.

Finally, it is in the congregations of the GMS where the daily, nitty gritty commitment to the unity of the church gets expressed. As congregations, pastors and members participate in local ministeriums, support ecumenical and interfaith food pantries and shelters, host joint prayer and worship services to observe significant events in our communities and culture, come together with other parishes and congregations for scripture and theological study, coordinate our engagement with youth to give them expanded opportunity for spiritual growth and community service, and include one another in our Sunday prayers—in these way and more, the unity of the church is not only something that is longed for, but realized, if only for a brief moment. We know from experience, how in the course of our busy lives it is easy to overlook the neighbor who is next to us. It is also easy in the midst of our busy ministry activities to overlook the Christian community down the road. I’m not saying that we should neglect some of our immediate ministry needs in order to be attentive to Christian unity. Never! But I am saying that being mindful of the unity of the Church can be a good way to help us meet our immediate ministry needs. Attending to the unity of the Church is not an addendum to everything else we do; it is at the center of everything we do.

I thank all the congregations, pastors and members in the Greater Milwaukee Synod for their commitment to the unity of the church. I pray that in the year to come you will find imaginative ways to combine your commitment to the unity of the church with you dedication to its Christ-centered mission. Unity and mission are not at odds, at least not in Jesus’ mind, as evidenced in his “High Priestly” prayer on the night of his betrayal: “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:22-23).

Sincerely,
Rev. Dr. Steven C. Kuhl
GMS Ecumenical Representative