

# Lutheran Churches in America

Today there are about 30 different Lutheran church bodies in the United States. They vary drastically in size, doctrine and practice. The following is intended to provide a brief description of each of these Lutheran bodies and the differences between them.

## Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)

The majority (over 60%) of Lutherans in America today are found in one very large church body known as the **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)**, which began its existence in 1988. The ELCA claims that it is a Lutheran church and that it honors the Lutheran confessions, but what is actually taught and practiced by these churches is not confessional Lutheranism. This church body outwardly rejects the Biblical doctrines of inspiration, the role of women in the church, church fellowship, and marriage/sexuality. They also allow many other false teachings to be adhered to and promulgated within its churches.

## Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC)

Some congregations in the ELCA have protested against various actions of the ELCA, chiefly the agreement with the Episcopal Church that brings the ELCA into conformity with the so-called apostolic succession. In 2001 **Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ** was formed. To date, 187 United States congregations have joined this group totaling about 150,000 members. While this group has taken a harder stance on sexuality and marriage than the ELCA, they still maintain the other false positions of the ELCA. The LCMC would differ from the ELCA in organizational structure, having a representative form of government. Interestingly, congregations who affiliate with the LCMC may at the same time be members of the ELCA or some other Lutheran church body. The LCMC does not operate its own seminaries but has a “working relationship” with other Lutheran and non-Lutheran seminaries.

## A Brief Study of the Lutheran Churches in America



Luther posts the 95 Theses

**Pastor David Lau**  
**Pastor Nathanael Mayhew**

## **Evangelical Lutheran Conference and Ministerium in North America (ELCM)**

This small church body broke from the ELCA in 1998. It is made up of 7 congregations, six of them in Pennsylvania and one in Minnesota. This group confesses that the Bible is the “immutable” Word of God, but is not “inspired.” For example, they would accept an evolutionary understanding of the Genesis account of creation. They would also differ from the ELCA on church polity. They use the “consensus model” not a simple majority. They also consider themselves the modern descendants of the Pennsylvania Ministerium. This group speaks of itself as a centrist, Biblical, confessional, evangelical, liturgical Lutheran alternative.

## **The Association of Free Lutheran Congregations (AFLC)**

This association of churches was formed 1962. The word "free" in their name underlines their stress on congregational polity. Each congregation is "free" from interference by a larger organization. The AFLC was formed out of the **Lutheran Free Church** prior to 1963 merger of the American Lutheran Church. The AFLC stresses pietism, allows women’s suffrage, millennialism, open communion, and the idea of free will in the doctrine of conversion. It publishes the Lutheran Ambassador and has a seminary in the Twin Cities.

## **The Conservative Lutheran Association (CLA)**

This group broke from the ALC in 1965 as a protest against the ALC’s departure from the inerrancy of Scripture and growing ecumenism. It was originally known as the **World Confessional Lutheran Association** but changed organized as the Conservative Lutheran Association in 1980. This group also wants to be confessionally Lutheran but has not been able to break all its ties with supporters of false religion. The CLA operates its own seminary in Tacoma, Washington. Their publication, *Lutherans Alert*, actually dates back to 1960, prior to the formation of the CLA. The CLA is a member of the National Association of Evangelicals.

## **Church of the Lutheran Brethren of America (CLBA)**

The **Church of the Lutheran Brethren of America** broke from the United Norwegian Lutheran Church around 1900 and differs from other Lutheran churches in some very striking ways. The CLBA have pietistic roots that can still be seen in their doctrinal stance. The CLBA wants its members to have a personal experience of salvation. Confirmands do not automatically become communicants. The CLBA has a nonliturgical worship style, and pastors wear no robes. They practice open communion, and the Lord’s Supper is received in the pews. The CLBA does not believe in receiving absolution from the pastor. While the CLBA does not permit women pastors, it does allow women to vote and hold other offices of authority over men in the church. Although it claims to be Lutheran in its teachings, it is unLutheran in its teaching of premillennialism. The CLBA headquarters are in Fergus Falls, Minnesota and includes a high school, Bible college, and seminary.

## **Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod (LC-MS)**

Founded in 1847 by German immigrants in St. Louis, Missouri, this church body was once THE confessional stronghold of Lutheranism in America. Under the leadership of C. F. W. Walther the Missouri Synod proved to be an orthodox, confessional Lutheran church body for almost 100 years. Many of the good things we enjoy as Lutherans today come from the founders and leaders of the Missouri Synod. They stressed the Lutheran confessions, Lutheran schools at every level, mission work among the heathen, and the development of a Christian lifestyle that included the practice of admonition and excommunication and doctrinal discipline. In 1872 the Missouri Synod joined with other Lutheran synods to form the Synodical Conference. This large Lutheran conference was a stronghold of orthodox, confessional Lutheranism for many years. Down through the years the Missouri Synod took a strong stand against evolution, lodge membership, and unionism (cooperating with false teachers). The Brief Statement of 1932, a summary of

Missouri Synod teaching, is still accepted by us today as a clear confession of Bible teaching on many different issues.

Shortly after 1932 the Missouri Synod began to move away from its former position. They began to declare certain doctrines of the Bible to be non-divisive, that is, doctrines on which Christians did not need to agree. They did this in order to be able to have fellowship with other Lutheran church bodies that did not altogether agree with the Missouri Synod. Other new policies were introduced: the approval of Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, the approval of the military chaplaincy program, and joint prayer with false teaching church bodies. They also began to allow the teaching of evolution, open communion, and woman suffrage.

Efforts were made by the other synods of the Synodical Conference and many within the Missouri Synod to correct these views. But although some of the leading false teachers left the Missouri Synod in a bitter dispute in the early 1970s, the Missouri Synod has never been able to return fully to its former orthodox position of 1932. While the Missouri Synod has not gone so far in its false teachings as the ELCA it continues to put up with those in its midst who agree with the ELCA. Many in the Missouri Synod are now pushing for the changes that are already found in the ELCA, such as women pastors.

### **The American Association of Lutheran Churches (AALC)**

This church association was formed in 1987 from ALC congregations that refused to become part of the ELCA when it began in 1988. It seems that this church body wants to be confessionally Lutheran, but it does not follow God's warning in Romans 16: 17-18 about avoiding all those who support false teaching. The AALC has allowed the charismatic movement to take root in its churches, and women are allowed voting rights and positions in the church. In 2006 the AALC and LC-MS finalized an agreement to enter into full pulpit and altar fellowship. Since then the AALC seminary and headquarters in St. Paul, Minnesota has been moved to Ft. Wayne, Indiana where it has been integrated with the LC-MS.

### **Lutheran Ministerium and Synod - USA (LMS-USA)**

This Lutheran church body is made up of a small number of pastors and congregations who withdrew from the AALC and organized as a separate group in 1995. They left the AALC in order to take a stronger stand for the inerrancy of Scripture and against the charismatic movement. They subscribe to the Lutheran confessions contained in the Book of Concord of 1580, as well as the Indianapolis Statement on Scripture. They present themselves as Biblical, confessional, evangelical, liturgical, and congregational. The official publication of LMS-USA is *Table Talk*.

### **Orthodox Lutheran Conference (OLC)**

In 1951 a group of congregations left the Missouri Synod because of the doctrinal issues stated earlier. They formed the **Orthodox Lutheran Conference**. Five years later a controversy divided this group bringing about the formation of the **Concordia Lutheran Conference (CLC)** in 1956 and the **Lutheran Churches of the Reformation (LCR)** in 1964. The **Illinois Lutheran Conference (ILC)** was in fellowship with the LCR for a time, but this fellowship has been broken by a recent dispute. The **Fellowship of Lutheran Congregations (FLC)** broke away from the LCR in a dispute about a matter of church discipline and in 2004 joined the **Concordia Lutheran Conference**. (The CLC refers to the **Church of the Lutheran Confession** as CoLC.) In 2006 another church body broke away from the LCR over an issue on women suffrage and formed the **Orthodox Lutheran Confessional Conference (OLCC)**.

These five very small Lutheran church bodies all share one common bond: They firmly favor congregational polity as opposed to synodical polity. All of these seem to take the position that only pastors of congregations can be ministers of the Word and only congregations can be churches. In other words, they do not call teachers or professors of the Gospel ministers of the Word if they are not pastors of congregations. They do not believe a synod or a group of congregations should be called a church.

## **Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America (ELDoNA)**

The **Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America** was organized in Malone, Texas in 2006 by pastors and congregations who left the Missouri Synod. This group would seem to have a stand on Church and Ministry similar to the churches of the OLC. They have taken the term diocese because synod was not applicable, and fellowship and association was too vague. They state that they are "committed to the restoration and advancement of consistently Evangelical Lutheran doctrine and practice in harmony with the Sacred Scriptures and the Book of Concord (1580)."

## **Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS)**

The Wisconsin Synod was organized in 1850. In its first years this synod was not confessionally Lutheran but unionistic. In fact some of its pastors were willing to serve Lutheran and Reformed congregations at the same time. Gradually the Wisconsin Synod became more confessional. In 1869 the Missouri Synod recognized the Wisconsin Synod as an orthodox church body. From 1869 to 1961 the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod worked together as sister churches.

## **Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS)**

The **Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS)** is a much smaller church body of Norwegian descent. It was organized in 1918 as the **Norwegian Lutheran Church of America**. Its members originally came from the **Norwegian Synod**, which had once been a member of the Synodical Conference. The ELS members left the Norwegian Synod in 1917 because that church body was merging with other church bodies even though there was no real doctrinal agreement on the doctrines of conversion and predestination. The old **Norwegian Synod** is now a part of the ELCA.

The **Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS)** and the **Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS)** were smaller partners of the

Missouri Synod in the Synodical Conference. The WELS and the ELS both protested against the doctrinal changes introduced by the Missouri Synod in the years from 1935 to 1961. But both bodies eventually promoted some false teachings of their own.

The ELS suspended fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1955. Yet the ELS continued to practice fellowship with the Missouri Synod through its membership in the Synodical Conference until 1963. Because of this inconsistency some of its pastors and congregations withdrew from the ELS and helped to organize the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC).

During the years from 1955 to 1961 the ELS promoted the teaching "that when a person or church body with whom we are in fellowship causes divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned, we mark them immediately, then admonish, and if this proves fruitless, avoid them." The Bible, however, teaches something different (cf. Romans 16: 17-18). This difference between the ELS and the CLC has never been resolved.

In 1955 the WELS declared that the Missouri Synod was guilty of causing divisions and offenses contrary to Scriptural doctrine. The WELS should therefore have suspended fellowship with the Missouri Synod. They postponed this decision, however, from 1955 to 1956, and then to 1957, and then to 1959, all the while the Missouri Synod was continuing to cause divisions and offenses.

In 1959 the WELS justified its postponement by declaring that "termination of fellowship is called for when you have reached the conviction that admonition is of no further avail." This also is contrary to the plain teaching of God's Word in Romans 16: 17-18.

In 1961 the WELS did reach the conviction that admonition was of no further avail and terminated fellowship with the Missouri Synod. We could say that at that point they did the right thing for the wrong reason.

In the years from 1955 to 1963 many WELS pastors and

congregations and individual members left the WELS and helped to organize the CLC. The differences between the WELS and the CLC have been discussed many times by representatives of the two church bodies. But the differences have never been resolved. The latest attempt fizzled when the WELS/ELS group claimed that there never was a doctrinal difference between the two groups. The CLC in its 1992 convention expressed itself as being in disagreement with that claim.

Other differences between the CLC and WELS/ELS have developed in the years since 1960. One important difference has been the WELS/ELS willingness to receive funds from and cooperate with fraternal insurance companies such as Lutheran Brotherhood (LB) and Aid Association for Lutherans (AAL). In its first years the CLC was also involved in a limited way with the AAL, but these ties were broken when it was realized that cooperation with the AAL is a way of supporting the false teachings of the ELCA, the Missouri Synod, and all the other Lutheran church bodies that cooperate with the AAL. God's Word, however, tells us to avoid them.

Lutheran Brotherhood and the Aid Association for Lutherans have now merged to form a fraternal insurance company known as Thrivent Financial for Lutherans. The WELS and ELS continue to cooperate with Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, but the CLC does not.

### **The Protes'tant Conference**

Another small group is known as the **Protes'tant Conference** of the Wisconsin Synod. This group began in 1927 as a protest against certain practices and policies of Wisconsin Synod officials. Over the years there have been three major splits within the Protes'tant Conference -- in 1930, in 1952, and in 1964. At present the membership is listed as 1,150 members. The **Protes'tant Conference** differs from the CLC in its understanding of Romans 16:17-18. One of the main projects of the **Protes'tant Conference** has been the publication of *Faith-Life*.

### **Association of Confessional Lutheran Churches (ACLCL)**

The ACLCL was formed as a result of the expulsion of several pastors and their congregations from the ELS because they protested the unscriptural removal of a Pastor Rolf Preus from his call and expulsion from the synod. The formation of the ACLCL is partially due to the ELS's adoption of its theses on ministry. The pastors of this church body have not yet determined a specific stand on church and ministry, but seem to be somewhere between the Missouri Synod and the WELS/ELS and the CLC. This group met in talk with ELDoNA but nothing came of their discussions.

### **Lutheran Confessional Synod (LCS)**

The **Lutheran Confessional Synod (LCS)** was organized in Decatur, Illinois in 1994 by one pastor and one congregation. This small synod at first declared itself in doctrinal agreement with the ELS and the WELS. But now it claims that it disagrees with the WELS and the ELS on the doctrine of church and ministry. The LCS has been designed to attract pastors and congregations and groups of members who wish to leave the ELCA because of the false teaching and practice of that large church body.

### **Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC)**

Our own small church body, the **Church of the Lutheran Confession**, was organized in 1960 by congregations and individuals who had withdrawn from Synodical Conference congregations in the controversies of the 1950s and early 1960s. The CLC is a confessional Lutheran church body, in full agreement with the Lutheran confessions printed in the Book of Concord of 1580. The CLC has a high school, college and seminary located in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. It also has a high school in Mankato, Minnesota, the original location of Immanuel Lutheran College and Seminary. The CLC has also accepted three more recent confessions of faith which declare our position in respect to more recent controversies:

**1) the Brief Statement of 1932**, which shows plainly why we are not in agreement with the ELCA and all the smaller pietistic and unionistic Lutheran church bodies.

**2) Concerning Church Fellowship**, which shows why we are not in fellowship with the Missouri Synod, the WELS, and the ELS. We printed a portion of this document in Lesson 39.

**3) Concerning Church and Ministry**, which shows why we are not in fellowship with the LCR, the other CLC, and the FLC.

### **Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship (LCCF)**

The **Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship (LCCF)** is made up of a few congregations who contend that the CLC has not taken a strong enough stand in opposition to fraternal insurance companies such as LB and AAL. Their publication is the LCCF Newsletter. Congregations are located in Sanborn, Mankato, and New Ulm, Minnesota.

### **Reformation Lutheran Conference (RLC)**

A few groups that left the LCCF joined with a few groups that left the CLC (or CoLC) to form an organization calling itself the **Reformation Lutheran Conference (RLC)**. Former ILC professor Robert Dommer is a pastor in this group. Congregations are located in Onalaska and Stoddard, Wisconsin, and in New Ulm and Austin, Minnesota. Issues on which the CLC and the RLC seem to differ include such items as self-esteem, membership in the American Legion, and suspension from the Lord's Supper.

### **Evangelical Catholic Church (ECC)**

It may seem strange that there is one church body that subscribes to the 1580 Book of Concord that does not use the word Lutheran in its name. This is the Evangelical Catholic Church, with headquarters in Phoenix, Arizona. This group promotes the episcopal form of church government and teaches that infants should receive the Lord's Supper together with all other Christians.

### **Evangelical Community Church - Lutheran (ECCL)**

Another small church body is The **Evangelical Community Church - Lutheran (ECCL)**. This group follows many Roman Catholic traditions and even honors the pope as head of the Western Church, although not considering him infallible. At the same time it acknowledges its agreement with the Lutheran confessions. Congregations are in Missouri and Georgia.

### **Apostolic Lutheran Church of America (ALCA)**

A few Lutherans are called Apostolic Lutherans. These are mostly pietists of Finnish background. Their pietism is evident in their demand for total abstinence from alcoholic beverages. There are several church bodies that call themselves Apostolic Lutherans. The largest one of these is the **Apostolic Lutheran Church of America**. Another such church body is the **Laestadian Lutheran Church (LLC)**, named after a pietist Swedish Lutheran pastor named Lars Levi Laestadius. The first Laestadian congregations in this country were made up of Finnish immigrants. Today there are 29 Laestadian congregations served by 68 ministers, most of whom are lay preachers.

### **Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC)**

At one time there were many Lutheran church bodies in the United States that kept up their connections with their mother churches overseas. It seems that at the present time only three of these remain: the **Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC)**, with 3,508 members and 12 clergy in the United States and 5,536 members and 11 clergy in Canada, the **Latvian Evangelical Church in America (LECA)**, with 13,584 members and 63 clergy in the United States, and the **Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church in Diaspora**.