

# Frequently Asked Questions

## A list of questions that have surfaced in congregational forums in the Saint Paul Area Synod about Churchwide Assembly actions

### **How did this change happen? What process was used?**

---

Unlike the Roman Catholics who are governed by Rome and pontifical teaching and edicts, Lutherans are governed by a representative body called the Churchwide Assembly, which brings together 1,045 people representing congregations from the 65 synods in the ELCA who gather together and center themselves in prayer as they consider issues that come before the whole church.

The number of voting members synods send to the Churchwide Assembly is based on baptized membership. In 2009 the Saint Paul Area Synod sent 29 voting members to the assembly. Two-thirds of these were elected at conference assemblies; the other one-third were elected by the synod assembly. Bishop Rogness and Vice President Gail Olson were part of this delegation. Constitutional provisions require that 60 percent of the delegation is lay and that 10 percent be comprised of persons of color or individuals whose first language is not English.

Voting members are nominated by the nominating committee (made up of six people—one representative elected by each of the six conferences), who gather names by talking with conference deans, pastors, and congregational leaders. Some nominees are identified because they express an interest in participating in the process.

Each congregation is charged with identifying and sending representatives to the conference assemblies and the synod assembly. And just as interest in civic matters varies among individuals, so too does interest in church matters. Many congregations have a system for identifying representatives for these assemblies; others struggle to find people and wait until the last minute. But the process exists and is outlined in governing documents.

It's important to understand that "voting members" to the Churchwide Assembly are different than "delegates" elected to attend a political convention. In the context of political parties, delegates are often bound to a candidate or particular point of view. Voting members come together as representatives sent by synods to represent the whole body of members of the ELCA. Throughout the assembly, they ground themselves in Word and Sacrament and seek the will of the Spirit in their deliberations. They are not attached to a particular cause or mindset as they seek to do the work of the whole church.

### **By what scriptural authority were these decisions made?**

---

Our ELCA constitution includes the wording that the "Holy Scriptures are the source and norm of this church's faith and life." Scripture informs our faith and shapes our decisions. At the heart of the written word is the living Word –Jesus—the object of our worship.

Both those who supported a change in policy and those who opposed it believe they are being faithful to the authority of Scripture as they explain their position. While whole books

have been written on these matters, a quick summary of some of these lines of thinking might include:

*The Authority of Scripture: Opposing the Actions of the Churchwide Assembly:*

- Scripture clearly sets forth a marriage between a man and a woman as designed by God and the appropriate—and only—setting for sexual intimacy. This is made clear both in specific scriptural passages and in the historic Christian tradition of understanding God’s “orders of creation” as being instructive for human living.
- Nowhere in Scripture is there affirmation of same-gender sexual relations. Every reference to such activity is negative, identifying it as sin.
- The stated teaching of the church for 2,000 years, and still broadly affirmed by most Christian bodies in the world today, understands same-gender sexual activity to be sinful.
- While Scripture recognizes that all humans are sinful, it is not appropriate for the church to place in public leadership those publically engaged in an unrepentant, sinful state.

*The Authority of Scripture: Supporting the Actions of the Churchwide Assembly:*

- Nowhere does Scripture address persons for whom same-gender orientation is a given, not a choice. Such an understanding is as foreign to the writers or the teachings of Scripture as is the understanding of the universe as described by Copernicus and Galileo, who were also judged, in their day, to be heretics teaching against Scripture.
- Sin is properly understood not as a list of particular behaviors, but as a condition that claims us all. At its core is alienation from God and God’s will for our lives.
- The specific condemnations of homosexual activity are given in the context of abuse, rape, and other behaviors that destroy rather than enhance human love and relationship.
- Our decisions only address the question of whether publically accountable, lifelong, monogamous same gender relationships can be understood to be a healthy and loving relationship and whether supporting such relationships might be a faithful response by a local faith community.

**Our congregation is going to withhold mission support because we want to send a message to the bishops and the people who made this decision.**

The 66 bishops in the ELCA—65 synodical bishops and the presiding bishops—were among the 1,045 voting members of the Churchwide Assembly. As the elected leaders, bishops do have influence in the decisions of this church, but in making the final decisions, they each have just one vote. No more. No less.

Withholding mission support might seem like a way to register your opposition, but, in fact, it tears apart the church and has no effect either on those who made the decision or those who are affected by it. Rather, decreased mission support means that:

- Fewer congregations can be launched and this church’s ability to reach new Christians and large immigrant populations in rural and urban areas is diminished;
- Our participation in the global community shrinks because lack of funding prevents us from extending our presence in far off corners of the world where the light of Christ is particularly needed.
- Tuition and fees because of dwindling dollars for those preparing for ordained ministry means that many pastors enter their first call with large amounts of debt

which can impinge on their ability to accept calls in places where they are most needed.

- The infrastructure and web of relationships that make possible many diverse ministries is weakened: Lutherans are at the forefront of response to disasters because of such infrastructure; our network of social service agencies is stronger than any other religious body; our ecumenical connections are stronger than anywhere else in the Christian world. All these “connections” are weakened as we weaken ourselves as a church body.
- And the list goes on.

While some congregations might choose to redirect mission support to designated Lutheran agencies, it's important to remember that—as necessary as those agencies are—few of them witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ as they go about their work. In addition, consider what would happen if your membership chose to withhold offerings whenever they disagreed with a controversial issues—the effect on your congregation's ministry would be crippling.

### **How does a congregation leave the ELCA?**

---

Termination of a congregation's relationship with the ELCA is outlined in Chapter 6 of the congregational constitution.

A congregation may terminate its relationship with the ELCA through a resolution indicating that desire at a legally called and conducted special meeting of the congregations. The resolution requires a two-thirds majority of the voting members present. The secretary of the congregation must submit a copy of the resolution to the bishop and mail a copy to voting members of the congregation, within ten days after the adoption of the resolutions.

During a period of at least 90 days, the bishop will consult with the congregation in a manner determined by the bishop. If after that time, the congregation still wishes to sever ties with the ELCA, such action must be taken at a legally called and conducted special meeting of the congregation. Two-thirds of the voting members present must approve the resolution, and the bishop or an authorized representative must be present. Notice of the meeting must be mailed to all voting members of the congregation at least ten days in advance of the meeting.

If approved, a certified copy of the action must be sent to the synodical bishop.

### **What happens to church property when a congregation leaves the ELCA?**

---

Property rights of the congregation are outlined in Chapter 7 of the congregational constitution. If a congregation votes to terminate its relationship with the ELCA and chooses to become independent or relate to a non-Lutheran church body, the right to property shall continue to reside in the congregation only with the consent of the synod council. The synod council, after consultation with the congregation through an established process, may give approval to become independent or to relate to a non-Lutheran church body, in which case the congregation continues to retain title to property. Should the synod council fail to give such approval, title to the property shall remain with those members who desire to continue as a congregation of the ELCA.

**Should our congregation vote to leave the ELCA, what other Lutheran church body might we join?**

---

- Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod
- Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
- Alliance of Renewal Churches (ARC)
- Association of Free Lutheran Congregations
- Church of the Lutheran Brethren of America
- Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ
- Lutheran CORE
- Word Alone