

What to Do When . . . (John 6:68)

The 2009 Churchwide Assembly for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America addressed some very important issues of ELCA church doctrine and policies. Many are concerned as how best to respond faithfully to possible changes in ELCA policies and practices. They are seeking guidance for options available to faithful Lutheran Christians. In an effort to assist individuals, pastors and congregations in their discernment, the WordAlone Network Board of Directors has developed this document.¹ WordAlone offers these considerations, to be taken only after much deliberation and prayer.

This document addresses factors a person (or family), pastor or congregation might consider after reviewing the actions taken at the 2009 churchwide assembly.

Response of a layperson

The complexity of this choice depends upon a person's involvement in a congregation and his/her marital/family status.

A) Response as a single person without children

If the outcomes at the churchwide assembly conflict with one's conscience, seeking fellowship in another Lutheran church in the area is the easiest option. The availability of Biblically faithful congregations varies among geographic locations. One choice could be joining a church in the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ, www.lcmc.net. WordAlone encourages you to visit nearby Lutheran churches, attend worship services there and then speak with the pastor(s) so as to gain a deeper understanding of their theology and church practices.

B) Response as a family with children

As a couple, each person is vital to choosing a church for faithful worship. It is important for each to be nourished in their walk with the Lord. Likely they will want to discuss all aspects of the worship experience, including things such as liturgy, music, worship times and opportunities for fellowship.

One's involvement in the present church (serving on committees, singing in choir, etc.) should be considered. Friendships within these congregations will affect responses to possible changes.

For parents, the needs of children are of special concern. Sunday school, confirmation and fellowship in youth groups are all factors that require prayerful contemplation. A child's age and degree of emotional and spiritual maturity as well as connectedness with friends their own age must be considered. The presence of baptismal sponsors, other family and supportive friends in the current parish can be significant.

Wherever one decides to worship, consider that church's programs to see if they are a good fit for your child's needs. Your baptismal responsibility here cannot be overemphasized.

Response of a pastor

A pastor's response can be far reaching. A pastor's responsibilities to the flock must be considered. If a pastor believes churchwide assembly decisions preclude remaining in the ELCA, this must be discussed – first, with the church council, then, with the congregation. Asking church members to pray for the pastor during this time of deliberation is most appropriate. Keeping the congregation informed of the theological basis and consequences of the pastor's decisions is also important. Because of the critical nature of these issues, if the congregation is not actively engaged, WordAlone encourages the pastor to help the members become so.

A) Pastor leaves the ELCA and congregation remains

In this case, it is evident that the pastor views the situation differently than the majority of the church council and congregation. In such a case, the pastor should resign after fully educating the congregation about the churchwide assembly decisions made, the biblical and theological ramifications of them and his or her personal thinking that led to his or her decision to leave the ELCA.

Leaving the ELCA may affect matters such as pastoral pensions, health care plans and other personal and professional issues, so they should be thoroughly reviewed with the ELCA Board of Pensions, the synodical bishop/office and an attorney. Typically ELCA pensions are fully funded and can be rolled into another retirement program. It is appropriate to cooperate with the synod bishop to effect a proper resignation from the ELCA roster.

A pastor can and should explore joining the clergy of another Lutheran synod. Most of them have pension and health care plans that can be accessed.

B) Pastor remains in the ELCA, but congregation leaves

A pastor who desires to remain in the ELCA, but is serving a congregation electing to end its connection with the ELCA, should consult with the synodical bishop. In at least one such case, the synodical bishop worked with the pastor so that he could transfer his membership to a nearby ELCA congregation (a constitutional requirement for ELCA pastors) and supported the pastor to keep serving the congregation leaving the ELCA until the pastor received a call from an ELCA congregation. It is also possible for an ELCA rostered pastor to serve a non-ELCA Lutheran congregation with synodical approval. These are a couple possibilities besides the pastor resigning. *See C under "Response of a Congregation."*

C) Pastor retires

If a pastor disagrees with churchwide assembly decisions and elects to retire, there is no need to go through an ELCA separating process since pension and health benefits remain no matter where a retired pastor worships. Such a pastor could elect to be removed from the ELCA roster listing.

D) Pastor and congregation leave the ELCA

See B under "Response of a Congregation."

Response of a congregation

A congregation's response will depend largely on how it understands **Biblical** truth, the details of policy drafts the ELCA has published and the theological discussions surrounding the drafts. It will also depend on how well informed the congregation is of churchwide assembly decisions and their theological and practical implications. Clearly not all members of ELCA congregations will be satisfied with churchwide assembly decisions. Cottage meetings, congregational meetings and council meetings can be venues for informing, delineating and determining the future involvement of a congregation within the ELCA. A church's constitution and bylaws need to be reviewed to clarify any potential legal issues.

A) Congregation and pastor remain in ELCA

- (1) This will likely be the choice of congregations in agreement with the churchwide assembly decisions.
- (2) This **may** be the choice if a congregation is in disagreement with churchwide assembly decisions but continues to believe it possible to faithfully remain in the ELCA to influence future decisions for good. Congregations may achieve helpful influence in several ways, including:
 - Pray that ELCA clergy and laity will seriously study God's Word and be open to a clear understanding of the Church's mission to reach people for Christ and teach God's revealed truth as applicable for daily living.
 - Offer orthodox Bible studies on the subject to ensure the laity is fully educated on the biblical view of sexuality and marriage in our lives.
 - Become more involved in WordAlone and Lutheran CORE, the coalition for reform, and be part of a national reform effort.
 - Reduce financial support of the churchwide organization as a way to “voice” discontent with churchwide priorities. There are many ways for benevolence dollars to be redirected in mission for Christ.
 - Encourage other pastors and councils to be in close communication with synodical bishops who are sympathetic to concerns about the current mission, ministry and policies of the ELCA.
 - Encourage church council members to write letters to "unsympathetic" bishops and leaders in the ELCA national office to keep them aware of discontent and on-going concern.
 - Look beyond the ELCA for resources. WordAlone can be of great assistance with Sola Publishing, and recommends the Institute of Lutheran Theology for theological education and ReClaim Resources for worship materials.
 - Improve the availability of on-going orthodox education in your area by becoming a teaching center within the Institute of Lutheran Theology.
 - Join LCMC (Lutheran Churches in Mission for Christ) while remaining in the ELCA. LCMC is an association of Lutheran churches that can act as a separate church. For example, they have their own pension plan, health insurance, call process, etc. However, they have also structured themselves in a way that allows churches to

belong to LCMC without leaving their current denomination. Although many congregations are taking advantage of this “dual membership” option, the congregation will need to be prepared for potential resistance from the bishop’s office. Additional information is available at the LCMC website (www.lcmc.net).

B) Congregation and pastor leave the ELCA

The big questions become: (1) Who owns the church land and building when the congregation leaves? (2) What affiliation might the newly separated congregation have?

- The answer to the first question, in most cases, can be answered simply: The local congregation does **if you transfer to another Lutheran church body**. A caveat applies to ELCA churches having their roots in the Lutheran Church of America prior to the formation of the ELCA. To effect a break from the ELCA and retain building and property, such churches must have two consecutive affirmative two-thirds majority votes of their congregations held 90 days apart. For ELCA churches that once were LCA churches or were an ELCA mission start-up, there is an additional requirement of permission from the synod council. This additional requirement has already been successfully met by some churches. The details of “who owns what” may also involve the date when your church was founded. These matters need to be fully researched by legal counsel before decisions are made.
- The answer to the second question includes various Lutheran church bodies. In some cases, Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (www.lcmc.net) has been the answer. For others, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (www.lcms.org), Association of Free Lutheran Congregations (www.aflc.org), Church of Lutheran Brethren (www.clba.org), The American Association of Lutheran Churches (www.taalc.org) or the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (www.evangelicallutheransynod.org) have provided "safe haven." Each congregation would need to research these possibilities.

C) Congregation leaves ELCA and pastor remains

Though the congregation may prefer to call either a pastor who is not on the ELCA roster or is in the process of resigning from the ELCA, there are other possibilities for the transition process. *See B under "Response of a pastor."*

D) Congregation remains and pastor leaves.

See A under "Response of a pastor."

¹ The purpose of this document is not to narrow choices, but to help inform them. As such, WordAlone provides this document as **only one source**. WordAlone neither warrants the completeness of these discussions, nor assumes liability for choices made by individuals, pastors or congregations using the information provided herein.