

# **Discernment Process**

## **For Congregations of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod**

### **Considering Dissociation from the ELCA**

A congregational decision to terminate its organic relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is among the most serious choices a congregation can make. Current leadership of a congregation represents a temporary stewardship of an historic community that includes the saints who have gone before us and the saints yet to come. The intention of those who have come before us and the welfare of saints yet to come must be at least as prominent in this discernment process as the opinions, wants or needs of the community that currently gathers in a particular expression of the Church.

Aside from these historic considerations, congregational leaders carry a burden of responsibility to understand and communicate clearly that we “are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” As the congregational constitution says in C3.02, “The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, therefore, derives its character and powers both from the sanction and representation of its congregations and from its inherent nature as an expression of the broader fellowship of the faithful. In length, it acknowledges itself to be in the historic continuity of the communion of saints; in breadth, it expresses the fellowship of believers and congregations in our day.” Thus is the Church an organic union between various worshiping communities bound together by a complex system of continuing covenants. The relationship between an individual congregation and the other congregations of the ELCA is, therefore, analogous, in many important ways, to a marriage relationship, joined together by God through public promises. The life-long nature and the mutual accountability of this covenant are both constitutional and ethical, and they are embodied in the constitutions of this Church. In the same way that the United States Constitution places a covenantal boundary on the freedom of individual states, the freedom of individual congregations is limited by their accountability to the constitutions of the ELCA, the Synod, and the Model Constitution for Congregations. Departure from the mandatory provisions of these constitutions threatens the faithfulness, internal harmony, and well-being of the congregation.

There are times, however, when congregations may feel so completely in conflict with the other congregations of the ELCA that a termination of the mutual covenant between them appears to be the only path that can be followed with integrity. This Discernment Process, therefore, is being instituted by the Bishop and the Synod Council of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod to assist congregations in a thoughtful and prayerful discernment that is consistent with the covenants and constitutions currently in force. Its purpose is to allow congregations and the synod itself to proceed with order, dignity, and faithful stewardship of the responsibility that has been entrusted to us.

### **Beginning the Process**

If the congregation council of a congregation believes that the congregation needs to consider leaving the ELCA as a matter of principle, the following steps will need to be taken:

1. The congregation council will send the synod bishop written notice, clearly and specifically stating the reasons that the congregation is considering a termination of covenant.
2. The synod bishop will contact both the pastor of the congregation and the congregation council president to acknowledge receipt of the letter of intent and to arrange a meeting with the leaders of the congregation.

## **First Congregational Meeting**

If the expressed concerns cannot be resolved in the conversation between the synod bishop and the leadership, the congregation council may choose to schedule another reconciliation meeting with the synod bishop, or may call a special meeting of the congregation to take the “first vote” on whether or not to terminate its covenant with the other congregations of the ELCA. The bishop or an observer appointed by the bishop will be invited to be in attendance at this meeting.

It is essential to understand that no legal separation between an individual congregation and the other congregations of the ELCA can take place with fewer than two congregational votes separated by a minimum of 90 days and completion of the required process outlined in provision 9.62 of the ELCA Constitution. This is true regardless of local variations in congregational constitutions. As stated in 9.22 of the ELCA Constitution, this process takes precedence over local governing documents on this point.

The resolution considered at this meeting should be similar or identical to the following:

“Resolved, that \_\_\_\_\_ Lutheran Church seeks to terminate its relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and therefore this congregation will enter into a process of discernment with the bishop of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod, beginning (date) and lasting not less than 90 days, to determine whether or not to terminate its continuing covenant with the other congregations of the ELCA.”

If this first resolution is passed by a 2/3 majority of adult congregation members present at that meeting, the synod bishop is immediately notified by mail so that the formal 90-day discernment process must begin.

## **Consultation with the Bishop**

Upon receipt of notification of the adoption of the “first resolution,” the bishop will organize a consultation panel comprised of the bishop, two pastors, and two lay leaders from the synod. The bishop, in conversation with leaders from the congregation, will schedule a consultation process, which shall include conversations among members of the congregation and the panel. The purpose of these conversations will be to assure that voting members are accurately and adequately informed about the issues that have instigated the motion to terminate the congregation’s relationship with the ELCA, and about the long- and short-term implications of such a decision.

After the consultation process, the consultation panel will prepare a report to the synod council on the findings of the consultation. This report will be sent, simultaneously to the congregation council.

After receiving the report, the congregation council must decide whether or not to proceed with a second congregational meeting to consider a second resolution to terminate affiliation with the ELCA. If the congregation council decides not to proceed, the matter is considered resolved and no further action is required. If the congregation still intends to terminate its ELCA membership, the synod council will determine whether it must approve the termination, and if so, will undertake to reach a decision as promptly as possible.

If the congregation council decides to proceed toward termination, the report of the consultation team must be mailed to all member households of the congregation in the interest of full disclosure to the members at the time of voting. In addition to the report of the consultation panel, the members of the congregation must receive notification from the congregation council of the intended status of the congregation after termination of relationship with the ELCA; specifically, whether they intend to remain an independent congregation, to associate with another recognized Lutheran church body, or to associate with some other non-Lutheran denomination or church body.

### **Second Congregational Meeting**

If the issues cannot be resolved in the consultation process outlined above, the congregation council may choose to call a second special meeting of the congregation to take the “second vote” on whether or not to terminate its covenant with the other congregations of the ELCA. The bishop or an observer appointed by the bishop must be in attendance at this meeting.

The resolution considered at this meeting should be similar or identical to the following:

“Resolved, that \_\_\_\_\_ Lutheran Church hereby terminates its relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and its continuing covenant with the other congregations of the ELCA, effective \_\_\_\_\_(date) or upon ratification of this decision by the synod council of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod, if required by the ELCA Constitution.”

If this second resolution is passed by a 2/3 majority of adult congregation members present, the synod bishop is immediately notified by mail.

### **Additional Matters**

The final resolution of a vote to terminate the covenant between the congregation and the other congregations of the ELCA, and the final resolution of property ownership and disposition will be determined in strict accordance with the provisions of Chapter 9 or the ELCA Constitution.

For congregations that were established by the ELCA and for congregations that were members of the Lutheran Church in America, any decision by a congregation to terminate its relationship with the ELCA must be ratified by the synod council in order to take effect. In such cases, the synod council will review the findings of the consultation panel. To assist in the council’s determination, the Synod Vice President may also appoint a committee to investigate the situation and make a recommendation to the full council.

If the synod council ratifies the congregational resolution, the covenant between the congregation and the ELCA is terminated and the Secretary of the ELCA is notified. If the synod council fails to ratify the congregational action, the congregation continues as a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

For congregations that were members of other predecessor churches (ALC or AELC), synod council ratification is not required.