
INTRODUCTION and OVERVIEW

At the August 27, 2009 Hosanna! Council meeting, the following resolution was unanimously approved:

"The Hosanna! Lutheran Church Council establishes a Task Force, reportable to the Council. The purpose of this Task Force shall be the exploration and recommendation for which Lutheran Church body Hosanna! should be affiliated with and "be in community with" as we pursue God's work as we strive to help people connect with Christ, one another and those in need. This Task Force shall report its progress to the Council at its October 2009 meeting or a specially called meeting for this purpose."

The role of the Task Force was to research, report and recommend to the Hosanna! Council which of three options Hosanna! should be affiliated with. The three options explored were:

- Remain affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)
- Affiliate with the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC)
- Affiliate with the Lutheran Coalition for Renewal (Lutheran CORE)

For each of the three alternatives, the Task Force researched the following 10 areas:

1. Does our Constitution allow affiliation change and what is the process? (answer = yes, as outlined in the Hosanna! Constitution and Bylaws)
2. Benefits - pensions, insurance (answer = not an issue regardless of affiliation)
3. National and / or international ministry partners - today and into the future (answer = will not affect regardless of affiliation)
4. Theology - the basis by which we understand God and His work in the world, which Lutheran body reflects Hosanna!'s understanding of theology?
5. Authority of scripture - which Lutheran body reflects Hosanna!'s understanding of the authority of scripture?
6. Practices - what does the Church teach people about how to live God's way and which Lutheran body reflects Hosanna!'s understanding of God's way and its teaching?
7. Congregational and Pastoral support community - wider Church issues, engaging the world with the Gospel and which Lutheran body reflects Hosanna!'s understanding of Church community?
8. Availability of Pastors (including interim Pastors) - how to find, how to evaluate them, how get approval
9. Pastoral accountability - ethics, disciplinary action
10. How affiliation affects Hosanna!'s calling and church life - as we connect with Christ, One Another and Those In Need

The first 3 items were simple, clear and quickly addressed as shown above. The Task Force broke into working groups to address areas 4-9 as follows: 4 & 5, 6 & 7, and 8 & 9. Item 10 was an over-arching consideration as each working group conducted their due diligence.

TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION

Based on Task Force member research, (which included personal contacts with LCMC and Lutheran CORE organizational leaders and congregations; consultation and discussion with multiple representatives of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod and the ELCA including Rev. Steve Srock – Synod Secretary and Executive Committee member and Rev. John Dumke – Synod Council member and Executive Committee member; monitoring the ELCA Churchwide Assembly proceedings live via the Internet; as well as trips to observe the Lutheran CORE Convocation in Fishers, IN and the LCMC Annual Gathering in Fargo, ND), the Task Force’s findings can be summarized in the following table:

Does each area fit with Hosanna! as we are a Biblical, Missional, Evangelical, Lutheran Congregation dedicated to Connecting with Christ, One Another and Those In Need?

	ELCA	LCMC	Lutheran CORE
Authority of Scripture and Theology	No	Yes	Yes
Practices and Community	Yes and No	Yes	Not Applicable
Availability of Pastors and Accountability	No	Yes	Not Applicable

It is the recommendation of 7 Task Force members that Hosanna! discontinue its affiliation with the ELCA and become affiliated with the LCMC going forward. One Task Force member dissents with the rest of the group and recommends that Hosanna! continue its affiliation with the ELCA.

As one can see from the table, Lutheran CORE is not an option for Hosanna! to affiliate with mainly because they are not a Lutheran Church body in the same sense that the ELCA and LCMC are. As we learned at their Convocation, CORE is taking the next 12 months to discern and work towards becoming what God intends it to be – whatever that turns out to be. CORE organizationally is an independent entity which has individual members, congregation members, and other organizations as members. Yes, as an example, ELCA churches and Pastors can be members of CORE, but there are also LCMC churches and Pastors who are members of CORE.

With this in mind, the Task Force still conducted investigation into all 3 options, but effectively removed the affiliation option of Lutheran CORE in their consideration for recommendation.

Each working group has prepared a report highlighting elements of their research central to the comparisons between the 3 options. These individual reports follow.

AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE and THEOLOGY

“The grass withers, the flower fades; but the Word of our God will stand forever.” – Isaiah 40:8

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” – Hebrews 13:8

"Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink – even if you have no money! Come, take your choice of wine or milk – it's all free! Why spend your money on food that does not give you strength? Why pay for food that does you no good? Listen, and I will tell you where to get food that is good for the soul! Come to me with your ears wide open. Listen, for the life of your soul is at stake. I am ready to make an everlasting covenant with you. I will give you all the mercies and unfailing love that I promised to David. He displayed my power by being my witness and a leader among the nations.”
– Isaiah 55:1-4

In keeping with the covenant promise between God and we, His people, He calls us to be obedient to His eternal living Word and live out the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. We are to follow Biblical teachings, as summarized by Jesus Himself:

“Jesus replied, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the other commandments and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.”
– Matthew 22:37-40

These laws He put in place to protect us and guide our daily lives. This understanding is at the heart of Lutheran tradition and what Hosanna! preaches, teaches and practices every day. As such, this is the lens through which we evaluated the three options regarding Hosanna!’s Lutheran Church body affiliation. The differences between them are distinctly clear and glaringly apparent.

ELCA: The erosion of the authority of scripture and the elevation of relativistic human interpretation of the Bible has been occurring within the ELCA for more than 10 years now. This movement away from historical confessional Lutheran and global Church understanding gained momentum in the 1999 “Called to Common Mission” agreement between the ELCA and the Episcopal Church. Through the actions approved in Minneapolis this past August, the new ELCA policy of “bound conscience” has effectively changed the Doctrine of Sin as no longer being defined by God through His Word, but rather as a matter of personal opinion which cannot be questioned by others.

In August, for example, the ELCA has admittedly changed the teaching and theology of God-ordained marriage and the 6th Commandment prohibiting adultery. As Jesus admonishes us:

“Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”
– Matthew 5:19

Yet, this troubling situation goes far deeper and further than simply the lightning rod issue of sexuality and includes other politically-motivated agendas. It is clearly the ELCA's perspective that God's laws and agenda are subject to human interpretation. Representatives of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod of the ELCA, in a discussion with Task Force members, were asked "What is sin and who defines it?" The Synod leaders replied "Scripture defines sin and humans interpret scripture" and "There are no absolutes."

Instead, as Hosanna! understands that God's Word is the source of truth that we ourselves must submit to – even if we don't happen to agree with God's perspective. We are reminded:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord."

– Isaiah 55:8

Luther himself, in his Large Catechism teaching regarding the Sixth Petition of the Lord's Prayer, writes:

"Then comes the devil, inciting and provoking in all directions, but especially agitating matters that concern both the conscience and spiritual affairs, namely, to induce us to despise and disregard both the Word and works of God to tear us away from faith, hope, love and bring us into misbelief, false security, and obduracy, or, on the other hand, to despair, denial of God, blasphemy, and innumerable other shocking things. These are indeed snares and nets, yea, real fiery darts which are shot most venomously into the heart, not by flesh and blood, but by the devil."

The ELCA's position is clearly in direct contradiction to Hosanna!'s understanding and goes against historical Christian and Lutheran precedent, the witness of the Church catholic worldwide, and the Word of God. It is for these reasons (and more) that this working group of the Hosanna! Task Force concurs with many prominent confessional Lutheran theologians, (as well as with countless other ELCA Pastors and congregations,) and rejects the ELCA's new theology and standing related to the authority of scripture and dismissal of historical Lutheran Christian theological teaching.

LCMC and Lutheran Core: Both the LCMC and Lutheran CORE share and hold firmly onto the same beliefs and understandings that Hosanna! affirms. This is clear from interviews with CORE and LCMC leaders as well as laid out in the published CORE "Common Confession" statement and the LCMC's "Statement of Faith".

PRACTICES and COMMUNITY

In the area of the comparative practices, listed below are those we researched across the 3 different groups being considered:

1. We practice Open Communion
2. We are a Confessional Lutheran Congregation
3. Infant Baptism (or older)
4. We welcome all people
5. We are in the world, but not of the world
6. Biblical – pointing people to the authority of God’s Word
7. Those who choose the homosexual lifestyle will not be in leadership positions
8. Autonomous in our decision making
9. We connect with likeminded ministries
10. We believe in the priesthood of all believers

ELCA: As Hosanna! has been a part of the ELCA since its formation, we’ve successfully conducted mission and ministry in affiliation with the ELCA within its organizational hierarchy of regional Synods, Bishops, boards, committees, departments and divisions. However, due to the actions taken at the Assembly in August, in particular, items 5 through 8 above are areas where we begin to see differences between the practices of the ELCA and those here at Hosanna! The actions taken at the Assembly in August begin to take the ELCA in a more worldly direction, away from the authority of scripture as covered in “The Authority of Scripture and Theology” section. Hosanna!’s stance on the homosexual lifestyle could put the autonomy of Hosanna! at risk at some point in the future regarding potential discipline from the Synod for non-compliance to changes in policy and procedure resulting from the August Assembly decisions. As mentioned in the “Availability of Pastors” section, this is already affecting the Call process of Hosanna!. Regarding Community, there are times when Hosanna! has taken the lead on Synod-wide projects and initiatives and other times when we have been held at a distance – mostly with regard to issues and topics where Synod leadership disagreed with Hosanna!’s leadership.

LCMC: The LCMC was formed in 1999 and to this day is organized structurally very much similar to the old ALC (which was one of the Lutheran Church bodies that came together to form the ELCA.) LCMC is a flat association of congregations and Pastors operating autonomously, but conducting mission and ministry in partnership and accountability to one another while professing a common Statement of Faith.

They have currently only 2 full-time paid staff (and are in process of hiring 2 part-time employees to assist in handling paperwork and correspondence.) If three or more LCMC churches are interested in being more deeply connected based on geography or common mission / ministry, they are free to form a formal LCMC District, which fosters community and shared purpose. Churches can belong to any number of Districts – or none at all. For the purposes of regional representation on the LCMC’s Board of Trustees and Ministry Board, congregations are set into geographically-based Areas whose borders will change in order to keep each Area of equivalent size (in terms of numbers of congregations in each Area.)

The business and affairs of the LCMC are conducted by an elected Board of Trustees. Credentialing, clergy roster and if necessary, accountability of Pastors are conducted by an elected Ministry Board (and is discussed further in the document under the “Availability of Pastors and Accountability” section.)

LCMC-wide resolutions and decisions are made in a manner dramatically different from the ELCA – and give decision making voice and empowerment to all member congregations regardless of location or size. Each congregation selects at minimum 2 voting delegates to the LCMC Annual Meeting. Every congregation which has weekly average worship attendance over 500 is entitled to 1 additional delegate per 250 additional average worship attendees. Any LCMC Constitutional amendments or policy / practice resolutions require a 2/3 majority approval of gathered delegates at an Annual Meeting, but then for final approval, each LCMC congregation also votes independently on the issue and 2/3 of all LCMC congregation votes (each congregation having only 1 vote) must approve of the change in order for the item to become adopted.

Hosanna!’s and LCMC’s practices compare consistently across all 10 items. Based on the fact-finding trip to Fargo, ND, there is a very strong sense of community and cooperative ministry / mission between the LCMC congregations and leadership. One example being a LCMC-wide Men’s Group that works to raise funds for start-up mission congregations and helps with the educational debt of seminary students and recent seminary graduates. LCMC congregations are encouraged to help financially support the LCMC with benevolence giving, but are directed to primarily focus financial benevolence support on those missions and ministries where each congregation feels called to support in order to advance the cause of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the world.

Lutheran CORE: CORE does have some common practices and shared community efforts that are consistent with Hosanna!’s, but these are not relevant to our decision process here as explained in the “Recommendation” section – CORE is not a Lutheran Church body that Hosanna! can consider affiliation with.

AVAILABILITY OF PASTORS and ACCOUNTABILITY (including Interim Pastors)***How to find Pastors, how to evaluate them, how to obtain approval***

ELCA: The ELCA has control of the Call process. Bishops must approve all Rostered Leader Profiles, all recommendations for Call, and all Letters of Call within the ELCA. According to one resource, the typical ELCA Synod presently has about 25 Pastoral vacancies, with not enough new Pastors to replace the ones who retire, die or leave ministry. Candidates are provided to congregations by the local Synod. Hosanna! has been seeking an Associate Pastor since spring 2005 and has received only one candidate from the Metropolitan Chicago Synod (in early 2009). A new Mobility Database has been developed as a tool to Synod offices and congregations entering the Call process, however its effectiveness has yet to be determined. It was developed as a solution to a recognized problem that there was frustration amongst clergy and congregations with the Call process. The new tool continues to rely on Synodical Bishops to design and manage the Call process in a way that fits their Synodical context, although they are hoped to encourage a higher degree of creativity, transparency and initiative than may have been true before. Hosanna! has been told by the Associate to the Bishop responsible for our area that because of our position (as stated several times in letters from Council to the Synod) it is unlikely that Hosanna! will receive further candidates. As well, the Synod has turned away a candidate who specifically expressed interest in being considered for Hosanna!'s Associate Pastor position without allowing that individual to even speak with our Call Committee or our Senior Pastor.

LCMC: According to Rev. Bruce Wilder, LCMC Pastor and Board of Ministry member, the LCMC does not micromanage or control the Call process. Congregations are free to contact, interview and Call any Pastor on the LCMC Clergy List. LCMC currently has more Pastors than vacancies. LCMC and its Areas will maintain a list of those serving who have subscribed to the LCMC Statement of Faith. The list will include those with a Certified Call (candidates who have received a seminary education), a Contract Call (those without seminary education but, in the opinion of a single congregation, the person is able to fill a Pastoral role in a congregation and is Called to serve at that congregation only), retired (emeritus) and those currently on leave from Call. After three years without a Call (except retired pastors), a candidate's status will be evaluated by the LCMC Ministry Board or its designates. List of Clergy will be made available to all LCMC congregations upon request. Procedures for a Certified Call and/or a Contract Call in LCMC were reviewed by the Hosanna! Task Force and found to be satisfactory. In addition, the LCMC provides a Call Packet available to anyone, which we found to be an excellent resource for both congregations as well as Pastoral candidates. However, due diligence on any candidate lies with the congregation.

Lutheran CORE: Does not have a roster nor a Call / candidacy process in place. CORE does have a "Supporter List" of rostered ELCA leaders who subscribe to CORE's Common Confession statement, but no formal procedures to connect people on this list to congregations looking for Pastoral candidates.

Pastoral accountability – ethics, disciplinary action

ELCA: The ELCA has a process for the discipline of clergy and rostered laypersons. The disciplinary process is set forth in Chapter 20 of the ELCA Constitution and Bylaws, and in Rules Governing Disciplinary Proceedings Against an Ordained Minister, a Rostered Layperson, or a Congregation of the ELCA. The booklet Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline. Ordained Ministers, Associates in Ministry, Members of the Deaconess Community, and Diaconal Ministers, Congregations sets forth the types of conduct that may lead to discipline. The Synodical Bishop and four other groups have authority to file written charges. Prior to that, the process is informal, largely within the discretion of the Synodical Bishop and often guided by Synodical-specific policies. The Synodical Bishop has the option of convening a five member panel to assist the Bishop by evaluating evidence or making recommendations to resolve the controversy. Filing written charges make the process very formal. The ELCA Secretary receives written charges, and a Discipline Hearing Committee (DHC) is convened. This committee is made up of 13 people selected from Synod and Churchwide disciplinary committees which were elected at a prior Synod Assembly or Churchwide Assembly. A hearing is held before this DHC and a decision is made. Decisions can be appealed to the 12 member Committee on Appeals that was previously elected by the Churchwide Assembly. A decision by this committee is final.

In summary, Synodical Bishops generally hold Pastors accountable. Most often discipline is handled at the Synod level, and the Metro Chicago Synod is viewed by our Senior Pastor and others as being subjective and inconsistent. It should also be recognized that past disciplinary action against Hosanna! by the Synod, included delaying our Call process for a length of time.

LCMC: All Pastors are accountable to the LCMC and agree to abide by the constitution, by-laws and ministry standards of the LCMC. There is an agreed-upon disciplinary process for addressing congregations and Pastors whose actions violate the LCMC statements of faith and practice.

Pastors are accountable to God and to the local congregation. If problems arise, they are to be dealt with first and foremost following a Matthew 18 model by the local Congregational Council. Only when issues cannot be resolved at the congregational level should they be brought to the attention of the LCMC Board of Trustees or Ministry Board. As an example, two LCMC Pastors have been removed from the Clergy List after investigations.

Lutheran CORE: As CORE has no structural or procedural accountability in place, this discussion does not apply to CORE.

CONCLUSION

This is what the LORD says: "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls." – Jeremiah 6:16

Many hours of research, discussion, thoughts, and prayers have gone into this decision. Affiliating with the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ will provide the path forward for Hosanna! to stay Connected with Christ, One Another, and Those in Need and remain true to our understanding of God's Word and how it directs our earthly lives.

The Task Force encourages everyone to further their own understanding and dig into the websites of all 3 organizations for themselves. Visit: www.elca.org; www.lcmc.net; and www.lutherancore.org for additional information.

May God's guidance and blessings continue to be with us all.