

Study Guide on

The Right Form of an Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation Independent of the State – C.F.W. Walther

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Introduction

“An Evangelical Lutheran local congregation is an assembly of believing Christians at a certain place among whom God’s Word is preached purely according to the Confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the holy sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution as stated in the Gospel, in the midst of whom, however, there is always also an admixture of spurious Christians and hypocrites, and at times even public sinners.”

(John 14:23; 10:27; 8:31-32; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 5:1-2; 6:5-8; 11:18-19; 15:12; 2 Corinthians 12:21; Matthew 13:47-48; Augsburg Confession VII; VIII)

What makes a congregation a Lutheran congregation?

In addition to the Bible, what else needs to thus be read and studied by the members of the congregation?

How can this be done in your congregation?

“A congregation is independent of the state when the latter allows it to rule itself in all things.”

(John 18:36; 2 Corinthians 10:4; Matthew 23:8; Luke 22:25-26; Augsburg Confession XXVIII.10-18)

If the government would pass legislation against churches that do not ordain women into the office of the holy ministry or that teach that homosexuality is wrong; what should be our response? (Acts 5:29)

If the government would remove the tax exempt status of congregations, abolish charitable donations made to churches on the income tax form, or remove the clergy residence deduction for pastors; what should be our response? (Matthew 22:18-21; Romans 13:7)

What is the difference between the above two scenarios?

Concerning The Rights Of An Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation

“All the rights of an Evangelical Lutheran local congregation are embraced in the keys of the kingdom of heaven, which the Lord gave to His whole church originally and immediately and in such a way that they belong to every congregation in equal measure, the smallest as well as the largest.”

(Matthew 16:15-19; 18:17-20; John 20:22-23; 1 Peter 2:5,9; 1 Corinthians 3:21-23; 1 Corinthians 12:27; Small Catechism V; Large Catechism, Second Part 55; Treatise 24)

What is the one purpose and task of your congregation?

From whom does your congregation derive the power and authority to do this?

How is this done in your congregation?

Concerning The Duties Of An Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation

1. In the first place the congregation should see to it that the Word of God dwells richly and has free course in its midst.

According to Colossians 3:16, how does the Word of God dwell in us richly?

Why is it necessary that the Word of God dwells in us richly? (John 20:31; Romans 1:16; 10:17; 2 Timothy 3:15)

1.1 The congregation exercises this duty especially by establishing and maintaining the public ministry in its midst.

(Ephesians 4:11-14; Luke 10:16; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 13:17; Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 4:1; 14:33-34; 1 Timothy 2:11-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20; Augsburg Confession XXVIII. 21; Apology XIII. 11-13)

Is the office of the holy ministry instituted by God or by the congregation?

Is having a pastor an optional matter for a congregation?

Read Ephesians 4:11; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-3. What are some of the words used in these verses for those who have been called into the public ministry? What do those words mean or imply as to the task of pastors?

1.2 The first step in the appropriate care for the establishment and maintenance of the public ministry in a congregation is the election and calling of a pastor.

(Acts 1:15-26; 6:1-6; 14:23; Titus 1:5; Treatise 13, 67-68)

According to Titus 1:6-9, what are the main qualifications a congregation should consider when calling a pastor?

What are the procedures for calling a pastor according to your congregation's constitution?

1.3 In order that the Word of God may dwell richly in a congregation it is necessary, moreover, to introduce, not legalistically, but earnestly, the observance of regular services on Sunday and the customary festive days as also of certain weekday services, especially during Advent and Lent, annual days of humiliation and prayer, harvest festivals, general or special thanksgiving, and other sacred feasts.

(Colossians 2:16-17; Luke 11:28; Acts 2:42; Hebrews 10:24-25; Augsburg Confession XV; XXVIII. 55-60; Large Catechism, First Part 87-92, 96-97)

According to Luke 10:38-42, what is the one necessary thing for members of your congregation to be doing?

According to 1 Timothy 4:13, what is the chief task of the pastor in the congregation's worship services?

1.4 In order that the Word of God may dwell richly in a congregation it is necessary also that the members permit their pastor, as the steward of the mysteries of God, to baptize their newborn infants without delay; that they allow him to prepare them for the full appreciation of the means of grace and in due time to confirm them publicly; that they often desire and receive the comfort of absolution and of the sacrament of the body and blood of Jesus Christ; and this indeed after a preceding examination and confession; that they permit their betrothed publicly to be blessed by God's Word and prayer at their marriage; that in sickness, death, and other tribulations and trials they let themselves be instructed and comforted by the pastor from God's Word; and finally that they permit him to give their dead a Christian burial.

Read Mark 10:13-15; John 3:5-6; Acts 2:38-39; Augsburg Confession IX. Why should newborn infants be baptized without delay? Who is responsible for bringing infants to the pastor to be baptized?

Read 1 Corinthians 11:28; Apology XV. 40-42; Small Catechism, Preface 1-6; Large Catechism, Shorter Preface 1-6. What is necessary prior to admission to the Lord's Supper? What are the basic parts of instruction in the Christian faith? What materials, requirements, etc. are used in catechetical instruction in your congregation?

Read John 20:23; 2 Corinthians 2:10; Hebrews 13:17; James 5:16; Augsburg Confession XI; Smalcald Articles VIII. 1-2; Small Catechism V. 16-20. Do members of your congregation avail themselves of the opportunity for private confession? What could be done to revitalize this neglected practice?

Read 1 Corinthians 11:20-26; Acts 2:42; Augsburg Confession XXIV. 1-3; Apology XXIV. 1; Small Catechism, Preface 21-24. How often is the Lord's Supper celebrated and offered in your congregation? Do the majority of the members avail themselves of the opportunity to commune often?

According to 1 Timothy 4:3-5, what is essential in a marriage service? (See also the Lutheran Service Book Agenda, p. 64)

According to James 5:14-15, what should members of the congregation who are sick or facing other problems do?

In Acts 8:2 we read of the burial of Stephen. How are (or should) funeral services be conducted in your congregation? (See the Lutheran Service Book Agenda, pp. 117-118)

1.5 In order that the Word of God may dwell richly in a congregation it is necessary, moreover, that, if possible, the congregation establish an Evangelical Lutheran parish school and call and appoint for this purpose orthodox, pious, and competent teachers.

(Matthew 18:10; Ephesians 6:4; Deuteronomy 6:6-7; 2 Timothy 3:15; Large Catechism, First Part 172-177)

Who has the primary responsibility for the instruction of children in God's Word?

What is your congregation doing (or could be doing) to assist in the instruction of children in God's Word?

1.6 In order that the Word of God may richly and rightly dwell in a congregation it is finally necessary that the congregation shall tolerate no divisions by conventicles, that is, by meetings for doctrinal instruction or prayer conducted by persons not called and beyond the supervision of the divinely instituted public ministry.

(1 Corinthians 11:18-19; 12:28-29; 14:28; Romans 10:15; Hebrews 13:17; James 3:1; Augsburg Confession XIV)

If your congregation has small groups, cell groups, societies, and the like; who is to have supervision over them?

2. The congregation should see to it that purity of doctrine and life is preserved in its midst, and therefore it is to exercise church discipline in regard to both.

2.1 All members of a congregation shall strive to grow and become enriched in all doctrine and all knowledge that they may not remain children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, but that they may examine and judge the doctrine proclaimed to them, according to God's Word.

(Matthew 7:15-16; Acts 17:10-11; Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 1:4-6; Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21; 2 Peter 3:17-18; 1 John 4:1; 2 John 9-11; Hebrews 5:11-14; Augsburg Confession, Conclusion 6-7)

Who is to judge whether or not what is being taught and practiced in a congregation is correct?

On what basis is this judgment to be made?

What, therefore, do members of the congregation need to be doing?

How is this being done in your congregation?

2.2 A congregation shall also establish the office of such elders or overseers as do not labor in the Word and doctrine, but assist the incumbent of the office of the divine Word in ruling, disciplining, and keeping order in the congregation.

(1 Corinthians 12:28; Acts 6:1-4; 1 Timothy 3:8-12)

What, according to your congregation's constitution, is the task of elders or deacons?

2.3 The congregation shall see to it that only doctrinally pure books, approved by the orthodox church, are introduced and tolerated in church and school and that confessional ceremonies are not discontinued.

(1 Thessalonians 5:21; 2 Timothy 1:13; Colossians 3:16; Augsburg Confession XXIV. 3; Apology XV. 20-21, 51-52; Apology XXIV. 1; Formula of Concord, SD, X. 10-17)

What service book or hymnal is used in your congregation for all worship services?

What orders of service are used for marriages and funerals?

The maxim coined by Prosper of Aquitaine in the fifth century states, "*lex ordandi, lex credendi*" ("the law of prayer is the law of faith"); that is, as you worship, so you believe and as you believe so you worship. What does this mean, and how does it apply to this thesis?

2.4 The congregation shall in public assembly, according to God's Word, in Christian order, and with the employment of witnesses, examine those of its members who are reported as disobedient to God's Word in doctrine or life, and have already been reprov'd in vain according Matt. 18:15-16, privately as well as before witnesses, or whose false doctrine or sin is manifest and known to all.

(Matthew 18:17-20; 1 Corinthians 5:1-5; 2 Corinthians 13:1; Galatians 6:1-2; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15; Titus 3:10-11; 1 John 2:19; Smalcald Articles IX; Large Catechism, First Part 276, 279-280)

What does your congregation's constitution state as to the proper procedure in this matter of excommunication and self-exclusion?

2.5 Congregations shall not be so presumptuous as arbitrarily to depose their pastors and others who administer an ecclesiastical office. But if they fall into pernicious errors and are found guilty by lawful procedure and refuse to accept instruction from God's Word either by the congregation or by the pastors called in for this purpose; or if they have become manifest as contumacious impenitent sinners; or if they have committed an offense by which they have lost their good report among those who are without and by which they cause the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, then Christian congregations in Christian order must remove them from office as such as God Himself has put out.

(1 Timothy 3:7; 5:19; Titus 1:7-9; 2 Peter 2:1-3; Matthew 7:15-16; Apology IV. 233-234, 240-243)

What does your congregation's constitution state as to the proper procedure in this matter of removing their pastor?

("You pastors, see to it that you don't expect too much from your people. You can't turn every piece of wood into a dowel. It simply can't be done; not all wood is suitable for dowels. Not every indiscretion is of the sort that necessitates the procedures of church discipline. But once the devil has created dislike and animosity in you toward a particular member, he sees to it that you deal far more sternly with his transgression than you do with a member who has always treated you with love and goodwill. 'Divisions will also easily develop if the people immediately want to master and nitpick everything in the life and conduct of the bishops or pastors,' says the Apology. Also our dear congregations should note this carefully. When a pastor makes an occasional mistake, they should not be too harsh in their judgment but should consider, 'Did he do that out of weakness? Is it really serious enough to sound the alarm or not?' And if you determine that it was done in weakness and is a matter of little importance, then you should either ignore it or tell him in a friendly way, 'You did not handle that correctly.' Otherwise, if the congregation insists on nitpicking about every little thing, then the beautiful relationship of the spiritual father and his spiritual children will come to an end. Then the devil laughs up his sleeve, when the people no longer heed the pastor's word; then he has torn the members from their orthodox pastor. We must support one another! The pastor should not expect the members of his congregation to be nothing but angels, and the members should not demand that their pastor be an angel either, for that he cannot be. . . . We cannot avoid offending one another, but we can let ourselves be reconciled, and then we can forget the whole incident." – Walther)

2.6 Lastly, the congregation shall also see to it that neither the congregation nor individual church members enter into any church union with unbelievers or heterodox communions and so become guilty of religious unionism in matters of faith and church.

(2 Corinthians 6:14-18; Romans 16:17; 2 John 9-11; 1 Corinthians 10:16-21; Treatise 41; Formula of Concord, SD, X. 5-6).

What do these passages say about such things as: community World Day of Prayer services, participating with other churches in Canada Day or Thanksgiving Day religious observances, members of your congregation communing at congregations that are outside our fellowship of faith, promoting and attending non-denominational or joint-denominational evangelism crusades or youth events, pastors outside our confessional fellowship participating in marriage or funeral services in your congregation?

3. The congregation must make it its concern that all its members are well taken care of in their bodily needs and do not suffer want or are forsaken in any need.

3.1 In the first place, the congregation should do everything in its power to see to it that its pastor has food, clothing, and a home for himself and his family.

According to Matthew 10:9-10; 1 Corinthians 9:14; Galatians 6:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; and 1 Timothy 5:17-18, what responsibility does the congregation have toward its pastor?

How is the pastor's salary, housing, and other benefits determined in your congregation?

3.2 The congregation shall also provide food, clothing, habitation, and all other necessities for the poor, widows, orphans, aged, and invalids, which these themselves cannot procure and for which they have no relatives who first of all owe them these things.

(Galatians 6:10; Romans 12:13; James 1:27; 1 Corinthians 12:26; 1 Timothy 5:16; Matthew 25:35-36)

How is this being done in your congregation?

4. The congregation must see to it that all things are done decently and in order, and this not only before the Lord but also before men.

(1 Corinthians 14:33, 40; Matthew 18:17; Acts 6:1-4; Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:27-28; 2 Corinthians 8:20-21; 1 Peter 4:10-11; Augsburg Confession XXVIII. 53-55; Formula of Concord, Epitome, X. 4)

In order that a matter of church discipline might be discussed and acted upon by the congregation, in order that the congregation might gather together to call a pastor, in order that the congregation might make provision for the support of its pastor's material and family needs, in order that the congregation might set times for worship services, in order that the congregation might make decisions relative to the care and upkeep of the building where the people gather together to hear God's Word and receive the Sacrament, in order that the offerings that members of the congregation give might be properly received and used, in order that matters pertaining to the church at large might be discussed and acted upon; what does the congregation need to have?

Does the Bible command that a congregation be organized or structured in a certain way; for example, voters assembly, boards, etc.?

How is your congregation organized or structured according to your constitution? Is there too much organization and structure or too little?

("A written church order (constitution) shall contain only what is most necessary and has been tried out in the practice of the congregation." – Walther)

("I know well and have experienced it myself that when laws are enacted too early and before they are tried out in practice, they rarely succeed. The people are not used to them, as those think who sit apart and picture to themselves in word or thought how things should proceed. To prescribe and to obey differ greatly from each other. If some things prevail and come into use, then it is easy to add to them and to arrange them in order. To make laws is indeed a great, glorious, and important thing, but without God's Spirit nothing good will result from it. Therefore it is necessary to proceed with fear and humility before God and to observe these bounds: short and sweet, little and well, tender and always onward. After these things have become rooted, then more will be added as is necessary." – Luther)

("In a Lutheran congregation, matters which are decided in God's Word and are attested in the Confessions of the church cannot be decided by a majority, but every member must subject himself to the Word of God as the supreme judge, and to the Confession as the witness of the orthodox church. Adiaphora, however, that is, matters which in God's Word are neither commanded nor forbidden, are to be decided according to the principles of love and fairness." – Walther)

5. The congregation has the duty to devote itself to the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace and love also with the orthodox church beyond its area.

5.1 A congregation shall diligently pray together for all saints.

(Ephesians 6:18-20; Colossians 4:2-4; Acts 4:23-24a, 29-30)

Besides the needs of individual members of your congregation, who do you (or should you) pray for in the Divine Services?

5.2 As every true Evangelical Lutheran local congregation has the same official confessions as the true Evangelical Lutheran Church, it should also diligently seek to be united with the latter in life and with it to speak the same thing, in the same mind and in the same judgment.

(1 Corinthians 1:10; Ephesians 4:1-3; Romans 12:16; 1 Corinthians 11:2, 16; Book of Concord, Preface, pp. 13 (last paragraph)-14)

How does this thesis apply to the congregations of our synod in such areas as –

- worship forms and services?
- communion practices?
- marriage and funeral services?

5.3 Every congregation shall agree with its neighboring sister congregation on their mutual local boundaries.

(Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 4:15; 5:1-2; Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 3:3-7)

(“The membership of a congregation constitutes a parish. Territorial parish lines are not established by divine right. Nevertheless the follow reasons may be cited for establishing such lines: a. God is not the author of confusion, and therefore He wants all things to be done decently and in order, 1 Cor. 14:40; 1 Peter 4:15. b. Schisms and sects in a congregation should be avoided, and church members should not be given occasion to attach themselves to the person of one pastor in preference to that of another. This in itself is a sectarian tendency, which Paul condemns, 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:3-7. c. The private care of souls, an essential duty of every pastor, is rendered more difficult where there are no parish lines and in many cases is impossible, nor can church discipline be well exercised. A member who on account of distance no longer regularly attends church services shall be advised to affiliate with the nearest orthodox Lutheran congregation in his neighbourhood. d. The example of the apostolic church favours the separation of congregations by parish lines; for in the

days of the apostles, bishops were appointed for every city, Titus 1:5. The example of the apostles, it is true, is not equal to an express command which must be obeyed by Christians at all times and under all circumstances; yet the custom of apostolic times speaks in favour of the reasons given above, and therefore it is proper that we should not without good reason fail to follow such example.”
– Lutheran Church-Canada Handbook, Bylaw 4.61)

5.4 A congregation shall regard the need of its sister churches as its own and help them as much as it can.

(1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:1-14; 9:1-15; 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10)

If a neighbouring sister congregation is without the services of a pastor, what is the responsibility of your congregation?

If your congregation or a neighbouring sister congregation is unable to support a pastor due to its limited size and financial restraints, what should the two congregations do?

When your congregation sends offerings designated for missions to the district, how are a portion of these funds to be used?

How many financially assisted (subsidized) congregations are there in our East District?

Can you list them?

Are the members of our congregation being made aware of the needs of their sister congregations?

6. It is also the duty of the congregation to do what it can in order that the whole church may be built up and promoted.

Why does Walther not list this as the first and primary duty of the congregation – missions and outreach? (*“It is true, brethren, as you well know, that in our day it is common for people to say, ‘Emphasizing doctrine so much only harms and hinders the kingdom of God, yes, even destroys it.’ Many say, ‘Instead of disputing over doctrine so much, we should much rather be concerned with souls and with leading them to Christ.’ But all who speak in this way do not really know what they are saying or what they are doing. As foolish as it would be to scold a farmer for being concerned about sowing good seed and to demand of him simply to be concerned about a good harvest, so foolish it is to scold those who are concerned first and foremost with the doctrine, and to demand of them that they should rather seek to rescue souls. For just as the farmer who wants a good crop must first of all be concerned about good seed, so the church must above all be concerned about right doctrine if it would save souls.”* – Walther)

6.1 A congregation shall see to it that gifted boys and young men are dedicated to the service of the church and that it is made possible for them to prepare themselves for this work.

(1 Corinthians 12:7; 1 Timothy 3:1; 2 Timothy 2:15; Small Catechism, Preface 19-20)

If a congregation is to establish and maintain the public ministry in its midst, where is it going to get its pastor from?

If pastors are to preach and teach the whole counsel of God’s Word in its truth and purity, how do they learn to do this?

Who is responsible for the support of the training of pastors?

How does (or could) your congregation carry out this duty?

6.2 A congregation should see to it that the bread of life will be broken to such fellow believers as are in spiritual need of it; it should therefore support those who desire to do this work of love.

(Acts 11:19-20; Philippians 4:10-20; Galatians 6:10)

Where are the missions of our synod that your congregation is supporting financially?

What is your congregation’s mission goal?

6.3 A congregation should be zealous to spread the written Word of God.

(1 Thessalonians 1:8; 5:27; Colossians 4:16)

What are some of the auxiliaries and listed service organizations of our synod and other organizations that have as their purpose the spread of God's Word and which are supported financially by various individual members of our congregations?

What is (or could) your congregation as a whole do to carry out this duty?

6.4 A congregation should do its share that the Gospel may be brought to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death, namely to the wretched heathen and Jews.

(Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Peter 2:9; Acts 13:1-5; Jude 22-23)

What are some of the mission prayers in the Lutheran Service Book, pp. 305-306?

According to Hymn #826 st. 2-3 in the Lutheran Service Book, what are four things can every member of your congregation do to help bring the Gospel to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death?

6.5 A congregation should be ready to unite with other Evangelical Lutheran churches in the land if it has opportunity to do so and the union serves and promotes the glory of God and the spread of His kingdom.

(Ephesians 4:1-6; 1 Corinthians 12:7, 12; Acts 15; Smalcald Articles, Part II, IV. 9)

What is your congregation doing as a member of Lutheran Church-Canada? (See Handbook of LCC, Constitution, Article III)

What must your congregation do to remain a member of Lutheran Church-Canada? (See Handbook of LCC, Constitution, Article VI)