

Lutheran Mission Matters



Volume XXVII, No. 1 (Issue 54) May 2019

Autonomous LCMS Congregations: The Burial Ground of Ecclesiology and Merger as an Additional Tool for Unburying the Gifts of the LCMS

Brian J. Hesse

Abstract: As C. F. W. Walther shaped the LCMS early on, the unique system of self-governance positioned the church body for both confession and mission. Today that self-governance has often been described as congregational autonomy. This has led to poor stewardship of declining congregations, and it is time to repent and consider new partnerships in ministry mergers as an additional tool for sharing what Christ has given to the LCMS.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we read about a certain servant who took the generosity of his master's money and hid it in the ground. I would argue that the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) is becoming much like this third servant in Jesus' parable.

Saint Matthew states that the third servant “was afraid, and [he] went and hid [his] talent in the ground” (Mt 25:25 ESV). The temptation to hide the talents of theological truth and faithful use of the means of grace in the ground of LCMS structures has become real. There is no better time than the present to review what it means that we are church.

For Lutherans, the Augsburg Confession's definition of the church shows what it means that we are church. Article VII states:

Likewise, they teach that one holy church will remain forever. The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. And it is enough for the true unity of



Rev. Dr. Brian J. Hesse serves as Senior Pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Amarillo, Texas. He earned his Doctorate of Ministry from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in December 2018, on the topic of LCMS Mergers into Multisite Ministry. He can be reached at bhesse@trinityama.org.

Copyright 2019 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 27, no. 1 (2019) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://lsfm.global/joinlsfm.html>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere. As Paul says [Eph. 4:5, 6]: “One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.”¹

It is important to note that the reformers were not attempting to create a new church. The Lutheran doctrine of the church was not defined in an effort to remake the church. It was rather to show that Lutherans were part of the one Church. Robert Kolb states, “Article VII exhibits Melanchthon’s skill at combining his and Luther’s theological concerns with language designed to make a decisive case to the emperor that Luther’s reform program did not carry the Wittenberg theologians beyond the pale of the church, as their Roman Catholic foes were charging.”²

There is no better time
than the present to review
what it means
that we are church.

Article VII continued the faithful notion that the church is ultimately a gathering of believers around the Gospel. By the time the Augsburg Confession had been presented, the church had already manifested itself into a different role. Kolb explains, “On the official level, it had become a religion in which a question of polity defined the church, not as a people of God but rather as the structure of following Christ in submission to his vicar, the bishop of Rome.” Kolb goes on to state, “Luther and Melanchthon believed that the church was instead a creation of God’s Word, his identifying himself and his human creatures through the message of the prophets and apostles, as given in Holy Scripture.”³

At the heart of Article VII is the tension between the structural institution of the church that was present in Luther’s day and the location of the church in the Gospel and sacraments. In confessional Lutheranism, there is always a tension between church function and church polity or structures. Repeatedly, Lutheran theologians note that, “Scripture does not prove anywhere that a certain external church organization has been or is to be established.”⁴ Yet the external church is still important and necessary for the purpose of sharing this faith and bringing others into the life of the church.

This was a tension that C. F. W. Walther recognized as the LCMS was brought to fruition in the religiously pluralistic new world of the United States. John Wohlraabe carefully recounts the history, challenges, and issues that faced Walther and the birth of the LCMS. The tension that Walther holds has been foundational to the doctrine of the church in the LCMS and remains so still today. Wohlraabe concludes:

Walther's doctrine of the church grew directly out of his experiences: the Saxon immigration, the colonists' experience with their leader Martin Stephan, the Altenburg Debate, and the controversies with J. A. A. Grabau of the Buffalo Synod, and J. K. W. Loehe in Germany. Yet his doctrine of the church was based on his understanding of Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, and distinguished church fathers. The freedom of religion provided in America allowed Walther to distinguish the doctrine of the church from church polity.⁵

Today, when we examine the state of the church in the LCMS, many are still tempted to believe that the doctrine of the church is centered only in the faithful teaching of the Gospel and right administration of the sacraments. As this tension still exists in the church today, the dominant view is that the institutional church is less important.

When this balance between understanding that *no particular church structure is divinely instituted* and appreciating that *church structure does matter* is not properly maintained, the church runs the risk of becoming the burial ground for the "talents" we have been given in the LCMS. Walther's distinction of church polity separate from and connected to ecclesiology is a unique distinction that should enable LCMS congregations to be an active church body on both levels. Charles Arand states, "Individual persons do not come to the faith apart from contact with the church." Arand goes on to state, "The church gives birth to new Christians."⁶ That is, external church polity and structures are important. External churches, congregations, and other church structures must facilitate and provide service to the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

An important, common, and unrecognized hindrance to maintaining this balance in the LCMS is that many congregations regard themselves as independent of each other. Frequently, the reason is that many LCMS pastors and Lutheran Christians will claim their congregations are autonomous. Congregational autonomy is often defended as given in Article VII of the LCMS Constitution. But the term autonomous is never used. The Article states: "In relation to its members the Synod is not an ecclesiastical government exercising legislative or coercive powers, and with respect to the individual congregation's right to self-government it is but an advisory body."⁷ This is not to say that a congregation is a law unto itself and should only be concerned with itself.

Congregations should not overlook their relationship to the synod or other opportunities for trans-congregational relationships. To be sure, the external structure of the LCMS is designed as self-governing congregations. However, self-government was never, and is not now, in any way to mean abandonment of the larger trans-congregational relationships that still exist for the purpose of supporting the whole church body. Congregations must not divorce trans-congregational

Copyright 2019 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 27, no. 1 (2019) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://lsfm.global/joinlsfm.html>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

relationships from our understanding and doctrine of the church. Congregations who work jointly through trans-congregational relationships position themselves for the greatest opportunities for growth in their understanding of ecclesiology and as Lutherans. For a more in-depth examination of trans-congregational relationships, one helpful resource is Jeff Kloha's "The Trans-Congregational Church."⁸

In Jesus' parable of Matthew 25, a characteristic of the master is to transcend the boundaries his servants are willing to go. The master admits he will "reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed" (Mt 25:26, ESV). Congregations committed to being autonomous create the sort of boundaries for ministry rejected by the master of the parable. Extreme commitment to external structures, polity, and congregational autonomy become burial ground for talents of Word and Sacrament ministry to be traded or administered rightly in the ecclesiastical work of the church.

The LCMS, individual congregations, pastors, and individual LCMS Lutherans are beginning to see the lack of fruit, growth, and gains that burying our talents in external structures has created. There is a serious wrestling taking place in Lutheranism regarding the lack of growth, the decline in members, and other issues facing the church. Martin Noland best expressed this wrestling when he writes, "What should confessional Lutherans do about this? Imitating Evangelical worship practices, sheep-stealing, accepting charismatic or unionistic practices or any other Evangelical practices or theology will only erode the membership of 'confessional Lutheran' churches. These are not options for us."⁹ However, LCMS Lutherans do not have to remain the wicked servant hiding the talent in the burial grounds of external structures.

The formation of a dual parish or a multipoint ministry has been one method used in the LCMS to preserve congregational self-governance and remain viable in mission. The LCMS has labeled these ministries "multi-congregation parish relationships." The LCMS provides guidelines to circuit visitors in the formation of these multi-congregation parish relationships.¹⁰ In these multi-congregation parish relationships, the external structures of congregational self-governance and church polity are maintained. The structure is defined as "Two or more congregations of the Synod served by the same pastor."¹¹ The LCMS Circuit Visitors Manual offers a six-point list for establishing these multi-congregation relationships. Upon examination of the list, a commitment to the traditional polity and external structures is obvious. There are numerous congregations in the LCMS that are effectively using dual parish agreements to facilitate ministry. In the right context, dual parish ministry can be a useful agreement and structure for parish ministry.

However, beyond such agreements, there is little to till the soil where we have buried our talents for ministry. The only other approach ordinarily provided to LCMS circuit visitors and LCMS congregations for consideration is the so-called

“Satellite Worship Site.” But little guidance is given for this congregational structure. Instead of guidelines for establishing satellite locations, a single definition states, “A satellite worship site is not intended to become a separate LCMS member congregation, and its establishment is not to be reported by district president or the mission executive. Instead, it will be reported by the corresponding congregation on forms that will be provided annually to the congregations by the Office of Roster and Statistics.”¹²

The guidance given to congregations for dual parishes and satellite worship sites gives attention to preserving the sort of congregational self-governance that continues to breed the attitudes of autonomy that plague the LCMS. Despite these structures, the LCMS continues to decline.

There is a third option for ministry that is now beginning to take shape, both outside and inside the LCMS. For example, many communities are now seeing the trend of larger megachurches purchasing and allowing smaller congregations to join them. These mergers come under the umbrella of the ministry of the larger megachurch. Frequently, these congregations are nondenominational in character and lack the doctrinal integrity to shape true mergers of ministry and are more corporate in nature. Some large congregations maintain those merged congregations as multisite ministries and additional campuses. They attempt to create a growth model much like a bank with different branches scattered throughout the town.

Church mergers are becoming more frequent and common. Church mergers are also taking place in a variety of ways. With church mergers becoming more common, many speculate why church mergers are necessary. The most common perception of a church merger is that it has become one of necessity. Like the business world, mergers are often seen as the result of a failure. One resource on church mergers states in its opening comments,

In the boom times of Christendom, when congregations multiplied in a culture favorable to faith, ‘merger’ was synonymous with ‘failure.’ Today however, the positive anxiety is often uppermost in church leaders’ minds and hearts. In these lean times of post-Christendom, when congregations struggle to just hold their own in a culture suspicious of faith, ‘merger’ has become synonymous with ‘opportunity.’¹³

This strategy can be a model for growth. The corporate nature of these mergers has led some members of LCMS leadership and some congregations to reject the idea of mergers as an idea that is more corporate than Lutheran. However, this growth strategy can be done better in the LCMS, given the commitment to unified doctrine and practice within the church body.

It is time for the LCMS to seriously consider another tool that tills the soil of our unique distinctions of ecclesiology and polity. Church mergers can be a useful tool that unburies our talents from the dirt of our usual external structures and once again puts them to work in service to the Kingdom of God. The lean times referenced above have been well documented by many. Thom Rainer states, “As many as 100,000 churches in America are showing signs of decline toward death.”¹⁴ In the LCMS, the news is even bleaker. One recent study states:

However, this growth strategy can be done better in the LCMS, given the commitment to unified doctrine and practice within the church body. . . . Church mergers can be a useful tool that unburies our talents.

In 1971, the number of LCMS adherents stood at 2,772,648. By 2010, the total number was only an estimated 2,270,921 adherents—a drop of about 500,000 people. While there was a decline in every decade since 1971, about half of that decline occurred between 2000 and 2010—the number of adherents dropped by 250,000 people over that ten-year period.¹⁵

These realities might be cause for panic in some circles. In the post-Christian world, many congregations are panicked over questions of survival. However, panic and survival do not need to drive the landscape of church mergers. Bandy and Brooks also state, “The resulting panic attack led church people to ask: *Is it time for a merger?*”¹⁶ There is a better reason than panic and survival to consider church mergers. Bandy and Brooks go on to say, “Sometimes, however, the question is raised out of a *kairos* moment. *Kairos* is a New Testament word that describes an unexpected moment of divine revelation that changes everything for the good. It is stressful, but it is positive.”¹⁷ Church mergers have a goal to create a situation where everyone involved wins. To meet the challenges, church mergers are becoming a vital tool towards successful transformation of congregations.

In 2016, two LCMS congregations agreed to pursue church merger. Each congregation created exploratory committees that would investigate the feasibility of merger. One congregation was stable (maybe even plateaued) in ministry. The other congregation was in rapid decline. Both congregations had numerous reasons for merger and numerous reasons not to merge. As a result of the exploratory phase, the congregational merger was recommended. The two congregations shared common DNA and ministries. They agreed to form one ministry together, retaining both congregational campuses. Imagine a marriage of two congregations becoming one.

This merger into a multisite ministry for these LCMS congregations meant restructuring operations, committees, leadership, staffing, and finances. All of this restructuring was accomplished through a jointly established implementation team.

The merger was completed with careful attention to both ecclesial care of members from both congregations, as well as to the external structures and polity necessary to complete a legal merger. These two LCMS congregations made the decision to merge because they believed they could be better together in their God-given kingdom work. They did not choose to do ministry jointly as a dual parish. They chose to do ministry together as one merged church family. Church mergers are different from dual parishes, the table below highlights the key differences.

They chose to do ministry together as one merged church family.

Multisite Mergers or Satellite Structures	Multi-Congregational Structures (Dual Parishes)
Motivated by common mission goals.	Motivated by maintaining church polity.
Unified single governance for all sites.	Each congregation retains its governance.
Organizing Document: Articles of Partnership	Organizing Document: Statement of Agreement
Pastor(s) called to one unified ministry	Pastor(s) called to all congregations involved.
Reporting is unified by congregational reports	Reporting of agreements filed with District Office.
Single, unified mission and ministry	Joint mission and ministry efforts with a separation clause.

Table 1. Table by Brian J. Hesse, David Peter, Mart Thompson, and Gerhard Bode. “Best Practices in LCMS Congregational Mergers into Multisite Ministries.” Doctor of Ministry. Major Applied Project, Concordia Seminary, 2018.

The surveys and research surrounding church mergers provide a wealth of knowledge regarding the blessings, wisdom, and values of two churches becoming one. The research also demonstrates that a multisite model provides a best practice for the church merger to be successful. Any congregation considering this relatively new tool should do the necessary homework, follow specific steps, and be intentional about the decisions surrounding church mergers.

Church mergers are a growing trend. They represent a significant opportunity for LCMS congregations to retain their self-governance and also revitalize the Word and Sacrament work of the church in new ways that promote growth of Christ’s kingdom.

In 2016, the two LCMS congregations agreed to merge into a multisite ministry. After one year, the congregation completed a legal merger. The two congregations

worked together as one. They worshiped together as one congregation on one site. They maintained children's ministries, Bible studies, and other activities on both campuses. After nearly three years, in November, 2018, the merged congregations finally launched worship services on that multisite, merged location. The newly merged congregation is seeking to expand the witness of the Gospel and revitalize Gospel outreach from both campuses. The merger has been a more effective tool than the dual-parish structure.

In conclusion, the LCMS has developed a long-standing commitment to congregational autonomy. This has, in many ways, become a corruption of the unique self-governance that Walther created to facilitate the mission of the church. A new opportunity now exists to maintain our self-governance, while at the same time to incorporate an additional tool for the ecclesial work of Word and Sacrament ministry in the church. LCMS congregations need to be informed about what the possibilities of church mergers could mean for their ministries.

Despite the opportunities that church mergers offer, few resources are available to LCMS congregations. Circuit visitors are trained in creating dual parishes but rarely have the knowledge, training, or experiences to guide congregations to consider church mergers. Circuit visitors need more information for equipping congregations to consider this additional model for accomplishing ministry in God-pleasing ways that are consistent with LCMS doctrine. It is time for the LCMS to consider church mergers to facilitate missional work, revitalize our congregations, and potentially reverse the declines experienced for so long.

Endnotes

¹ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert eds., *The Book of Concord: the Confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 43.

² Robert Kolb, "Sheep and the Voice of the Shepherd: The Ecclesiology of the Lutheran Confessional Writings," *Concordia Journal* 36, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 328.

³ Kolb, "Sheep and the Voice of the Shepherd", 328–29.

⁴ Eugene F. Klug, "Luther on the Church," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (July, 1983): 194.

⁵ John C. Wohlrabe, Jr. "The Americanization of Walther's Doctrine of the Church," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (January, 1988): 8.

⁶ Charles P. Arand, "What Are Ecclesiologicaly Challenged Lutherans To Do? Starting Points for a Lutheran Ecclesiology," *Concordia Journal* 34, no. 1 (July 2008): 160.

⁷ *Handbook: 2016 Constitution, Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation as Amended by the 2016 LCMS Convention 10–14 July 2016* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2016), 13–14.

⁸ Jeffrey Kloha, "The Trans-Congregational Church in the New Testament," *Concordia Journal* 34, no. 3 (July 2008): 172–190.

⁹ Martin Noland, “Why Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and Its Kin Have Declined in Membership and What To Do About It,” *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* (April 20, 2016).

¹⁰ The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Circuit Visitors Manual (2012 Revision) COP Approved September 2012, Edited 2015* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2015), 83.

¹¹ The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Circuit Visitors Manual*, 84.

¹² The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Circuit Visitors Manual*, 84.

¹³ Thomas G. Bandy and Page M. Brooks, *Church Mergers: A Guidebook for Missional Change* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 1.

¹⁴ Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* (Nashville: B & H, 2014), 7.

¹⁵ George Hawley, “The LCMS in the Face of Demographic and Social Change: A Social Science Perspective,” *Journal of Lutheran Mission* 3, no. 3 (December, 2016): 38.

¹⁶ Bandy and Brooks, *Church Mergers*, 2.

¹⁷ Bandy and Brooks, *Church Mergers*, 2.