

Sizeable Lutheran Church Bodies in the United States

by Thomas E. Jacobson



[Editor's note: This list prepared by Pr. Jacobson is a very fine summary, non-polemical and objective, and I thought it would be of both interest and use to our readers. Pr. Jacobson is happy to have his summary copied and distributed for use in local congregations. I thank him for his willingness to share it with you here.]

Compiler's note: This list includes Lutheran church organizations considered "sizeable," meaning that they have more than a handful of congregations. There are several smaller groups in existence. Those described here are listed in descending order of size according to number of congregations. Though these brief sketches are admittedly superficial, I have attempted here to provide fair and accurate descriptions of the history and distinguishing characteristics of each group. Though no value judgments should be inferred from my descriptions, I must provide the disclaimer that I am a member of the North American Lutheran Church (NALC) and Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC). The numbers of congregations and members for each group are estimates and are based on information available as of August of 2022.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)

ca. 8,800 congregations; ca. 3.2 million members

Headquarters: Chicago, IL

The ELCA began in 1988 from a merger of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), the American Lutheran Church (TALC) and the much smaller Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC). The LCA was a product of mergers that united older German immigrant congregations with a large Swedish Lutheran body, with smaller numbers of Finnish, Danish, Icelandic, and Slovak congregations included, as well. TALC was a product of mergers that united later German immigrant congregations with a larger Norwegian Lutheran body and a much smaller Danish group. The LCA and TALC were joined in the 1988 merger by the AELC, a small group that had broken away from the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod in 1976. At the outset, the ELCA had roughly 5.2 million members and 11 thousand congregations. Controversies in the ELCA over the years led to the departure of many members and congregations and the formation of

Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC) in 2001 and the North American Lutheran Church (NALC) in 2010. Like its predecessor bodies did as of 1970, the ELCA permits the ordination of women, has focused on ecumenical cooperation with like-minded Protestant church bodies, and is often described as "liberal" in its understanding of faith and social values.

Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS)

ca. 6,100 congregations

ca. 2.1 million members

Headquarters: St. Louis, MO

The roots of the LCMS, often known simply as the "Missouri Synod," are in the Saxon German immigration of the early nineteenth century, which settled in Perry County, Missouri. Organized officially in 1847, they have had a continuous history since their founding, avoiding mergers with other groups. The LCMS did, however, join a cooperative federation of like-minded Lutherans known as the Synodical Conference in 1872, which dissolved in the early 1960s. Over time, two smaller groups of Slovak and Finnish Lutherans were absorbed into the LCMS. Those who founded the LCMS expressed concern for maintaining a distinct Lutheran witness in the face of pressure to conform to non-Lutheran perspectives. They permit only the ordination of men, and though there is some diversity within the LCMS in practice, they are generally considered conservative in their doctrine, requiring what they regard as complete doctrinal agreement for "altar and pulpit fellowship," meaning the exchange of pastors and the sharing of Holy Communion. They regard themselves as strongly rooted in the "inerrancy" of the Bible and in the theology of the Lutheran confessional writings.

Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS)

ca. 1,200 congregations; ca. 375,000 members

Headquarters: Milwaukee, WI

The roots of the WELS are also in the German immigration of the early nineteenth century, with special strength in the state of Wisconsin. Originally founded in 1850, the Michigan and Minnesota

Synods joined with the Wisconsin Synod in 1892. With the LCMS, it was a member of the Synodical Conference, founded in 1872. The WELS eventually broke fellowship with the LCMS over certain points of doctrine and is generally considered more conservative than the LCMS, requiring complete doctrinal agreement not only for the sharing of pastors and Holy Communion, but also for joint prayer with other Christians. The WELS also prohibits the suffrage of women in congregations and assemblies. The WELS is currently in fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS; see below).

Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC)

ca. 800 congregations (in the USA); ca. 300,000 members
Note: LCMC also has international congregations in many different countries. Including these congregations, there are over 900 congregations in total. Additionally, over one hundred congregations of LCMC are dually affiliated with the North American Lutheran Church (NALC; see below)

Headquarters: Canton, MI

LCMC was founded in 2001 by 25 congregations from the ELCA. In 1999, the ELCA adopted an ecumenical agreement with the Episcopal Church USA, which required the ELCA to conform to the ordination standards of the Anglican Communion for the interchange of clergy. Within the ELCA, a group called the Word Alone Network opposed this move, viewing it as a violation of the Lutheran Confessional Writings. Some members of the Word Alone Network formed LCMC as an alternative organization. From the beginning, LCMC has understood itself as "post-denominational" and an "association" of congregations rather than a traditional denomination. As an association, LCMC generally does not make pronouncements on behalf of its member congregations. It did, however, produce an "admonition," stating that marriage is between a man and a woman. Consisting mostly of small, rural congregations and large "megachurches," LCMC is more socially and theologically conservative than the ELCA, though it differs in character from the LCMS. It permits the ordination of women and contains a strong "strain" of "evangelical renewal," which is focused on "contemporary style" worship practices. LCMC grew gradually since its founding, but much of its membership was added after the

ELCA in 2009 changed its policy concerning pastors in same-sex relationships. LCMC has also started many mission congregations.

North American Lutheran Church (NALC)

ca. 475 congregations; ca. 150,000 members
Headquarters: Dallas, TX

The NALC was formed in 2010 by congregations dissatisfied with some positions taken by the ELCA and its general atmosphere. The ELCA's decision in 2009 to change its policy concerning pastors in same-sex relationships, but more significantly underlying issues of biblical and theological authority, was the impetus for the creation of the NALC. Unlike those who founded LCMC nearly ten years earlier, however, the NALC was conceived as a more traditionally structured denomination rather than an association of congregations. In general, though not absolutely, NALC congregations exhibit more liturgical formality than is found in LCMC. However, over a hundred congregations of the NALC have dual affiliation with LCMC, and the two organizations together occupy more "centrist" ground in the American Lutheran field today. The NALC exists as a more theologically and socially conservative expression of the ecumenical Lutheran tradition than is found in the ELCA and is committed to its understanding of biblical, creedal, and confessional faithfulness. The NALC permits the ordination of women. Though not officially in fellowship with the LCMS, it has a history of positive conversations with the LCMS over issues of common interest.

Association of Free Lutheran Congregations (AFLC)

ca. 270 congregations; ca. 43,000 members
Headquarters: Plymouth, MI

The roots of the AFLC are in the complicated history of Norwegian-American Lutheranism. In 1890, a merger of three Norwegian-American Lutheran groups produced the United Norwegian Lutheran Church (UNLC). In the interest of compromise between the two largest of the merging groups, the UNLC decided that Augsburg Seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota (from "The Conference") would be the seminary of the new organization and St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota (from "The Anti-Missourian Brotherhood") would be the college of the new organization. This was unsatisfactory to

many who came from "The Conference," who desired a unified college and seminary program, and in 1897 they broke from the UNLC to form "The Lutheran Free Church" (LFC). The LFC existed independently for many years, but eventually took part in the merger negotiations to form The American Lutheran Church (TALC) in 1960. When the LFC finally succeeded in mustering enough votes to merge into TALC in 1963, around 20 percent of its congregations refused to join the merger, and they formed the AFLC as an alternative. Before the formation of LCMC and the NALC, the AFLC was for many years the fourth largest Lutheran group in the United States. Today, they value their heritage in the Scandinavian Lutheran revival tradition, tend toward liturgical simplicity in worship, and are theologically and socially conservative. They do not permit the ordination of women.

Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS)

ca. 130 congregations; ca. 19,000 members

Headquarters: Mankato, MN

The ELS also has its roots in the Norwegian-American Lutheran tradition. Leading up to 1917, three Norwegian-American Lutheran bodies began merger negotiations that led to the formation of the "Norwegian Lutheran Church of America" (NLCA) that year. In 1918, a small group of pastors and elements of various congregations from one of the merging bodies called the "Norwegian Synod" rejected the theological compromise on the issue of predestination or "election," which made the merger possible. This group was often known as the "Little Norwegians" to distinguish it from the much larger NLCA. Now known as the ELS, this group considers itself to be the genuine continuation of the "Norwegian Synod" and is in fellowship with the WELS, sharing its general outlook while also carrying forward its own Norwegian heritage.

Church of the Lutheran Brethren of America (CLBA)

ca. 120 congregations; ca. 24,000 members

Headquarters: Fergus Falls, MN

Yet another group with roots in the Norwegian-American Lutheran tradition, the CLBA was formed in the year 1900 by congregations that came mostly from the United Norwegian Lutheran Church (UNLC). They were concerned about the

existence of nominal membership and sought to maintain "pure" congregations through the implementation of church discipline. With roots in the Norwegian Haugean tradition, they have remained a small though active group, placing emphasis on foreign mission. Theologically and socially conservative, the CLBA also emphasizes liturgical informality.

Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC)

ca. 80 congregations; ca. 9,000 members (in the US)

Headquarters: Eau Claire, WI

The CLC was founded in 1960 by congregations primarily from the WELS. Those who formed the CLC felt that the WELS and the ELS did not follow Scriptural principles in severing ties with the LCMS over what they considered violation of rules of church fellowship on the part of the LCMS. The CLC strives to uphold the principles of the Synodical Conference, which was founded in 1872, placing emphasis on biblical "inerrancy," Scripture as the basis of doctrine, and the Lutheran Confessional Writings as an accurate presentation of what Scripture teaches. It operates a high school, college, and seminary in Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

American Association of Lutheran Churches (AALC)

ca. 65 congregations; ca. 16,000 members

Headquarters: Fort Wayne, IN

Prior to the formation of the ELCA in 1988, a group of around a hundred congregations, mostly from The American Lutheran Church (TALC), declined to join the new organization over concerns of biblical and theological faithfulness. Known as the AALC, this group has remained small throughout its existence and currently shares a fellowship arrangement with the LCMS. They seek to carry forward what they understand as the more conservative element of TALC and share most of the perspectives of the LCMS.

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