

LCMS

Frequently Asked Questions

Denominational Differences – Lutherans

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Lutherans

Can an LCMS member commune at a non-LCMS church?

Q: *Is it wrong for a member of an LCMS congregation to receive Holy Communion at an ELCA church? Is it wrong for an ELCA member to receive Holy Communion at an LCMS church?*

A: The LCMS practices "close communion," which is summarized as follows by the Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR): In keeping with the principle that the celebration and reception of the Lord's Supper is a confession of the unity of faith, while at the same time recognizing that there will be instances when sensitive pastoral care needs to be exercised, the Synod has established an official practice requiring "that pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, except in situations of emergency and in special cases of pastoral care, commune individuals of only those synods which are now in fellowship with us." By following this practice whereby only those individuals who are members of the Synod or of a church body with which the Synod is in altar and pulpit fellowship are ordinarily communed, pastors and congregations preserve the integrity of their witness to the gospel of Christ as it is revealed in the Scriptures and confessed in the Lutheran confessional writings.

The Synod has not attempted to define precisely what constitutes "special cases of pastoral care," but has entrusted to its pastors and congregations the responsibility to make judgments in individual cases about the propriety of communing non-LCMS Christians.

With regard to LCMS members communing at non-LCMS altars, the CTCR says the following in its report on the [*Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper*](#):

"In accordance with the confessional nature of participation in the Lord's supper, and in agreement with Lutheranism's historic position, it is inappropriate to attend the Lord's Supper at non-Lutheran altars. Since participation in Holy Communion, scripturally and confessionally understood, entails agreement in the Gospel and all its articles, it would not be appropriate to attend the Lord's Supper in a church with which such agreement is not shared."

Usage: We urge you to contact an LCMS pastor in your area for more in-depth discussion.

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What are the main differences between the LCMS and the ELCA?

Q: *What are the main differences between the Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)?*

A: In terms of the official position of our two church bodies as reflected in formally adopted statements of belief and practice the three main areas of difference between the LCMS and the ELCA are the following:

1. The doctrine and authority of Scripture. The LCMS believes that the Bible is without error in all that it says. The ELCA avoids making such statements, holding that Scripture is not necessarily always accurate on such matters as history and science. Differences between the LCMS and the ELCA on the authority of Scripture also help to explain why the ELCA ordains women to the pastoral office, while the LCMS does not (based on 1 Cor. 14:33-36 and 1 Tim. 2:11-14). Similarly, on the basis of what Scripture clearly teaches (Rom 1:18-28; 1 Cor. 6:9), the LCMS position on homosexual behavior is unequivocal: homosexual behavior is contrary to God's will, while the ELCA has declared that it lacks a consensus regarding what Scripture teaches about homosexual activity. Consequently, those who disagree with one another in the ELCA have been called to respect the 'bound conscience' of the others. The ELCA has also determined to allow the ordination of practicing homosexuals as long as they are in a life-long, committed relationship.
2. The commitment to Lutheran confessional writings. The ELCA, while affirming its commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as witnessed to in the Lutheran confessions, also tends to emphasize the historical character of these writings and to maintain the possibility of dissent to confessional positions that do not deal directly with the Gospel itself understood in a narrow sense. All LCMS pastors are required to affirm that the Lutheran confessions are a correct explanation of the teachings of Scripture.
3. The level of agreement necessary to join together in one church body. While the LCMS believes that the Bible requires agreement in all that the Bible teaches, the ELCA holds that disagreement in some matters of doctrine, such as the mode of Christ's presence in Holy Communion, do not prohibit church fellowship.

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What has the LCMS stated about the theological differences between the LCMS and ELCA? (3 pages)

Q: *What has The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) stated officially about its differences with the theological position of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)?*

A: During its 1998 convention, the LCMS adopted a resolution that provides a helpful summary of some of the key differences between our two church bodies, particularly as these differences have to do with ecumenical decision and relations. Here is that resolution:

To Express Deep Regret and Profound Disagreement with ELCA Actions RESOLUTION 3-08A Adopted in Convention by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, July 1998

Preamble

In 1997 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) adopted A Formula of Agreement which formally declared full communion with the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ based on what is referred to as "a fundamental doctrinal consensus" (A Formula of Agreement, p. 19).

Although this document acknowledges that "it has not been possible to reconcile the [Lutheran and Reformed] Confessional formulations from the sixteenth century" concerning the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, it contends that "these enduring differences" can be regarded "as acceptable diversities" and should therefore not be regarded as "church-dividing, but are complementary" (p. 20). The Lutheran Confessions, however, reject the Reformed position on the presence of Christ in the Sacrament (FC Ep. VII, 21-42; FC SD VII, 111-28), and they clearly affirm what the Scriptures teach, namely: "We believe, teach, and confess that in the Holy Supper the body and blood of Christ are truly and essentially present and are truly distributed and received with the bread and wine. We believe, teach, and confess that the words of the testament of Christ are to be understood in no other way than in their literal sense, and not as though the bread symbolized the absent body and the wine the absent blood of Christ, but that because of the sacramental union they are truly the body and blood of Christ" (FC Ep VII, 6-7).

The ELCA in 1997 also formally accepted the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. The purpose of this statement is "to show that on the basis of their dialogue the subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ" (p. 2). While recognizing that this common understanding "does not cover all that either church teaches about justification," this statement declares that "the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnation" (p. 2). However, these "differences in ... explication" as articulated in this statement itself have to do with such critically important issues as the following:

- The centrality of the doctrine of justification in its relationship to all other teachings of Scripture (para. 18)
- The Roman Catholic view "that persons 'cooperate' in preparing for and accepting justification by consenting to God's justifying action" (para. 20)
- The relationship between the Lutheran understanding that "the sinner is granted righteousness before God in Christ through the declaration of forgiveness" and the Roman Catholic emphasis on

"the renewal of the interior person through the reception of grace imparted as a gift to the believer" (para. 23-24)

- The precise role of faith in justification; i.e., the significance of the difference in the Lutheran understanding that "God justifies sinners in faith alone (sola fide)" and the Roman Catholic understanding which only "sees faith as fundamental in justification" (para. 26-27)
- The compatibility of the Lutheran understanding of "the Christian as a being 'at the same time righteous and sinner' " and the Roman Catholic view that the inclination toward sin in the justified Christian is not really "sin in the authentic sense" (para. 30). It is clear that Roman Catholics and Lutherans have not yet resolved substantive points of disagreement over the doctrine of justification.

Whereas, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's actions—i.e., the declaration of full communion with three Reformed church bodies while recognizing continuing disagreements between them regarding the understanding of the bodily presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar; and also its adoption of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification which claims a common understanding between Lutherans and Roman Catholics on the sinner's justification by God's grace through faith in Christ in spite of continuing lack of agreement between them on critically important aspects of the doctrine of justification—have significant implications for all Lutherans and other Christians in the United States and around the world; and

Whereas, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod desires to remain faithful to its commitment to Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions as stated in Article II of its Constitution, even while striving to resolve differences in doctrine with other church bodies; therefore be it

Resolved, That in faithfulness to God's Word and the Lutheran Confessions, and motivated by our love and concern for the people and pastors of the ELCA, we express our deep regret and profound disagreement with these actions taken by the ELCA; and be it further

Resolved, That we encourage all members of the LCMS to commit themselves to engage in theological discussions with the members of the ELCA; and be it further

Resolved, That the LCMS support its President as he continues to work together with the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA in arranging for discussions of these issues between representatives of our two church bodies; and be it further

Resolved, That these discussions address such theological issues as the doctrine of justification, the Lord's Supper, the nature of Lutheran identity, and the appropriate relationships with churches of other theological traditions in today's confusing and changing ecclesiastical landscape; and be it finally

Resolved, That the CTCR be asked to prepare an evaluation of the [ELCA/Reformed A Formula of Agreement](#) and the [Lutheran/Roman Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification](#) for use in discussing these issues throughout the Synod.

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What are the main differences between the LCMS and WELS?

Q: *What are the main differences between the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS)?*

A: From the LCMS perspective, the three main theological differences between the LCMS and the WELS are the following:

1) The biblical understanding of fellowship.

The WELS holds to what is called the "unit concept" of fellowship, which places virtually all joint expressions of the Christian faith on the same level. In an official statement made in 1960 the WELS states, "Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith" (Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1970, pp. 51-52). The LCMS, however, has historically not understood or practiced church fellowship in this way. Our Synod, for example, has made a distinction between altar and pulpit fellowship (for which full doctrinal agreement is required) and other manifestations of Christian fellowship, such as prayer fellowship (which do not necessarily require full doctrinal agreement). Disagreements on this issue led the Wisconsin to break fellowship with the LCMS in 1961.

2) The doctrine of the ministry.

With respect to the doctrine of the ministry, since the days of C. F. W. Walther our Synod has held that the office of the public ministry (the pastoral office) according to Scripture is the one divinely established office in the church, while the church possesses the freedom to create other offices, by human institution, from time to time to assist in the carrying out of the functions of the pastoral ministry. The WELS' *Theses on Church and Ministry*, however, expressly deny that the pastoral ministry is specifically instituted by the Lord in contrast to other forms of public ministry (see Doctrinal Statements, pp. 9-11; cf. the Commission on Theology and Church Relations' 1981 report on [The Ministry: Office, Procedures, and Nomenclature](#)).

3) The role of women in the church.

While both the LCMS and the WELS strongly oppose the ordination of women to the pastoral office on Scriptural grounds, the LCMS has concluded that the Scriptures do not forbid woman suffrage in the church. The WELS opposes woman suffrage in the church as contrary to Scripture.

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What church bodies does the LCMS have altar and pulpit fellowship with?

Q: *Where can I find a listing of the various worldwide churches that the LCMS is in altar and pulpit fellowship with?*

A: For a list of church bodies that the LCMS is in fellowship with, please click on the link below.

[Partner Church Bodies](#)

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