



## Commentary on the Common Confession

[www.commonconfession.net](http://www.commonconfession.net)

### **CC7) The Mission and Ministry of the Congregation**

We believe and confess that the church is the assembly of believers called and gathered by God around Word and Sacrament, and that the mission and ministry of the church is carried out within the context of individual congregations, which are able to work together locally and globally.

American Lutheran churches have always lived in the dialectic between congregational and central authority. At one extreme or the other congregations have not functioned optimally. Between ecclesiastical authority and local autonomy...there has been life and mission at its Lutheran best.

We seek to live in-between with the positive tensions that this dialectic creates. Attempts have often been many to push to one extreme or the other. American Lutheran history is full of such stories and their less-than-missional results.

Many of the Lutheran bodies now united in the ELCA have differing ecclesiastical histories. We have come from both extremes. This is why we have such diversity among ourselves as we try to live together.

Independent Lutheran is an oxymoron. It is the nature of faith and thus of the church to connect, believer-to-believer, congregation-to-congregation. There is a basic congregational priority we seek to assert, however. We believe it is in the best missional interest of the ELCA to keep congregational authority solidly in its functional place. We believe this is where most Lutheran believers live best, too.

At the same time the ELCA is at its best with the dialectic firmly and intentionally in place. People on both ends of the issue will do well to listen to each other and find the other point of view for themselves, too.

People join congregations, not synods and surely not churchwide expressions. It is important for the ELCA's future to keep this reality clearly in view.

Increasingly people come to ELCA congregations with no Lutheran background at all. In time they may develop loyalty and faithfulness to larger entities. They will not do so by the imposition of authority top down, nor will they easily understand. They will learn to love the ELCA if they find it worthy of their affection and trust.

Congregations will continue to need each other, connected in both official and other relationships. This will be true in both rural and urban/suburban settings, in large and small congregations. It will also increasingly be true of Lutheran congregations linking with members of other ecumenical partners, too.

We believe that any attempts to diminish or challenge congregational authority are counter-missional. It is a relational priority that believers discover the gospel first in the congregational setting and then come to experience the larger reality of the denominational church.

This is probably most certainly true of the future ELCA than ever of any of the past. It is mission that asserts this dialectic that we support and affirm together.

by Pastor Paul Uring, Columbus, OH