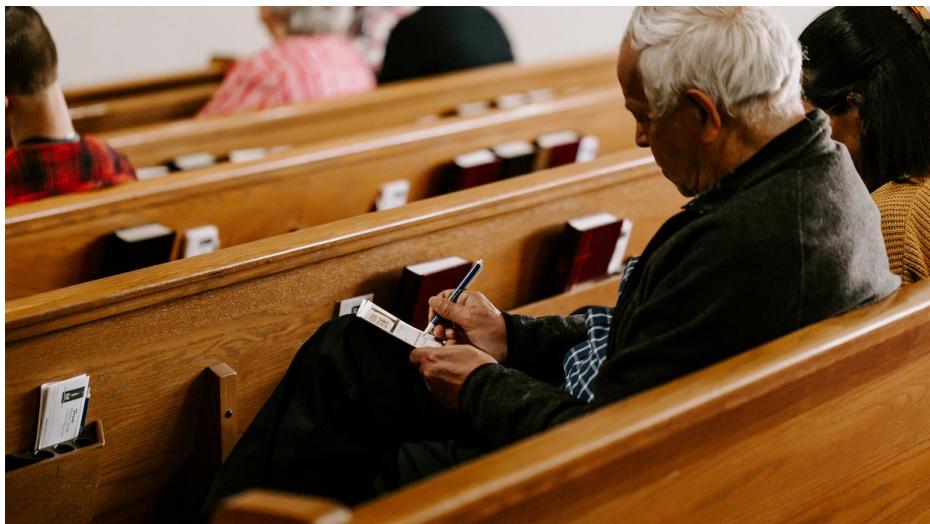


## “What We Can All Learn from the ELCA’s Dramatic Decline”

by [Pr. Don Brandt](#), Director of Lutheran CORE’s [Congregations in Transition](#) and [Congregational Lay-Led Initiative \(CLI\)](#)



### In This Issue:

- Evangelistic outreach
- The history of “bound conscience”
- Preaching the Gospel
- How to talk to your friends about faith
- Registration for the NALC’s Continental Youth Gathering
- March for Life and Y4Life

Ever since I became a Lutheran pastor I have been fascinated with denominational statistical trends. I have especially been interested—and concerned—with trends among Lutheran denominations in general and, starting in 1987, the statistical trends for the ELCA in particular.

The ELCA currently stands out as the Lutheran denomination dealing with the most dramatic rate of institutional decline. Or perhaps “dealing with” is something of a misnomer. Why? Because I see no indication that ELCA leaders even *acknowledge* their precipitous decline, let alone “deal” with it.

However, as an NALC pastor, I don’t want to only speak to what’s happening in the ELCA. I also want to address what the NALC—and the LCMC—can learn from the astonishing rate at which the ELCA is losing members. So bear with me as I share some ELCA statistical realities.

Even attempting to *discern* the actual rate of decline for the ELCA has, admittedly, been a significant challenge for me. The reason for this is because, by and large, ELCA leaders have chosen not to publicly acknowledge their staggering losses. And this has especially been the case since 2010.

The most striking example of the failure of ELCA leadership to address this issue was their lack of response to an article published by *Faith-Lead Magazine* in September of 2019. This article was written

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# The Past, Present, and Future of “Bound Conscience”

by [Robert Benne](#), NALC Theologian

*Director's Note: Many thanks to Bob Benne, esteemed NALC theologian and friend of Lutheran CORE, for his review of the history of the whole issue of “Bound Conscience.”*

*The 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly passed two resolutions that called for reconsideration of the 2009 social statement, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust.”*

- *Reconsideration #1 called for a review of specific text references in light of the 2015 Supreme Court ruling regarding same sex marriage and “public acceptance of marriage of same-gender and gender-non-conforming couples.”*
- *Reconsideration #2 called for a reconsideration of the “church’s current concept of the four positions of bound conscience” found on pages 19-21 of “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust.”*

*The task force that was appointed to work on these reconsiderations had recommendations for the 2025 Churchwide Assembly regarding Reconsideration # 1. They described these recommendations as “simply editorial,” even though they amounted to no less than a complete embrace of every form of sexual orientation and gender identity.*

*The task force is now working on its recommendations for Reconsideration # 2, which will be voted on at the 2028 Churchwide Assembly. Given everything that is happening and the direction in which everything is going, it is hard to imagine that providing a place of dignity, belonging, and respect for traditional views and those who hold them will survive.*

Most Lutherans know of Martin Luther’s famous appeal to “bound conscience” at the Diet of Worms in 1521. He insisted: “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason... my conscience is captive to the Word of God.” His appeal to “bound conscience” meant that his theological and inner moral compass were not free but held captive by the authority of Scripture and clear reason. For Luther, this wasn’t about subjective feeling but about obedience to God’s revealed truth, a profound conviction that led him to refuse to recant his writings, seeing it as right and safe only to follow God’s Word.

There are no doubt many uses of the phrase in the history of Lutheranism since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but the use we want to examine is its use in the midst of a controversy in the ELCA over the nature of marriage



and its attendant sexual ethics. While we will focus on the ELCA since 1989, it is important to note that agitation to change traditional teachings on those subjects was already present in the merging churches—the American Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church in America, and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches—especially in their youth divisions, as well as in their seminaries.

## The Past

In the first Assembly of the ELCA in 1989, I roomed with a Virginia pastor who later became the Bishop of Virginia. He was assigned to attend the newly emerging youth organization. Every evening he would sorrowfully recount to me the ways that the adult leaders were propagandizing the youth into accepting practicing homosexual pastors and homosexual marriage. We could already see what was to come in the new church.

Soon thereafter there were theological gatherings to resist the revisionism pushed by the new church and its Bishop, especially the Called to Faithfulness Conferences held in Northfield, Minnesota. By the turn of the century the newly organized Word Alone led many congregations out of the ELCA as a protest against its agreement with the Episcopal Church that all ordinations must be in the “apostolic succession,” which generally meant that Lutheran ordinations had to have an Episcopal Bishop among the presiders. Those churches then became Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ.

Word Alone also sponsored the emergence of a protest movement against the moral revisionism of the ELCA. I was present at its first gathering at St. Olaf College in 2003, which was organized and led by retired ELCA Bishop, Paull Spring. Soon it took

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# If You Leave the ELCA

by [Pr. David Charlton](#), former Lutheran CORE Board President and NALC pastor in Florida



My congregation voted successfully to leave the ELCA in 2023. Reflecting on the past three years, here are three things I would encourage you to keep in mind if you choose to follow suit.

First of all, remember that, whether you stay in the ELCA or not, the priority is Christ. He is the center. The mission of the Church is to preach the Gospel of forgiveness of sins, life and salvation in Jesus Christ. We voted to leave the ELCA because we came to believe that preaching the Gospel was no longer the priority. Instead, we believed that another gospel, or other gospels, had taken the place of the true Gospel in the mission and ministry of the ELCA.

One of the dangers of remaining in the ELCA and “continuing the fight” was that, in doing so, we would be distracted by the ongoing culture wars in our country and in the world. Don’t assume that the temptation to focus on the culture wars will dissipate if you leave the ELCA. The same forces that worked against the Gospel from within the ELCA, still do so from the larger culture. The key is not to try to win the cultural wars, but not to let them distract us from the mission of the Church.

A second thing to remember is that the political right is not automatically an ally of the Gospel. Several members of my congregation assumed that with a successful vote to leave the ELCA, we would begin to openly embrace the causes of the political right. There is an old saying among progressives that says, “No enemies to the left.” Don’t be tempted to turn that around by saying, “No enemies to the right.” While we are disgusted by the antisemitism, gender and identity politics of the left, we should not forget that there are equally loud voices of antisemitism, misogyny, and identity politics on the right. There really is a movement calling itself Christian

Nationalism that is racist and sexist. There really are popular voices like Nick Fuentes that encourage your people to embrace antisemitism. Guard your congregation against these trends.

There was an earlier split within Lutheranism in the 1970s. In that case, it was people on the left who departed and formed a new denomination. Eventually, they helped form the ELCA. One of the mistakes that they made, in my opinion, is that they tended to assume that if their old denomination was against something, they should embrace it. Many seemed unable to recognize that it is also possible to go too far to the left.

**...we voted to leave the ELCA ... we came to believe that preaching the Gospel was no longer the priority.**

My third warning has to do with the reality of spiritual warfare. The devil loves to sow division. Even on the human level, it can be observed that once a congregation experiences a division, it becomes easier for new divisions to arise. The devil certainly knows that. He will seek any opportunity to make small disagreements into church dividing ones. He is also alert to any spiritual vacuum. When a congregation leaves a denomination it is alone until it becomes part of a new denomination. Mutual support among clergy and congregations, as well as ecclesial oversight take time to grow. Beware of unexpected spiritual forces that may arise causing chaos and division.

Whether you stay in the ELCA or seek to leave, remember that a successful vote one way or the other does not solve all of your problems. You live in a sinful world. Your mission is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Pray that God will help you to keep steadfast in His Word, amidst the trials and temptations that will inevitably come your way.

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**Aim your phone's camera at the QR code to the right to bring up the link to Lutheran CORE's website.**



# Right Then and There

Pr. [Megan Ann Shaffer](#), NALC pastor in Pennsylvania



“I don’t want to offend anyone or lose my friends.” That was the reason one of my church council members gave as to why she holds back from talking to her close friends about faith.

Her response came from a discussion we were having about the importance of building intentional relationships with friends and neighbors with whom we can talk about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. It’s reasonable to understand her hesitancy. Yet, simultaneously, sadly, this is an excuse many believers fall back on because they don’t know how. Admittedly, I have not been exempt from using it myself, that was until one day, I was moved to change.

I had been invited as a guest to attend an NALC Regional Convocation. During one of the breaks, I had an engaging conversation with four individuals from the same church, who were attending as a group. They had asked me about my seminary experience. Up to that point, I had had difficulties with the ELCA candidacy process and I was contemplating leaving to join the NALC.

Throughout our exchange, I noticed how easy it was to talk to them. Even though I was a fish out of water, so to speak, they never made me feel uncomfortable. Their questions were genuine, not attacking or forceful, all while respectful. As we neared the end of the break, they asked if they could pray for me. As I told them that I would appreciate it if they would, they did something quite unexpected; rather than going on their way, they surrounded me, each placing a hand on my shoulder or arm, and began to pray for me, right then and there. It caught me by surprise because I had never had someone not only offer to pray for me but to do it! Over the next few minutes, each of them took a turn praying over something they had picked up on as they listened in, praying for God to

give me the insight I needed to make my decision, whatever it was to be, for strength and guidance to go wherever He called me. As they ended, I opened my eyes to find that there were no longer four people surrounding me; passersby had also stopped to pray, placing their hands on those around me.

That day, I witnessed a group of believers demonstrate what following Jesus looks like, and I saw that conversations about life and faith don’t have to be divisive, inspiring me to do the same.

When our Lord encountered someone who was spiritually and/or physically hurting, he didn’t attack them. He didn’t simply offer to pray for them and then continue on his way. Instead, he stopped and prayed over them at that moment.

In the years since, I have stepped out of my comfort zone and offered to pray for strangers—even someone who struck up a conversation with me on a flight home from Texas.

The feeling I have after praying for someone is that of joy. Doing so reminds me of Luke’s Gospel, where Jesus sends out his disciples ahead of him. As Christ told his disciples (I’m paraphrasing), “If you meet someone receptive to the Word, have a conversation; if they are not, don’t force it and go on your way.” However, I have never encountered anyone who refused my offer of, ‘Can I pray for you?’

Yet, encouraging her and telling her how to do it—based on scripture—only goes so far. While I have had such a positive experience, I find myself asking how I can help empower my councilwoman to set aside her fear and step out in faith.

Her fear is reminiscent of the disciples when Jesus told them to feed the five thousand. They had no clue how, and they certainly didn’t believe they had what it took to get the job done until their shepherd showed them the way. Their reaction was evident; they needed more time to be equipped and empowered.

After they had spent some time watching and learning how Jesus ministered to others, he released his disciples to try it for themselves. That’s when he instructed them in how to minister to those receptive to the Word of God and to those who are not.

When they came back to him, they reported incredible joy. As her earthly Shepherd, I can see how God has prepared her to spend time with me to learn how to follow Jesus.

# NALC Continental Youth Gathering: Forming Young Disciples Across North America

by [Pr. Teresa Peters](#), Director of Youth & Family Ministry, Winnipeg, MB, Canada

Every two years, youth and their leaders from across the North American Lutheran Church (NALC) will gather for four days of worship, teaching, and service at the Continental Youth Gathering (CYG). What began as a hopeful experiment in 2024 has already grown into a vital tradition where young people encounter Christ, deepen their faith, and discover what it means to live as His disciples in the world.



The first CYG – WE BELONG, was held in Boerne, Texas, in 2024 and brought together youth, adult leaders, and volunteers from across the United States and Canada. The next CYG – REJOICE, will take place July 7–10, 2026, at St. John Lutheran Church in Roanoke, Virginia, where organizers are planning for approximately 400 youth, leaders and volunteers. While the event is hosted by the NALC, its reach and impact extends well beyond. It includes partner agencies and the local community who play significant roles in making it possible.

At its heart, the CYG is not a “conference” or a “camp,” but a gathering built around Word, worship, and witness. Each day centers on Scripture, with teaching that is deeply rooted in the Gospel and the Lutheran confessional tradition, yet accessible and engaging for today’s youth. Large-group sessions combine solid biblical preaching with practical application, helping young people connect Christ’s finished work on the cross to the very real questions and pressures they face in daily life. Bible studies invite youth into smaller communities where they can dig deeper, share their own experiences, and learn to read Scripture not just as a story “back then,” but as God’s living Word for them today. And Worship is part of the daily rhythm, not a side event. Through song, prayer, and proclamation, participants are invited to bring their whole selves to the Lord—joys, doubts, anxieties, and hopes. By celebrating the Lord’s Supper with the wider church, participants are reminded that we belong to something larger than a single local congregation; we belong to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church and that is a reason to rejoice.

A key aspect of the 2026 gathering in Roanoke will be mission projects throughout the local community. Youth will step beyond the walls of the host



## REJOICE!

church to serve alongside local organizations—supporting shelters, food ministries, neighborhood projects, and other community partners.

These mission experiences are not simply “volunteer hours” to be logged. They are framed as an extension of the Christian life: a lived response to the grace participants have received in Christ. Throughout the CYG youth are guided to reflect on why Christians serve, how Christ is present in the margins, and what it means to be a witness in everyday life.

For local agencies and ministries, CYG offers an influx of energetic volunteers and an opportunity to build longer-term relationships with congregations across North America. Many youth will return home eager to continue serving in their own communities, inspired by what they experienced together in Roanoke.

Events like the Continental Youth Gathering do not happen in isolation. They rely on a web of partners—congregations, local ministries, prayer supporters, and agencies that share a commitment to forming lifelong disciples of Jesus.

You can support the CYG in a variety of ways:

- Pray and give encouragement to youth, leaders, organizers, speakers and those volunteering.
- If you are a local mission in Roanoke reach out to

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## NALC March for Life and Y4Life Conference in January!

by [Dennis Di Mauro](#), pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church (NALC) in Warrenton, VA.



The NALC Life Ministries team is once again preparing for the March for Life in Washington D.C. this January, but our plan is a little different. Instead of holding a life conference, NALC Life has decided to team up with Lutherans for Life (LFL) and participate in their events at the march! Their youth conference, Y4Life, will be held at the Hilton Arlington Landing Hotel (2399 Richmond Highway, Arlington, VA 22202) from Thursday, January 22nd, 2026 through Saturday, January 24th, 2026 and it has over 400 kids already registered - register at <https://y4life.org/events/> We encourage all our NALC youth to participate in this free conference.

On Friday, January 23rd we will be once again participating in the March for Life under the NALC banner, and I hope you can join us at 12th and Madison Sts., N.W at noon as we march to the U.S. Capitol.

Before the march there is a prayer service at DAR Constitution Hall 1776

D St. NW (18th and D St.) Washington, DC 20006 starting at 8:30am. The service will be in celebration of America's 250th birthday, celebrating the Right to Life as recognized in our Declaration of Independence and honoring the memory of Charlie Kirk. The special speaker will be Liche Ariza, who plays the role of Gedera, a Sadducee in Jerusalem and a member of the Sanhedrin in *The Chosen*.

All our NALC members are invited to attend this service and our clergy are invited to participate (stoles are white). If you have any problems at the march, please contact Pastor Dennis Di Mauro at (703) 568-3346. Pastor Di Mauro can also host you in his home if you would like to stay overnight in DC. We can't wait to see you in our nation's capital this January!!



## ... Learn from ELCA Decline ...

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by Luther Seminary (ELCA) professor Dwight Zscheile, and was entitled, “*Will the ELCA Be Gone in 30 Years?*” Needless to say, this title captured my attention. (And keep in mind that Professor Zscheile was and still is a member of the faculty at Luther, the ELCA’s largest seminary.) The two most salient points of this article were predictions of the loss in baptized members and regular worship attenders if the internal demographic trends for the ELCA in 2019 continued. And here were those predictions:

1. The ELCA would only have a total of approximately 67,000 members nationally by 2050. And...
2. The number of ELCA worshipers nationally—on a typical Sunday in 2041 will be less than 16,000.

Furthermore, this article made clear that, if these projections turned out to be accurate, the ELCA would no longer be viable as a national church body in 2050.

Given that, back in 2010, the ELCA still claimed on their website that they had “almost” five million members, I was initially skeptical that a denomination of that size could essentially implode by the year 2050. And I was also not sure how ELCA leaders would respond to this article’s conclusions. So in 2019 I started monitoring the ELCA’s national magazine, *Living Lutheran*, to see what their response might be. I found absolutely no response to or acknowledgment of the 2019 article; or for that matter, any article where an ELCA leader addressed the subject of the ELCA’s institutional decline.

Granted, the ELCA’s national denominational website has, over the last fifteen years been periodically adjusting downward their stated national membership total. They now (as of late 2025) describe that number as “nearly” 2.7 million members. This represents a loss of approximately 2.3 million members in fifteen years. And this translates into a 46% drop in membership in those fifteen years!

My on-going investigation, since 2019, to obtain the full story regarding what’s happening in the ELCA finally “paid off” this last November. That was when I discovered an internal study by the ELCA’s own Research and Evaluation Team, released in February of 2025. The title of this document is, “The Future Need for Pastoral Leaders in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America”. Now while the staff’s assignment was to address the future need for more ordained pastors, part of this document is a section focused on “the present state of congregations” in the ELCA. In that section of the report the authors acknowledged that congregational member-

ship figures were typically out-of-date; and *that* being the case, they instead looked at average worship attendance as the more meaningful statistic. What did they report when it came to the “present state” of ELCA congregations? Between 2015 and 2022, congregations with fewer than 50 in average attendance almost doubled. In 2015, 3 out of 10 congregations reported less than 50 worshipers on an average Sunday. By 2022, there were nearly 6 out of 10 churches in that size category. For medium-sized churches (worshiping between 151 and 250) the trend was similar. Congregations of that size were 12% of ELCA churches in 2015, but only 4% in 2022. And finally, large congregations (worshiping over 250 in 2015) were 9% of ELCA churches in 2015, but only 2% in 2022. Here’s a direct quote regarding these “large” ELCA congregations: “To be exact, in 2022, only 167 congregations (nationally) reported an average worship attendance over 250.” Keep in mind that this is only 167 “large” congregations out of the 8,500 “worshiping communities” the ELCA currently reports on their website!

One more quote from this study: “In summary, the decline in worship attendance in congregations has profoundly reshaped the makeup of the ELCA. Only a few years ago, the ELCA was composed mostly of small to medium-sized congregations. Today, it is mostly *very small* congregations.” (Emphasis mine)

Now keep in mind that since these statistics were true as of the year 2022, they no doubt are an undercount of the ELCA’s total losses as of 2026, and consequently minimize the current, full extent of the ELCA’s institutional decline.

### But How is the ELCA’s Decline Relevant for Congregations in the NALC and LCMC?

I assume that most readers of this article belong to NALC or LCMC congregations. So let me be clear: The primary reason why the ELCA decline is so dramatic, while both the LCMC and NALC appear to be relatively stable, is because there continues to be an exodus of ELCA congregations through disaffiliation. And virtually all of these churches leaving the ELCA end up joining either (or both) the LCMC and NALC. And it’s also important to recognize that movement from the ELCA to the NALC and LCMC does *not* constitute evangelistic growth. To use a tired phrase, this is nothing more than a “reshuffling of the saints.”

Furthermore, it is imperative that we recognize that many of the institutional trends in the ELCA—such as plummeting numbers of baptisms and confir-

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## ... Learn from ELCA Decline ...

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mations—and an aging membership, are also trends among many LCMC and NALC churches. Just one demographic statistic that pertains to our country's population as a whole: Between 2010 and 2020 the U.S. population of seniors 65 and over grew nearly five times faster than the overall population. Not surprisingly, this trend has an impact on the overwhelming majority of our congregations.

However, to put it bluntly, I think we need to consider whether we can learn from the dramatic decline of the ELCA. In other words, we need to ask whether the LCMC and NALC could be facing similar rates of decline in the not-too-distant future.

Now I'm convinced that part of the ELCA's rate of decline is due to the increased politicization of the ELCA since 2009. But I also believe that a second cause for this decline is an apparent complete disregard, by most ELCA leaders, of the importance of congregational evangelism. So consider this a wake-up call for all Lutheran congregations: It's time to make evangelistic outreach your top ministry priority. And not just to stem the tide of future institutional decline. Ultimately this is about our New Testament mandate to share the Good News; to witness to the increasing number of Americans who self-identify as "nones" when asked about their religious affiliation. It's about reaching out and connecting—as individuals and congregations—to those who do not yet know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Just trying to "keep the ship (your congregation) afloat" will no longer suffice. The challenges we are facing are too significant for us to settle for a passive and/or reactive response. Instead, we need proactive, congregation-wide strategies for reaching, evangelizing and discipling those in our community who are not a part of a Christian church. In pursuit of that goal, I encourage you to consider the ministry strategies below.

### Congregational Outreach Strategies

The single, overarching principle I advocate for is simply this: Creating new groups and ministries for new people. And to pursue this principle in a comprehensive way, consider what this principle could entail in *four* areas of your congregation's ministry. (And if you can't do all four simultaneously, choose one to start with, and try to excel in that one area of ministry.)

1. Small Groups and Bible Studies. This could be your primary discipling (i.e., disciple-making) effort. It can be the best way to not only help members grow

in their faith; it can also be a tremendous witnessing opportunity that will—incrementally—help motivate members to bring friends and acquaintances to your congregation. Never forget the unfortunate reality with small groups that are only made up of already-committed members: they often become cliques. However, small groups with a discipling emphasis can become effective ways to reach the unchurched; one person (or two) at a time. For published discipling small-group resources consider Sola Publishing.

2. Worship and Hospitality. For your worship service to reach and assimilate new people it needs to be both participatory in its content and be characterized—before and after worship—by intentional hospitality. Here's the goal: Make your Sunday morning worship life the kind of experience that will motivate and inspire your members to invite and bring their unchurched friends and acquaintances to your service.

3. Community Outreach. Do this primarily for the sake of those you serve. But do it, in addition, so your members can use their gifts in such a ministry, and so your congregation will be seen, by your surrounding community, as the church that does far more than simply "take care of its own".

4. Organizing and/or strengthening your ministries for children and youth; *and* for their parents.

This can be a huge challenge. Some congregations are simply too small; and as a result don't have *any* children or youth. However, if you sense any potential at all to build this kind of ministry, be ready to invest the necessary resources to help make this happen. Remember that for those congregations who end up without any nesting stage, active families, their future, long-term viability as a faith community is at risk.

If you have any questions regarding the details of these congregational outreach strategies, don't hesitate to contact me directly by email.

Pastor Don Brandt

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Director of Lutheran CORE's Congregations in Transition, and the Congregational Lay-leadership Initiative

# The Past, Present, and Future ...

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the name of Solid Rock and began organizing resistance to proposed changes in sexual ethics that would come about in the Churchwide Assembly of 2003. Solid Rock morphed into Coalition for Reform (CORE) with Roy Harrisville, Jr., as its executive. Enough resistance was organized in both 2003 and 2005 that the revisionists did not get their way. In 2005 a report noted that “When Christians disagree about an ethical issue of this magnitude, one important category for determining the policy of the church may be the recognition that participants in this debate are disagreeing not out of pride or selfish desires, but because their consciences are bound to particular interpretations of Scripture and tradition. The careful way Luther approached moral dilemmas (e.g., in *The Estate of Marriage* [Luther’s Works 45: 17-49] or *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* [Luther’s Works 46: 93-137]) showed a genuine concern for the integrity of disputants.” This report would become the groundwork for the “bound conscience” clause of 2009.

The Assembly of 2007 was supposed to be a truce concerning these issues, but at the end of the Assembly a Bishop proposed a successful amendment that no discipline should be used against those who were already disobeying church rules on sexual ethics.

After much work by a rather loaded task force on those issues, it proposed a social statement entitled *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*. The statement turned out to be ambiguous about every crucial issue and passed by a single vote at 666. The Assembly also passed provisions for allowing partnered gay pastors and gay marriage.

Though the task force that drafted *Human Sexuality* was loaded with revisionists, there was enough resistance that the “bound conscience” provision was inserted as a concession to the traditionalists and as a defensive move to prevent a wholesale rebellion in the ELCA. It recognized four “conscience-bound” positions that Lutherans could faithfully hold on the matter of same-sex relationships, ranging from full opposition to full affirmation of same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ+ clergy.

When hearings were held about the provision during the Assembly of 2009, I attended one and posed the question about whether it was simply a sop

to traditionalist pastors and congregations at the local level to prevent wholesale losses, but that it would not protect traditionalists in any other facet of the church. That has turned out to be true. The upper levels of the church have been purged of recalcitrants.

The provision has been crucial for maintaining a painful compromise within the ELCA amid diverse views on human sexuality at the local level. Though hundreds of congregations left after 2009, those traditionalist pastors and congregations that stayed sheltered under the bound conscience provision. I have taught a number of such pastors at the Lutheran Institute of Theology, but they are worried about the future. One has already transferred to the NALC.

## The Present

What is going on to make such pastors and their congregations apprehensive?

**The ELCA will continue down the slippery slope of accommodation.**

The ELCA has already edited the statement and its rules to allow for same sex marriage language and is contemplating a more systematic application of the diversity, equity, and inclusivity ideology, which would definitely not include those traditionalists who cannot agree with the LGBT gender agenda. They are the oppressors and should be silenced or expelled. Further, the elite of the ELCA have committed themselves to new fervid anti-racist policies that signal panic about the loss of black members even after decades of affirmative action, including the election of a black man as Presiding Bishop.

Those moves certainly signal that the bound conscience provisions are in grave danger. Further, the task force that has been organized to examine and propose future policy has a majority of “progressives” that are likely to favor a withdrawal of the bound conscience provision. But it seems that such a proposal is some distance in the future. Meanwhile, traditionalist pastors and congregations are in uneasy limbo.

## The Future

My hunch is that the bound conscience clause will go. There are certainly many level-headed members of the ELCA who prudentially see what will happen: lots of losses of pastors and congregation with no gains. More perceptive folks will see the further accommodation of the ELCA to secular progressive culture, much like sister liberal mainline denominations have done. Such accommodation means

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## The Past, Present, and Future ...

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continued decline.

However, I think the “commanding heights” of the ELCA will push forward with their agenda, including the abolishment of the bound conscience clause. The ELCA will continue down the slippery slope of accommodation. When we in CORE were defeated decisively in 2009, we wagered that the ELCA would be unable to say “no” to anything in the sexual revolution. To confirm that wager, it has even made the grave error of propagandizing for transgenderism for children.

There is a long shot chance that the elite themselves will not push their agenda so quickly, or that synod representatives at the ELCA Assembly of 2028 will rebel and resist. But it is more likely that the Assembly will be managed well by the dominant elite, as it has been in most of them. They will make sure that their agenda will prevail. And there will be one more step away from the Lutheranism whose teachings on marriage and sexuality are clearly grounded in Scripture and Tradition, to which our bound consciences yet cling.

## NALC Continental Youth Gathering: Forming Young Disciples Across North America

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the Director of Youth and Family Ministries to see how we can partner.

- Financial support—through designated gifts, sponsorships, or grants—helps keep registration costs accessible, provides scholarships for youth from smaller congregations, and underwrites the local mission projects we are able to offer in Roanoke.
- Help spread the word so that more congregations can send youth and leaders.

In a world where many young people feel disconnected from church, the CYG offers a hopeful counter-story: a living picture of the Gospel at work, drawing together youth, mentors, and congregations around Christ and His mission.

For more information contact Pastor Teresa Peters at [tpeters@thenalc.org](mailto:tpeters@thenalc.org).

If you would like to register you can do so here:

<https://thenalc.org/en-us/our-work/equipping-disciples/families/>



## Coming Events

- **Nicaea Pro Ecclesia: The Status and Potential of Our Nicene Heritage in Christian Catechesis and Ecumenical Dialogue**—Beeson Divinity School, Samford University, Birmingham, AL. January 12-14, 2026. Click [here](#).
- **NALC Continental Youth Gathering 2026**, Roanoke, VA, July 7-10, 2026. Registration is open, but there are only 350 spots! Click [here](#).
- **LCMC 26th Annual Gathering & Convention**, Lutheran Church of Hope, West Des Moines, IA, October 4-7, 2026. Click [here](#).

### CORE Voice Newsletter

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