



Case studies prepared by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) as we resume dialogue with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), 2020

Disciples of Christ collaboration in the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod (SWPA) of the ELCA

The territory of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod includes ten counties around the city of Pittsburgh. Within this compact geography may be found significant variety in population and world view. To use the jargon of current political distinctions, Pittsburgh is strongly blue; the rest of the synod is strongly red. Within our synod there are only two small areas of population growth. Some communities are holding their population in a stable pattern; most are continuing a long pattern of decline. The population of the Pittsburgh area reached its peak around 1950. The current population is about where it was in 1890.

Pittsburgh has “reinvented” itself a couple of times since the decline of the steel industry, but not all the smaller communities in the territory of the synod have done so, at least not in a way that provides economic stability. In this context, the congregations of this synod typically face the need to “reinvent” themselves for their continued life and ministry. One way of doing this is to collaborate with other ELCA congregations to provide quality, consistent pastoral care. Another is to collaborate with other full-communion partners to achieve the same goal. This case study is about one such attempt to “reinvent” church in an area of economic decline.

What is now known as “Around the River” parish is a collaborative ministry of four congregations on either side of the Ohio River in the Beaver Valley. Two of the four congregations have called pastors. The other two receive pastoral care through contract ministry. Pr. Michael Sourwine is the called pastor of House of Prayer, Aliquippa. Pr. Susan Irons is the called pastor of Rehoboth, Baden. Faith, Aliquippa and Van Kirk, Monaca are the other two congregations in the parish. When Pr. Patrice Weirick, the last pastor to serve these two congregations under call, left for a call in West Virginia, she entrusted the interim care of the two congregations to her neighbor Michael. As he was on sabbatical at the time he reached out to Susan for help. Together Susan and Michael and their congregations of call embraced the opportunity for renewed ministry and began to think and work as four congregations served by two pastors. The synod staff helped put in place contracts for ministry to formalize the arrangement.

The spirit of renewal and welcome that both pastors model in their approach to ministry attracted Pr. Paul Leone (a pastor of the Disciples of Christ), who began to attend the liturgies and program ministry of the parish in his retirement. Paul was invited to exercise his gifts for pastoral ministry within the parish and developed a positive rapport with Michael and Susan. The three pastors sought to formalize this relationship as well and came to me for help in how to do that. While I affirmed the ministry that was being provided through their collaborative efforts, I could find no constitutional warrant for authorizing Paul to provide sacramental ministry to the parish. It is this point of friction between the positive ministry experience of the pastors and congregations, on the one hand, and the constitutional boundaries around sacramental ministry, on the other, that has made this local situation something of a test case within the life of our wider church.



To put it most succinctly, the ELCA recognizes the ordination of pastors ordained in churches that confess the ecumenical creeds.¹ The Disciples of Christ rose out of an anti-creedal movement. If Pr. Leone had been willing to enter the Candidacy process of our church in order to join the roster of ELCA pastors, our church would have ordained him rather than receive him onto our roster. But Paul is deeply committed to the validity of his ordination, and found this path to authenticated ministry in congregations of the ELCA unattractive. So did Michael and Susan and I. Our conversations with Paul revealed a kindred spirit who held Word and Sacrament together in pastoral practice and in theological articulation that looked and sounded very familiar to our Lutheran eyes and ears.

It is worth noting that in our conversations Paul and I discovered another point of friction. He fully expected that after our favorable interview I could personally vouch for him and authorize his sacramental ministry in congregations of this synod. I understood my office not to have the authority to do this, as our church recognizes the pastoral ministry of whole churches and not of individual pastors on a case-by-case basis. Pr. Leone respected our polity and was willing for a time to distribute the sacrament from a prior celebration within the parish following our rite of Sending Communion, but to him and to Michael and Susan and me, this seemed less than satisfactory as a sustainable pattern of ministry.

Complicating the matter (or perhaps opening the situation to a different outcome), our churches are both in full-communication with the United Church of Christ. I did briefly explore with Pr. David Ackerman, Conference Minister of the West Penn Conference of the United Church of Christ, whether the policies and practices of our two churches might offer a creative way to authorize Paul to serve in sacramental ministry in an ELCA congregation but we could not find a way.

Pr. Leone has since moved on to other interests and is not currently serving in any capacity in Around the River parish. But this case study may yet be valuable in testing whether a new approach to authorizing ministry between churches based on the mutual recognition of their full-communication partners could open the door to a ministry of this kind between two churches that do not yet enjoy full communion with each other.

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¹ 5.2.5 Ordination or Reception of a Candidate After a candidate has received and accepted a letter of call, the bishop of the synod of Assignment will consult with the Office of the Secretary to determine if ordination is necessary. The ELCA receives as ordained many ministers of Word and Sacrament ordained in other traditions. Those from churches not confessing the faith of the historic ecumenical creeds or those whose authority for ordination is from a single congregation will be ordained according to the ELCA Service of Ordination. The Office of the Secretary will determine how this policy applies in the case of each candidate. ([ELCA Candidacy Manual](#), p. 55)



Disciples of Christ collaboration in the Sierra Pacific Synod of the (ELCA)

Our experience in Sierra Pacific has been limited to one of our pastors offering interim ministry in a DOC congregation in the East Bay Area. This lasted for about fifteen months while the congregation completed a call process. The pastor was “on leave from call” during this time, since no full communion agreement existed at that time by which a Letter of Extended Service or some other means of formalizing his service was available. [Below] are the reflections of Pr. David Ernat, who served as an interim (without synod call) at First Christian Church (FCC) of Concord, CA. Concord is a bedroom community in the East Bay area. David is a solid pastor who offered himself for interim ministry in our synod. I hope his reflections are helpful for our ongoing dialogue with our CC(DOC) siblings in Christ.

Other than that, I could see applications of a full communion agreement making possible other collaborative ministry opportunities, from pastors of each communion offering interim or called service to congregations of the other denomination, or congregations sharing a pastor as part of a “two point” parish agreement.

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Brief reflection on serving as Intentional Interim Minister to First Christian Church – Concord (FCC-C), California by Pastor David Ernat

I entered my ministry with FCC-C as any other congregation – a community of people that had one or more “systems” about how it lived. I was there to walk with the congregation, and to help them understand their systems and help them if they wished, to start changing one or more of their systems.

Their theological systems are similar and very different from the systems I have experienced with my faith community of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). In many ways, its theological system more resembles the “unofficial” theological systems I have enjoyed in the ELCA. An adage shared with me by a seasoned, former Missouri Lutheran Church pastor, I think captures the essence of this unofficial system – “Right relationships verses right thinking.” Below are a few examples of how my experiences with FCC-C’s official theological system and ELCA “unofficial systems” are similar.

FCC is non-creedal. The ELCA is creedal while generally providing people great freedom to think differently concerning theological concepts. Because of this both communities (FCC more so than the ELCA) have very broad opinions and ideas about theology and more. Both communities depend on “process” guidelines to make congregational decisions.

As a non-creedal community, FCC-C, (and I believe this is true with most Christian Church congregations), lifts the rolls of Elder and Deacons much higher than the ELCA. At FCC-C the Elders and not the clergy (Senior Minister) preside over the “sacrament” of Holy Communion. As a non-creedal community, FCC-C, (and again I believe this is true with most Christian Church congregations) embrace “believers baptism.” As Interim Senior Minister, I did enjoy being in its large tank and helping adults to

fully submerge themselves for baptism. True with both communities, clergy “professional creep” is present. That is too much deference can be paid to, or claimed by, the “trained minister” especially when addressing tough issues within the life of the congregation.

As a whole, I experienced most members of FCC-C and most folks at the ELCA congregations I have served, as seeking to be understood, seeking to be loved and able to return the same through mutual respect and humility.

National public recognition of ministries & implications of the broader landscape

Throughout the 40-year trajectory of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), Lutherans were observer-participants. We were interested in the enterprise, but remained committed to bilateral approaches to full communion, rather than the reconciliation of ministries through (multi-lateral) organic union. The shift away from seeking organic union through COCU and toward covenanting together through Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) provided a new opportunity. In 2002, the ELCA joined the founding of CUIC not as a member, but as a partner in mission and dialogue focused on ‘shared mission to combat racism’ and “dialogue to clarify theological issues and deepen our understanding of racism.”

The member churches of CUIC continue to regularly wrestle with questions of the recognition and reconciliation of ministries, most recently through a ministry consultation in 2016 (the consultant for which was the recently retired former ELCA ecumenical staff officer). One significant outcome of the consultation was that in 2017, in Dallas, the ELCA fully participated with the CUIC member churches in a service of mutual recognition. This was a public acknowledgement and celebration of mutual recognition of ministries, which had been long assumed among the churches of CUIC.

At the 2019 plenary, the ELCA announced its departure from CUIC. For the ELCA, ecumenical efforts and agendas in the area of anti-racism – the ELCA’s *raison d’être* at the CUIC table – had become duplicated and thus diminished. In a letter detailing the decision, the ELCA observed that the 2016 consultation made clear that the remaining questions of reconciliation had become even more challenging in light of how the “intricate web of our various bilateral agreements changes the landscape, and at the same time new models for ecumenical agreement and experimentation are emerging– creativity fueled in large part by missional needs on the ground,” The ELCA announced its intention to double-down in its anti-racism work in other ecumenical spaces where the CUIC churches are also present, including WCC and NCC, and to resume bilateral relations with the CC(DOC) and the Historic Black Churches.

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