



HISTORY & BACKGROUND OF THE ACELC

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It's a little difficult to know exactly when the idea that culminated in the formation of the ACELC actually occurred. I think it sort of accumulated like "dust-bunnies" under the bed. I suppose it began with all the other good-faith efforts that preceded it but never quite brought about the changes that were needed in our Synod to assist her to listen to the Word of God and to permit that Word to unite us in orthodox doctrine and practice. So, some words of commendation are in order for those efforts that pioneered the way for the ACELC.

It's actually a bit difficult to know how far back into our Synod's history we should go to determine why the ACELC has become necessary. Some would have us back up all the way to the Statement of the 44 in the 1940's and the failure of the Synod to adequately love and work with those who issued the statement to see what the Word of God actually said so that they could rightly retract their error and be united in the truth. Sadly that did not happen and the error remained among us.

Then there was the grand effort to keep our Synod faithful to the Word during the 1970's during the so-called "Battle of the Bible" and the failure of the Synod bring our Synod together under the Word of God and our Confessions to correct the errors prevalent not only at our St. Louis seminary but in all of those throughout the Synod who also held to the errors outlined in the so-called "Blue Book" which exposed the theological disunity of the seminary faculty

Rather than adequately address the heterodoxy among us at the time it became inevitable that false doctrine and bad practice continued to escalate among us. Not only is the infatuation with higher-critical biblical interpretation still a factor among us, but those erring ranks were joined by the "Renewal In Missouri" charismatic pastors and people.

Then came an error that we frankly didn't see coming. The advent of Donald McGavran at Fuller Theological Seminary and his budding Church Growth Movement prompted a pell-mell rush to push numerical growth and "missions", often at the expense of theology and practice among the Reformed. Some in the LCMS took note of the movement and saw an opportunity to emulate these practices not realizing that this theology of glory, once adopted, would dramatically alter the character and doctrine of our church body. And once again the error not only remained among us, but became the rallying cry to radically change our Synod. In addition, the fruit of higher-critical interpretation combined forces with the feminist movement to put forward an encroachment of women into offices within the congregations which they should not biblically occupy. Then in an effort to look more "user friendly" and to be more inclusive many in our Synod adopted a blatantly open disregard for the biblical and Confessional practice of the

Lord's Supper, and for the traditional worship forms of the Lutheran liturgy shattering any illusion of true fellowship among us.

Then in 1989, with the best of intentions, we disregarded the doctrine of the call by establishing the practice that non-ordained laymen could publicly preach, teach, and administer the Sacraments in our congregations. Tragically, we failed again to love those who had strayed from the orthodox Christian faith and bring all these things under the Word of the Lord and into conformity with our Lutheran Confessions. Ultimately, we have become a Synod in name only being held together not by commonly held doctrine and practice, but by the benefits of the Concordia Health and Retirement Plans!

With the election of President Gerald Kieschnick in 2001, the downward spiral accelerated markedly. Almost immediately the "Yankee Stadium" interfaith worship service, "A Prayer for America", spawned yet more entrenched "camps". There were those who understood the clear language of our Synod's Constitution in Article VI – Conditions of Membership that, "Taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession;..." applied to the unionistic and syncretistic worship service held on September 23, 2001, but that too was never corrected but rather justified and supported even by the President of our Synod. Again, we did not love our brothers in Christ sufficiently to believe that God's Word could unite us, we permitted the error to stand, and we became an even more divided Synod.

So, orthodox voices tried to speak out to the obvious degeneration of our Synod's unity. Pastors and laymen of the Northern Illinois District banded together to produce "That We May Be One" a document which rightly outlined the violation of Holy Scripture and our Lutheran Confessions related to matters of Christians Fellowship. It garnered thousands of individual signatures, and was finally exonerated of false concerns related to its content, but the issues it raised were never adequately addressed and corrected by the Synod as a whole.

Again an organization called Consensus was formed to attempt to address the many issues fracturing our Synodical unity by addressing them both theologically and politically. Once again this was not an organization of member congregations of the Synod, but of well-intended individuals. While many good things were done by those who organized and ran Consensus, in the end they were unable to achieve their goal of electing a Confessional Lutheran as president of the LCMS. By the end of the 2004 Synodical convention they had virtually ceased to exist.

Other groups within our Synod also spoke to these issues, like the Lutheran Concerns Association and Balance, Inc., which were and are well-intended but were never more than part of the marginalized "unofficial" efforts of the Synod. These groups too were organizations of individuals, not of congregational members of the Synod and collectively, they all helped raise awareness of issues within our Synod and for that they do need to be commended and supported.

As the deterioration of the theological integrity of our Synod continued to decline, more and more congregations became enamored of the tenants of the Church Growth Movement, now fully embraced and promoted by the administration of the Synod. The mantra of "Missions First" became the litmus test of every "progressive" pastor and congregation and those who disagreed with that agenda were considered as nothing but "obstructionists", "ultra-orthodox" or "liturgical Nazi's", or my personal favorite, "Black snakes in the bedroom that need to be thrown out of the house."

Against this ground-swell within the Synod individual pastors did stand up and raised voices of objection. Papers were written, articles for unofficial publications were penned and published, overtures were

written, but often district and Synodical convention floor committees ensured that such concerns would rarely be addressed and virtually never corrected. The individual voice simply were not heard.

Motivated by their Synodical leaders, many laymen hopped on the “Progressive Missouri - Church Growth” bandwagon. Seminary curricula were redesigned accordingly. LCMS congregational members visited other LCMS churches on vacation or business trips to discover praise bands, projector screens, vestmentless clergy, small groups, bizarre evangelistic efforts and brought these ideas home to traditional pastors urging and sometimes demanding that they change with the times and buying the out-right lie that if we did not radically change how we did “business” that the LCMS would surely die.

Pastors who objected were often persecuted by their own members and by Synodical officers intent on filling pastoral vacancies with those who fit the Church Growth/Mission-driven agenda. Confessional pastors often found it nearly impossible to get a call and not a few of them were unbiblically removed from their offices because they wouldn’t go along with the heterodox practices demanded of them choosing instead to keep their ordination vows even if it cost them their livelihood. It remains a scandal within our Synod to this day that many fine and faithful pastors are wasting away on the uncalled clergy roster. Some have given up and found other vocations. A few, in frustration, have found sufficient support within their congregation to survive and some have left the Synod.

When questioned about the errors in our Synod, they were mostly denied by the previous Synodical administration or marginalized as only differences in “practice”. The official avenues of redress led nowhere. The Dispute Resolution Process was a stacked deck which did not consider what God’s Word or our Lutheran Confessions said to be paramount. Hand-picked convention floor committees denied the addressing of errors time and time again. The official media of the Synod were essentially closed to any open discussion of the issues which divided us. The overtures of multiple districts were simply dismissed. No one was listening!

It was at this juncture in our Synod’s history that the idea began to develop for the formation of the ACELC. Somehow, someway the Confessional faithful had to find a way to make their voices be heard. What should be done? Yes, we could have formed yet another organization of individuals and that would have been far easier to do. Frankly, the track record of those previous organizations simply hasn’t been very good and their efforts had not brought about a consideration of the errors that continue to divide us. The Synod has proven to be roundly unresponsive to individual pastors and individual congregations.

Thus, the idea of forming an association of LCMS congregations whose concerns and voice might more likely be heard finally floated to the top. The idea is a natural outcome of the nature of our Synod itself. The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod is, after all, a congregationally based organization whose fundamental unit is the Church itself, that is, Pastor + People. The voice of an association of congregations should not be so easily ignored since it would be a collective voice within the Synod’s congregations. An association of congregations could more easily pool resources, could serve as a better “network” within our Synod, and provide mutual support, as we together seek a way to love our own Synod sufficiently to do the hard work to unite us under God’s Word and our Confessions.

This idea was floated on the internet among a group of about 30 pastors and laymen for several months during the early months of 2009. The discussion culminated finally in the election of a Steering Committee to explore the organization of such an association. At the time the Steering Committee had members in Illinois to the east and in Kansas City to the west so a central location of the Country Kitchen restaurant in Columbia seemed a likely meeting place. So on August 6, 2009, the first face-to-face meeting of the ACELC Steering Committee took place and our work began in earnest.

We began to float ideas to the larger group of 30. One thing we did NOT want to be was another secret group in our Synod. In our opinion there is far too many such groups and they do not foster trust within the Synod at large. When we were ready, we wanted to do “business” with openness and full transparency.

Obviously, we had absolutely no idea who would be elected to serve as the next President of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod a year prior to the 2010 Synodical Convention, and frankly what we were considering needed to be done regardless of who the new President might be. At a meeting of the Steering Committee at the Symposia in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in January of 2010, it was determined that the best course of action which would be open and transparent would be to send out a Letter of Fraternal Admonition to every pastor and congregation of the Synod. Had the 2010 Synodical convention reelected President Kieschnick, we understood that we would likely be in some very hot water and possibly removed from the Synod because of such an action. The ACELC had to form, errors had to be identified, study of the errors had to occur, discussion had to happen and finally, resolution in one way or another had to become a reality. If that resolution was that we were to be removed from the Synod, then so be it. God’s Word and our Lutheran Confessions had to be defended!

From August of 2009 until we sent out the Letter of Fraternal Admonition in July of 2010, the Steering Committee and the larger group of 30 worked very hard to formulate the documents that would identify what we stood for, what we considered the errors in our Synod to be, and provide evidence that the errors actually existed within our Synod. The documents of the ACELC: *The Definition of Confessional Lutheranism in Light of Present Day Issues*, *The Fraternal Admonition and Catalog of Errors*, and the ten *Evidence of Errors* documents are the product of untold hours of work by the members of the advisory group of the ACELC and the Steering Committee. Additionally, we took the time to have these documents reviewed by some of the best Confessional theologians of our Synod. When they were done, we were and are confident that they say only what the Word of God says, clearly and concisely identify the major issues with which our Synod struggles, and says them in ways that both pastors and laymen can understand. Such writing is no small challenge.

In addition to writing the documents, we had to obtain funding to mail out the Letter of Fraternal Admonition. Finally the \$4,600 + funds were raised and we were ready to send it out. It was prior to the 2010 Synodical convention and we had originally intended to mail it out at that time. However, good advice was received from several quarters that if we did, it might look like we were attempting to influence the elections at the conventions or that our documents might possibly (but inaccurately) be connected with Rev. Harrison, and he would be subjected to the same bad press as those who filed the LCA lawsuit at the 2007 convention. So we waited until after the 2010 convention and sent out the letter.

We were not at all surprised that “Progressive Missouri” didn’t appreciate our efforts. That was to be expected. We were a bit surprised at the vitriol coming to us from the Confessional side of our Synod. Cries of “schismatic” were inaccurately leveled at us. We were told that we were trying to form a “Synod within the Synod”. Of course, our documents said nothing of the kind and many read into our documents the conclusions to which they came. As for being schismatic, the ACELC is absolutely the antithesis of schismatic. To be schismatic means that without doctrinal cause, an individual or group is trying to leave the Synod. Schismatics would break fellowship with the Synod and likely even refuse to commune those not in agreement with them. The ACELC has done no such thing! We are seeking to unite our Synod in doctrine and practice, not leave it! Our concerns are specifically doctrinal and as such the label of “schismatic” has been inappropriately and inaccurately applied to us.

Some even claimed that we wanted to leave the Missouri Synod and form a new church body! I must ask them why we would go to all the trouble to seek to address theological errors in our Synod if our goal was to leave it?

Still others indicated that they thought the timing of the mailing was just awful coming right after the election of President Harrison. We were told that we were trying to set his agenda for him. We were told that we were undermining his proposed Koinonia Project. We were told that we should let President Harrison solve the Synod's errors. We responded by indicating that one man didn't get us into this mess and one man isn't getting us out of it either! We responded that President Harrison needs all the broad-based support he can get and the ACELC was more than willing to help and support his efforts to bring unity. They called us a "rump" group that had no business forming an association. We responded that there is no such thing as a bad time to identify error and to stand up for the truth. As an association we are just doing so with a united voice that has the possibility of being heard.

After a while the furor died down a bit and then we received a very pleasant surprise. I received an e-mail from First Vice President Herbert Mueller which said:

"I am writing to open a dialog with you regarding the concerns expressed by you and other members of the group proposing the ACELC. I am doing so (quite willingly) at the direction of President Matthew Harrison and the Council of Presidents.

At the direction of President Harrison and the COP, I would propose a meeting to include President Ray Mirly, President Russ Sommerfeld and myself with you and two or three others from your association – President Mirly because several of you are in the Missouri District, President Sommerfeld because at least one of the leaders is in the Nebraska District and myself at the direction of the President of the Synod.

The purpose of this meeting would be to discuss how addressing the legitimate doctrinal concerns you have expressed can be folded into what President Harrison has called "The Koinonia Project" (an initiative we pray will lead, over time, to greater doctrinal agreement in our Synod under the Word of God). In so doing we will also wish to discuss as brothers in Christ any other mutual concerns we have regarding the manner in which doctrinal issues and problems are expressed.

Are you willing to open such a dialog with us toward such a meeting? You may respond by return email or by phoning my office at 314.996.1410. We seek simply to discuss face to face as Christian brothers our mutual concerns."

This invitation began a series of three meetings with representatives of the Council of Presidents which totaled slightly in excess of 15 hours. The first meeting was held at the International Center in St. Louis and the last two at Holy Cross, Kansas City. These meetings were always cordial, brotherly, and frank. Mostly the District Presidents wanted to talk about the process we used rather than the issues themselves, but we did spend considerable time speaking about the various errors identified by the ACELC Steering Committee.

Also, during these meetings, the COP representatives indicated some concern that if the ACELC became a legal corporation that it would appear more likely to be seen as someone trying to form a new synod or a synod within the synod. Our only purpose in contemplating such a move was to meet legal requirements to become a non-profit corporation so as to receive funds from people in support of our

efforts that would be tax exempt. In navigating the course to non-profit status we discovered that all the rules have changed since 9/11. In order to apply for a tax-exempt status as a non-profit corporation, it is first necessary to obtain a Federal Tax Identification Number. In order to obtain the Tax Identification Number you must be incorporated. In order to become incorporated, there must be an election of corporate officers, articles of incorporation, etc. We were prepared to jump through all those hoops and had done much of the considerable work to accomplish this end, but decided to put doubt about the intentions of the ACELC away by simply organizing informally instead of formally. We were told by the President of the Synod himself that this was helpful and the representatives of the COP agreed and appreciated that effort on our part.

At the first two meetings held with representatives of the COP, joint statements resulted from each meeting. Here are some of them:

- "All six agree we have theological issues that need to be discussed under the Word of God.
- The way we pastors talk and think about one another needs also to be brought under the Word of God.
- Together we seek and support a process of the whole Synod to come to agreement on and to resolve these issues under the word of God.
- Representatives of the Steering Committee of the ACELC, 1st VP. Herb Mueller and DP's Russ Sommerfeld and Ray Mirly agree that there is an urgency for a comprehensive study of doctrinal and practical issues within the LCMS. We therefore strongly encourage the COP to recommend to President Harrison and 1st VP Mueller to consider the incorporation into a Koinonia project the topics addressed by the Ten Concerns of the ACELC. We further suggest that a high priority be given to develop in-depth Bible/Confessional studies FOR LAITY and for CLERGY that lead to a Synod-wide study of Worship and Holy Communion. We ask that all clergy and their congregations commit themselves to participate in these Studies. It is further encouraged that these studies will be expanded to be conducted at a Circuit Forum level to engage clergy and laity in this effort."

From the ACELC perspective we were delighted that these meetings occurred. We seriously doubted that they would have occurred under the previous administration or they would likely have been of a disciplinary nature. We were also delighted at level of agreement we achieved with these brothers. To conclude with them that our identified errors needed to be studied, discussed, and resolved and that this needed to happen as the result of a process of the whole Synod was more than we had hoped for. We were pleasantly surprised as well that at each of our three meetings with the representatives of the COP, that the ACELC was expressly promised a seat at the table for the proposed Koinonia Project. We did not agree that our concerns should be addressed through the Dispute Resolution Process.

While we are confident that we have our detractors on the COP, we also have our supporters and we will be grateful if they just simply leave us alone. One thing I do know, with the election of Rev. Harrison as our Synodical President, the Lord has provided this weary old Synod with one, possibly last chance to reclaim this venerable church body as an orthodox Lutheran body. Perhaps the Lord will provide more time, perhaps not. We must take this opportunity the Lord has given us. There is absolutely no guarantee that Matthew Harrison will be reelected in 2013 and this is not about one man. It is about us – the people and pastors of the Synod. The responsibility is ours and no one else's.

Finally, the effort of the ACELC is the right thing, the biblical thing, the churchly thing, and the ethical thing to do if we care about our Synod and want an orthodox Lutheran church body for our children and grandchildren. There is simply no such thing as a bad time to stand up for the truth of God's Word! There is no such thing as a bad time to identify and to lovingly correct error within Christ's Church! We must have faith that God's Word can change the hearts of men and redeem them from error. We must have faith that God can unite us!

I have been honored to work with the good and Godly men and women of the ACELC. I have known no more courageous and hardworking people in our Synod.

Please permit me to ask the members of the ACELC Steering Committee to stand and be recognized as I call their names.

Rev. Daniel Bremer, Rev. Drew Newman, Rev. Bruce Ley, Mrs. Virginia Valleau, and your humble servant.

Permit me also to recognize those who are with us who served in the larger group of about 30 who were instrumental in bringing this association into being. If you served, please also rise with the Steering Committee.

Also, permit me to recognize Rev. James Gier, the chairman of the Conference Committee who lead the effort to organize this gathering, and who also worked very hard to bring the final drafts of the extensive "Evidence of Errors" documents into being. Jim, please rise.

Finally, let me express my profound thanksgiving to Almighty God for the commitment you have all shown in making the time, expending the finances, and attending this Convening Conference of the ACELC. As we were preparing for this Conference it was truly an adventure in faith. We arranged for the excellent array of speakers we have enjoyed, not knowing how many would attend this important event or if the attendance would permit us to pay for all of the arrangements. It is strengthening to my faith and my heart to know that so many of you are not willing to remain silent in the face of doctrinal error or the toleration of error and who love the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod so much as to do all in your power to stand together to correct her errors so that we might once again be a faithful and Confessional Synod.

Today I am reminded of the words of our Lord as he spoke to the prophet Elijah who sat in despair under the broom tree in the wilderness near Beersheba and said to him:

"Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him." (I Kings 19:18, ESV)

You are among the 7,000 in Missouri who will stand together for truth and defend against error. Thanks be to God!