

Reflections on “Leaving the ELCA”

Question: We are so opposed to the ministry policy changes taken by the 2009 Churchwide Assembly that we feel like leaving the synod/ELCA. How should we ponder this possibility?

Responses:

1. First, an anecdote to help you in your discernment.

Many of us have had the experience of driving down a highway and suddenly hitting a bank of fog—going from “clear sailing” to a situation of very low visibility. How do you respond when you are suddenly driving through a foggy stretch of highway? Chances are you do two things: (1) you don’t stop abruptly, because another driver could run into your car from the rear; and (2) you don’t keep traveling at the same speed, because you could “rear-end” a driver ahead of you. So your first reaction, wisely, is to slow down—to keep moving, but to reduce your speed.

When the thought of “leaving the ELCA” first hits you, imagine yourself entering a bank of fog. Don’t stop. But please slow down. Take a deep breath. Give yourself—and your fellow church members—time to respond thoughtfully rather than to react instinctively.

2. Second, reflect deeply and discuss intentionally the question: **“Exactly why do we feel like leaving?”** Be brutally honest and jot down all the reasons that come to mind—do a little personal (or corporate) brainstorming. Complete the sentence: **“I/we think it’s time to leave the ELCA because _____.”** You and other members of your church may generate a number of responses as you “fill in the blank.”
3. Reflect upon and pray about all of your responses generated in step #2 above. Which responses sound like quick, *emotion-laden reactions*? Which responses are deeper, more *thoughtful responses*? Then try again to complete this sentence: **“We believe it may be time to withdraw from membership in the ELCA because _____.”**
4. Think about and discuss another question: What do you hope to accomplish by withdrawing from the ELCA? How will doing that “change things?” **What would be the intended consequences of taking this action?**
5. Now ponder some **possible unintended consequences** of withdrawing from the ELCA. Here are some examples of “unintended consequences:”
 - You could lead some members of your congregation who do not want to disaffiliate with the ELCA to leave your congregation.
 - You could, by example, encourage individual members who in the future might differ with some action by the congregation that it is appropriate, when disappointed, simply to withdraw from the church.
 - You would cease supporting **missionaries of the ELCA** who share the gospel across the globe.

- You would no longer help prepare future pastors and lay ministers through the eight **seminaries** of the ELCA.
- You would diminish the capacity of the ELCA to start **new congregations** and/or help renew existing congregations.
- You would sever your formal ties with **a whole web of ministries and relationships** you have known in the ELCA—Bible camps, ELCA colleges (e.g. Concordia, Moorhead), social ministry organizations of the ELCA, Lutheran Disaster Response, the ELCA Hunger Appeal, Lutheran campus ministries, etc.
- You would **give up some of your local and regional connections** through the ELCA and the Northwestern Minnesota Synod—conferences, clusters for the Synod Women’s Organizations, junior high and senior high youth gatherings, synod theological conferences, the annual synod assembly, etc.
- You would no longer look to the Northwestern Minnesota Synod for prayer, partnership in synodical mission and ministry, support in the call process, assistance in dealing with parish conflicts, encouragement for pastors and lay ministers, 148A background checks for rostered leaders, advice on administrative and organizational matters, participation in things like the ELCA Group Tax Exemption program, etc.
- You might lose your pastor if he or she chooses to remain in the ELCA.
- *What other “unintended consequences” can you think of?*

6. *Reflect on, pray about and discuss together this question: “Do the **intended** consequences of leaving the ELCA outweigh the **unintended** consequences?”*

7. Invite, if you have not yet done so, **all members of your congregation** into a time of discussing, praying about and reflecting on steps 1-6 above. This might happen best in a series of open forum opportunities over the course of several weeks or even months.

8. If after following these steps you still believe you need to consider the formal process of terminating your congregation’s relationship with the ELCA, please study carefully and follow completely the process laid out in sections 9.60 and 9.70 in the *Constitution, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* (summarized also in Chapters 6 and 7 of your congregation’s constitution). Please note especially the requirement of a 2/3 majority vote at two special congregational meetings scheduled at least 90 days apart from one another (with the bishop or his representative present for the second meeting).

9. At all points along the way, please consult with the synodical bishop/staff and elected leaders of the synod. Please also seek out accurate information about the ELCA, making full use of the rich resources available at www.elca.org