

ELCA Office of the Secretary

Myths and Facts About Congregational Governance

Recently, a number of rumors have been circulating regarding supposed changes to ELCA governance coming before the 2025 Churchwide Assembly from the Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church (CRLC). Some are suggesting that the Churchwide Assembly will eliminate congregational autonomy. Others are claiming that the Churchwide Assembly will authorize synods or the ELCA churchwide organization to seize congregational property.

To be clear, these rumors are untrue.

Response:

It may be the case that such rumors exist, but let's be clear that the LCSN is not making these specific claims. The LCSN does claim that the ELCA continues to shift away from congregational autonomy toward a corporate institutional mindset that diminishes congregational autonomy. That reality is not a rumor. It is a fact. And it is substantiated by the ELCA's own documents. See responses below to get more facts.

What is the Churchwide Assembly?

The Churchwide Assembly is the highest legislative authority in the ELCA churchwide organization. It meets every three years. This year, the 2025 Churchwide Assembly will meet in Phoenix, Arizona from July 28 through August 2.

Response:

Agreed

Will the Churchwide Assembly consider constitutional changes?

Yes, as it always does. At every meeting, the Churchwide Assembly considers changes to the Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the ELCA, which include the Constitution for Synods and the Model Constitution for Congregations. These proposed changes come to the Churchwide Assembly from the Church Council, which serves as the churchwide organization's board of directors. The Church Council must act on the proposed changes and transmit them to the synods at least six months prior to the Churchwide Assembly.

Response:

Agreed, but there is a second way to amend the constitution from the floor of the Assembly. There is a proposed amendment to significantly change that floor amendment process. See below for more details on that proposed change.

Do any of the proposed changes eliminate congregational autonomy?

No. The proposed changes can be found [here](#), and the rationales can be found [here](#). As you can see from reading these documents, there is nothing in the proposed changes that would eliminate, or even reduce, congregational autonomy and self-governance. In particular, the proposed changes to the Model Constitution for Congregations are minimal and do not reduce congregational autonomy in any way.

Response:

The key here is what is meant by congregational autonomy. If your congregation doesn't have final authority over what your congregation's constitution says, that would certainly seem to indicate there is a legitimate concern over autonomy. At that point, congregational autonomy IS a myth. Think of it this way: If the ELCA is able to tell you what belongs in your governing documents, they can determine what happens with your ministry, how disputes are resolved, and even perhaps the role the synod has in claiming control over your leadership and property.

Watch our [videos](#) regarding how Synodical Administration has been used to understand how this happens. And watch the embedded videos on the LCSN website of the Synod Assemblies of the [Metro New York Synod](#) and the [Southwest California Synod](#), both examples of Synodical Administration being applied to congregations. The fact that Synods can claim to apply provisions from the ELCA Model Constitution to a congregation that has not adopted that Model Constitution is, at a minimum, a reduction in a congregation's autonomy. NOTE: Pay attention to the videos. The Synod leaders explicitly state their concern is the value of the property.

Do any of the proposed changes allow synods (or the churchwide organization) to seize congregational property?

No. The proposed changes do not affect congregational property ownership. Likewise, there are no changes to the provisions related to synod administration or preservation of congregational property.

Response:

Agreed: The key words here are “proposed changes.” Constitutional provisions concerning Synodical administration such as S 13.24 are not going to be changed. They don’t need to be changed. Synods across the nation have already applied Synodical Administration. See the response below for more information.

Do any of the proposed changes affect the disaffiliation process?

No. There are no proposed changes to the disaffiliation process.

Response:

Agreed. However, a change to the so-called floor amendment process will be voted on at this summer’s Churchwide Assembly. That change will allow constitutional amendments to be made by 25 Assembly members, passed, and then voted on by two thirds of the Church Council to become effective. This is a significant change in process, as currently such floor amendments would require a second vote three years later at the next Churchwide Assembly. This means that while there may not be a proposed change to the disaffiliation process right now, such a change, and any number of other changes, could certainly come up on the floor and be codified quickly with this new, streamlined process.

What is the Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church (CRLC)?

The 2022 Churchwide Assembly instructed the Church Council to create the CRLC to review the constitutional Statements of Purpose and Principles of Organization of the three expressions of the church (congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization), keeping in mind this church's commitment to dismantle racism.

Response:

Watch [this video](#) to learn more about the CRLC. Their work includes examining, and perhaps redefining the purpose of the three expressions of the church, one of which is congregations. Additionally, the CRLC How Are We Governed committee reported on August 9, 2024 that they have begun a discussion with the full committee of matters relating to “accountability, autonomy versus uniformity, and the need for structural flexibility.” Additionally, they presented draft proposals of possible changes to governance structures. In their January 25, 2025 meeting that same Committee finalized five proposals to be presented to the Conference of Bishops at their February/March meeting and to the Church Council at their April 3-6 meeting.

Does the CRLC have the authority to make any changes?

No. It is an advisory body formed to make findings and recommendations.

Response:

Agreed. The CRLC does not have any authority on its own to make changes, but they are tasked with making recommendations to "... reconsider the statements of purpose for each of the expressions of this church, the principles of its organizational structure, and all matters pertaining thereunto, being particularly attentive to our shared commitment to dismantle racism, and will present its findings and recommendations to the 2025 Churchwide Assembly in preparation for a possible reconstituting convention to be called under the rules for a special meeting of the Churchwide Assembly." Clearly, the scope of the CRLC's work is broad and will directly impact congregations.

Do the CRLC's recommendations eliminate congregational self-governance, threaten congregational property, or affect the disaffiliation process?

No. Although the CRLC's report is not yet complete, none of the recommendations advanced to date would do any of these things. Some of the CRLC's recommendations are already incorporated in the proposed changes the Church Council is sending to the Churchwide Assembly. Those recommendations are specifically noted in the rationale Document.

Response:

This is part of the broader conversation about a congregation's control over their governing documents. One of the CRLC's recommendations that will be voted on at the Churchwide Assembly is a change to the way the ELCA can amend its constitution. LCSN Video on proposed changes to the constitutional amendment process unpacks this proposed change. We can put it simply to say the CRLC's proposal will eliminate the requirement of a second Assembly vote three years later for all floor amendments approved at the first Assembly. Instead, a floor amendment that passes the first Assembly simply needs to be passed by two thirds of the Church Council and it becomes effective. That means the constitutional amendment process is greatly streamlined and congregations will have little to no opportunity to provide input or offer changes to the amendment before it is adopted. Certainly, it is not unreasonable to assume changes to congregational self-governance, congregational property matters and disaffiliation processes could be included in this new fast-tracked floor amendment process.

Where can I learn more?

The proposed changes to the constitutions offered to the assembly by the Church Council are [here](#), and the rationales are [here](#).

The CRLCs' home page is here: <https://www.elca.org/about/leadership/church-council/crlc>.

Response:

Go to the [LCSN.us website](#) for more information.