

## WHAT ABOUT VACANT, ISOLATED, OR SMALL CONGREGATIONS IN LUTHERAN CHURCH—CANADA?

“Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake.” (Augsburg Confession IV.1-2)

“So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given (John 20:22). He works faith, when and where it pleases God (John 3:8), in those who hear the good news that God justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ’s sake.” (Augsburg Confession V.1-3)

“The Church is the congregation of saints (Psalm 149:1) in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered.” (Augsburg Confession VII.1)

“Our churches teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church, or administer the Sacraments, without a rightly ordered call.” (Augsburg Confession XIV)

These four statements from the Augsburg Confession of our Evangelical Lutheran Church are foundational to addressing the matter of vacant, isolated, and small congregations in Lutheran Church—Canada . . . a situation which more than likely is only going to increase in the foreseeable future.

### I. The situation before us at the present time:

While many small, vacant congregations are currently receiving Word and Sacrament ministry, yet they have no official pastor. This is evident by the fact that we have many congregations under the misnomer of Vacant Non-Calling congregations. Such congregations grow accustomed to inexpensive ministry and when encouraged to be faithful to the Word of God find it hard to accept both the financial and personal commitments needed to form a parish and call a pastor.

Since it is not in keeping with God’s Word that a congregation would exist apart from a called and ordained pastor, it is incumbent that the Synod assist them in this matter so that regular Word and Sacrament ministry may be in vogue among them.

### II. Challenges which may have led to this situation:

- a. There has been a significant decrease in population due to de-ruralization and smaller families.
- b. The financial burden of supporting a full-time pastor, along with increased costs of maintaining the church properties, has become more than some congregations can bear. Coupled with this reality is some congregation members failing to implement biblical stewardship principles in their lives.
- c. Some congregations are resistant to change when it comes to worship times and locations.

d. The attitude of society to the church has changed drastically over the past number of years so that we are now living in what has been called a pre-Constantinian age (i.e., the church is no longer in a favoured position or viewed positively or even necessary).

e. The rampant individualism, apathy toward spiritual matters, and self-indulgence characteristic of our society has infected and affected also the church and her members.

f. Not only has there been a clergy shortage over the past few years, but rural areas do not have the availability of emeritus or retired pastors to draw from when it comes to serving vacancies or being officially called to serve such congregations with regular Word and Sacrament ministry.

g. Some congregations have resisted aligning with other congregations into a dual or multi-point parish in order to be regularly served by a called pastor – citing such things as losing their identity, autonomy, voting privileges at synod conventions, and the like.

h. Past policies and procedures in the former districts of LCC focused primarily on missions and the establishment of new congregations, while small and isolated congregations were often ignored or simply taken-for-granted.

### III. Addressing this situation:

a. Call (not contract) a pastor with compensation below the suggested guidelines with the expectation of a reduced amount of time that the pastor would spend working in the congregation. This option may especially be a possibility if calling an emeritus or retired pastor who is currently receiving a pension.

b. Call a pastor from a neighbouring or sister congregation to also be their regular (i.e., not vacant) pastor. In such a case the congregations should be encouraged to establish a formal parish relationship. Templates for forming such parish agreements are available.

c. Establish a multi-point parish with other small, vacant congregations and together call a pastor (and perhaps also an older pastor who is receive a pension) to serve them. This is similar to what was formerly known as a “circuit rider” model. While weekly services may not be possible in this situation, there would still be regular pastoral ministry taking place. This could be augmented by lay-led services, using resources that are currently being put together by the President’s Ministry Council of Lutheran Church—Canada.

d. Such small, vacant congregations could amalgamate or merge into one congregation, perhaps at a different location, and call a pastor.

e. Disband the congregation with the members transferring to a neighbouring or sister congregation.

### IV. Some Encouraging Words from C. F. W. Walther (founding father of the Missouri Synod):

“What a blessing it is when Christians can freely assemble in a church where God’s Word is purely and clearly proclaimed and where the holy sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution. Such a church, no matter how small and poor it may appear, is of more value than all of the splendid palaces of the world.”

“Let everyone who is in a tiny little congregation take note and know that church matters are not like worldly matters. The smallest congregation is just as important as the largest one, and the largest is no more important than the smallest, because every congregation is great only because Christ is present in it.”

“O Lord, let this Your little flock, Your name alone confessing,  
Continue in Your loving care, True unity possessing.  
Your sacraments, O Lord, and Your saving Word  
To us, Lord, pure retain. Grant that they may remain  
Our only strength and comfort.” (LSB 647 st. 2)

President's Ministry Council  
April 2020