

## **N/W Lower Michigan Synod ELCA**

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## **Reflections on Cooperating Congregation Covenants**

More and more congregations are working together in one way or another to share resources, skills, mission and ministry. Partnerships and cooperatives can run the spectrum from a pastor serving more than one congregation, to fully blended congregation with ecumenical partners. As we work together more fully it seems good to have covenants and documents that guide us. In a recent gathering of Directors of Evangelical Mission of the ELCA, they share some reflections on the process and what should be included in those documents.

### **Where We Begin**

We begin and end with God. It's all about mission: God's mission and the congregation's mission. Cooperative conversations, joining of congregations, and shared ministry needs to be centered in what God is doing and not just from economic scarcity. The whole conversation begins with God and that should be reflected in mission/vision/guiding principles that are substantiated in the covenant documents.

Cooperating Congregation Documents should begin with some phrasing like: "After prayerful reflection and for the sake of God's mission we enter into the following agreements..."

Any agreement should begin with a summary of where God seems to be leading, how the mission and ministry of the congregations will be moved forward, and why it is important to do this. Plus it should include some reflection on history and historic mission initiatives.

### **Actions Leading to a Covenant**

Experience has shown that the suggested steps shown below are the most effective in working toward a cooperative ministry or partnership. Starting with discussing disposition of buildings or times for worship will most often doom the whole process. Discussions with synod and judicatory staff should be the initial step.

- 1) Listening to God - Acts or related bible study and prayer
- 2) Listening to each other - including fellowship, worship, and social activities for the congregations to get to know each other
- 3) Listening to the community - engagement with the community to see the missional needs outside the churches and how a cooperative ministry covenant will enhance the congregation's outreach
- 4) A time of writing mission/vision/guiding principles for the cooperative ministry
- 5) Celebrate histories and share stories
- 6) An examination of assets through tools such as Asset Mapping or the Congregational Vitality Assessment Tool

## **Details**

Once the above steps have been taken, then the cooperating congregations can begin to outline details about how they will work together. It is important to note that this will take time to work out. Probably the best action plan would be to proceed with a calendar of implementations over many months to several years.

Probably the first decision that needs to be made would be: will each congregation retain its individual identity or will the congregations be a blended entity, or will there be something totally new emerging. Once that decision is made with a timeline, then the rest of the decisions will fall into place more easily. A suggested outline might include:

- 1) Contacting judicatories for advice and counsel
- 2) Empowering an implementation team
- 3) Determination of staffing
  - A. pastoral and/or lay pastoral care
  - B. support staffing
- 4) Administration and governance
- 6) Programs to be shared
- 7) Review and adjustment of covenant
- 8) Remaining connected to what God is going
  - Listen to God, Listen to Each Other, Listen to community again to see how its going and where there needs to be adjustment

## **Here is an Alban reprint with good insight**

### **THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE**

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Alice Mann, senior consultant at the Alban Institute, says a congregational merger is "a strategy for dramatic change." She strongly encourages congregations to look at all their options before considering a merge so they'll be very clear as to whether a merger will be beneficial. As she points out, mergers are universally stressful situations, and they usually demand much more change than the people involved ever anticipated.

"Readiness" is a key component when considering a merger, and according to Mann, it involves four things:

Do the people involved really believe there's an urgency to do something differently?

There must be more than three or four "eager beavers" who want change. The congregation must be prepared. Communication must be open and transparent, and a majority of the congregation must be supportive of the merger and all it

could entail—including possible new leadership, a new location, and a new style of worship.

It is critical for congregations to do a self-assessment. They must be aware of the internal dynamics, strengths, foibles, styles of communication, and interpersonal relationships that are affecting the congregation. This knowledge will be extremely important when deciding whether a merger is the best option. It will also help them to know what type of congregation would be best for them to merge with.

Armed with the knowledge from their self-assessment, Mann says the leadership then ought to weigh all possible options—other than a merger. If congregational growth has reached a plateau or finances are challenged, would it help to change locations, leadership, or worship styles? Is it time to consider a “holy death” for the congregation and allow members to find a new church or synagogue?

Finally, before considering a merger, it must be determined whether the congregation and leadership are fundamentally focused on God’s mission in their community. Mann says that most positive merger experiences involve people who are more committed to the continuity of their faith than the building. Many find it difficult to separate their ministry from the building, and that can cause problems later in the process.

After a congregation decides to move forward with a merger, practical, legal, and heart issues must be addressed.

### **Practical issues**

“Congregational merger” is a far-reaching term with many possible variables. In some cases a stable church or synagogue will absorb a struggling congregation, in which case one party simply closes its doors and there are no negotiations to speak of.

However, sometimes the receiving church will go to great lengths to welcome the new congregation, incorporating some of their traditions and even taking on their staff.

Another common scenario is when denominational officials decide to take two or three struggling congregations that are geographically close and combine them. While this may seem like a quick solution to financial woes, Mann warns that this situation can have a negative outcome. In her experience, the factors that contributed to the state of these churches, unless resolved, can multiply when other struggling congregations are joined.

Mann says that in this type of case it’s often better to move the strained

congregations to an entirely new location, call someone new to lead, and give the merged churches a new name. This increases the likelihood of survival. Cluster churches and cooperative ministries are also becoming more common. In these situations, congregations maintain their separate identities—and even locations—but share ministry resources as well as their rabbis or ministers. They combine groups such as youth and elder care, and they may pool administrative staff. However, if the cost of maintaining a large or aging building is putting a burden on congregational finances, cooperative ministries may not be the best solution. Also, some congregants may feel they are not getting the attention they once received, and clergy may feel overwhelmed with the additional responsibilities this approach requires of them.

### **Legal issues**

There are many legal issues involved in a church merger, and Mann says it is very important that all parties seek legal representation so that everything remains above board.

If a church is part of a denomination, it must seek denominational approval and determine whether the church property is owned by the denomination before proceeding.

Bequests to the congregation will also have to be dealt with. In some cases, inheritances may revert to another heir if any changes are made. The leadership should find out what valuables, if any, were inherited.

In addition to bequests, all gifted items should be made transparent. It is critical to communicate with congregants so that gifts to the church find a new home that is suitable to the giver, and nothing is lost in the transition.

Finally, decisions must be made concerning the new entity. Will it be a continuation or will incorporation papers be necessary? If it is renamed, what will the legal consequences be? These answers will be specific to actual congregations, so legal representation is a must.

## **Heart issues**

Probably the biggest issues involved with a merger are matters of the heart. When two congregations are joined together, blessings are multiplied, but for the sake of unity, some things may also be sacrificed.

Communication through town hall meetings, e-mails, and verbal updates during the weekly worship service are vital. Congregants must understand why change is necessary in order for them to support it.

A congregational merger can bring about changes in worship style, music, leadership, and traditions unique to a local church or synagogue. These issues can be deal breakers—or deal makers—when people of faith choose a house of worship. If the congregations involved take ownership of the idea to merge, a successful transition is likely, and everyone will benefit.

While there are many scenarios to consider and several challenges to overcome, successful mergers are quite possible to achieve. Resources such as books, seminars, and private consultations are readily available, and leaders who utilize them will greatly increase the chance of success.

Consultations can be made with the synod's Director for Evangelical Mission in the ELCA and  
The Canon to the Ordinary in the Episcopal Church.

Also see - [A Resource for Persons Considering Forming A Multiple Parish](#)  
By Ken Inskeep and Jacqueline Skrypek  
ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation  
Cooperative Ministry Spectrum—NW Lower Michigan Synod