

What Lutherans Believe

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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The LC-MS and other Lutheran Bodies – LEADER's GUIDE

Additional thoughts to supplement the discussion:

Membership:

- ELCA: 3.4 million members (5th largest Protestant denomination in the U.S.)
- LCMS: 2 million members (8th largest Protestant denomination in the U.S.)
- WELS: 350,000 members.

Commonality – Yes and No:

The LCMS and the WELS have far more in common with each other than they do with the ELCA.

Doctrine and authority of Scripture. Both the LCMS and the WELS believe that the Bible is without error in all that it says. The ELCA avoids making such statements, holding that Scripture is not necessarily always accurate on such matters as history and science. This in turn leads to additional differences between the LCMS/WELS and the ELCA. The LCMS/WELS view many issues as being dictated by Scripture, while the ELCA views those same issues as being specific to culture and time, and thus are open to reinterpretation by successive generations. E.g.:

Women's ordination: The LCMS/WELS believe that there are many offices (positions of responsibility) which may be granted to those who are qualified and which are in some cases limited to men or women. Ordination in particular is limited to certain men who meet certain biblical qualifications. The ELCA believes that all offices are open equally to men or women. Essentially, for the LCMS/WELS, this is an issue of Scriptural authority; for the ELCA it is more a matter of social equality.

(Neither the LCMS nor the WELS believe that there is any higher value or importance ascribed to men, nor that there is any deficiency in women. Both

agree that both men and women are created in God's image and entirely equal in value, importance and salvation.)

From an LC-MS Pastor: Everything in creation is ordered by God, and biblical positions of authority are about responsibility, not power or value. When someone in a position of authority, including a pastor, uses his position to make others feel devalued or less important, it is in fact a misuse and an abuse – and that person is no longer walking faithfully within his calling.

Evolution: The ELCA believes that the biblical account of creation may be accepted as myth in light of evolutionary science. The LCMS/WELS believe that the biblical account of a six-day creation is fully compatible with science, and that science is by its very nature never settled.

Homosexuality: The LCMS/WELS believe that homosexual activity is a sin according to biblical teaching, while also teaching that all sins are forgiven in Jesus Christ. The ELCA believes that biblical admonitions against homosexuality are cultural and thus open to reinterpretation.

Abortion: The LCMS/WELS are pro-life and thus believe that abortion is the willful destruction of human life and thus equated with the sin of murder, as is active euthanasia (assisted suicide). The ELCA believes that an individual has the right to choose their own stance on abortion, as well as when to end his or her own life.

Commitment to Lutheran confessional writings. The ELCA, while affirming its commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as witnessed to in the Lutheran Confessions, also tends to emphasize the historical character of these writings and to maintain the possibility of dissent to confessional positions that do not deal directly with the Gospel itself understood in the narrowest sense. Both the LCMS and the WELS hold that the Lutheran confessions are a faithful exposition of Scripture.

Level of agreement necessary to join together in one church body. While the LCMS and the WELS differ on the level of church fellowship allowed (see point #1 below), both believe that the Bible requires agreement in all that the Bible teaches in order to have **full** church fellowship, while the ELCA holds that disagreement in some matters of doctrine do not prohibit church fellowship on any level.

Theological areas from which the LCMS and the WELS differ from each other:

Biblical understanding of fellowship. The WELS holds to what is called the “unit concept” of fellowship, which places virtually all joint expressions of the Christian faith on the same level, requiring full doctrinal agreement in all cases. The LCMS, however, has historically not understood or practiced church fellowship in this way, and makes a distinction between altar and pulpit fellowship (for which full doctrinal agreement is required) and other manifestations of Christian fellowship (such as prayer or Bible study), which do not necessarily require full doctrinal agreement. This means, for example, that if a community prayer vigil was held, an LCMS Lutheran would have the freedom to participate where a WELS Lutheran would not.

Doctrine of the ministry. The WELS believes that there are many different forms of one, divinely established Ministry. These include pastor, teacher and others. The LCMS teaches that only the pastoral office is divinely established, while all other church offices are human institutions.

Role of women in the church. While both the LCMS and the WELS oppose the ordination of women to the pastoral office on Scriptural grounds, the WELS teaches that women’s suffrage in the church (voting on church matters) is contrary to Scripture, while the LCMS supports it.