

## **The Lutheran Theology of Church Fellowship in the Mission Field**

### Abstract

“When one crosses that big pond, it seems like his theology differs from his sending church body.” This statement reveals what happened to the LCMS's world mission in the past and what the current LCMS missionaries face in the field to rectify the theology inseminated by the earlier missionaries.

Since there are divergent practices and theology in the U.S., LCMS missionaries in the past and present also experience the struggles extended to their prospective fields. LCMS' partner churches have difficulty understanding LCMS theology because sometimes LCMS missionaries disagree on theology and practice.

LCMS' fellowship theology and practice become exponentially complex when a partner church enters the equation. For example, LCMS has a formal altar and pulpit fellowship with the Lutheran Church--Canada (LCC). Still, our partner church, China Evangelical Lutheran Church (CELC) in Taiwan, does not have that relationship with LCC. Could a church member from the LCC congregation partake in the Lord's Supper at a CELC church? Can a pastor who belongs to the LCC preach and administer the sacrament at a CELC congregation? There are divergent opinions on these questions. Finding the solution without carefully examining the issue will be too hasty and irresponsible. It is critical to look at why LCMS has the theology of the altar and pulpit fellow in the first place.

Our Lutheran theology demonstrates that the altar and pulpit express concord. Therefore, LCMS pastors and missionaries instruct people to God's Word and encourage them to live out their faith.

How can we be faithful to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions but simultaneously struggle to understand cultural and linguistic complexities? Is pastoral discretion the silver bullet to all the questions regarding the LCMS fellowship matters in the mission field?

This paper might not have all the answers, but it may help the readers to ask informed questions.

The Lutheran Theology of Church Fellowship in the Mission Field

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## **Introduction: Not an Autopsy, but a Diagnosis**

“When one crosses that big pond, it seems like his theology differs from his sending church body.” This statement is more than anecdotal—it captures a tension that has long simmered beneath the surface of LCMS global missions. It reflects a hard truth: the theology that missionaries carry abroad may not always be faithful to the doctrine of their sending body, and when faulty theology takes root in the mission field, its consequences can last for generations.

Is our mission field doomed? Is it too late to recover what was lost? This author is pleased to report that this paper is not an autopsy report on a dead or dying mission. Rather, it is a practitioner’s diagnosis—a reflective and hopeful examination of what went wrong, why it happened, and how we might, with God’s grace and truth, solve.

Despite the very real failures in LCMS mission history, the Lord has not abandoned His Church. The Word of God does not return void (Isaiah 55:11), and the Sacraments continue to strengthen the faithful—even in imperfect, wounded mission contexts. The goal of this paper is to encourage and lead all of us to repent and receive Christ’s forgiveness -- not despair.

## **What Happened? A Brief Theological Diagnosis**

When problems arise in the mission field, one of the first questions often asked is, “What happened?” But behind this question lies another: “Where did we do wrong?” The answer, as is often the case in matters of church history and theology, is complex and multi-layered.

As Christians, we begin with the foundational truth: humanity is sinful. Wherever people go—whether to a seminary classroom, a local congregation, or a foreign field—they carry with them the marks of original sin. Furthermore, Satan remains active and malicious. The devil’s goal is to thwart the Gospel at every turn. Since he cannot destroy God Himself, he goes after His creation—particularly those who bear the Gospel.

In many parts of the world—especially in Africa and Asia—the spiritual battle is not hidden. Demonic oppression, spiritual rituals, and ancestral veneration are visible reminders of the conflict between light and darkness. In contrast, the West often views these spiritual realities with skepticism or dismisses them as primitive. This cultural blind spot has hampered many missionaries’ understanding of the spiritual landscape they enter. A well-known Missiological scholar Paul Hiebert pointed out “flaw of the excluded middle.” Westerners tend to divide the world into two: physical and spiritual. However, many part of the world do not see the world that way.

Satan does not only attack from without. He undermines from within. His favorite tactic is divide-and-conquer. Missionaries fall sick. They become discouraged. They experience schisms, isolation, and even theological confusion. The enemy’s tactics are subtle: if he cannot drive the missionary home, he may instead allow him to stay—while quietly twisting the Gospel he proclaims.

Some missionaries, intentionally or not, taught doctrine that was not in line with LCMS confessions. These errors—ranging from mild dilution to outright falsehood—were not always recognized or addressed quickly. And as a result, entire partner churches absorbed them.

In some cases, the sending synod did not even notice until years—or decades—later.

### **Historical Background of LCMS Missions**

To understand the current theological challenges in the LCMS mission field, one must first look at the historical development of the Synod's global missionary efforts. Lutheran mission work within the Missouri Synod began in earnest in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Initially, the missionaries were men deeply grounded in Lutheran theology, often trained at institutions like Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. They held to a high view of Scripture, emphasized the efficacy of the Means of Grace, and sought to establish Lutheran congregations rooted in the Lutheran Confessions.

However, as the 20th century progressed, the LCMS found itself facing pressures from both outside and within. Western intellectual and theological movements—like higher criticism, existentialism, ecumenism, feminism, and liberation theology—began to infiltrate the seminaries and theological schools, particularly in the post-World War II era. Many American church bodies, including some within Lutheranism, sought to adapt to the cultural and intellectual climate by “modernizing” their theology. Unfortunately, these shifts did not remain confined to the U.S.

As LCMS missionaries were sent abroad, they carried with them not only the Gospel but also the theological debates of their day. This meant that mission fields sometimes became battlegrounds for theological ideas that originated in America rather than in the Scriptures or the Confessions. Some missionaries held to biblical inerrancy and confessional Lutheranism, while others were influenced by the rising tide of liberal theology, which questioned the historical reliability of the Bible, downplayed the uniqueness of Christ, or focused on social justice over justification by faith.

One of the key historical developments in this regard was the 1974 Seminex crisis, where a significant number of faculty members and students left Concordia Seminary over disagreements about biblical authority. This internal division within LCMS had ripple effects across the global mission field. Partner churches, often trained and shaped by these same missionaries or theological currents, were now left with theological frameworks that were inconsistent with each other. Some were catechized in solid Lutheran doctrine; others were left with a version of Christianity barely distinguishable from liberal Protestantism.

In many cases, LCMS leadership sought to implement the Nevius Plan—a strategy of making mission churches “self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating” as quickly as possible. While this plan had practical and financial appeal, it often assumed a level of theological and

ecclesiastical maturity that was not present. As a result, local churches were granted independence too early, and without sufficient catechesis, oversight, or support.

The problem was not only structural—it was doctrinal. When missionaries who were poorly formed themselves attempted to teach and lead, they exported flawed theology that would later prove very difficult to correct. Local leaders, trusting their teachers, absorbed these views without knowing they deviated from Lutheran orthodoxy.

The result? A tangled web of relationships: churches that were born of LCMS mission work now held theological positions or ecumenical affiliations that placed them at odds with the very church body that had helped found them. The mission was not finished—it had barely begun—but LCMS, financially strained and internally divided, began withdrawing.

And into that vacuum came other influences: the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), ecumenical partnerships, and in some cases, theological perspectives that would never have been accepted had they originated on American soil.

### **Theological Drift in the Mission Field**

When discussing the problems in the global mission field today, the visible issues—altar and pulpit fellowship confusion, LWF ties, local theological misunderstandings—are symptoms. The real sickness lies deeper: a theological drift caused by decades of unclear or inconsistent doctrine exported to partner churches.

Missionaries are ambassadors—not only of the Gospel but also of the church that sends them. If they are unclear in their theology, that ambiguity becomes embedded in the churches they help establish. The problem is not just personal—it is institutional, generational, and deeply spiritual.

In many cases, missionaries genuinely believed they were preaching the Gospel. However, due to the influence of higher criticism, some no longer regarded Scripture as fully inspired or inerrant. Others prioritized social development and contextualization over Word and Sacrament ministry. Some downplayed the Lutheran Confessions entirely, emphasizing instead a vague Christianity focused on good works, human rights, or even ecumenical unity.

This kind of theology may have sounded appealing—especially in post-colonial contexts—but it lacked clarity and real power. It produced churches that were socially active yet sacramentally weak, or congregations that bore the Lutheran name but had no understanding of the Book of Concord.

As local leaders were trained by these missionaries, they inherited both the strengths and the weaknesses of their teachers. The problem deepened over time: bad theology was normalized, contextualized, and then indigenized. It was not just foreign influence anymore—it was the local theology.

The phrase "bad theology went native" captures the tragedy. The mission churches were no longer echoing a foreign error—they had embraced it as their own.

Meanwhile, back in the United States, the LCMS began a process of theological renewal. The fallout from the Seminex crisis led to a reaffirmation of the authority of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. Concordia Seminary was eventually staffed with pastors and professors who took the Bible seriously and had a deep commitment to Lutheran identity.

But the mission field did not experience this renewal in the same way. LCMS may have recovered much of its confessional foundation at home, but its former missionaries had already planted different seeds abroad. The partner churches, many of which were now “independent,” continued down a different theological path.

This has created a painful paradox: churches founded by LCMS missionaries now exist in formal altar and pulpit fellowship with LCMS, yet they may simultaneously belong to the LWF or endorse doctrinal positions that contradict confessional Lutheranism. These are not abstract issues—they are deeply personal and spiritual. They affect real congregations, real pastors, and real believers.

It is easy to blame the missionaries of the past, but this would be too simplistic. Many of them served faithfully, even sacrificially, in very difficult contexts. However, some were sent without clear doctrinal supervision, and in some cases, their own theology was already compromised before they arrived in the mission field.

In addition, LCMS’s withdrawal from many mission fields due to financial or strategic concerns left partner churches without the support and guidance they still needed. This premature departure did not only leave a gap in leadership—it created space for competing voices to rise, including liberal ecumenical groups and local theological movements unaligned with Lutheran doctrine.

The long-term result is what we face today: a mission field in crisis, not because the Gospel failed, but because it was too often misrepresented.

Still, the Word of God remains powerful. Even in flawed mission fields, faithful pastors continue to preach the Gospel, administer the Sacraments, and lay people hunger for theological clarity. They are not enemies—they are brothers and sisters in need of support, discipleship, and encouragement.

The path to recovery will not be quick or easy. But it is not impossible. With humility, clarity, and renewed theological training, we can begin to untangle the knots left behind. And most importantly, we must remember that the mission field is not a lost cause. It is fertile soil, ready to receive the Word of God—again and again.

**China Evangelical Lutheran Church (CELC) – Taiwan**

The China Evangelical Lutheran Church (CELC) offers a striking example of how theology, history, and politics intersect to shape a church's identity and challenges. Founded initially in mainland China, the CELC was a product of LCMS mission efforts in the early 20th century. The missionaries who planted churches there brought Lutheran doctrine, sacramental worship, and catechetical instruction. However, their work was interrupted dramatically when Communist forces took control of the country in 1949. Many of the Lutheran seminarians became martyred for their faith.

Faced with religious persecution, many CELC pastors and LCMS missionaries fled to Taiwan. There, the church was re-established, carrying with it a unique blend of theological memory, and refugee resilience. In Taiwan, CELC maintained close ties with the LCMS and entered full altar and pulpit fellowship.

LCMS supported CELC in numerous ways—sending theological educators, providing English teachers to Concordia Middle School in Chiayi, and encouraging ongoing pastoral formation. However, because of financial issues of LCMS forced its missionaries to leave and encouraged CELC to be fully independent.

There was a theological seminary for CELC, but it closed due to lack of students and CELC's students went to a pan-Lutheran seminary on the island. Initially, this arrangement was made for necessity, but LCMS and CELC soon realized that there should be a theological seminary only for CELC. It was challenging for students to learn what LCMS and CELC confessed.

This case reveals a core issue: when pastoral formation was done on the unclear theological foundations, it may grow into something that looks Lutheran on the outside but is spiritually fragmented on the inside. Without a consistent focus on catechesis, Lutheran identity, and the Means of Grace, partner churches can drift—often unknowingly—toward heterodoxy.

Unfortunately, the story of CELC demonstrates that the LCMS's theological crisis is not confined to one region. It is global, systemic, and deeply rooted in how missionaries were trained, sent, and supervised. Wherever missionaries were unclear in their theology, the churches they planted now bear the marks of that confusion.

Still, the mission field is not a graveyard—it is a vineyard. The Lord is still working. Faithful pastors and laypeople still exist in each of these contexts. The challenge for the LCMS today is not to despair but to re-engage—humbly, clearly, and faithfully—with our partner churches. That means confessing where we failed, listening to the voices of our brothers and sisters, and returning to the work of catechesis, theological education, and shared worship around Word and Sacrament.

### **Present-Day Challenges**

As we examine the present-day state of LCMS mission fields and our global partner churches, we are met with a mixture of hope and heartbreak. The hope lies in the fact that the Gospel

continues to be proclaimed, the Sacraments are still administered, and faithful Lutherans are still being formed. The heartbreak comes from seeing the ongoing consequences of theological drift, premature withdrawal, and ecclesial confusion.

### **Short-Term Missions vs. Long-Term Discipleship**

In recent decades, the LCMS—like many other church bodies—has increasingly relied on short-term mission trips. These trips, often well-meaning and filled with eager volunteers, can provide valuable service and exposure. However, they cannot replace the long-term work of discipleship and theological formation.

Short-term trips rarely build lasting relationships with local congregations. They may emphasize acts of service, cultural exchange, or evangelistic events, but they often do not involve sustained preaching, catechesis, or pastoral presence. In some places, these quick visits have created dependency or even resentment, as local churches feel like projects instead of partners.

The strength of early LCMS missions was their long-term presence—missionaries who lived among the people, learned their languages, and walked with them for decades. The Gospel was not a quick handout but a daily companion. In contrast, today’s short-term mission trips cannot sustain theological clarity or ecclesiastical unity.

### **Sending “Missionaries” and Funds Without Going Through the OIM**

The following Old Testament verse captures the current state of global mission work all too well: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6). Recognizing the need for greater coordination and doctrinal consistency, the LCMS Synodical Convention passed a bylaw directing that all international mission work be conducted through the Office of International Mission (OIM). However, some congregations and independent agencies have chosen to bypass this structure, sending “missionaries” and funds apart from Synodical oversight. These actions, while often well-intentioned, only deepen the confusion in an already fragmented and chaotic mission landscape.

### **Loss of Lutheran Identity in Partner Churches**

One of the most pressing challenges is the erosion of Lutheran identity in partner churches. In some places, the name “Lutheran” remains, but the theology behind it is fading. This is not always due to open rejection of the Confessions—it is often the result of simple neglect. Where there is no strong catechesis, no regular instruction in the Small and Large Catechisms, and no emphasis on the Augsburg Confession, the distinctiveness of Lutheranism becomes diluted.

This is evident in practices such as:

- Open communion (inviting those not catechized in Lutheran doctrine to the Lord’s Supper).

- Lay consecration of the elements (allowing laypeople to consecrate and distribute the Sacrament without a rightly called pastor).
- Women preaching (allowing laypeople and deaconesses preaching in the divine service).
- Syncretistic worship (blending elements of other religions or spiritual practices into the liturgy).
- Charismatic theology (placing emotional experiences or private revelation above the Means of Grace).

In some partner churches, pastors have been trained in theological institutions that are not confessional or even Lutheran. This leads to a scenario where churches that bear the LCMS imprint now operate on theological frameworks that would not be permitted within the LCMS itself.

The danger here is not merely academic—it is pastoral. Without a strong Lutheran identity, churches may lose their connection to the Gospel’s central gifts: justification by grace through faith, the authority of Scripture, and the centrality of Word and Sacrament.

### **Fellowship Confusion: Altar and Pulpit vs. Ecumenical Affiliations**

Perhaps the most perplexing present-day challenge is the issue of confessional fellowship. The LCMS maintains altar and pulpit fellowship with several partner churches worldwide—meaning we share the same doctrine and can commune at each other’s altars and exchange pastors.

However, some of these same churches are also members of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), a body whose official theology is, in many areas, incompatible with LCMS doctrine. The LWF openly endorses the ordination of women, affirms same-sex unions in some member churches, and tends toward a liberal hermeneutic of Scripture.

How can a church be in fellowship with two groups that do not agree on basic doctrine? How can the LCMS maintain a consistent witness while its partners openly commune with churches that deny key tenets of the faith?

This situation causes confusion not only for theologians but also for laypeople—both at home and abroad. A member of a partner church may rightly ask: “If our church is in fellowship with both LCMS and LWF, does that mean these differences don’t matter?”

The LCMS must respond clearly. Fellowship is not merely relational or institutional—it is doctrinal. When we say we are in altar and pulpit fellowship, we are saying: “We believe, teach, and confess the same doctrine.” If that is no longer the case, then the fellowship must be examined, and in some cases, re-evaluated.

LCMS’ fellowship theology and practice become exponentially complex when a partner church enters the equation. For example, LCMS has a formal altar and pulpit fellowship with the

Lutheran Church--Canada (LCC). Still, our partner church, China Evangelical Lutheran Church (CELC) in Taiwan, does not have that relationship with LCC. Could a church member from the LCC congregation partake in the Lord's Supper at a CELC church? Can a pastor who belongs to the LCC preach and administer the sacrament at a CELC congregation? There are divergent opinions on these questions. Finding the solution without carefully examining the issue will be too hasty and irresponsible. It is critical to look at why LCMS has the theology of the altar and pulpit fellow in the first place.

### **Language Barriers and Theological Translation**

Another challenge that often goes unmentioned is the difficulty of translation—not just linguistically, but theologically. In many mission fields, key Lutheran concepts do not always have direct equivalents in local languages or cultures.

For example, how does one translate “means of grace” into a language with no theological vocabulary? How do you explain the distinction between Law and Gospel in a culture steeped in ancestor veneration or karmic justice? What happens when Lutheran terms like “justification,” “Confession and Absolution,” or “Sacrament of the Altar” are misunderstood or translated poorly?

This is not a mere semantic issue—it is a spiritual one. Faulty translation can lead to faulty theology. If pastors and teachers are using resources that have been translated inaccurately or inadequately contextualized, then theological errors will multiply.

To meet this challenge, LCMS must invest more deeply in local theological education, accurate translations, and the long-term training of native theologians. It is not enough to send books—we must send teachers who can equip faithful translators and educators from within each cultural context.

### **Looking Ahead**

The challenges facing LCMS missions today are significant—but they are not insurmountable. The Gospel remains powerful. The Word of God is still active and living. The Sacraments still deliver Christ's forgiveness.

The question is not whether the mission field is redeemable. It is. The question is whether we, as the LCMS, are willing to re-engage with humility, theological clarity, and long-term commitment.

We must remember: our goal is not to preserve an institution but to serve the Church of Christ. And that Church—no matter how broken or fragmented—belongs to Him.

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