



# Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Greetings in the name of Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life sent down from heaven and the Fount of living water that quenches the thirst for everlasting righteousness – Taste and see that the Lord is good!

We in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod are often asked why we continue as a separate American Lutheran Church body since in comparison with others we are so small. The answer has often been given that we have a distinct ELS Flavor that is cherished among us and is desired to be preserved. Prior to the last convention of the old Norwegian Synod which established a union with two heterodox church bodies in 1917, a Synodical Conference committee met with some of the leaders who would be part of our reorganized Norwegian Synod. Dr. Franz Pieper, former president of the LC-MS, who served on this committee is quoted to have said to some of our founding fathers: “What I am especially interested in is that you testify. Your testimony may not bear fruit for a hundred years, but it will bear fruit.” Then it was observed by an eyewitness: “One important question was whether to continue our own Synod or to join the Missouri Synod as a district. The committee advised us to rebuild the Norwegian synod on the old foundation.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1961 when the ELS numbered about 75 congregations, a memorial was considered in the midst of the doctrinal disagreement in the Synodical Conference that the ELS merge with the WELS. The decision was to defer such action. President Aaberg, communicated with President Oscar Naumann, who responded:

Our Synod also once declined to be absorbed and, I believe, rightly so. There are distinct advantages to remaining an organizationally separate body. If we [ELS & WELS] were to merge, we would be one body, standing rather alone confessionally. As it is, we are two sister synods, one in doctrine and confession, mutually encouraging and strengthening one another in our common God-ordained calling.<sup>2</sup>

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## **The Flavor of the ELS: “*Lift Up Your Hearts—Your Sins Are Forgiven.*”**

### **1. The ELS has a Gospel predominance.**

This is evidenced in the synod’s commitment to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions which point to Christ and His atoning work for sinners. A proper distinction between Law and Gospel is sought in all activities and receives special attention in our preaching and teaching. Items of casuistry\* are not legalistically resolved but evangelically. At times, this may appear as if pastors are not committed to the truth; it is actually evidence of patience, and understanding that the people involved are sinners who need the Gospel. Pastoral care is not neat and tidy; it involves working in the dirt of sin, with other sinners. The Gospel must shine forth in such situations. Seeking and finding the lost while trusting completely in the power of the Gospel is a priority in the work of the ELS domestically and abroad. (*\*to discern the most valid approach when two seemingly competing biblical truths are being considered*)

### **2. The ELS has a non- hierarchical form of organization.**

This flavor tends more toward a grass-roots approach due to the desire to ensure that pastors and congregations are involved in the decision-making process for their synod, and not relying on bureaucratic processes to provide the way. The synod has a long history of desiring knowledgeable and pious laymen and recognizing the autonomy of local congregations. The ELS ministerium desires to demonstrate both a high view of the office of pastor and an unpretentious manner in the care of souls as pastors and members of congregations historically have interacted with each other with gentleness and hospitality.

### **3. The ELS is a liturgical Lutheran church body with a traditional approach to the Divine Service.**

This flavor is exhibited in a traditional, historical approach to worship which includes, but is not limited to, Norwegian influences on liturgy and hymnody. These influences are preserved with the publication of the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* (1996) which combined the traditions of the *Lutheran Hymnary* (1913) and *The Lutheran Hymnal* (1941). Although there is a variety in worship through which congregations maintain their local customs, a healthy caution toward assumed improvements via innovation in liturgy and hymns has marked the regular worship of the synod.

#### **4. The ELS prioritizes a Christ-centered liberal arts education.**

This is demonstrated through the support of Lutheran elementary and high school education and also Bethany Lutheran College which readies individuals with the *“One Thing Needful”* to serve their Savior and His Church in various vocations. We also view our schools as vehicles by which we are enabled to reach students beyond the ELS with the Gospel (cf. #1).

#### **5. The ELS is compassionate toward those who find themselves in difficult confessional situations.**

Since her formation in 1918, the synod has welcomed pastors, congregations, and individuals from various backgrounds who have been left without a confessional Lutheran home. This also is demonstrated by the provision in the synod’s constitution allowing for individual membership in the synod. This compassion has made the ELS a “melting pot” of various backgrounds gathered around pure doctrine and practice. The ELS also acknowledges contributions and insights that come from outside our synod (e.g., Reformation Lectures; devotional and educational materials).

We view the church’s history, our synod’s history, and our current circumstances through the lens of the theology of the cross, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (1 Cor. 1:18 NKJV)

By His grace, the Lord has kept the ELS steadfast in His Word and it was noted at our 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary:

A church body that finds as its highest priority the correct understanding and proclamation of the saving Gospel will never be a failure in the Lord’s eyes whatever the outward circumstances of that church may be. The Savior’s call has ever been to faithfulness, above all, faithfulness to His word of truth.<sup>3</sup>

As a further reflection on the ELS flavor this was also observed:

The central truth of scripture that Jesus Christ, true God and true Man, by His death and resurrection has overcome sin, death, and hell, stands at the center of the ELS and colors the synod’s preaching and teaching. ... As such, every sermon very specifically is to direct the hearer to the risen Christ as the fulfillment of the text and the only hope and source of forgiveness and eternal life. Former synod president George Orvick related that early in his ministry an individual spoke to him following a Sunday morning service and said: “When I go to work, my boss is mad at me. When I come home from work, my wife is mad at me. And when I come to church, you’re mad at me too.” That man wanted to hear the sweet gospel come from his pastor’s lips as God’s Word was preached from the pulpit. The law serves its place, but the gospel of forgiveness, which is “sweeter than honey” must predominate in any sermon. The ELS strives to be what her name says—“evangelical.”<sup>4</sup>

In Jesus’ name,

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<sup>[1]</sup> Lutheran Sentinel, “Lest We Forget” by John A. Moldstad, Vol. 26, April 1943, p. 115.

<sup>[2]</sup> Letter on file in the ELS Archives, from President Oscar Naumann (WELS).

<sup>[3]</sup> Built On The Rock, by Herbert Larson and Juul Madson, Evangelical Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1992, p. 72

<sup>[4]</sup> Lutheran Synod Quarterly, “ELS: An Introspective” by Craig Ferkenstad, Vol. 59, No. 1 (March 2019), p. 150.