

# AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE CONFERENCE OF BISHOPS AND THE GLOBAL MISSION UNIT ON COMPANION SYNOD RELATIONSHIPS IN THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

## INTRODUCTION

God's purpose for the world is for it to be a reflection of that which God is; a community sustained by love where each of the persons of the Trinity dwells reciprocally within one another. Through Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are called to participate in this mission through our proclamation, service, and witness of how God continues to restore community with humanity and all of creation. The mutuality and reciprocity reflective of God's being shapes our response to and participation in God's mission.<sup>1</sup>

To aid in the fulfillment of God's mission to create community, this protocol between synodical bishops and the Global Mission program unit defines the partners and principles involved in companion synod relationships, and outlines how to develop new initiatives within those relationships.

Since its inception early in the life of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Companion Synods Program has grown rapidly. Due to this rapid growth and the evolving challenges, this protocol may require frequent revision.

## I. PARTNERS

### A. National Churches who are Companions

- Through the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), the ELCA is in relationship with 140 Lutheran church bodies in 78 countries.<sup>2</sup> Each of these national churches has primary responsibility for mission and ministry within its territory. The ELCA also has bilateral (church-to-church) relationships with 80 of these national churches, which can include sending missionaries, providing grants, or having a companion synod relationship.

**B. Global Mission Program Unit** - The Global Mission unit "shall be responsible for this church's mission in other countries and shall be the channel through which churches in other countries engage in mission to this church and society." The Global Mission unit stewards a complex array of activities, personnel, and relationships, including missionaries, grants, and scholarships for the purposes of "evangelism, witness, education, promotion of justice, service, relief, and development" in cooperation with ecumenical, global, regional, and mission organizations (ELCA Constitution 16.12.B05).

### C. ELCA Synods and International Companions

- The Global Mission unit established, shapes, and supports the Companion Synod Program as a way to deepen bilateral relationships.<sup>3</sup> The Global Mission unit connects<sup>4</sup> each ELCA synod with one or more Lutheran church bodies (called "international companions" in this Protocol). In some cases, these international companions will be national churches. In other cases, they will be synods, dioceses, or districts of those national churches.<sup>5</sup> ELCA synods are responsible for deepening relationships with specific international companions on behalf of the entire ELCA.<sup>6</sup> Companion synod relationships are part of the wider work of the church for the sake of mission.

**D. Bishops** - The Global Mission unit has oversight over the Companion Synod Program. Bishops have oversight over how the companion synod relationships are carried out in their synods. The bishop of both ELCA synod and the bishop/president of the international companion share a significant and complementary role in

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developing this relationship, under the oversight of the Global Mission unit (and the national church of the international companion, when applicable). These two leaders set the tone and the manner by which the relationship emerges.<sup>7</sup> For ELCA synodical bishops, this role arises from their constitutional responsibility to be the “chief ecumenical officer”<sup>8</sup>, to “exercise leadership in the mission of this church”, to “interpret and advocate the mission and theology of the whole church”, and to “foster awareness of other churches throughout the Lutheran world communion and, where appropriate, engage in contact with leaders of those churches”.<sup>9</sup> These responsibilities include promoting interdependent relationships among the expressions of the ELCA, overseeing the Church’s mission within the territory of the synod, and serving as a “sign of the unity of the Church, between their respective synod and other denominational families and ecumenical organizations”.<sup>10</sup>

**II. PRINCIPLES**

- A. **Accompaniment** - “A walking together in solidarity that practices interdependence” in a way that honors each other’s integrity and wholeness.<sup>11</sup> The first priority is to pray for each other.
- B. **Patience** - Companion relationships take years to grow into true accompaniment, and sustainable programs are preferable to those that are short-term.
- C. **Mutuality** – ELCA synods and international companions working with the Global Mission unit and the national church body of the companions will establish priorities and agendas together.

ELCA synods and the Global Mission unit learn from each other as they interact with companions.

- D. **Transparency** - ELCA synods and the Global Mission unit will inform each other of ministry undertaken with their international companions (such as volunteers or funds sent to or received from an international companion) in order to avoid duplication, competition, and mixed messages. ELCA synods and the Global Mission unit commit themselves to engage in ongoing mapping of evolving relationships, and to seek mutual accountability for the management, allocation, and distribution of resources.<sup>12</sup>
- E. **Sharing Information** – ELCA synods should try to communicate frequently with their international companions through exchange of official visitors and prayer requests. ELCA synods should discuss with the Global Mission unit if they prepare to engage in ministry in other countries, within or outside of the international companion relationship (see section III which follows). The Global Mission unit will inform an ELCA synod if it engages in ministry within the territory of that synod.<sup>13</sup>
- F. **Preparation** - ELCA synods and the Global Mission unit are committed to provide quality orientation for visitors and personnel traveling to and from international companions.
- G. **Collaboration** – This is necessary in all companion relationships, particularly where more than one ELCA synod has the same international companion, or when an international companion is also a national church.<sup>14</sup> Mutual planning between these synods and the Global Mission unit

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enhances the development of healthy, non-competitive relationships.

**H. Representation** – Each of us represents all of us. Representatives of the ELCA synods are recognized as representatives of the ELCA in their international companion activities. Therefore, ELCA synods will exercise caution and diplomacy, recognizing that their speech and action are understood by companions to express the position and commitment of the whole ELCA. ELCA synods and the Global Mission unit commit themselves to formalizing relationships through agreements which both strengthen the companion relationships and also take into account the implications for the whole church.

**III. HOW TO DEVELOP NEW INITIATIVES**

**A. Step One: Companion Request** - ELCA synods and the Global Mission unit will develop new initiatives in the territory of an international companion only in response to that companion's request. (If the international companion is a synod, diocese, or district, the national church will also need to endorse the request.)

**B. Step Two: Inform Partners** - To ensure effective ministry and to avoid duplication, ELCA synods and the Global Mission unit will inform each other of these companion requests,<sup>15</sup> jointly assess requests,<sup>16</sup> and coordinate responses. ELCA synods will provide regular progress reports to the Global Mission unit, and the Global Mission unit will provide regular progress reports and maintain communication with other ministry partners involved in related projects in international companions (e.g. national churches, LWF, Lutheran World

Relief, ecumenical groups, European churches and agencies, and other ELCA synods also in relationship with that international companion).<sup>17</sup>

**C. Scholarships** - The Global Mission unit will inform ELCA synods of ELCA or LWF scholarships given to members of their international companions. ELCA synods will first consult with the Global Mission unit before providing scholarships to students from any other countries, to avoid duplication and provide consistent guidelines and expectations for scholarship recipients and donors.

**D. Funding Requests**<sup>18</sup> - Priority should be given to requests from international companions that build capacity for future ministry rather than funding an ongoing expense. For example, some international companions request ELCA synods to provide salaries for their pastors. This practice can encourage an unhealthy dependency and paternalism – and sow seeds of envy *between* international companions, when one receives salary support and others do not.<sup>19</sup>

**E. Shared Personnel Placements** - A creative context exists today<sup>20</sup> for synergistic collaboration through shared personnel placements in international companions sponsored by ELCA synods and the Global Mission unit. Options include:

1. **Short-term Volunteers (two weeks to three months)** - The ELCA synod conducts its own selection process, provides orientation using Global Mission unit materials, arranges for funding (e.g. self-funding or sponsorships), and informs the Global Mission unit of this placement. In addition, ELCA synods are encouraged

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to arrange for direct orientation at the Lutheran Center. ELCA synods are advised to consider issues relating to health insurance, evacuation, liability, housing, transportation, and other matters, some of which are described in the Companion Synods Handbook.

2. **Mid-term Volunteers (three to nine months)** - The ELCA synod conducts its own selection process, provides orientation using Global Mission unit materials, and writes an endorsement letter to the international companion and to the Global Mission unit, attaching the volunteer's biographical material. In addition, ELCA synods are encouraged to arrange for direct orientation at the Lutheran Center. The Global Mission unit then appoints the volunteer as an ELCA volunteer missionary under a Letter of Agreement. In turn, the volunteer agrees to serve under the Global Mission unit *Personnel Policies and Expectations*. The Global Mission unit provides major medical insurance, including evacuation coverage, for all volunteers who request it, based on the availability of funding from the Global Mission unit's spending plan. Arrangements for all other provisions and financial support are developed between the volunteer and the ELCA synod.
3. **Long-term Volunteers and Compensated Personnel (nine or more months)** – The international companion, the ELCA synod, and the Global Mission unit will jointly develop a job description. If the ELCA synod identifies a person for this position, that person would make

application for service with the Global Mission unit and go through the candidate screening process. Following this process, the Synod Council would then endorse this person to the Global Mission unit for service as a missionary in the international companion.

- i. The Global Mission unit will provide orientation, medical and evacuation insurance, regular communication with the continental desk, and assistance in securing visas and work permits. Further financial support will be provided by the ELCA synod or, in some instances, jointly by the ELCA synod and the Global Mission unit.<sup>21</sup>
- ii. For rostered persons serving in stipendiary positions, the Global Mission unit will recommend to the ELCA Church Council a call to service outside the territory of the ELCA synod and the ELCA.<sup>22</sup> Non-rostered persons will receive a Letter of Agreement from the Global Mission unit.
- iii. The missionary will provide annual reports to the local bishop of the international companion, with copies to the national church office, the ELCA synod, and to the Global Mission unit, and will serve under Global Mission *Personnel Policies and Expectations*. As with other ELCA missionaries, the Global Mission unit will be the employer of record, provide contractual details of employment through a Letter of Agreement developed jointly with the ELCA synod, and

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will provide for support, care and supervision.

**IV. AREAS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION**

- A. **How do we receive** the expertise and gifts of international companions in order to enhance the mutuality of the companion relationship? This may involve creating tools and formats for ELCA synods and international companions to jointly engage in asset mapping, gift assessment, and planning for mission.
- B. **How do we develop communication tools** for ELCA synods and the Global Mission unit to share information in a manner that is simple and accessible (e.g. through the internet)?
- C. **What is the role of congregations** within companion synod relationships and in other global relationships (e.g. with congregations or mission organizations in other countries)?<sup>23</sup>
- D. **How do we share concerns** that surface about relationships, interference, or involvements in our international companions by other churches outside of the ELCA or LWF (e.g. by other Lutheran bodies)?
- E. **How do ELCA synods invite, welcome, and utilize personnel** from our international companions to engage in ministry in their synods?

*Recommended for preliminary approval at the ELCA Conference of Bishops meeting on March 9, 2009.*

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<sup>1</sup> The Accompaniment model assumes a "relational missiology" based on the New Testament understanding of koinonia and the doctrine of the Trinity. See Rafael Malpica Padilla

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*Accompaniment as an Alternative Model for the Practice of Mission* in

[HTTP://www.trinitylutheranseminary.edu/publications/TSRvol29.2](http://www.trinitylutheranseminary.edu/publications/TSRvol29.2)

<sup>2</sup> As of March 1, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> The Global Mission unit staff includes associate directors for companion relationships who provide guidance and support for companion synod relationships through resources, events, and consultations. They work with the Area Program Directors of the four continental desks (Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe and the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific, and Africa) to coordinate ELCA companion synod relationships with the ELCA's wider church-to-church commitments.

<sup>4</sup> The original process for establishing a companion synod relationship was for the Global Mission unit to determine which potential companion churches were available to engage in a companion relationship, to speak with interested ELCA synods about their options, and to communicate their selection to the international companion for concurrence and approval. Increasingly this process involves mutual conversation and concurrence between an ELCA synod and a potential international companion.

<sup>5</sup> In 2008, 26 ELCA synods have one companion synod relationship, 27 synods have two; seven synods have three; two synods have four; and two synods have five, for a grand total of 122 relationships with international companions in 63 national churches (almost half the total number in LWF) in 52 countries.

<sup>6</sup> This may lead to a variety of combinations of bilateral (church-to-church) and companion synod relationships. For example, the Lutheran Church in Malawi is a national church with a bilateral (church-to-church) relationship with the ELCA. It is also in a companion synod relationship with the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin.

<sup>7</sup> See the article *Some thoughts about being companions* by Bp. Gary Hansen on page 69 of the *Companion Synods Handbook, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Global Mission*; see

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also pp. 7-8 for further discussion of the role of bishops. For further reading on the role of bishops, please see *Advice and Principles for Companion Synod Relationships as written by synodical bishops – March 2006* in which Bp. Gary Hansen summarized bishops' comments.

<sup>8</sup> ELCA Constitution 10.31.5

<sup>9</sup> ELCA Constitution for Synods S8.12.h.5

<sup>10</sup> *Relational Agreement Among Synodical Bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, p. 2, section I.

<sup>11</sup> A further description of accompaniment may be found in *Global Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Vision of Evangelical Faithfulness in God's Mission* [www.elca.org/globalmission/policy/gm21full.pdf](http://www.elca.org/globalmission/policy/gm21full.pdf), or in the article *The Road to Emmaus: A Model of Accompaniment* by Bp. Richard H. Graham, Jan. 2008, and other materials on the Global Mission unit's web site.

<sup>12</sup> This may involve more collaborative efforts in the transfer of funds to the companion through the Global Mission unit to ensure compliance with legislation such as the Patriot Act.

<sup>13</sup> This provision arises from synodical bishops' constitutional responsibility for "oversight of the preaching, teaching, and administration of the sacraments" within the territory of the synod (ELCA Constitution for Synods S8.12.h.1), and is similar to the current practice between bishops (*Relational Agreement among Synodical Bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, section III.A). Global Mission staff will inform bishops when they preach or teach in a synod congregation, e.g. a missionary on home leave, or a regional director commissioning a missionary. If staff of the Global Mission unit serve on the board of an educational or mission organization on the territory of that synod, they would not necessarily need to inform a bishop of their presence or activities unless it impacted ministry in that synod.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. the national church in Peru, the *Iglesia Luterana Evangelica Peruana* has a bilateral (church-to-church) relationship with the ELCA and also two companion synods relationships with the

Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod and the La Crosse Area Synod.

<sup>15</sup> The Global Mission unit's initial point of contact in a synod will be the bishop, who may refer the proposal to a synod volunteer, committee, or staff member. A synod's initial point of contact in the Global Mission unit will be the associate director for companion relationships for the appropriate continental desk, who may coordinate a response to the proposal or refer it to the appropriate person.

<sup>16</sup> The *Planning Implications Assessment* on p. 21 of the *Companion Synods Handbook* is a useful tool. Other questions to consider include: Will this initiative enhance the missional capacity and impact of the companion synod, the national church, the synod, and the Global Mission unit? Has there been adequate consultation between the companion synod, the national church, the synod, and the Global Mission unit, as well as any other ministry partners (e.g. LWF, LWR, and other mission organizations).

<sup>17</sup> Since companion synods and national churches often have multiple partners, a commitment from one in a capital expenditure can sometimes "leverage" other support. For example, in Liberia, Global Mission agreed to provide half the funds needed for a vehicle, joining with another European church partner that has had a long-standing relationship with the Liberian church. That purchase "leveraged" a commitment from the European Union of *four times* the dollars spent – 60,000 Euro – for programmatic costs relating to the expansion of primary health care around Curran hospital.

<sup>18</sup> Further information is available in the *Pamphlet for Bishops on Global Relationships* (DGM, August 24, 2001) distributed to the ELCA Conference of Bishops, October 2001, Exhibit K, Part 2.

<sup>19</sup> For further discussion of this principle, see pp. 16-17 of *Global Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (ELCA Division for Global Mission, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Global travel and communication are exploding. New patterns of global service are emerging. Pastors are taking sabbaticals overseas. Synods

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and congregations are sponsoring mission trips to Companion Synods or to countries in which a national church is located (e.g., “Thrivent/Habitat Builds Worldwide”). Synods are inviting Companion Synods to send missionaries and to exchange pastors.

<sup>21</sup> For example, a pastor was sent for two years to Lithuania, with \$28,000 per year provided by the Grand Canyon Synod and \$21,500 per year by the Global Mission unit.

<sup>22</sup> ELCA Constitution 7.44.A05a

<sup>23</sup> A simple survey to assess the extent of congregational global involvement may be the first step, followed by the development of an ongoing reporting mechanism. This may resemble a greatly simplified parochial report, with results tabulated and shared between synods and the churchwide organization.