

Understanding OSLC's Constitution, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions



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Introduction

Welcome to this guide to the constitution, bylaws, and continuing resolutions of Our Saviour Lutheran Church. This brief handbook will help you to understand the general purpose and structure of these documents, as well as some important processes pertaining to their maintenance.

Taken together, we refer to the constitution, bylaws, and continuing resolutions as our Congregation's governing documents, and we'll review each of them as a part of this document.

Built around the constitution

Our congregation's constitution forms the foundation of our governing documents. It describes who we are, what we believe, how we are structured, and how we accomplish our work as a congregation. It exists to provide ongoing guidance to our congregation and its members on the most fundamental principles of our faith journey together.

The constitution is both a legal and a missional document that reflects the underlying theology and doctrines of our church and governance structure. It is intended to provide our members with a clear understanding of our statements of faith, our relationship with other church bodies, our mutual commitments, and our way of organizing.

It is uniquely our own but connected to other congregations.

Although our constitution is very specific to our congregation, it also shares common language and construction with the constitutions of other congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It follows as its framework the latest edition of the *Model Constitution for Congregations*, which was adopted by the Constituting Convention of the ELCA.

The model constitution sets forth a common format that is to be followed by all ELCA congregations, as well as certain provisions that are to be included in each constitution.

It links us to the wider church.

Each of us, as ELCA Lutherans, participate in *three expressions* of the ELCA; our congregation, our synod, and the churchwide ELCA. Each of these expressions has its own constitution, and all three work together as a part of an integrated whole. Through them, all our structures and actions are tied together.

Three documents in one

Something worth noting about our governing documents is that while they include constitutional provisions, bylaws, and continuing resolutions, they are *not divided*

into separate writings. In the ELCA Model Constitution approach, all three types of provision are presented together as a part of the main body of one single document. This method has the advantage of keeping all the information related to a particular topic together in one place, making it more usable, even for readers who may not regularly access its contents. A brief description of each type of provision follows.

Constitutional Provisions.

Constitutional provisions cover the most fundamental principles of our church, such as our name, our beliefs, and organizing structure. They generally do not prescribe specific operating procedures.

The fundamental and enduring nature of constitutional provisions results in them tending to change less frequently than the other two types of provision.

Correspondingly, the process for amending constitutional provisions calls for a higher level of review and process for adoption than the others. These changes must be considered at two congregational meetings and reviewed by the Virginia Synod before they can be enacted.

Bylaws.

Bylaws are a more concrete set of operational rules or policies that specify with greater detail exactly how we operate. They follow the organizing principles set forth by the constitution and provide additional guidance that members can refer to in day-to-day business. Bylaw provisions follow the constitutional provisions to which they apply.

Bylaws can be expected to change somewhat more frequently than constitutional provisions, as they are more procedural than foundational. Accordingly, the process to change them is a bit simpler. With proper review and notice, bylaws can be established or modified at any congregational meeting.

Continuing Resolutions.

Continuing resolutions are intended to provide descriptions of operational patterns and practices or of the ongoing responsibilities of committees or other units within the organizational structure of the congregation. They follow the relevant constitutional provision or bylaw to which they refer. Continuing resolutions can be established either by the congregation at a legally called meeting or by a Planning Council as a part of its regular business.

Arrangement of our Governing Documents.

One of the first things you will notice when reading our constitution is that every section has a code that includes a "C" followed by several digits. Each part of this code has significance, and we'll examine them one by one.

The "C" which precedes every provision signifies that it is a part of our *congregation's* governing documents. This is specified as a part of the Model Constitution's numbering hierarchy, and distinguishes these provisions from those of

a synod (prefixed by an "S") or ELCA church-wide (no prefix). The Model Constitution *requires* certain provisions to be included in our constitution, and those provisions also have an asterisk (*) preceding the "C".

The digits that follow the "C" reflect a three-level hierarchy, which is explained in the following paragraphs.

Level 1: Chapters

Major sections are designated as chapters. The chapters are numbered 1 through 19. The chapter designation becomes the first number in the codification sequence and is followed by a period. As an example, Chapter 8 is a major section under the subject "Membership", and all of the provisions of this chapter begin with a "C8." (required provisions begin with a "*C8").

Level 2: Constitutional Provisions

The next level of classification within the chapters are Constitutional provisions, which are codified with two sets of numbers: the chapter number and a two-digit number followed by a second period. Thus, one of the constitutional provisions related to the "Membership" is codified *C8.02.

Level 3: Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions

Bylaws and continuing resolutions follow the constitutional provisions to which they pertain and they each have an additional (and unique) level of coding.

Bylaws are codified with three sets of numbers: the chapter number, the related constitutional provision number, and a two-digit designator for the bylaw. Thus, a bylaw related to "Membership" might be codified C8.02.01.

Continuing resolutions also are codified with three sets of numbers, except that the third set is preceded by a capital letter. Thus, a continuing resolution might be numbered C8.02.A16, with the letter "A" signifying that it is the first continuing resolution regarding that subject (A=1, B=2, etc.) and the "16" indicating that it was adopted in 2016.

Letters or numbers contained in provisions:

Frequently within provisions (constitutional, bylaw, or continuing resolution) there is a need to include an enumerated list of subparts. When this is the case, the subparts are designated either by numbers or letters according to the following rules.

- a. When many related provisions are parts of a unit that are considered inseparable, they are normally lettered "a.," "b.," "c.," etc.
- b. When related provisions are part of a unit but considered separable, such as a list of duties, they are normally numbered in sequence.
- c. If the related provisions cannot be clearly judged to be separable or inseparable, preference may be given to a numbered sequence.

How provisions are sequenced:

Chapter numbers are considered the major sequence number, constitution numbers as a fraction of the chapter number, and bylaw and resolution numbers as a fraction of the constitution number. As a result, C10.03. precedes C10.07.01., and C12.03.21. precedes C12.04.

Missing numbers:

You will notice that certain numbers are missing from the numbering sequence in some chapters. These omissions are intentional. For example, in some chapters the number ".10." and multiples thereof have been reserved for possible use as section headings in future editions.

A word about terminology

In this constitution, "Church" with a capital letter is used in references to the one, holy, catholic, and Apostolic Church. In references to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the words "church" and "this church" in lower case letters are employed. When we refer to Our Saviour Lutheran Church, the words "this congregation" are used.

For more information

The ELCA maintains a detailed list of guidelines for congregations engaging in reviewing and amending their governing documents. They are included in a publication called "*GUIDE FOR USE OF THE MODEL CONSTITUTION FOR CONGREGATIONS*" and it is available through our synod office and at ELCA.org.