

## Independent Congregations (formerly mainstream)

The basic approach involved in researching this issue involved many hours of perusing web sites, following up on good leads, speaking to a couple of pastors over the phone, and exchanging e-mails with a couple of pastors who were willing to do so. It should be stressed that this trend data comes from limited sources. Any conclusions from this information should take that into consideration.

The research points to an interesting trend: there are very few truly independent churches. We were able to track down four distinct examples: First United Lutheran Church (San Francisco), St. Francis Lutheran Church (San Francisco), St. James Lutheran Church (West St. Paul, MN), and Grace Lutheran Church (River Forest). After separating from larger church organizations, these smaller entities did not remain organizations unto themselves. They all looked to affiliate with a larger church body. The relationship may not have been as defined, structured, or subordinate as it was to the former synod, but they clearly wanted to be part of some structure larger than themselves. First United and St. Francis associated with Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries. St. James maintains ties with and receives limited pastoral support from the Missouri Synod. Grace Lutheran's pastors are all ELCA rostered; they maintain contact with both the ELCA and Missouri Synod as well as using a non-profit church consulting group. All of these current pastors saw one of the strongest negatives about being independent as a struggle to avoid being "an island," a "lone ranger," to having "a disconnect with wider Lutheran agencies and ministries. Each these pastors expressed the belief that church members should rightfully belong to a world-wide Christian fellowship, and that independence, by its nature, pressured them in the opposite direction. Clearly, these churches all struggled with the calling pastors to fill open positions and finding supply pastors. First United's connection to Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries covered most of their needs. When internal conflict emerged, one church missed the assistance of the synod in trying to find resolution.

Several churches addressed the financial impact of independence on building ownership. First United's separation gave them freedom to sell their building and become a "church without walls" ; it allowed them to create and utilize their own endowment fund. Grace Lutheran entered into years of litigation with Missouri Synod, the end result being that they cannot affiliate with another church body until 2027 (despite their desire to do so); otherwise they forfeit their building. All these churches found that giving levels improved with independence. Pastoral compensation remained intact and reflective of the current marketplace.

Resources for liturgy and education seemed to be readily available; they were not dependent upon the former synod for these things.

There did not seem to be substantive changes in governance and theology. It appears that (except for the issues that prompted separation) the core of beliefs/practices they held prior to independence remained. Reportedly there seemed to be a stronger ownership of ministries and involvement by church members when they separated. Several churches found the independence really empowered their benevolence committees and made their plans much more intentional.