LLC Continent-wide Meeting of Ministers, Board Members and Delegates
May 7–8, 2021
Laestadian Lutheran Church of Monticello
Meeting Synopsis and Closing Comments

This synopsis was prepared by the LLC Pastoral Committee, Board Chairman, Board Secretary and Executive Director from notes taken by meeting secretaries Jeremy Glynn, Annette Johnson, Elizabeth Juntunen, Matt Keranen, and Sam Roiko.
Sent to LLC congregations on May 14, 2021.

The guiding and blessing hand of God through His Spirit was felt at the two-day continent-wide meeting of LLC congregation ministers, board members and annual meeting delegates. Registered in-person attendees numbered 265 along with a few LLC staff. In addition, due to the pandemic, our 5 Canadian congregations joined online with 59 meeting participants gathered at those local connections. Also, there were 18 individual connections registered by member congregations. In total over 340 registered meeting participants from across the continent joined the meeting. Approximately 200 meeting guests gathered to listen to the meeting at locations including Detroit, Glendale, Ishpeming, Longview, Minneapolis, Monticello, Phoenix, Rockford, Seattle, Spokane and Wolf Lake.

Each day began and concluded with a devotion or prayer kept by congregation ministers Ray Waaraniemi (Rockford) – Opening Devotion: Acts 15:22–31; Steve Haataja (Menahga) – Evening Prayer (Ps. 139:23,24) and Benediction; Dan Parks (Menahga) – Morning Prayer: *Hear our voice, O Heav'nly Father,* SHZ 553; and Tommi Kinnunen (Cokato) – Closing Devotion: Neh. 4:17–23. Throughout the meeting the gospel of forgiveness was freely requested and joyfully preached. The calling voice of the Good Shepherd was heard through the mouths of God's children speaking in love and truth.

The meeting was opened by LLC Executive Director Eric Jurmu calling congregations in alphabetical order to deliver a brief statement noting how the spiritual battles in recent years have affected their respective areas. Overall, the 30 statements heard portrayed the broad unity in the North American Zion, yet a differing voice was heard from a few congregations. Many congregations related of difficult meetings and discussions with concerns over differing understandings, confusion, mistrust, accusations, and separation among members.

Congregation reports were followed by LLC Board Vice-Chairman Jim Jurmu's presentation of a timeline of three dozen events, meetings and actions that have taken place around spiritual matters in the past six years. Jurmu noted the recurring spiritual topics and questions of the period including divorce and remarriage/abstinence/birth control; grace/continual forgiveness; Law and the Gospel; congregation/Holy Spirit/Word; confession; soul care/unconditional forgiveness/Church Law of Christ; calling ministers, and the role of ministers and board members; criticism of LLC Board and staff and local congregation servants. The timeline, which is only a partial listing of all that has happened, reveals how much effort has gone into discussing and attempting to resolve matters and that the concerns are not only in the Midwest but extend continent-wide.

Next, LLC Board Chairman Jim Frantti gave a presentation outlining the understanding of God's kingdom on several central doctrinal questions. The main topics included the following: Justification;

The Office of the Holy Spirit; The Congregation of God; Forgiveness; Confession; The Church Law of Christ; Servants of the Congregation; and How do we see God's kingdom?

Following the presentations, open discussion from the floor was moderated by congregation board chairmen Keith Hillukka (Phoenix), Mark Skoog (Menahga), Loren Hillukka (Elk River) and Longview minister Loren Keplinger. There were 54 individual extemporaneous speeches from those present at the church and 7 from the online participants. The speeches were open, direct, truthful, loving and peaceful. They contained words of instruction, comfort, rebuke and exhortation to repentance. The speeches also revealed the broad unity in the North American Zion and support for those who serve the LLC on its Board and in the office. About a dozen speeches took differing positions on the spiritual problems of recent years, yet none expressed disagreement with Jim Frantti's presentation covering central doctrinal questions.

The discussions and experiences of recent years have raised the question of whether there is a division, or two groups, in the North American Zion and also the existence of a false spirit. At the meeting it was broadly acknowledged that two groups exist. Some individual speeches also expressed that there is a false spirit in our midst as well as the danger of a heresy or schism. While the atmosphere at the church and during the meeting and breaks was open and cordial, division was clearly evident.

Those who differed with the general sense of the meeting asked for explanations of doctrinal differences between the groups and stated that no one has explained what the "other voice" is that has been written and spoken about. Some also felt that they have been labeled and mistreated and that the speeches in this meeting have been dwelling on the faults of others and expressed the need for patience and love. In response to the request for explanation of differences, the following points were expressed by many:

- There is a concern that a different understanding on the doctrine of the congregation exists in our midst.
- The view of the congregation or kingdom of God has dimmed.
- The relationship between the Holy Spirit, the congregation, and the written Word of God has become confused.
- For some the emphasis has shifted to knowledge and human reasoning.
- The grace gift of confession has been diminished by the fear of it becoming a work.
- The Church Law of Christ has been misconstrued, thereby restricting open discussion of public matters.
- There is concern over fruits that have been apparent that are not fruits of the Spirit, such as bitterness, harsh accusations, deceitfulness, pride, etc.

There was loving encouragement to humble oneself to be obedient to the mother, the congregation of God.

Those not in agreement with the general sense of the meeting also focused on the question of why congregations are not sending speakers to Minneapolis and Wolf Lake, stating that it is sin to not do so. They also felt that ministers have been relieved of their duties with no basis because they have not lived in open sin nor spoken wrong doctrine. Wolf Lake members also stated that their ministers are in the love of their congregation. Responses to these points explained how servants of the Word are called and sent by God through His Spirit in the congregation, and also are relieved by the congregation through the guidance of the Spirit. Also discussed were recent letters sent from the Minneapolis congregation indicating that the reason that half of the Minneapolis congregation departed the congregation in the fall of 2020 was because the decision was made not to sell the church. Also, Minneapolis expressed in its letters that the ministers who left the congregation are still welcome to serve there. Many did not agree with the above-stated positions from Minneapolis. Some from Minneapolis expressed that the intent of their letters was to also seek help and be in unity with the rest of Zion but many felt that the Minneapolis letters indicated a lack of understanding for the seriousness of the situation.

Overall, the meeting provided an opportunity for the entire North American Zion to hear firsthand what has happened and is happening, and to openly discuss matters with representatives from all congregations present. Sorrow was expressed over those who did not heed the call to care for matters through repentance. The fear was expressed quoting the words of Jesus, that “they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not…” (Matt. 13:13). Meeting participants were encouraged to visit about the meeting discussion in their local congregations with the prayer that the word sown at the meeting would bear fruit and lead to repentance.

The meeting concluded with closing remarks by LLC Board Chairman, Jim Frantti. These are included below in written form.

Closing Comments
May 8, 2021
Jim Frantti, LLC Board Chairman

First, I have to say that I have felt and still trust that the Good Shepherd has been with His flock as He has promised to be. The Holy Spirit has spoken to us yesterday and today. We have been reminded of the treasure that is in God's kingdom and of the preciousness of living faith. There is no other way to reach heaven. Jesus spoke of the love between His own; it is the sign that would allow all men to know we are His disciples.

That teaching of Jesus guides us to examine our own conduct and speech and ask, have we shown love towards our brothers and sisters. When we think about this question, let us not look to see if they have shown love toward me, but have I shown love toward them. Has my speech and communication been done in love? Has there been a critical mind toward fellow travelers or toward the Zion in North America? I have to say that the harsh words and criticism and bitterness in some speeches I have heard over the last few years do not come from the Holy Spirit.

I thought of a portion of James, chapter 3. He wrote, "Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace" (verses 13–18).

One thing struck me yesterday. We heard more than once in speeches that there have been secret recording of visits and meetings and notes taken and summaries made and sent all over the world, and we heard encouragement to avoid that. Yet I heard that people in Finland had received summaries of reports that congregations gave here yesterday and also a summary of my presentation. What I spoke yesterday is not hidden. It is how I believe, and I want to be an open book. However, it is troubling to hear about the spreading of such summaries, even after the concern was expressed.

The discussions about calling or sending certain ministers or not, or about selling the church in Minneapolis or not, these are not the problems. They have not caused division. They are the results. The question is not whether a minister is sent or not to a certain congregation, but the question is what has caused division between us.

We have also heard discussions many times, though it has not come up this weekend, about the 70s and 80s and the caretaking that happened then. Sometimes these are brought up as if matters have not

been resolved. My question is, what would it take to put these matters to rest so people wouldn't have to carry unforgiving hearts or bitterness?

Errors were made. People dried up in caretaking both in North America and overseas, but matters were cared for and most of those involved have gone to rest. The difficulties of those times have been openly discussed at meetings, acknowledged in articles in the *Päivämies* and *Voice of Zion*. To continue to hold bitterness will only hurt oneself, rob one's joy, and eventually cause shipwreck of faith. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that what you have forgiven, I also forgive (2 Cor. 2:10). Let us forgive errors of the past and move forward.

There is criticism of the teaching and also questioning the understandings of the Zion of North America. We have heard that Finnish believers believe differently than here. That has not been my experience. I have had opportunity to make a number of trips to Finland and Sweden, and sitting in services there, I could be sitting at home. There is the same message of God's word and the gospel. The same spirit teaches there as here in North America. We have rejoiced over the unity of faith of the boards of the Zions of North America, Finland, and Sweden. We have regular meetings and discuss how we believe and have felt complete unity. Those brothers have testified of that as well. The message of the gospel is the same here as there.

The enemy of souls is trying to divide us. Do not listen to the enemy. We are not fighting against each other. We are fighting against the enemy of souls who would like to bring us down in faith. This is a common battle. This is not a debate where one is proven right and one is proven wrong; we are battling together against the enemy of souls. I dare say that in that battle, none of us comes through it without wounds. Let us fight the good fight of faith together.

There have been letters sent around broadly, also to Finland and Sweden. The brothers there wonder why they received those letters. They were surprised by what was sent. If we trust in the Zion of North America, that is where we can be cared for. If I could not trust the Zion of North America, I would wonder where I am. Some have said we have been taught wrong in North America for many years – one said for over 100 years. To me that claim pulls the foundation out from under us in the North American Zion. Where are we then if we have been taught wrong all these years? Where is the secure foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone?

There have been thoughts of wrong teachings. What are these wrong teachings? The teaching that I hear today in God's kingdom is the same as I heard as a child. Recently there have been accusations, very troubling accusations, of spiritual abuse and public humiliation. Soul care is love, not abuse. When a brother or a sister approach me in love, wanting to take care of me, and say, dear brother, your words were weak or your understanding on that matter is not correct, that is not spiritual abuse. It has been troubling to hear these statements.

When we hear these criticisms of the North American Zion, local boards, and the LLC Board, and these accusations of spiritual abuse, it seems we cannot say there are no differences or divisions among us. It's clear there are two groups in the North American Zion. The enemy tries to divide. I think it is time for all of us to stop and ask, where is my heart? The enemy does not like the unity of believers. It is always working to divide the flock and to divide us from the flock.

So it is good to ask, where is my heart? How does the kingdom of God look to me? Do I see it as a place of refuge? Is it a place where I, a weak traveler, can entrust my care and help? Do I see its beauty? Or do I see its faults? You don't have to look far for faults, you can see them right up here right now. I know my own nature and know that you would not have to look far to point out my faults.

God's kingdom is a place of righteousness, peace and joy. A place of love and forgiveness, where sinners can be cared for. It is not a place of oppression or demands or wrong teachings. How do we see this Zion of North America? These criticisms of the LLC Board and local boards and ministers have been sad to me. I have served alongside these brothers for some years and found them to be weak servants. None of them have asked for this duty. God's kingdom has called them and entrusted them with this duty. They have wanted to be obedient. They have felt their own personal weakness and have wanted to hear the gospel. Brothers who serve are sinful brothers.

Dear brothers and sisters, I say from the heart, and not in outward humility: I am chief of sinners among them. Paul wrote to Timothy: everyone should accept this saying, they are chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). I would ask you, how do you find yourselves today? Are there others who are chief among sinners?

Jesus, our Good Shepherd, gave His life for the sheep. We have been redeemed by the blood of one who had no blemish or spot. He offered His life to pay for our debt of sin. Yet death did not hold Him. He rose victorious. He lives and because He lives He can keep His promise. He is still with His own, as he has promised to be until the end of the world. Personally, I've felt His presence here these two days.

I told the brothers visiting over lunch that the discussions yesterday and today have left me joyful and saddened. Joy is the greater part. It has been joyful to hear speeches from so many brothers and sisters from so many congregations to which I can say in my heart that is how I believe. It has felt so secure and is such a reason for joy. But dear brothers and sisters, we have also heard speeches that have left me troubled and sad. Some have been finding faults with how God's kingdom has approached certain congregations, instead of finding faults in themselves. It is easy to point out faults, but do we find ourselves faulty in these things? I ask those who have criticized other North American congregations for not sending ministers, do all faults lie with others? Is there fault at home?

We cannot go on as a divided flock, and we do not want to fall away. We have heard this same thought in speeches which have been critical of North American Zion. We have heard that they want to reach heaven. This is the flock that is traveling to the eternal home in heaven. It is important that we are traveling in unity with the flock of God's children.

We do not want to rise above the flock in teaching and understanding. We do not want to be teachers or lecturers. The Spirit is our teacher, we want to have ears to hear it and not teach from our own understanding. The Spirit will speak even through weak and faulty travelers and will lead in the right way. We pray that God would open all hearts to find the need for God's grace and forgiveness.

It was clear yesterday and today that there are two different groups in the Zion of North America. And I simply say that we cannot go on that way. We cannot say that we would just take a fresh start. That is not how matters are cared for. We care for our own personal matters through repentance and believing the gospel. We have heard words of instruction from God's Spirit these days. We have been joyful and thankful that we have had such broad participation this weekend. It gives a feeling of security to see so many brother and sisters here and to hear your speeches.

It has also been good because the enemy has tried so hard to divide and spread inaccuracies. No matter how poor the economy, one mill that always goes full steam is the rumor mill. Here this weekend you have been able to hear for yourselves. You can bring what you have heard back to your congregations and discuss there.

The recording secretaries will prepare a synopsis that will help you in this. We hope God's Word and loving instruction here yesterday and today, the instruction of the Holy Spirit, would be taken to heart, especially by those of a different mind. The words of one brother from Minneapolis expressed the need for help; it is a good request, a good plea. I very much encourage any of you, whether individuals or congregations, that are confused about these matters, or feel you are not in union with the teaching of God's kingdom, to make that plea and request for help. We want to help each other. If you feel a need for help, please feel free to make that request. There are those who are willing to help. I say they are weak and would help in fear and trembling. Yet in love we want to help each other.

It is not our wish that anyone would be lost to the enemy's wiles. He has been busy of late. From my heart, I want to encourage those who are confused or troubled or who have not been able to join in unity of spirit with the discussions here these days. Seek help. Jesus promised, seek and ye shall find, ask and ye shall receive. We can trust in the promise of Jesus, dear brothers and sisters. Let us remain trusting in the care of God's kingdom, trusting in the Zion of North America. We've heard requests that we should seek help from Finland, that that is where help needs to come from, but they have said they have nothing new or different to offer. The kingdom of God is here in North America too. They have the same battles there. It is good that believers of North America can trust in God's guidance here. We want to seek help within God's congregation. It is in North America and with us today.

Instead of looking for faults among believers, or reasons to criticize boards of North American congregations, let us look into our own hearts and ask, where am I. Am I in unity of faith and spirit with the believers here? That's where I want to be. I struggled over keeping the presentation yesterday, and, with this summary today, I struggled even more. I am not a wise one among you. I only want to serve as asked, and all I can do is speak how I believe. I want to be an open book. As servants especially, we need to be open books. How can congregations care for us if we are not open books?

So I make that humble plea to those of you who may be of a different mind these days, seek help. Help will be given. Do not put it off. We cannot continue to be a divided flock. The enemy wants us to be divided because then we are easy prey. We do not want any to be lost. I say that for myself above all. I don't want to be lost. I want to remain on the way that will bring me to that eternal goal of heaven one day.

I know my own sinfulness even in speaking here to you with these weak words. I prayed that God would give right words and that you brothers and sisters would listen with charity in your hearts. But above all, carry me in prayers and forgiveness, can I even now believe? (Gospel preached).

I want to believe. It is the only thing that will get us to heaven. Not serving, not studying, not wise words, only believing gets us to heaven one day. The power for that is in the gospel. As a weak servant I reassure you that you may remain yet believing. In Jesus' name and blood all sins are forgiven, dear brothers and sisters. It is a good place to be where the gospel is preached. We can so freely believe without any merits of our own. When sins are forgiven, they are all forgiven. We can believe with joy.

(Many meeting participants raised their hands personally requesting to hear the gospel)