



## Michigan District

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod  
People of Hope ... Vigorously Making Known the Love of Christ

Brothers Pastors in the Michigan District:

Throughout society much attention has been focused on group identity. In recent years, and especially since the last Synod Convention, “Lutheran Identity” has generated much interest, conversation, and confusion in our LCMS circles. The Presidium of the Michigan District would like to encourage fraternal conversation about that within the ministerium of our District.

To that end we prepared this document for use at Winkel Meetings. It is largely a case study of recent events regarding Concordia University Wisconsin Ann Arbor.

Having read the document, then use the following questions for conversation:

- How do you describe Lutheran identity?
- How are Lutheran identity and Christian identity the same or different?
- How does the LCMS conversation about Lutheran identity become complicated with the existence of others professing to be Lutheran?
- Identity politics in American society causes fractures, animosity, virtue signaling, code speak, and shunning. In what ways does our focus on Lutheran identity lead to similar experiences?
- The Bible is our primary source (*norma normans*) and the Confessions are our secondary source (*norma normata*) of doctrine and practice. How do or should tertiary sources (traditions, other Lutheran theologians, other non-Lutheran theologians, personal experiences, personal preferences, social scientists and the like) influence our doctrine and practice?

Would you please devote at least an hour in one of your upcoming Circuit Winkels to discuss this topic fraternally (Psalm 133)? We all have much to gain by maintaining collegiality among us as we serve our congregations and reach out to our communities.

...eyes on Jesus...

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## ***A Brief Analysis of the Lutheran Identity and Mission Outcome Standards (LIMOS) from the CUWAA Task Force***

*August 2024*

The consideration of a “Lutheran Identity” is a novel metric in our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. This concept was promoted some years ago with the intention that “the governance, administration, and implementation of programs and campus life” of our CUS schools remain “faithful to the confession of and oriented toward the mission of the church.”<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, in its 68th regular convention, directed the CUS Board of Directors to write and adopt the “Lutheran Identity Mission and Outcome Standards” (LIMOS) together with an “Evaluation Tool” to be used in assessing each of our college and university campuses and to support these schools in “strengthening their Lutheran identity.”<sup>2</sup> The LIMOS were formally adopted by the CUS Board of Directors on February 1, 2024.

One of the first practical applications of the LIMOS appeared on February 29, 2024. The Board of Regents of Concordia University Wisconsin and Ann Arbor resolved that a task force be constituted to determine the feasibility of and the process for Concordia University Ann Arbor once again being established as a separately accredited institution of higher learning. The task force presented its findings in a written report dated May 31, 2024.<sup>3</sup> The report narrowed its focus to four considerations: Academic Accreditation, Financial Sustainability, Legal Viability, and the Lutheran Identity and Mission Outcomes metric. Each of these four areas was studied by a subcommittee recruited and organized by the Concordia University Wisconsin/Ann Arbor (CUWAA) President, Dr. Erik Ankerberg, and the CUWAA Board Chair, Rev. John Berg. The subcommittee assigned to consider “Lutheran identity” elected to follow the standards as outlined in the recently adopted LIMOS document.

For our consideration in this analysis, our question is: **How Lutheran are the “Lutheran Identity and Mission Outcome Statements”?** Our concern is less about the grade given by the CUWAA report and more about the standards of this “Lutheran identity.” Our intent is to examine LIMOS through the lens of our Confessions and consider the credibility of it in assessing purity of faith.

### **Confessional Analysis of LIMOS**

The LIMOS are intended to be comprehensive and holistic, centered unequivocally on “Christ, the Holy Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and the shared confession and practice of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.”<sup>4</sup> While not explicitly stated in the LIMOS report, its unambiguous focus ought to center on our Lord Jesus, the Scriptures, and the Lutheran Confessions, and therefore, the one article by which true biblical faith stands or falls: Augsburg Confession IV, Concerning Justification.

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<sup>1</sup> Convention Proceedings of the 68th Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, July 29-August 3, 2023, p. 176.

<sup>2</sup> Lutheran Identity and Mission Outcome Standards

<sup>3</sup> CUWAA Task Force Report (Report)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St. Paul says in Romans 3[:21–26] and 4[:5].<sup>5</sup>

Lutheran identity, properly understood, is shaped by this article alone and directed toward confessing Christ alone according to this article. Augsburg Confession IV is the primary factor that distinguishes Lutherans from all other Christian traditions in their understanding and doctrinal application of Holy Scripture. Note the necessity our Lutheran confessors place on this article to center truly and properly on Christ and the Holy Scriptures.

But since in this controversy the chief topic of Christian doctrine is treated, which, understood aright, illumines and amplifies the honor of Christ [which is of especial service for the clear, correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and alone opens the door to the entire Bible], and brings necessary and most abundant consolation to devout consciences . . .<sup>6</sup>

Critical to true Lutheran identity is not only upholding the centrality of this article in the LIMOS, but also the intended *universal* scope of it. The first five articles of the Augsburg Confession delineate the universal intention and dimension of God's love and the purpose for sending His Son into the world. Articles three through five particularly articulate the foundation and formation of the Christian church, and as such, intentionally precede the article on the Church. One must read these articles, therefore, through a lens greater than that of the Church, that is, through the lens of God's saving work for the world. These articles, including Article IV, must be read through the lens of God's mission, to understand them properly.

That raises a question, then, regarding the focus and scope of the LIMOS. Are they focused primarily on Christ's ministry to and *for the church* or are they focused on His ministry to and *for the world* with the church sharing in His missionary vocation? The LIMOS speak for themselves: "Mission statement, core identity statement, and values and goals statements are clearly centered in Christ and focused on the life of the church (ecclesiastical)." This church-focused priority is particularly evident in Identity Standard III—Student Recruitment and Student Life:

3.2 Enrollment management practices prioritize recruiting and maintaining students from LCMS congregations.

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<sup>5</sup> Augsburg Confession, IV in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 38,40.

<sup>6</sup> Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV.3 in *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 121.

3.3 Enrollment management practices deliberately to recruit and retain well-qualified students for pre-seminary and church-worker training.

3.4 Enrollment management practices strive to maintain a credibly Lutheran student peer group.

To assist in this distinction, we turn to “Set Theories” and their construction of the categories that govern our thought patterns. Paul Hiebert utilized the concepts of “Bounded Sets” and “Centered Sets” in understanding how people groups around the world use different “organizational principles” in forming mental categories.<sup>7</sup> These concepts prove helpful in our brief comparison. In short, bounded-set thinking defines identity (belonging to a set) by its relationship to the boundary. The set is determined by identifying *observable* characteristics essential for membership. In this way of thinking, the focus is on defining and maintaining a clear boundary based on the characteristics. Focus is on a clearly defined boundary, and this necessitates uniformity in the characteristics as well. As such, bounded sets tend to be static, exterior-focused.

In contrast, centered-set thinking defines identity (belonging to a set) by its relationship with the center. Identity is defined not so much by proximity, but rather by direction—toward the center rather than away from it. Centered-set thinking does not focus primarily on maintaining boundaries, but it clearly distinguishes between those facing toward the center (members) and those facing away. As a result, the set recognizes variation among its members. Membership is determined by direction toward the center rather than uniformity in observable characteristics. As such, centered sets tend to be dynamic.

There is potential for each organizational principle to be misused. For example, in focusing primarily on the boundary to determine standards for membership (orthodoxy and orthopraxy), a group (in this case the Lutheran church) may lose its firm grasp on the center (the Gospel). In seeking to maintain a clear boundary between true faith and heresy or heterodoxy, it may prescribe human ordinances, perhaps wholesome in and of themselves, as necessary litmus tests for doctrinal purity. As an effect, such practices may lead to a form of Pharisaism (Matthew 15:8–9), or worse, idolatry—replacing grace by faith alone with good works. On the other hand, centered-set thinking, when focused solely on the Gospel, runs the risk of Gospel reductionism or worse, antinomianism.

As noted above, **the Lutheran Reformers identified the Article on Justification as both the chief doctrine of the Christian church as well as the article that most distinguishes the Evangelical Lutheran Church from other churches, particularly the Roman Catholic Church. It’s what gives Lutherans their identity.** Martin Franzmann equates “justification by grace through faith” with the “radical Gospel.”<sup>8</sup> **The Gospel is the root or *center* from which all doctrine and practice grows and bears fruit.** Lutheran identity based primarily on the radical Gospel reflects a more centered-set thinking. Membership in the church is determined by relationship with the center—justified by grace through faith alone in the person and work of our Lord Jesus.

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<sup>7</sup> Hiebert, Paul G. “Sets and Structures: A Study of Church Patterns” in *New Horizons in World Mission*, David J. Hesselgrave, ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979)

<sup>8</sup> Franzmann, Martin H. *Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics*. (St. Louis: CTCR, 1969)

At the same time, the Reformers identified specific “marks” by which the true Church on earth is recognized. “The church is the assembly of saints among in which the gospel is taught purely and the holy sacraments are administered rightly.”<sup>9</sup> While not boundaries as such, they are visible attestations of the active working of the Gospel, and, therefore, reliable indicators of Lutheran identity. Significantly, the Reformers did not bind Lutheran identity to specific “human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings.”<sup>10</sup>

It appears that “Lutheran identity”, as promoted in the LCMS and applied to our CUS schools, reflects a more bounded-set thinking. Specific examples from the Mission Subcommittee portion of the CUWAA Report bear this out. The subcommittee specifically distinguishes “Lutheran identity” from “Christian identity.”

While it is clear to the committee that the campus is *Christian*, it is less clear that it is *distinctly Lutheran* as defined by the LIMOS. Efforts, particularly development of personnel, would be needed to build from a clear *Christian identity* to a distinctively *Lutheran identity*.<sup>11</sup> (*italics added*)

The Lutheran Reformers point to the preaching of the pure Gospel and right administration of the sacraments as the specific marks of the Christian church. Pure Gospel preaching and right sacramental administration hangs on Augsburg Confession IV. It’s this article that distinguishes the Lutheran churches from erring Christian traditions, such as the Roman Catholic or the Reformed. **Nothing in the report challenges the doctrinal teaching or practice on the CUAA campus on the basis of Article IV.** Instead it notes as a strength the core curriculum’s requirement of three theology courses. **It stands to reason that the report would have identified any teaching in these courses that did not uphold our Lutheran understanding of justification by grace through faith alone, if such flaws existed.** So, we are required to look elsewhere in the report to determine where CUAA falls short of the LCMS standards of Lutheran identity. The report states the following: “The weakness is a shallow understanding of Lutheran mission and identity that equates *evangelization* with Lutheran identity and mission” (*italics added*). The report applauds the school’s “heart for the lost;” however, it goes on to say, “but the campus would need to work to develop further evidence beyond successful evangelism efforts that it is meeting the Mission and Identity Objectives laid out by the CUS.” The report notes several missing or confusing elements that need to be addressed in order to meet the LIMOS criteria:

1. Paucity of Lutheran symbols publicly displayed on campus such as crucifixes and creedal statements;
2. Lack of understanding of how various *liturgical components* function in the worship service such as the Invocation, opening versicles, or confession and absolution;
3. Having a non-LCMS student serve as lector in chapel;

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<sup>9</sup> Augsburg Confession, IV in Kolb and Wengert, 43. Luther identifies seven “marks” by which the church is identified: in addition to the Word and sacraments he adds the office of the keys, the calling of pastors, public prayer, and the sacred cross (suffering for the sake of the Gospel) *Luther’s Works*, Volume 41, pp. 148-165.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> Report, 28.

4. Having student-led prayer outside the normal worship service and the chapel precincts;
5. Gestures and postures that confuse the role of the pastor and the laity;
6. “Proclamation of the Word”
7. Catechesis of baptismal candidates, ideally handed off to a local congregation;
8. Non-Lutherans leading athletic prayers and devotions;
9. Non-Lutheran coaches taking teams to visit non-Lutheran congregations.

Each of these notations in the report reflects bounded-set thinking. The assumption in such thinking is that the Gospel (as summarized in Augsburg Confession IV)—the Reformer’s primary standard for true Lutheran identity— will be accurately articulated in these outward symbols and behaviors. The fallacy in this thinking is that these outward symbols and behaviors specifically and unambiguously communicate Lutheran doctrine and practice, especially when shared with other Christian traditions (Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, and some Reformed).

Even more significant is the requirement that CUAAs worship conforms to the orders and hymns of the *LSB* or other official hymnals of the LCMS in order to maintain a “Lutheran identity”. While the orders and hymns of *LSB* clearly proclaim the Gospel and we do well to use them, commanded conformity to their exclusive use challenges the very nature of Lutheran identity, that is, “the right, power, and authority” the Lord Jesus has given the Church “in every time and place” (for the sake of the true Gospel) “to change, reduce, or expand such practices according to circumstances in an orderly and appropriate manner without frivolity or offense, as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church.”<sup>12</sup> **Our Lutheran Reformers were deeply concerned about maintaining Christian freedom as an essential element of “Lutheran identity.”**

At the same time, this also concerns the article on Christian freedom. With deep concern the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of the Holy Apostle, has commanded His church to maintain this freedom [Gal. 5:1, 13, 2:4], as we have just heard. For weakening this article and forcing human commands upon the church as necessary—as if their omission were wrong and sinful—already paves the way to idolatry. Through it human commands will ultimately increase and will be regarded as service to God equal to that which God commanded; even worse, they will even be given precedence over what He has commanded.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, this commanded conformity challenges a stated objective of the Synod: “Encourage congregations to strive for uniformity in church practice, but also to develop an appreciation of a variety of responsible practices and customs which are in harmony with our common profession of faith.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration X.9 in Kolb and Wengert, 637.

<sup>13</sup>Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration X.15 in Kolb and Wengert, 638.

<sup>14</sup>Handbook: Constitution, Bylaws, and Articles of Incorporation. (St. Louis, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 2023) p.12.

The LIMOS were intended to be comprehensive and holistic, intending to promote sound “Lutheran identity” on our Lutheran campuses. Unfortunately, they fall short of the mark of genuine “Lutheran identity.” **To be genuinely Lutheran, the LIMOS should articulate clearly and prominently the mission of Christ to make disciples of all nations by grace through faith as central to “Lutheran identity.”** Given the general Post-Christendom climate in America, our Lutheran colleges and universities not only have great opportunity but great obligation to reach out to the unchurched through the proclamation of the pure Gospel. **The sharing of the true Gospel should be a strong identifier of Lutheran identity.** Instead, it is at best assumed under the “Identity Standard I—Ecclesiastical Mission and Goals: Mission statement, core identity statement, and values and goals statements unambiguously give voice and controlling weight to the teachings of the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.” The mission of God is the hermeneutical lens given to us by the risen Lord through which we must read the Holy Scriptures (Luke 24:44–47). While terms like “the mission of the church” are not employed by the Reformers<sup>15</sup>, the missiological significance and intentionality of the Lutheran Confessions is essential for understanding and applying them properly. The creators of the LIMOS might protest this critique as not accurately portraying the role the mission of God plays in their formation; however, application of the LIMOS, as demonstrated in the report, speaks otherwise. **The primary place given to mission outreach, (i.e. *evangelization*), by CUAA is viewed as a weakness in the report.** Again, the statement, “The weakness is a shallow understanding of Lutheran mission and identity that equates *evangelization* with Lutheran identity and mission” (*italics added*). Evangelization is presented as Christian but **not** decidedly Lutheran. The LIMOS lean toward the increasingly popular notion in the Synod that “Lutheran colleges and universities are for Lutherans, not the world.”

“Lutheran identity,” as applied by the CUAA Task Force, seems to be measured as much by externals such as specific artifacts, liturgy, worship styles and resources, clerical dress and human actions as by the pure preaching of the Gospel and right administration of the sacraments. **This focus on externals runs the risk of diverting attention from the essential ministry of the Gospel** (Augsburg Confession, V) to elements that may be edifying and beneficial, but are not *essentially* Lutheran. A real possibility exists that the LIMOS will be used legalistically to require conformity to humanly developed ecclesiastical practices.

The Standards shall be elaborated to support both formative and summative functions. They shall engender local development and provide for outside monitoring of formative processes, engaging all institutions fully in intentional and measurable programs intended to advance their expression of Lutheran identity and accomplishment of mission outcomes. *They shall also enable the drawing of summative conclusions, concretely identifying strengths and weaknesses in institutions and programs, ultimately to provide clear rationale for decisions about continuation or termination of affirmation. (italics added)*<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Robert D. Preus, “The Confessions and Mission of the Church”, *The Springfielder* 39 (June, 1975)

<sup>16</sup> Bylaw 3.6.6.4(b) Handbook: Constitution, Bylaws, and Articles of Incorporation. (St. Louis, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 2023) p.136-137. The Handbook goes on in Bylaws 3.6.6.4.1 and 3.6.6.4.2 detail the use of the LIMOS in formal visits from the Synod President’s administration which may result in forced compliance with ecclesiastical practices not prescribed by Holy Scripture or the Lutheran Confessions.

**As godly and edifying as these practices may be, any required conformity to them flies in the face of true “Lutheran identity” as taught in our Confessions.<sup>17</sup>**

**If the LIMOS will place the same emphasis on Christ’s mission that the Holy Scriptures do and not be used to require or coerce conformity with ecclesiastical practices that are not required by God’s Word, they will prove to be a very helpful tool in assessing the true “Lutheran identity” of our schools and promoting the mission of God to the glory of God alone.**

Much more can be said about the LIMOS report. This is the first and most important analysis we would like to share with the brethren of the Michigan District.

### **Prepared by the Michigan District Praesidium**

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<sup>17</sup> Luther, Martin: “The doing does no harm; the teaching itself is the very Devil.” AE 40:130