



# ROOTS OF FREEDOM

The Association  
of Free Lutheran  
Congregations



Loiell Dyrud

The bottom half of the cover features a dark green background. Overlaid on this background are dark blue, stylized tree roots that branch out from the left side towards the right.

ROOTS OF FREEDOM:  
THE ASSOCIATION OF FREE LUTHERAN CONGREGATIONS

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# **ROOTS OF FREEDOM**

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Free Lutheran Congregations

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## Introduction

**T**he Association of Free Lutheran Congregations (AFLC) by way of its predecessor, the Lutheran Free Church, was founded by Norwegian immigrants to the New World.

Sailing on the sloop *Restaurationen*, the first boatload of Norwegian immigrants arrived in New York in 1825. By heritage they were Lutheran; by birth they were members of the State Church of Norway.

But not all Norwegians viewed their spiritual life as a mere extension of the State Church. At the time of this early emigration, many had been influenced by Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771-1824), the lay evangelist who led a spiritual awakening throughout Norway, primarily in rural areas. So effective was this awakening that some church officials, opposed to revival, had Hauge imprisoned. Yet lay workers continued the movement Hauge had begun until almost all areas of Norway had been reached.

In general, followers of Hauge believed there was more to being a Christian than having one's name registered in the State Church records. To be a Christian, Haugeans believed, was to have a relationship with Christ marked by an intense personal faith and to live differently from the world as the Holy Spirit, through the Word, worked in the believer's heart.

Since most Norwegians coming to America were from rural areas, it is not surprising that the first Lutheran congregation among Norwegian-Americans was organized by a follower of Hauge named Elling Eielsen. Eielsen had come to the small Norwegian settlement in the Fox River area of northern Illinois as a lay evangelist in the Hauge tradition. There in 1839, he organized a Lutheran congregation. (Today, the Fox River Lutheran congregation is affiliated with the AFLC.)



Hans Nielsen Hauge  
(1771-1824)

To the north of the Fox River area in the Norwegian settlement of Muskego, WI, another Lutheran congregation was organized in 1843. Rev. J. W. C. Dietrichson, recently ordained by the State Church of Norway, became their pastor in 1844. Since Dietrichson represented the State

Church perspective, the struggle begun in Norway decades earlier between the State Church and the Hauge Movement was now transplanted to America.

The State Church of Norway was a highly structured institution. Through its bishops and pastors, the State Church exercised control over spiritual matters, leaving little say on the part of the laity. On the other hand, followers of Hauge believed the laity were to participate actively in spiritual matters, including preaching on occasion. But there were other disagreements as well. State Church pastors were highly educated. Followers of Hauge believed higher education was not altogether necessary for understanding spiritual matters. In fact, some Haugeans believed higher education could at times be a detriment to faith and a contributor to rationalism. The congregations that followed Eielsen eventually became known as Hauge's Synod, and those who followed the State Church model of Dietrichson became known as the Norwegian Synod. The rift between these church groups was wide indeed.



## **The Conference and Augsburg Seminary: A Middle Position**

**A**s Norwegian immigrants moved across the Midwest into Iowa, Minnesota, and the Dakotas during the second half of the nineteenth century, a third group of Norwegian Lutherans organized a church whose position lay somewhere between those of the Haugeans (followers of Eielsen) and the Norwegian Synod (followers of the State Church model). This church body became known as The Conference for the Norwegian-Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church (usually called "The Conference") and established Augsburg Seminary in 1869 in Marshall, WI. In 1872, Augsburg Seminary moved to Minneapolis, MN, which had become the center for a rapidly growing Scandinavian population.

As evidence of this middle position, The Conference believed in the personal piety of the Hauge's Synod on the one hand while embracing the tradition of a theologically trained clergy of the Norwegian Synod on the other. But in a distinctly different position from both, The Conference believed the local congregation should be free from any form of higher church government as was often the case in a synod, where the clergy could exert control over the congregation.

Georg Sverdrup  
(1848-1907)

## Georg Sverdrup and Sven Oftedal

**I**n the mid 1870s, two young theologians from Norway were called to teach at Augsburg Seminary in Minneapolis. Georg Sverdrup and Sven Oftedal arrived in

America with a dream to build “a free church in a free land.” What they meant by this was that here in America where we were free from any form of State Church bondage, a Lutheran fellowship could be built with congregations functioning similar to the New Testament congregations. To this end they devoted the rest of their lives.

Georg Sverdrup came from a distinguished Norwegian family that included clergymen, Members of Parliament, and even a Prime Minister. Known for their scholarship and leadership qualities, the Sverdrups were among Norway’s most respected families. Yet Georg Sverdrup abandoned a bright future in his native land to cast his lot in America with his close friend Sven Oftedal. Both were recent theological graduates from the University of Oslo. While Sverdrup was more a theological scholar and writer, Oftedal was more a flamboyant speaker and organizer. Together they formed a powerful team among Norwegian Lutherans in the Midwest.





Sven Oftedal  
(1844-1911)

## The Lutheran Free Church Is Born

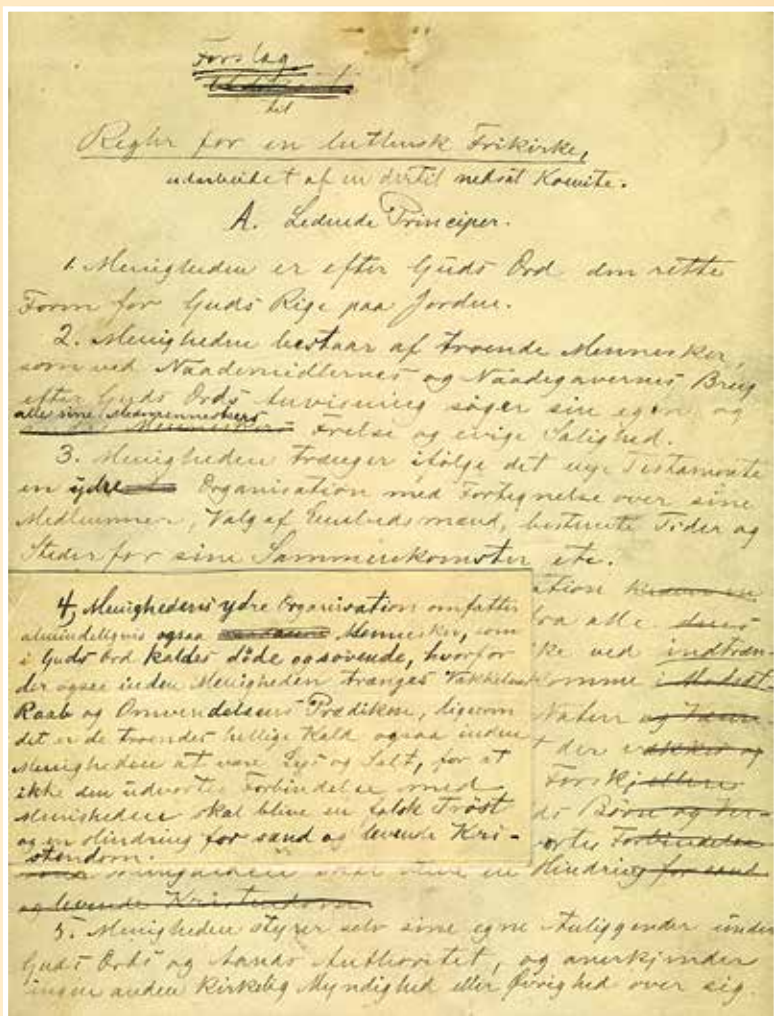
**T**o build “a free church in a free land” was not an easy task. Through the decades of the 1880s and 1890s, Sverdrup and Oftedal were involved in one theological struggle after another. In 1890, The

Conference joined with other Lutheran church bodies to form the United Norwegian Lutheran Church. This new Lutheran body ultimately compromised the commitment to congregational freedom as advocated by Sverdrup and Oftedal. Furthermore, a struggle developed over control of Augsburg Seminary.

Finally, in 1897, Sverdrup and Oftedal and their followers organized the Lutheran Free Church (LFC), structured around what they called the “Fundamental Principles” and “Rules for Work.” These documents became the guide for the Lutheran Free Church in place of a more traditional and restrictive constitution as was commonly found among synodical church bodies. The Lutheran Free Church was organized as an association of autonomous congregations working together in common endeavors such as missions, schools, and educational publications.







Courtesy Augsburg College Archives

Page one of the original draft of the Fundamental Principles. Written in Norwegian, this page contains the first five Fundamental Principles handwritten by Georg Sverdrup. The phrase at the top of the page reads: "Proposed Rules for a Lutheran Free Church." Immediately beneath the underlined title are the words: "Worked out by a committee for that purpose." Note how a newer version of Principle 4 has been fastened above the earlier version after numerous words had been crossed out.



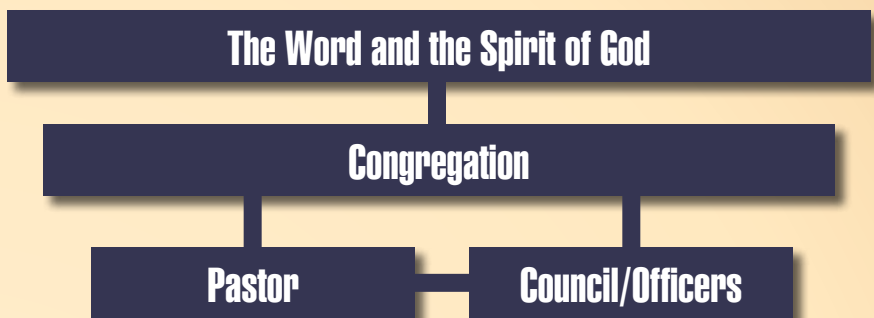
## The Fundamental Principles

**T**he Lutheran Free Church purposely avoided developing a constitution, fearing it would erode spiritual freedom for individual congregations. But how does a church body operate without a constitution to guide it? What then was to be the relationship between the congregations? What would be the responsibilities of the LFC president? How were the various boards to operate? To avoid the potential restrictions of a constitution and yet have a church body that would be more than a mere group of independent congregations, the organizers of the LFC wrote the Fundamental Principles and Rules for Work.

The Fundamental Principles became the framework for developing free and living congregations as well as guiding how these congregations were to relate to each other. The Rules for Work, on the other hand, detailed more specifically how the overall church body should operate. From the congregation's point of view, the twelve Fundamental Principles may be viewed as the more substantive document. Generally speaking, Fundamental Principles 1 through 6 deal with the individual congregation while Principles 7 through 12 deal with the relationship of congregations working together in ministries beyond the individual congregation.

The first Fundamental Principle proclaims the importance of the congregation: "According to the Word of God, the congregation is the right form of the Kingdom of God on earth." It is not the church body, not the clergy, not the schools, nor the seminary. Nothing is more important than the individual congregation, and all other ministries are designed to serve the congregations.

The fifth principle states, "The congregation directs its own affairs, subject to the authority of the Word and the Spirit of



### **How the AFLC congregation is organized**

*According to Fundamental Principle 5, the congregation "directs its own affairs, subject to the authority of the Word and the Spirit of God." Neither pastor nor board nor council is above the congregation.*

God." There can be no human authority over the congregation. In other words, the congregation has the final say concerning its own affairs. Even as Sverdrup and Oftedal believed there should be no hierarchy or "synodical" control over the congregation, neither should there be dictatorial control by the pastor over the congregation. The members of the congregation direct their own affairs under the guidance of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit.

And since God has given each member of the congregation spiritual gifts to be used in the congregation (Principle 6), the founders of the LFC believed lay members and pastors should work cooperatively in building up the congregation and reaching the lost.

Why is this kind of church organization so important? Sverdrup and Oftedal believed that when the congregation is free from synodical control without and free from pastoral domination within, then the Holy Spirit and the Word have a greater opportunity for creating a "living" congregation. Though this kind of freedom can never guarantee spiritual life, neither is it likely to hinder spiritual growth. And spiritual life and spiritual growth were paramount to Sverdrup and Oftedal's vision for the congregation. They believed the congregation is a living, spiritual organism to be modeled after the New Testament congregation as described in the Book of Acts, with no official church hierarchy governing it.



# Fundamental Principles

*Guiding Principles of the Lutheran Free Church  
and Association of Free Lutheran Congregations since 1897*

1. According to the Word of God, the congregation is the right form of the Kingdom of God on earth.
2. The congregation consists of believers who, by using the means of grace and the spiritual gifts as directed by the Word of God, seek salvation and eternal blessedness for themselves and for their fellow men.
3. According to the New Testament, the congregation needs an external organization with membership roll, election of officers, stated times and places for its gatherings, and other similar provisions.
4. Members of the organized congregation are not, in every instance, believers, and such members\* often derive false hope from their external connection with the congregation. It is therefore the sacred obligation of the congregation to purify itself by the quickening preaching of the Word of God, by earnest admonition and exhortation, and by expelling the openly sinful and perverse.
5. The congregation directs its own affairs, subject to the authority of the Word and the Spirit of God, and acknowledges no other ecclesiastical authority or government above itself.
6. A free congregation esteems and cherishes all the spiritual gifts which the Lord gives for its edification, and seeks to stimulate and encourage their use.
7. A free congregation gladly accepts the mutual assistance which congregations can give one another in the work for the advancement of the Kingdom of God.

\* The word "hypocrites" was changed by the LFC to "members" in the 1950s.

8. Such assistance consists partly in the mutual sharings of spiritual gifts among the congregations through conferences, exchange visits, lay activities, etc., whereby congregations are mutually edified, and partly in the voluntary and Spirit-prompted cooperation of congregations for the accomplishing of such tasks as exceed the ability of the individual congregation.
9. Among such tasks may be mentioned specifically the training of pastors, distribution of Bible and other Christian literature, home missions, foreign missions, Jewish missions, deaconess homes, children's homes, and other work of mercy.
10. Free congregations have no right to demand that other congregations shall submit to their opinion, will, judgment, or decision; therefore, domination by a majority of congregations over a minority is to be rejected.
11. Agencies found desirable for conducting the joint activities of congregations, such as conferences, committees, officers, etc., cannot in a Lutheran Free Church impose any obligations or restrictions, exert any compulsions, or lay any burden upon the individual congregation, but have the right only to make recommendations to, and requests of, congregations and individuals.
12. Every free congregation, as well as every individual believer, is constrained by the Spirit of God and by the privileges of Christian love to do good and to work for the salvation of souls and the quickening of spiritual life, as far as its abilities and power permit. Such free spiritual activity is limited neither by parish nor by synodical bounds.



## **The LFC Merges with The American Lutheran Church**

**T**he Lutheran Free Church that Sverdrup and Oftedal organized grew from about 6,000 members in 1897 to around 90,000 members by 1962. By then, however, many of the LFC congregations had drifted away from their founders' original understanding of congregational freedom. Some congregations, perhaps, may never have understood the concept from the beginning. Regardless of the reason, the distinction between an "association" such as the Lutheran Free Church and other Lutheran "synods" became blurred. Furthermore, by the 1950s, most Lutheran church bodies in America were involved in some form of merger negotiations. As a result, it is not surprising that after three referenda, the majority of the LFC congregations voted to give up their free-church polity and merge with The American Lutheran Church, a church body organized as a synod.

Thus in February of 1963, the Lutheran Free Church officially merged with The American Lutheran Church (TALC), though not all congregations of the LFC went along with the merger.

# The AFLC: Continuing the Dream of Free and Living Congregations

**M**any of the Lutheran Free Church congregations were unwilling to give up their heritage of freedom. Thus in the fall of 1962, hundreds of Lutheran Free Church members along with other interested people gathered at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Thief River Falls, MN, where they made the decision to continue the principles and practices of the Lutheran Free Church. They chose to organize under the name of "The Lutheran Free Church (not merged)." The courts, however, prevented them from using that name because it was too close to the original "Lutheran Free Church." As a result, the name was changed to the "Association of Free Lutheran Congregations," which the court accepted. By 1963, the LFC remnant that became the AFLC numbered about 6,000 baptized members.

The Fundamental Principles and Rules for Work retained by the AFLC are essentially the same as those adopted by the LFC in 1897. The method of operating schools and other ministries through corporations has also continued. In fact, every attempt was made by the founders of the AFLC to continue the traditions and practices of the LFC.

In the spring of 1963, the headquarters of the AFLC operated out of St. Paul's Free Lutheran Church in Fargo, ND. St. Paul's also doubled as the "Mission Center" and hosted the first Annual Conference of the AFLC that summer with 378 pastors and laity attending.



# The AFLC to the Present

In the fall of 1962, Rev. John Strand was elected president of what would become the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations. Born in Carpio, ND, in 1916, he was a graduate of Augsburg College and Seminary. Ordained by the Lutheran Free Church in 1944, Rev. Strand served in Grafton and Tioga, ND. He was 46 years old when he was elected President of the AFLC, a position he held for 16 years. Under his capable leadership, the AFLC grew to more than 130 congregations.

In 1964, a year after the AFLC was organized, 21 acres of land were purchased along Medicine Lake in the Minneapolis suburb of Plymouth, and the headquarters of the AFLC was moved from Fargo to the Twin Cities. That fall the Association Free Lutheran Theological Seminary (AFLTS), also known as Free Lutheran Seminary, began operating at the Medicine Lake site. In 1966 the Association Free Lutheran Bible School (AFLBS) opened on the same campus.

While serving as AFLC President, Rev. Strand also served as Dean of AFLTS from 1964 to 1966 and Dean of AFLBS from 1966 to 1968. During Strand's tenure, the AFLC World Mission Department was established, and in 1964 the first AFLC missionaries, Rev. John and Ruby Abel, began their work in Brazil.



John Strand  
(1916-1997)



Richard Snipstead  
(1928-1998)



After Rev. Strand resigned in 1978, Rev. Richard Snipstead was elected President of the AFLC. One of the original leaders of the AFLC, Snipstead had been instrumental in organizing the meeting in Thief River Falls in 1962 and helped guide the AFLC during its early years.

Rev. Snipstead was born in Meeting Creek, AB, Canada, and attended Camrose Lutheran College and the University of Saskatchewan before graduating from Luther Seminary in Saskatoon, SK, in 1953. He served congregations in Saskatoon; Greenbush, MN; and Ferndale, WA. Before assuming the AFLC presidency, he had also served as Dean of AFLBS from 1968 to 1975. He served as AFLC President until 1992.



Robert L. Lee  
(1943- )

Elected as third President of the AFLC in 1992, Rev. Robert L. Lee was the first AFLC President to have graduated from Association Free Lutheran Theological Seminary. Born in Escanaba, MI, in 1943, Rev. Lee graduated from Augsburg College in 1965 and AFLTS in 1968. He also holds a Th.M. from Bethel Seminary.

Before being elected President of the AFLC, Lee served congregations in Tioga, ND; Valley City, ND; and Newark, IL. He was also an instructor at AFLC Schools from 1979 to 1989. Rev. Lee served as president until 2007 and currently teaches at AFLC Schools.



Elden Nelson  
(1937- )

Rev. Elden K. Nelson was



elected as the fourth President of the AFLC in 2007. Born in Arlington, SD, in 1937, Rev. Nelson was educated at Dakota State College and the University of Minnesota and is a 1972 graduate of AFLTS. After serving congregations in Eugene, OR; St. Paul, MN; and Dickinson, ND, Pastor Nelson became Director of AFLC Home Missions, a position he held from 1976 to 1995.

From 1995 to 2002, he pastored a Home Mission congregation in Willmar, MN. In 1996 he was elected Vice President of the AFLC and served as Assistant to the President of the AFLC from 2003 until his election to the presidency. Pastor Nelson served as president until 2013, and currently resides in Prinsburg, MN.

Elected at the 2013 Annual Conference held in Osceola, WI, Rev. Lyndon C. Korhonen is the fifth President of the AFLC. Rev. Korhonen was born in Waconia, MN, in 1956. He graduated from the University of Minnesota–Duluth in 1980 and from AFLTS in 1983.

Rev. Korhonen has served on various boards and corporations of the AFLC and pastored congregations in Culbertson and Brockton, MT. He served Good Shepherd Lutheran in Cokato, MN, from 1990 until he was elected as President of the AFLC.

The AFLC has continued to grow and today has more than 265 congregations with a membership of more than 45,000. Though most of the congregations are concentrated in the Midwest and on the West Coast, the AFLC has congregations in 27 states. (AFLC Canada has congregations in four provinces.) The AFLC headquarters, seminary, and Bible school continue to share the campus by Medicine Lake in Plymouth, MN.



Lyndon Korhonen  
(1956- )



The 2022 Annual Conference met at the Association Retreat Center, Osceola, Wisconsin. The main item of business was the election of a new AFLC president, and after several ballots Rev. Micah Hjermstad, Fargo, North Dakota, was chosen. Hjermstad, elected at forty years old and our youngest president, is a third generation "PK" (pastor's kid) and the first graduate of both the Bible school and seminary to fill the office of AFLC President.

Micah Wayne Hjermstad, son of Rev. Wayne and Solveig (Larson) Hjermstad, was born in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, on June 15, 1982. He lived in several different towns in Minnesota and South Dakota, where his father pastored a number of congregations. After high school, he attended the Free Lutheran Bible College and graduated in 2002.

He attended North Dakota State University for two years, and then transferred to Minnesota State University Moorhead for two more years, graduating with a BA in 2006. That fall, he enrolled in the Free Lutheran Seminary, graduating in 2010 after serving his internship at Ruthfred Lutheran Church, Bethel Park, Pennsylvania.

He served as pastor of two different parishes: Hope Free Evangelical Lutheran Church, Ishpeming, Michigan (2010–2015), and St. Paul's Free Lutheran Church, Fargo, North Dakota (2015–2022). He married Brittany Bjornstad in 2021, and they have two kids, Levi and Sophie.

Rev. Hjermstad was re-elected AFLC President by an overwhelming majority at the 2025 Annual Conference held at the Association Retreat Center, Osceola, Wisconsin.



Micah Hjermstad  
(1982- )



Free Lutheran Schools Chapel, Plymouth, MN

## The AFLC: What We Believe

**W**e believe in the divine inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. As Lutherans, we accept the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the three ecumenical creeds, and *Luther's Small Catechism*. We promote personal piety and emphasize spiritual life and spiritual growth among our parishioners. Unlike the synodical structure so prevalent in other Lutheran denominations, we believe in the autonomy of the congregation where each congregation guides its own affairs in accordance with the Fundamental Principles.

And though our roots were originally in Norway, the AFLC today is truly a mosaic of nationalities and heritages united in one common goal—building “free and living congregations” under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God to reach the lost both at home and around the world.



Heritage Hall, Plymouth, MN

## Ministries of the AFLC

### Schools

Association Free Lutheran Theological Seminary (AFLTS), Plymouth, MN, is a four-year seminary founded in 1964 to prepare pastors, grounded in the Word, to serve free and living congregations. The great majority of its graduates serve in pastoral ministry in the United States, but its former students are represented in many fields of full-time Christian service in different parts of the world.

Association Free Lutheran Bible School (AFLBS), Plymouth, is a two-year, college-level Bible school founded in 1966. Offering courses in various books of the Bible, evangelism, discipleship, missions, music, and Lutheran doctrine, AFLBS trains youth for the purpose of serving our congregations in whatever occupations the Lord calls them.

### World Missions

AFLC Brazil, established in 1964 in southern Brazil, operates a Bible school, seminary, and children's home in Campo Mourao and serves several congregations in the State of Parana including the capital city of Curitiba, where AFLC Brazil operates

a retreat center. Other AFLC congregations are located in the states of Espirito Santo and Mato Grosso Do Sul.

AFLC Mexico, begun in 1978, includes ministries in Jerez, Leon, Celaya, and Obregon. Begun in 1979, AFLC India has several congregations in southeast India and receives training for lay pastors as well as aid for pastors and Bible women from the AFLC World Mission Department. AFLC Africa, begun in 2006, works with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Uganda ministering to the people and training pastors and leaders of the congregations.

In 2007 World Missions began a program called Ambassador Institute, designed to train pastors and church leaders internationally. Work has begun in Uganda and India.

## **Home Missions**

This AFLC ministry is responsible for planting and encouraging new congregations across the United States. FLAPS (Free Lutheran Association of Pilot Supporters) provides aviation service for Home and World Missions and other AFLC endeavors.

## **The Lutheran Ambassador**

The official periodical of the AFLC, *The Lutheran Ambassador*, began publishing biweekly in February 1963. Today it is printed monthly.

## **Ambassador Publications**

Publishing under the name of Ambassador Publications, the AFLC prints Sunday school curriculum for all grades as well as a Heritage Series, devotional books, Bible studies, and other educational materials for personal and congregational use.

## **Youth**

AFLC Youth Ministries help coordinate youth activities throughout the AFLC and encourage local congregations to win teenagers to Christ and disciple them through God's Word. This ministry also oversees the national FLY (Free Lutheran Youth) Convention held every two years.





AFLC Administration Building, Plymouth, MN

## **Evangelism**

The AFLC Commission on Evangelism provides resources and training to aid and encourage congregations to intentionally reach the lost within and beyond their communities.

## **Women's Missionary Federation**

The WMF seeks to awaken and deepen interest in and love for the Kingdom of God at home and abroad, thus sharing in the great missionary enterprise of the Christian Church. To this end, it seeks to unite all women of the AFLC in consecrated service for the missions, charities, and Christian Education program of our Association.

## **Association Retreat Center**

The ARC is the retreat center of the AFLC, located east of Minneapolis-St. Paul near Osceola, WI. Purchased in 1979, the former United States Air Force Radar Station has been converted into a modern facility capable of providing convention, retreat, and Bible camp accommodations for more than 600 people.

*For more information on AFLC ministries, go to [www.aflc.org](http://www.aflc.org).*

# Discussion Questions

1. The first two Norwegian Lutheran church leaders who came to America in the nineteenth century were Elling Eielsen representing what later became the Hauge's Synod and Rev. J. W. C. Dietrichson representing what later became the Norwegian Synod. Briefly explain their differing views.
2. "The Conference" took a middle position between the Hauge's Synod and the Norwegian Synod. What was this position?
3. Who were Georg Sverdrup and Sven Oftedal? What was the dream they devoted their lives to in America?
4. The Lutheran Free Church was established in 1897 and was guided by the Fundamental Principles. How does this document protect congregational freedom? (See Fundamental Principles, pp.10-11.)
5. How do the practices of your local congregation compare with the organizational chart at the top of page 9? (You may want to look at your congregation's constitution.)
6. Under what circumstances was the AFLC born? Why was the term "Association of Free Lutheran Congregations" chosen for its name?
7. The word "polity" means how a church body operates or governs itself. What are the essential differences between the way a "synod" operates and the way the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations operates?
8. One of the main goals of the AFLC is to promote "free and living congregations." What does this phrase mean?
9. Regarding "spiritual life," why does the AFLC believe its unique polity is so important?
10. Because an "association" is less tightly structured than a "synod," how do we maintain our "free" Lutheran heritage? (Discuss several ideas.)





Minneapolis, Minnesota

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