

Indiana–Kentucky Synod

Guidelines for Adopting or Amending Congregation Constitutions¹

When a congregation starts the process of adopting or amending its constitution, there are a few documents it should consult immediately. The first and most important is the latest edition of the *Model Constitution for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*.² The *Model Constitution* is updated at each Churchwide Assembly, currently held every three years.³ The Office of Secretary also maintains the ELCA Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions, the Model Constitution for Synods, and other resources for church leaders.⁴

As those documents explain, the governing documents of the ELCA, Indiana–Kentucky Synod, and their member congregations call for the Synod to review any changes to a congregation’s constitution.⁵ The Indiana–Kentucky Synod’s bylaws specifically assign this review to the Constitutions Committee, a committee of and overseen by the Synod Council. See S10.11.03.b. The Synod Council has approved a procedure for the review and guidelines for congregations to follow in revising their constitutions.

The Synod’s role in reviewing congregations’ constitutions helps ensure congregations include language required by the applicable governing documents, foster responsible life in Christian community, support the role of rostered leaders, and provide for collective discernment of the Holy Spirit in deliberation and decision-making. The Synod Council seeks to provide for basic best practices from legal, communal, and missional perspectives. Specific principles include protecting minority voices within congregations, providing transparency and accountability in congregations’ governing structures, and complying with Indiana or Kentucky law and the church’s governing documents. Still, the Synod Council affirms that “congregations may organize themselves in a manner which they deem most appropriate” to their mission. See ELCA 9.53.03.

With the advice of the Constitutions Committee, the Synod Council has adopted the following guidelines for congregations to use when amending their constitutions and bylaws. These guidelines are not all-inclusive; a provision could be submitted that does not meet with Synod Council approval for reasons not addressed by these guidelines.

¹ Adopted by the Indiana–Kentucky Synod Council, as amended, on November 14, 2025.

² Available at the ELCA’s website: <https://resources.elca.org/office-of-the-secretary/model-constitution-for-congregations-2025/>.

³ The model may only be revised by the Churchwide Assembly. ELCA bylaw 9.53.02.

⁴ These and other helpful documents can be found at the ELCA Secretary’s website: <https://www.elca.org/about/churchwide/office-of-the-secretary/constitutions>.

⁵ See *C16.03.–04. in the model constitution for congregations.

Steps in Approving Constitution Changes (language not verbatim from model)

- Whenever updating your congregation's constitution, we encourage you to start from the Word document downloadable from the ELCA's website available here: <https://resources.elca.org/office-of-the-secretary/model-constitution-for-congregations-2025/>.
- Select the options, fill in the blanks, and do not otherwise change any language in sections marked by an asterisk.
- For sections that are not marked with an asterisk, keep track of changes to the model language other than filling in blanks and making selections (choosing from language in brackets but not changing anything else).
- To adopt changes that copy model language verbatim, whether in sections with an asterisk or not, follow the procedures in *C16.04.
- To adopt changes in sections without an asterisk that do not copy model language verbatim, follow the procedures in *C16.01. to *C16.03.
- Once you've completed a draft but before presenting anything to the congregation's voting members, request advisory assistance from constitutions@iksynod.org (OPTIONAL). See Guideline 32. This step is always a good idea but is not required. Please allow for about three months in advance of when you'd like to present any amendments to a congregation meeting.
- Follow amendment process in *C16.01. to *C16.03., including (1) adoption by a majority at any congregation meeting and (2) ratification by two-thirds vote at a regular congregation meeting.
- Submit the entire constitution, including newly adopted amendments, in Microsoft Word or equivalent format to the Synod to constitutions@iksynod.org. Please also include any bylaws and continuing resolutions, whether recently amended or not. Please clearly identify the congregation's contact person or persons for purposes of communicating decisions about the constitution. If that information changes, please email the changes to the same email address.
- A Synod representative will acknowledge receipt of the constitution, and a reviewer from the Synod's Constitutions Committee will be assigned.
- The reviewer will submit a report to the Constitutions Committee, and the Constitutions Committee will decide to take one of the following actions:
 - Approve
 - Approve with conditions, which may be met by adopting compliant changes by a stated deadline, to be verified by a reviewer from the Constitutions Committee
 - Disapprove
- The Constitutions Committee will report its decisions to the Synod Council.
- The Synod Secretary will communicate the Constitutions Committee's decision to the congregation by emailed letter.
- A hard copy of approval letters and submitted constitutions will be kept in the Synod's file for the congregation.

General guidelines

1. **Congregation constitutions, bylaws, and continuing resolutions must not conflict with the faith and life of the church or the constitutions, bylaws, or continuing resolutions of the ELCA or the Indiana–Kentucky Synod.** See ELCA 9.53.
2. **Constitutions will be compared to the version of the *Model Constitution for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* in effect at the time the congregation holds its first vote on the revisions.** The Constitutions Committee may require a congregation to comply with a more recent version if the Constitutions Committee’s action on the constitution requires a Congregation Meeting before the constitution may be resubmitted.
3. **Congregation constitutions, bylaws, and continuing resolutions must not contain internal inconsistencies. See *C17.01. and *C18.01.** Please remember that *all* bylaws and continuing resolutions adopted by the congregation must be sent to the synod, whether or not a congregation’s constitution is also revised. *C17.04. and *C18.03.⁶
4. **Constitutions must be consistent with applicable laws.** The most important of these are Indiana’s and Kentucky’s statutes governing nonprofit corporations, which are found at Ind. Code §§ 23-17-1-0.2 to -32-9 and Ky. Rev. Stat. §§273.070 to 273.991.
5. **Constitutions must use the correct name of the synod.** It is the *Indiana–Kentucky Synod*, using a hyphen or an en dash to connect *Indiana* and *Kentucky*.
6. **Constitutions that provide for more than one regular Congregation Meeting a year must designate one as the “annual meeting.”** The *Model Constitution for Congregations* provides model language. See model C10.01. Elsewhere, it contains model language that uses only “annual meeting.” See C11.02., C12.02., C12.03., C12.09., C13.02. For example, C10.01. could read, “The quarterly meetings of this

⁶ All references to sections of a congregation constitution (e.g., C10.02) are to the *Model Constitution for Congregations*.

congregation shall be held at times specified in the bylaws. *The first congregation meeting of the year is designated as the annual meeting.*” A provision that the bylaws must designate which meeting is the annual meeting also meets this requirement. For instance, C10.01. could read, “The semiannual meetings of this congregation shall be held at times specified in the bylaws. The bylaws must designate one semiannual meeting as the annual meeting.” Kentucky and Indiana statutes require congregations to hold annual membership meetings. Ky. Rev. Stat. § 273.193; Ind. Code § 23-17-10-1(a).

7. **The Synod Council strongly recommends using the numerical codification system outlined by Introduction to the *Model Constitution for Congregations*, in which bylaws and continuing resolutions are integrated with congregation constitutions.** See “Codification Explanation” on page 4 of the *Model Constitution for Congregations*. The ELCA’s and Synod’s constitutions, bylaws, and continuing resolutions are organized in this way.

8. **The Synod Council strongly recommends including the date the most recent changes became effective.** This guideline recommends that a constitution include an updated effective date after the adoption of any amendment. The effective date is either the date of the congregation’s vote approving changes that bring any section into conformity with the *Model Constitution for Congregations* (*C16.04.) or the date the synod notifies the congregation of synod approval (*C16.03.). It is helpful to include the most recent effective date prominently on the first page of the constitution and in the footer of the constitution, i.e., “(8-2026).” See the cover page and footers of the *Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* and this document.

9. **The Synod Council has approved granting seasonal membership to voting members of other ELCA congregations who wish to retain such membership but desire to participate in the life and mission of another congregation, including exercising limited voting rights in the second congregation.** As a result, congregations of the Indiana–Kentucky Synod may grant seasonal membership to eligible individuals. The voting rights of seasonal members are governed by *C8.02.e.

Required sections and model language requiring editing

- 10. Constitutions must duplicate required provisions exactly as they appear in the latest model constitution (currently the *Model Constitution for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 2025*).** The Introduction to the *Model Constitution for Congregations* states, “These sections must be used without alteration or amendment of the text in any manner (i.e., neither additions nor deletions are permissible).” This includes provisions like *C6.05.g., provides set out extra requirements for terminating a congregation’s relationship with the ELCA based on whether the congregation was a member of the Lutheran Church in America or was established by the ELCA. Even when a congregation does not fall under one of those categories, these provisions are still required.

- 11. Constitutions must follow the organizational structure of the latest *Model Constitution for Congregations*.** This means the order of chapters 10–14 should follow the *Model Constitution for Congregations*. It is helpful but not required if sections follow the same order as those in the *Model Constitution for Congregations*. Any additional chapters should appear after the last required chapter and begin with Chapter 21 even if the congregation is not part of a parish and Chapter 20 is not included.

- 12. Congregations must select one alternative where choices are presented and shown with brackets. The brackets must be removed.** See C1.02., *C4.04, *C5.03, C5.05, *C8.02., *C9.01., *C9.21., C10.02., C10.03., C11.01., C11.02., C12.01., C12.02., C12.05., C12.06., C12.12., C13.04., C13.05., C13.07., C13.08., C14.02., *C15.11.

- 13. Congregations must replace all blanks with the appropriate information.** See C1.01., C1.02., C1.11., *C5.04., *C6.01., *C6.04., *C7.01., *C7.03., C7.05., *C9.03., C10.01., C10.02., C10.04., C11.02., C12.01., C12.02., C12.05., *C16.01.

- 14. Constitutions must include at least basic provisions in Chapter 10 through Chapter 14.** Except as provided in these guidelines, these may be constitutional provisions referring to the bylaws. (For example, C14.01. could say, “Organizations within this congregation will be provided for in the bylaws.”) Guidelines 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, and 28 all refer to requirements within these chapters.

- 15. In optional sections, constitutions must use the same terminology as required sections or include an explanation that different terms are the equivalent of those used in required sections.** For example, a congregation may call its Congregation Council, referred to in *C4.04. and other required sections by that term, a *board*, but it must state something like “The Congregation Council is also referred to as the Congregation Board.” Using the terms in the *Model Constitution for Congregations* is recommended.
- 16. Constitutions must state that the Congregation Council is the congregation’s Board of Directors in C12. See C12.05.a. Constitutions should not refer to the Congregation Council as Board of Trustees.** See Ind. Code § 23-17-2-4 or Ky. Rev. Stat. § 273.161.

Protections of pastoral role, minority groups, and the deliberative process

- 17. Constitutions must contain quorum requirements for Congregation Meetings and Congregation Council meetings.** See C10.04., C12.12.
- 18. Constitutions must have a percentage of voting members required for quorums (“those present” is insufficient). The Synod recommends the required percentage be no lower than 15 percent.** The percentage should be large enough to protect the minority but small enough to allow business to be conducted. Using a percentage avoids the need to adjust for changes to the congregation’s size. The recommended range for Congregation Meetings is between 15 and 25 percent of voting members, but this could vary based on context.
- 19. Constitutions must provide that the pastor is an ex officio member of the Congregation Council.** The following language from the model’s C12.01. accomplishes this: “The voting membership of the Congregation Council shall consist of the pastor(s)”

20. As part of meeting a quorum for Congregation Council meetings, constitutions must require (1) the pastor's presence, (2) in the pastor's absence, the pastor's prior approval of the agenda limiting business to be conducted, or (3) consultation with the bishop after chronic or repeated absence of the pastor. See C12.12.

21. Constitutions must have reasonable notice provisions for all meetings. See model C10.03., C12.13., C10.03., *C16.01., *C16.04., and *C17.03. of the *Model Constitution*, which allow notice by electronic means "as permitted by state law." Ind. Code § 23-17-10-5(c)(4) allows congregations to provide notice of meetings by "electronic means capable of verification." Ky. Rev. Stat. § 273.162(2) allows notice by "other electronic means."

22. Constitutions must prohibit proxy and absentee voting. See model C10.05.

23. Constitutions must require live meetings of the Congregation Council and congregation. Meetings of the Congregation Council and congregation may be electronic, but a live discussion must be provided for, e.g., teleconference or videoconference. See C12.13. Provision for electronic meetings may fall within the constitution, bylaws, or continuing resolutions. Model C12.13. should not be read as permitting decision-making by email or other remote communication that does not allow for live deliberation, and constitutions, bylaws, and continuing resolutions should not allow for decision-making by email or similar means.

C12.13 allows electronic and telephone conference "as permitted by state law." Ind. Code §§ 23-17-10-1, -10-2, and -15-1(c) allow congregation and Congregation Council meetings through "any means of communication by which all members participating may simultaneously hear each other during the meeting."

Indiana and Kentucky statutes allow remote meetings of the congregation as long as the congregation

(1) implements reasonable measures to verify that each person deemed present and permitted to vote at the meeting by means of remote communication is a member

(2) implements reasonable measures to provide members ... a reasonable opportunity to participate in the meeting and to vote on matters submitted to the

members, including an opportunity to read or hear the proceedings of the meeting substantially concurrently with the proceedings, and

(3) records any vote or other action taken at the meeting by a member ... by means of remote communication and maintains as a record the recorded vote or other action taken (e.g., by minutes).

Kentucky Revised Statute § 273.195(2); Ind. Code § 23-17-10-1(f); *see* Ind. Code § 23-17-15-1 (allows for electronic meetings of Congregation Councils under similar conditions, including providing for “simultaneously hear[ing] each other during the meeting”).

24. **Constitutions must limit the Congregation Council’s ability to buy, sell, or encumber real property without a meeting of the congregation.** See model C12.05.b.

25. **Constitutions must limit the Congregation Council’s ability to (1) enter contracts in excess of budgeted amounts and (2) incur obligations in excess of anticipated receipts.** See model C12.05.c. and d. Note that the limitation on entering contracts is connected to budgeted amounts and the limitation on incurring obligations is connected to anticipated receipts.

26. **Constitutions must include at least a basic committee structure. Constitutions must provide for at least a call committee, nominating committee, and audit committee.** See model Chapter 13. Constitutions may allow providing for other committees in bylaws.

27. **Constitutions must not allow members of the Congregation Council to serve on nominating committees, except that outgoing Council members may be members of nominating committees.** See model C13.02., which provides that up to two outgoing Congregation Council members may serve on a six-member nominating committee. C13.02. should not be read as allowing any other Congregation Council members to serve on nominating committees.

28. The synod strongly recommends that constitutions prohibit members of the Congregation Council from serving on the Audit Committee. One of the Audit Committee's purposes is to inquire into the business of the Congregation Council. A Congregation Council member serving on the Audit Committee likely would raise a conflict of interest related to that inquiry. See C13.03. See also ELCA's Congregation Audit Guide as a resource for conducting audits, currently available at https://elcamediaresources.blob.core.windows.net/cdn/wp-content/uploads/Congregational_Audit_Guide.pdf.

Special provisions

29. Congregations with endowments or plans to have endowments should include limiting language for the purpose of the endowments. The model's C5.05. contains excellent language for this basic purpose: "The purpose of the mission endowment fund is to provide for mission work beyond the operational budget of this congregation." This language prohibits using endowment funds for day-to-day operations of the congregation.

30. Congregations anticipating or considering dissolving, entering a parish relationship, forming a federated congregation, forming a union congregation, or otherwise merging should update their constitutions to ensure they conform to the current version of the *Model Constitution for Congregations* and these guidelines.

31. Chapter 20: If the congregation is a part of a parish, this chapter is required. If not a parish, the congregation may decide whether to include it. It may be prudent to have this chapter to ensure formation of a parish is allowed.

Help is available

32. Congregations may submit or make inquiries for an advisory opinion to the Synod's Constitutions Committee.
33. Congregations should consult the Introduction to the *Model Constitution for Congregations* and any other resources available from the Office of Secretary (see <https://www.elca.org/about/churchwide/office-of-the-secretary/constitutions>) before beginning the amendment or adoption process.