

# The Evangelical Lutheran Society of Texas

Founded 1851 • Re-established 2009  
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Pastor, Council, Congregation,

As you are well aware by now, we are living in historic times in the ELCA, and American Lutheranism in general. As the following documents demonstrate, there are still those within the ELCA that are working to preserve confessional and scriptural Lutheranism. In particular, the Evangelical Lutheran Society of Texas (ELST) is of the belief that it can provide a much-needed voice in the three synods of Texas.

The following documents grew out of the need to articulate the exact context American Lutheranism finds itself, how it got there, and where we can go from here. They were written at different times by different authors. As you might expect, the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly brought a lot of these issues to the table, but the formation of the ELST is not merely a reaction against homosexual clergy or marriage. Rather, this society will move forward on the basis of positive energy and identity, not negative energy or fear of the future.

As you read the following documents, consider where your congregation is now, and where it hopes to be in the next 5, 10, or even 50 years as a Lutheran witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Is it interested in donating time, energy and resources to the priorities of the ELCA? Is it interested in breaking away to a congregationalist or independent church body? Is it interested in reclaiming its rightful Lutheran heritage as a faithful witness to the scriptures? Every congregation is different, and we do not aim to persuade congregations to leave the ELCA. That is for the congregation to decide.

We do aim to give you the best information we have available about the Evangelical Lutheran Society of Texas, so in the event that your congregation is called to defend the great *solas* of the Reformation, we will be a vehicle through which that can be accomplished. May God richly bless your congregation.

In Christ,

The staff and board of the Evangelical Lutheran Society of Texas

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## Introduction and Purpose of the ELST

### A Time of Great Opportunity

The Lutheran confessional movement in America is today presented with a remarkable opportunity for revitalization and growth. The Evangelical Lutheran Society of Texas (ELST), originally founded in 1851 in Houston, is now being re-established to lead the renewal of American Lutheranism, by example.

### Overcoming Division

For centuries the promise of Lutheranism on North American soil has been thwarted by needless and often petty divisiveness. Despite the 20th-century achievement of the unification of hundreds of independent synods (including those of German, Norwegian or Swedish ethnic origin, those established before or after the Civil War, those from the North, South or Midwest, and so forth) into a small number of church bodies, the dawn of the 21st century has brought a new round of discord which threatens to splinter American Lutheranism again. Recent action by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) allowing the ordination of clergy who are in lifelong, monogamous, same-gender sexual relationships now threatens to set off a new round of splintering and disunity.

### No Place in the Middle

Looking at the role of women in the Church, for example: in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Society (LCMS), women cannot be ordained and in many congregations cannot even vote or teach men. In the ELCA, women are given quotas for leadership at all levels, except of course in congregations. Neither of these extremes represents the vast majority of American Lutherans in the pews, who accept women in the pulpit and in leadership, but see no need for quotas of any sort at any level. These American Lutherans find increasingly that they have no church home. Is it any wonder that over the past ten years American Lutheranism has lost over 700,000 members, almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  of this loss in the ELCA? The situation is even worse in Texas, where Lutheran church membership has declined from 3% to 1% of the population in just several decades. Since the creation of the ELCA in 1988, its membership in Texas has actually declined, and new mission starts in growing communities have become rare.

Unless something changes, Lutheranism in America, and in Texas, will continue to decline. And no greater mistake can be made than to suppose that Lutherans can retreat into their congregations and stick their heads in the sand. The vitality and even the survival of local congregations depends in no small measure on the viability of the denomination of which they are a part. Look, for example, at the former Evangelical Society congregations in Texas which are now a part of the dying United Church of

Christ. What one will see is a lot of lights being turned off and doors being locked. This must not become the fate of the Lutheran church.

### **The Promise of the Future**

Lutheranism in America, and in Texas, can become a growing, thriving movement again only if confessional Lutherans, not bound to the extremes of left or right, join together in a God-pleasing church which confesses the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in accordance with the historic doctrine and biblical teachings of the symbolic books of the Lutheran church. These doctrines not only preclude the ordination of practicing gays, but also command an open, loving church consumed by passion for the Gospel, and the care of all people and all creation. Some call such a church and people Lutheran traditionalists.

### **What Must Be Done**

Lutheran traditionalists must work through and resolve their differences and go forward on a united, positive basis. There is every reason to believe that the splintering apart of American Lutherans into a variety of small denominations will not be effective. If history repeats itself, there would likely be further splintering in the future.

This is difficult work. It requires not just ‘servanthood,’ but also ‘serpenthood’; that is, focused thinking and good strategy. Lutheran traditionalists range from Pietists to Evangelical Catholics, Midwesterners to Easterners, Southerners to Texans, and everything in between. They must agree on what is important, and find structures that bring together the strengths of their traditions. Some have said this is like herding cats. And time is of the essence.

### **What the Evangelical Lutheran Society of Texas Will Do**

Lutheran traditionalists in Texas include every strand represented in the country. The ELST is being formed to “think globally, and act locally,” to lead by example. The goal is to get Lutheran traditionalists in Texas together in one boat, and show that these issues can be worked through, unity on essentials can be achieved, and the Church among us can be set on a positive, open and expanding course. What a gift that Texans are bound together by seemingly limitless good will and optimism, and can put these attributes to work on behalf of Lutheran Christians all across America.

Some have already decided to leave the ELCA, some may intend to stay, and many are unsure which way to jump. The ELST will function as a society in formation, comprising congregations which retain their status within the ELCA or other existing denominations (such as the LCMC or the UCC, for example), or independent congregations. Congregations may first become “Participating Congregations” by Congregation Council action, or later “Member Congregations” by action at a meeting of the congregation. A structure will be provided for participation by individuals who are in other congregations as well.

After a period of discernment, the shape of the future will emerge. Traditional Lutherans may find themselves in a new society, or in a special society within the ELCA, or perhaps held together in some structure encompassing both. But the Lutheran confessional movement will not have splintered apart,

or disintegrated, or turned anxious or even bitter, and will have begun to achieve its destiny on North American soil.

### **Questions and Answers**

**Q:** Is the Evangelical Lutheran Society of Texas (ELST) a new Lutheran denomination?

**A:** No. For now the ELST will provide a structure within which Lutheran congregations from the ELCA and any other church body will work in unity to discern their future paths.

**Q:** Will congregations have to leave the ELCA or their society to join ELST?

**A:** No. They can remain where they are. That is their decision.

**Q:** Is this not just another split within Lutheranism?

**A:** No. The split already exists in the minds and hearts of many Lutherans. The ELST is an effort to preserve unity around traditional Lutheranism.

**Q:** Is the ELST limited to ELCA congregations?

**A:** No. The only criterion for affiliation is an affirmation of traditional Lutheranism.

**Q:** Is the ELST merely a reaction to the ELCA Churchwide Assembly's adoption of the Statement on Sexuality?

**A:** Not at all. The adoption of the Statement on Sexuality is only a symptom of a far greater crisis in Lutheranism.

**Q:** How is the ELST funded?

**A:** Participating Congregations and individuals are free to support the work of ELST.

**Q:** Does the ELST have a Confessional Statement?

**A:** Yes. The provisional Confessional Statement consists of a Confession of Faith, a Statement as to the Nature of the Church and Affirmations.

**Q:** How does a congregation or individual join the ELST?

**A:** A congregation may become a Member Congregation by action taken at a congregational meeting.

### **The Prayer of the Church**

Most gracious Father, we humbly beseech thee for thy holy catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where anything is amiss, reform it; where it is right, strengthen and confirm it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided and rent asunder, heal the breaches thereof, O thou Holy One of Israel; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Revised April 9, 2010**

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## Statement as to the Nature of the Evangelical Lutheran Society of Texas (ELST) and the Intended Role for Which It Has Been Created

### The Problem

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is in crisis. The events of August, 2009 have confirmed that the ELCA has become little more than another mainline liberal American Protestant denomination. Many congregations, pastors, lay members, and some bishops have reluctantly concluded that the ELCA as presently constituted can no longer be seen as a suitable vessel to which they can pledge their hearts, or within which they may continue to carry out their ministries.

### Two Obvious Alternatives

Seekers may see themselves as needing to make one of two choices: either staying and fighting within the ELCA (the **First Rail**), or leaving to join or establish new American Lutheran denominations (the **Second Rail**).

To some, the seeming crisis is in fact a rare opportunity to reform and revitalize American Lutheranism. The ELST has been re-established as one vessel within which this renewal can begin. At the national level, Lutheran CORE has been formed for this very purpose. The ELST, as an affiliate of Lutheran CORE, will fulfill this role in Texas.

### A Safe Terminal within Which to Construct a Third Rail

It is clear that Seekers are going to embark on a journey toward mission. What is not clear is whether they will journey on the First Rail (within the ELCA), the Second Rail (in a different existing or newly-formed American Lutheran denomination), or perhaps a **Third Rail**, a structure which will combine and unite Lutheran reformers who choose to remain within the ELCA and those who decide to join or establish new American Lutheran denominations.

For this process to proceed, a time for discernment and planning is mandatory. To achieve a spectacularly effective outcome, leading to the vigorous renewal and reinvigoration of the Lutheran confessional movement in America, a degree of unity is essential, and this cannot be achieved in a fortnight. The desire for instant gratification has become a hallmark of our society, but a safe terminal within which wise discernment and well-considered action can take place is needed. The ELST is the safe terminal within which this needed discernment and action can occur.

### Exactly What the ELST Is

The ELST is not a new denomination, nor is it necessarily the precursor of any new denomination. Neither is it a comfortable lounge for those inclined to endless study and conversation. Rather it is a safe gathering place where the necessary reflection and discernment – and not one bit more than is absolutely necessary – can occur before the trains start pulling out of the station. And the hope is that all “we” passengers will leave on the same train, or at least in tandem, all headed to the same destination.

In essence, the ELST aims to gather congregations in fellowship to do the things we are unsure we want the ELCA to do, or to do the things the new small denominations simply will not do. As we grow, the following programs are what we hope to offer:

1. Confirmation camps
2. Youth activities
3. Continuing Education and top-notch theological conferences
4. Local ministeria for clergy
5. Joint missions and service activities

### **How This Is Different from the ELCA?**

First, the ELCA appears to have substituted Luther’s understanding of the conscience being bound by the Word of God with what they call the “bound conscience” of the individual, all with no biblical point of reference. This fundamental and pervasive “**Theological Problem**” will be the subject of a theological paper to be issued by the ELST.

Second, the structure of the ELCA is fundamentally flawed in that the entire doctrine of the denomination is subject to the whim of no more than two Church-wide Assemblies, or as in the case of the recent changes concerning sexuality policies, one Church-wide Assembly. This is the “**Flawed Ecclesiology**” of the ELCA.

Third, it is most sad and disappointing that faced with the opportunity presented by the Flawed Ecclesiology of the ELCA, organized elements within the ELCA did in fact seek and achieve a fundamental change in polity as understood by the Church for some 2,000 years, all while admitting that no consensus for change existed. This is the “**Politicized Environment**” of the ELCA. It is not enough that revisionists read the rules, followed the rules, and won by the rules. The Protestant experiment requires that the mind of the Church must be discerned, not just the votes won in accordance with principles of democracy.

Fourth, the hierarchy and structures of the Church must exist to follow the Word of God and its proper application according to the historic doctrines of the Church, unless and until there is a widespread consensus that the doctrine is flawed. By contrast, the purpose of the “church-wide expression” of the ELCA seems to have become to be an agent for achieving “social justice.” And that concept of “justice” in many contexts is clearly found by the ELCA to be found in the left wing of the American political spectrum – things such as easing travel restrictions to Cuba, increasing farm subsidies, promoting a certain kind of immigration reform, instituting certain reforms to combat global warming, promoting “a Lutheran concept of health care reform.” This is the “**Left-wing Political Agenda**” of

the ELCA. Most Lutherans across the whole political spectrum of America do not believe that the exercise of political partisanship, left or right, is a primary role of the Church, or any role at all. And for those who think a simple return to the days of the “good ol’” ALC is solution and plan enough, there seems to be little realization that the left-wing bias of the ALC was at least as bad as that of the ELCA today, as its Legislative Office fought for a 55-mph speed limit, gun control, disarmament, and so on.

### **God Is in Charge, and Not We Ourselves**

We properly leave the defense of the Gospel to God, and do not arrogate that responsibility for ourselves. But we are not longer content just to be a part of a church with a fundamental and pervasive Theological Problem, a Flawed Ecclesiology, a Politicized Environment, and a Left-wing (or Right-wing) Political Agenda. Instead we want to be a part of a **Bible-centered Church** (where the Bible is read according to the high scholarly standards of traditional Lutheranism), which has a **Solid Ecclesiology** (which requires genuine consensus for change), and a **Non-politicized Environment** where there is **No Political Agenda, Left or Right**. The ELST will provide a safe terminal in which such structures will be carefully planned and memorialized before any trains pull out.

### **This Is Not about Sex**

A generation ago Lutherans were quite confident that women had no place in the ordained ministry. There is much in the Bible to support that view, as some within the LC-MS would be happy to explain. Today those outside the LC-MS (and WELS) do not read the Bible this way; our fealty to the Scriptures has not changed, but our interpretation of the Bible has changed. We do not know how Biblical references to homosexuality will be interpreted in 50 years, or even 25 years or less. But we do know that the historic doctrine of the Church will not be changed by reference to a parliamentary majority, or a vote of two thirds. It may be changed based upon a reading of scripture, but not the sinking sands of the “bound conscience,” as it is not clear to what those consciences are bound.

So one might say that this is about theology, not about sex; but there is more to the matter. This change in polity relating to homosexuality and the ordained ministry has also opened the eyes of many to the simple fact that the ELCA has become just another liberal, mainstream Protestant American denomination. We all, left and right, expect more of our denomination.

Another way to say this is that we do not want to be part of a **dying** denomination. The experience of the prototypical American liberal denomination, the United Church of Christ (not to be confused with the fundamentalist Church of Christ) is frightening. This imploding denomination is falling apart at an accelerating and dizzying pace, with membership decline from 1.4 million to 1.1 from 1998 to 2008. The same thing is now happening in the ELCA, beginning even before the recent vote (membership decline from 5.2 million to 4.7 million in ten years).

### **These Events Are Not Just an Accident**

The seeds of the present crisis are not recent, but were sown quite intentionally by the Commission for a New Church, which created and structured the ELCA more than 25 years ago. Much of the “credit” belongs to the bizarre “**Quota System**” of the ELCA, which has greatly contributed to the

magnification of the traditional disconnection between the views of ordinary church members and the often self-promoting persons who end up dominating the proceedings of national church bodies. This “**Disconnection Phenomenon**” can be observed in many, if not most, national organizations, including church bodies. The leftward march of the ELCA, for example, greatly resembles the right turn of the LC-MS a generation ago.

So now, the ordinary people of the Church must wrest power from this newer generation of special-interests, however well-intentioned they may be. Whether this can be done within existing structures (such as the ELCA with its Quota System), or whether a new denomination is necessary, remains to be seen; what we can now clearly see is that one (the ELCA) should have been enough, and that more than one replacement is at least enough.

### **Why Just Texas?**

The work of the ELST is being done nationally by Lutheran CORE, and done well. We in Texas have been given a special assignment – is it possible that by working at the local level in one place, contacts, relationships and solutions might bring about results which would elude the national effort? And if so, might not Texas be that place – given the natural optimism, goodwill, and confident nature of Texans? The ELST invites the participation of Texas Lutheran congregations, pastors and members in this effort as we pursue a different future for the Lutheran confessional movement in America.

### **P.S. What Is the “Lutheran Confessional Movement?”**

Martin Luther did not want or intend to start a “new church,” any more than many of us want to do so. What he did intend was to begin a “confessional movement” within the Church, which would someday reform the Church so that the “one holy, catholic and apostolic church” would become manifest among us, bear witness to the Gospel, and be home to all of us (“Mother Church”). That day has not yet arrived; and so it is that we remain a “confessional movement” within the “church catholic.” We pray not just for the unity of the “church catholic,” but also in the interim for the unity of our “confessional movement.”

**October 28, 2009**

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### Alphabet Soup: Discerning the ELST Amid Other Church Bodies

In the wake of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) Churchwide Assembly in August, 2009, many congregations are wondering what their future holds. As in any institution or family, opinions vary greatly. Some congregations are ready to disassociate with the ELCA as soon as possible, some are investigating alternative church bodies, and some are pleased with the vote and will work to further the current direction of the ELCA. For those of us who are concerned about the past actions and future direction of the ELCA, we need to be in discernment about who we are, where we stand, and what options are before us.

As iterated above, there currently exists no place in the middle for centrist, traditional Lutherans to turn if they are concerned with the ELCA, be they of a "high church" or a "low church" persuasion. Congregations that do not ordain women represent about a third of American Lutheranism. Among other differences that have long separated these brands of Lutheranism, and assuming that these differences will not be soon resolved, ELCA congregations have only a small smattering of church bodies to comfortably exist within. The first is, of course, the ELCA itself. Another emerging, but not yet fully defined option is Lutheran Coalition for Renewal (CORE). A third option is the congregationalist Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC). A fourth option is WordAlone. For Texans, the ELST is in the process of forming. By way of brief comparison, let's look at each church body.

The ELCA has clarified its position on human sexuality, much to the dismay of many within ELCA congregations. But the ecclesiological and theological errors within the ELCA are myriad, and by no means limited to the sexuality discussion that has dominated assemblies for the past decade. Everything from quotas at synodical assemblies to expensive political lobbying to altering sacred language in our worship hymnals has served to damage the cohesion of the ELCA. Reform movements like the ELST do not delight in this lack of cohesion, but mourn it. Instead of the threefold expression of the Church (Churchwide, synod, and congregation) strengthening and encouraging congregations, the ELCA often puts congregations in theologically compromising positions. Congregations are also left without a legitimate vehicle for dissent, as even voting members at Churchwide Assemblies are encouraged to vote their conscience and not represent their home synod. (Hence, they are no longer called "delegates" but "voting members.") The most recent attempt to remain cohesive in the face of serious disagreement was the principle of the "bound conscience," a theologically untenable "way" for the church to agree to disagree. The ELCA does participate in many outstanding missions, and there is

wide agreement that they merit continued funding. But blanket support for the ELCA is in question for many, as the level of trust has deteriorated in recent years.

Lutheran CORE is an umbrella group that houses many reform movements within the ELCA. It is now called a “confessing community” and it will remain both a confessing community (previously called a “free-standing synod”) and it will form a new church body. For now, it does not provide enough resources (call process assistance, for example) for a congregation to land after disassociating with the ELCA, should a congregation choose to do so. That will likely be resolved within six months, however, with the formation of a new church body. And it certainly provides, in our estimation, a faithful and confessional movement through which we can defend Christian orthodoxy. What CORE will become is perhaps the most prescient question facing North American Lutheranism today, and that question will largely be answered in August, 2010.

LCMC is a standalone denomination within American Lutheranism. Currently numbered at about 200 congregations, it does not regard itself as a “church”, per se, but as an association of congregations. Congregations are the highest authority within LCMC, and no decision is made without consultation and voting at their annual conference. For this reason, LCMC offers congregations great freedom and autonomy, both financially and structurally. LCMC does not provide much in the way of structure, however. It is not involved in the call process for congregations, and they do not provide protection for clergy in the event of conflict. Congregations, for better or worse, are left alone to call pastors and resolve difficult situations, assuming those situations do not involve legal matters. There is no synod structure and no bishops, which is seen as an advantage for some, but may leave some feeling that there is not enough outside support. Being a denomination, they are able to provide roster status, a pension program and benefits for clergy. For congregations who would prefer a similar structure and oversight as the ELCA, LCMC is probably not their final destination.

WordAlone, like CORE, is not a standalone denomination. Rather, it is a reform movement within the ELCA that is associated with the umbrella group of CORE. It came to prominence when the ELCA entered into full communion with the Episcopal Church U.S., addressing then not questions of sexuality but questions of the exact role of bishops in ordination. WordAlone tends to be of a more congregationalist character, and many of LCMC’s current congregations began as WordAlone congregations within the ELCA. It is unlikely that WordAlone will develop into anything more than a reform movement as LCMC seems to be their denominational destination of choice, and as a confessing community itself, it has fully merged with Lutheran CORE.

For those of us in Texas, a new society has formed with the intent of being a reform and renewal movement for American Lutheranism. The ELST is geared towards centrist traditional and confessional Lutherans who value the solas of the Reformation: sola scriptura, sola Christus, sola gratia, sola fide. It is similar to the other church bodies listed above, but it has its own unique gifts. What will it look like? Here are some ways of seeing the way ELST compared and contrasted with other comparable church bodies.

Like the ELCA, the ELST will operate within a churchly structure. Unlike the ELCA, CORE and ELST will have a high threshold for changing its constitution or policies and it does not permit practicing homosexual clergy. The bond between congregations and ELST will be very strong and congregations will have a great amount of input. No quotas will be instituted.

Like LCMC, ELST strongly values the unique gifts of the congregation and will welcome their voice and votes in theological matters. Unlike LCMC, ELST will, over time, provide a larger context for "being church" as it will be more than a mere association. It is likely that many LCMC congregations will also be a part of ELST, as ELST is a non-denominational (but highly confessional!) church body.

Like Lutheran CORE is doing at a national level, ELST is striving to find a way centrist, traditional Lutherans can be church together, moving forward together with positive energy and zeal for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Unlike the national CORE, ELST will be local, and representative of the unique cultural religious heritage Texas has to offer. Also like CORE, ELST will be an umbrella organization, where congregations can simultaneously be in the ELCA, LCMC, Word Alone, or any other reform movement in addition to the ELST. (The reasons for these dual associations are varied, not least of all are pension and benefit concerns for clergy and staff, or the sense that LCMC alone is not enough support for a congregation.)

Why also be in ELST, then? Our vision of ELST is that it will offer what the ELCA, LCMC, Lutheran CORE and WordAlone do not yet offer – a strong, local and visible sense of the holy catholic and apostolic Church. There are ways ELST will add value to a congregation: theological conferences, confirmation camps, joint missions and support, and strong confessional fellowship.

Many are wondering where the vitality of American Lutheranism has gone. Unfortunately, it has been lost to endless squabbles, debates, and votes pertaining to a social gospel. Would it not be grand if American Lutherans could reclaim that lost vitality, if we could focus on the great traditions of Lutheran theology, preaching and worship? These are the passions of ELST.

What does it mean to participate in ELST? Like other church bodies, it means being a part of something larger than the congregation. Participation means that we recognize that the defense of the gospel and the adoration of Christ are more fully realized when congregations come together in common mission. It means coming together to support overseas missions, new mission congregations, and theological and ecclesiastical leadership. It means working together to preserve the great traditions we have inherited over time. It means that those in the pews of ELST congregations can be sure that their tithes and offerings are not promoting the political and social causes célèbre that sadly drive too many mainline protestant church bodies

Many congregations are asking, "Where do we go now?" Every congregation is unique, and that process of discernment is often time-consuming and perhaps even painful. The aim of ELST is to be a best-of-all-worlds opportunity: congregations will be valued and at the center of all we accomplish together, church structures will support and protect those congregations, and the values and traditions that centrist Lutherans hold near and dear will be preserved for future generations.

If this is something that your congregation would like to be a part of or learn more about, there are several ways to get involved. First, ELST holds regular meetings in all three of the largest metropolitan areas in Texas: Dallas/Fort Worth, Houston and San Antonio/Austin. Please get on our email distribution list so you are aware of those meetings and can attend. Second, contact us directly with any questions or concerns. Our contact information is listed above. Third, request that ELST staff visit your congregation, council, or conference meeting. We will be happy to accommodate as able. Our interest is not in wresting congregations from the ELCA; that is for congregations to discern on their own terms. Our interest is in working towards a positive, confessional Lutheran witness in Texas and beyond, whether that is with ELCA congregations and synods, or non-ELCA congregations. If your congregation shares that desire, let us know how we can work together. As fruit needs the nourishment of the branch, and as the branch needs the nourishment of the roots, congregations need each other now more than ever.