



## THE LUTHERAN CHURCH - HONG KONG SYNOD

68 BEGONIA ROAD,  
YAU YAT CHUEN,  
KOWLOON, HONG KONG.  
香港九龍又一村海棠路六十八號

TELEPHONE: 2397 3721  
FAX: 2397 4826  
WEB-SITE: [www.lutheran.org.hk](http://www.lutheran.org.hk)  
EMAIL: [hksynod@lutheran.org.hk](mailto:hksynod@lutheran.org.hk)

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Rev. Dr. Allan YUNG

Hong Kong, 6 May 2019

President of

the Lutheran Church Hong Kong Synod

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District Presidents and Bishops of

the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS)

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*Ms. Joyce M.L. Woo*

## A Letter of Clarification

Dear Brothers in Ministry,

We were surprised and indeed saddened by the statement of the Council of Presidents (COP)<sup>1</sup> and by the FAQ published on the LCMS website<sup>2</sup> which basically drew upon Dr. HARRISON's letter dated April 17th, 2019. Therefore, we are convinced that some further clarification of the specific paragraphs of the FAQ is necessary on our part.

### "Why is The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) selling property in Hong Kong?"

The LCMS is selling three properties in Hong Kong that were previously being used primarily as housing for missionaries and as office space for the LCMS Asia Regional Office. With the move of our Asia Regional Office to Taiwan, these properties are no longer needed for LCMS ministries in Hong Kong, and the prudent stewardship of LCMS resources has led the LCMS Board of Directors to sell these three properties."

<sup>1</sup> <https://blogs.lcms.org/2019/cop-places-candidates-thanks-mueller-affirms-unity/> [Accessed on 4 May 2019].

<sup>2</sup> <https://files.lcms.org/wl/?id=JAKyEVzyzNv7vvDGSo2cavazuws4oljM> [Accessed on 4 May 2019].



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In our letter dated April 29th, 2019, we explained why the sale of the three properties would run counter to the wishes of the donors who financed the purchase of those properties and why such a sale would cause damage both to the ministry of the LCMS OIM in Hong Kong and to the ministry of the LCHKS. The assertion that "these properties are no longer needed for LCMS ministries in Hong Kong" reflects the mind-set of the LCMS leadership that never discussed with us whether these three properties which are being sold might be used to advance the ministry of its partner church, that is, of the LCHKS.

Furthermore, we would like to point out a discrepancy in the FAQ. On the one hand, in the FAQ, the LCMS claims to "continue to have missionaries on the ground to support [its] efforts and to work alongside the LCHKS". On the other hand, the three residential venues are being sold as "no longer needed for LCMS ministries in Hong Kong", according to the LCMS statement. Since missionaries serving with the LCMS OIM and other missionaries who are members of the LCMS are living in Hong Kong, we cannot understand how the three properties purchased in the past solely for the sake of Gospel ministry in Hong Kong are being sold by the LCMS as "no longer needed".

We can see the LCMS logic and recapitulate it as follows: "Since the LCMS does not want to use its residential venues, they must be sold so that the revenue could be taken away from the field and might be used for other purposes unknown to us and not reported publicly".

Therefore, let me ask solemnly whether you have ever taken into consideration the possible furtherance of LCHKS ministry while selling these three properties? These three properties, which the LCMS is selling right now, were purchased from the offerings of the LCMS donors years ago for one purpose only, namely, to advance Gospel ministry in China, particularly in Hong Kong. Although the LCMS claims that these three properties are "no longer needed for LCMS ministries in Hong Kong", they could strengthen our ministry and could serve the next generations of Chinese Lutherans.



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**"Why did the LCMS move its Asia Regional Office out of Hong Kong to Taiwan?"** The LCMS Office of International Mission (OIM) relocated its Asia Regional Office to Chiayi, Taiwan, for several reasons. The building there in central Taiwan is exceptional, with ample housing and office space for the OIM regional missionary staff and plenty of room for expansion. They were able to relocate there at little cost and with no capital investment. Chiayi also offers a much lower cost of living for our OIM staff than they were experiencing in Hong Kong. Finally, the opportunities in Taiwan are significant, particularly since Taiwan enjoys religious freedom and is home to the only Mandarin-speaking Lutheran seminary in the world. [...]"

In our letter dated April 29th, 2019, we have already clarified why the above assertions about religious freedom and the "only Mandarin-speaking Lutheran seminary in the world" could not be regarded as accurate from our perspective. In fact, we are concerned that the LCMS fails to note the concept of religious freedom as defined in the constitution of the People's Republic of China (§ 36).

Moreover, it is not right to set our Synodical seminary (Concordia Theological Seminary [CTS]) and the other seminary located in Taiwan in competition of any sort. The fact that different spoken languages are used at these institutions should not be presented by the LCMS as one of the reasons for moving the LCMS OIM regional headquarters to Taiwan because the CTS contribution to theological education in Asia is recognisable and Rev. Charles FERRY, LCMS OIM Regional Director for Asia, admitted this in his report to the forthcoming LCMS Convention.<sup>3</sup>

**"Did the LCMS agree or promise to transfer all of its property in Hong Kong to the Lutheran Church-Hong Kong Synod (LCHKS)?"** The LCMS agreed a number of years ago to transfer several pieces of property to LCHKS, when the LCHKS indicated they were ready to receive them. The majority of these properties have already been transferred to the LCHKS. The LCMS and the LCHKS are currently in discussion about making the transfer of the remaining agreed-upon properties, and the LCMS is prepared to transfer these properties once all legal steps necessary to enable the transfers, including governmental approvals, have been implemented. The three properties that the LCMS is currently selling have never been included in any discussion of potential transfers to the LCHKS. The LCMS Board of Directors is solely responsible for deciding to sell the three properties in question and for determining the use of the

<sup>3</sup> Charles Ferry, "Asia Region," in *Convention Workbook: Reports and Overtures 2019 (The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Tampa, FL, July 20-25, 2019)*, 32: "We enjoy a wonderfully rich partnership in particular at Concordia Theological Seminary Hong Kong [...]"



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sale proceeds. The LCMS has the full right and authority to own and sell its properties as it believes is prudent and in furtherance of the mission of the LCMS. Over the decades, the total number and value of properties which the LCMS has gifted to the LCHKS is substantial and further demonstrates our longstanding partnership with the LCHKS."

The issue of the transfer of the remaining properties to the LCHKS was elaborated on in our letter dated April 29th, 2019. It should be noted that the protocol which was signed by the LCMS and the LCHKS in 1996 laid down a transparent and feasible procedure for transferring the properties in question.

Therefore, in our opinion, all remaining properties and the Kwun Tong property could be transferred promptly in the same way as some other properties were transferred by the LCMS to the LCHKS in the past. It appears to us that no special "governmental approvals" are required to execute the transfer of these properties besides ordinary legal arrangements with which we are familiar and which can be enacted over a span of several months, not years. In the light of Hong Kong law, these properties are viewed as private and their transfer from one charitable institution to another does not require "governmental approvals".

The fact that congregations using these remaining properties and the Kwun Tong property feel insecure about their venues should be taken by the LCMS seriously, given that the stability and welfare of the ministries housed therein are at stake.

As regards the contention that "the LCMS has the full right and authority to own and sell its properties", we avow that in the case of the three properties which are being sold by the LCMS right now the LCMS acts only as a trustee, while the LCHKS remains their beneficiary. In addition, we are confident that our view of the legal status of these properties would be defensible in the light of common law. Therefore, please be mindful that our Synod might be compelled to consider taking legal action in this regard.

This present state of affairs between the two Synods saddens us because we are committed to upholding a positive and thriving relationship with the



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LCMS, yet there is little understanding for our concerns on the LCMS side. To have a dispute with the church that planted our church body is far from pleasant for us.

**"Has the LCMS stopped or curtailed its mission work in Hong Kong and China? [...]** The LCMS continues to have missionaries on the ground to support our efforts and to work alongside the LCHKS. In spite of the many hurdles, God's Word is clearly working in China today, and the number of Christians in China is growing rapidly. The LCMS has supported work in China through two areas in particular: education and mercy. Through Concordia International School Shanghai, the LCMS provides quality education (preschool through high school) to Shanghai's rapidly increasing expatriate population and equips its students for service to others in China and around the world. [...]"

As far as the LCMS international schools are concerned, we do acknowledge their academic excellence and, therefore, we want to partner with them. Our international schools and those of the LCMS share the same legacy of Lutheran education and stem from the same historical and ecclesiastical root. Therefore, instead of applause for the LCMS international schools in China, the LCMS shall explain to the members of the two Synods why the LCMS international schools repeatedly deny any connexion with our endeavours in the field of international education.

**"Has the relationship between the LCMS and LCHKS become strained because of the sale of the property?** The LCMS and the LCHKS have been partner churches since the formation of the LCHKS in 1977, and the LCMS highly values the relationship and opportunity to work together with our sister church in sharing the Gospel in Hong Kong. The LCMS met with the highest leadership of LCHKS, a valued church partner, on multiple occasions to discuss the transfer of the five remaining properties and the sale of the three properties in question. Those early meetings were cordial and cooperative. In the last 18 months, however, the highest leadership of the LCHKS has written a number of disappointing letters to LCMS leadership expressing several inaccurate assertions and assumptions. The LCMS has responded with clarifications and corrections, and with repeated offers to sit down in person to discuss the matter and improve the relationship between the LCHKS and the LCMS. Those offers have not been accepted by the LCHKS."



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Despite a prolonged and unilateral suspension of the transfer of the remaining properties by the LCMS to the LCHKS, the core leadership of our Synod worked hard to sustain and to cultivate civil and cordial relationships with the LCMS for the sake of Gospel ministry in China. The situation changed when the LCMS leadership started to work on selling the three properties in Hong Kong and on moving the LCMS OIM regional headquarters to the Taiwan Province without consulting the LCHKS and counter to our wishes, in a way which effectively strained the partnership between our Synods. We do not intend to be silent about our concerns. In fact, we learnt about the relocation of the LCMS OIM regional headquarters from Hong Kong staff members laid off by the LCMS who were searching for a new employment with the LCHKS. No consultation has ever taken place.

**"How has the sale of the Hong Kong properties been received by the LCMS Council of Presidents?** At their April 29, 2019, meeting, the LCMS Council of Presidents was thoroughly briefed and responded to the false accusations that have been circulating regarding the sale of the Hong Kong properties. They unanimously passed the following resolution:

*Given the past false and derogatory claims, which are violations of the Eighth Commandment, on the issues of property in Hong Kong, the Council of Presidents affirms that the LCMS Board of Directors and President Harrison have acted honorably and with integrity in the matter of the handling of properties in Hong Kong."*

The above statement mentioned "the past false and derogatory claims, which are violations of the Eighth Commandment".

First, our assertions, called "claims" in the COP statement, are factual and were endorsed by an overwhelming majority of the delegates at our last convention. All but one congregation, which is habitually negative about the Synod as such, voted in favour of the resolutions and thus approved the letter and the statements made therein.

The General Conference (Convention) of the Lutheran Church Hong Kong Synod (LCHKS), which took place on 27 April 2019, endorsed our letter



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to the LCMS District Presidents [Resolution 2019-03 and 2019-04], while the LCHKS Executive Council resolved that this letter was to be sent out on 29 April 2019. Moreover, all letters previously sent by me to LCMS leadership were endorsed by the LCHKS Executive Council.

Second, when I take my Latin-German edition of the Book of Concord, which is our collection of cherished Lutheran Confessions, I see that Dr. Martin Luther, one of our Reformers, explained in his Small Catechism that in the 8th commandment, God urged us to exculpate our neighbour, to speak well of our neighbour as well as to take and to interpret everything in the best possible way or to turn everything for the benefit of our neighbour.

Actually, we followed this path. We were extraordinarily patient. We have waited for more than 9 years since the process of transfer was unilaterally suspended by the LCMS. We sent numerous letters to Rev. Dr. Matthew HARRISON and to the core leadership of the LCMS. Not many of them received a timely response. We strove to put the best possible construction on the words and actions of LCMS leaders but this could not be done to the detriment of the mission of our Synod.

Other commandments must define to which extent we may bear or condone actions which imperil the stability of LCHKS congregations, schools and agencies and which endanger the welfare of all the precious people engaged in these God-pleasing ministries. By insisting that the statements contained in our letter were "false and derogatory", you bring heavy charges against the overwhelming majority of the delegates at our last convention.

We can understand that our letter, which ventured to question some decisions of the LCMS core leadership, was not looked upon by you with favour, yet our sole focus shall be on the issues raised in our writing and, therefore, we seek further response and explanation from you. We do it in the full confidence that the Executive Council of the LCHKS and the office of the LCHKS



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President have a responsibility, both moral and legal, to protect the Synod and its people, according to the LORD's mandate.

Finally, on 5 May 2019, most of the LCHKS pastors received an email titled "LC-MS Council of Presidents Condemned Pr Allen Yung's Letter and Rejected His False and Derogatory Claims" which was sent from an American email account [[cop.announcement@gmail.com](mailto:cop.announcement@gmail.com)] and which contained statements taken out of the post available on the LCMS website.<sup>4</sup> In our opinion, the LCHKS ministers shall not be exposed unilaterally, that is, without our involvement, to LCMS announcements which might potentially erode the authority of the LCHKS core leadership. Rather, we prefer to inform LCHKS ministers about the current dispute so that they could be shielded from unverified allegations.

We would like to clarify whether this letter was sent out by the LCMS or by persons authorised by the LCMS. It seems to us that this letter was delivered to most of our congregations and to their pastors. In some instances, the aforementioned letter was sent to their private email addresses. Moreover, we would like to know whether the title accurately presented the position of the COP as far as the reception of our letter by the LCMS District Presidents is concerned.

Cordially in Christ,

Rev. Dr. Allan YUNG

LCHKS President

<sup>4</sup> <https://files.lcms.org/wl/?id=JAKyEVzyzNv7vvDGSo2cavazuws4oljM> [Accessed on 6 May 2019].