



Judgment of the USC Appeals Board in the matter of:

LIFT Church - Western v Clubs Governance Board, 2025:8 Clubs

Hearing Date: April 3, 2025

Judgment Released: April 9, 2025

Panel: William Fawcett (Chair), Ann Sony, Anjali Kupchand

Reasons: Fawcett (Sony, Kupchand)

PART I: INTRODUCTION

1. LIFT Church – Western (“LIFT”) applied for ratification during the most recent round of applications. The Clubs Governance Board (the “CGB”) declined to ratify LIFT on the basis that it duplicated other services provided by the USC or Western University.
2. On appeal, LIFT has provided additional information to assist in differentiating LIFT from other Christian fellowship clubs and on-campus churches.
3. However, as this information was not put before the CGB at the time LIFT applied for ratification, it does not assist LIFT. Based on the information before the CGB at the time of its decision, the CGB’s decision not to ratify was reasonable. Accordingly, LIFT’s appeal is dismissed.

PART II: FACTS

4. LIFT's application for ratification contained the usual materials. Those materials framed LIFT in a manner consistent with a Christian fellowship club.¹ The following examples are illustrative.
5. LIFT's written statement provides an overview of the club's mandate.

1. Club Mandate and Objectives

a. The official mandate of LIFT Church - Western:

- i. To create a supportive and inclusive environment where students can explore their faith, develop meaningful relationships, and find personal and spiritual growth.
- ii. LIFT Church - Western aspires to be a place where students not only connect with God but also gain a sense of purpose, community, and support, enriching their university experience, holistically.

b. Our Vision:

- i. To see students at Western University experience the hope of Jesus.

c. Our Mission:

- i. To create a community where students can explore faith and Christianity while being given the opportunity to serve their campus and community.

d. A vital part of how LIFT Church - Western fulfills its mission is through "Simple Churches".

- i. We recognize that there is value in both large format and small format discussion about faith and spirituality.
- ii. For this reason, LIFT Church - Western uses small groups called "Simple Churches" as a vehicle for smaller format Bible study, prayer, discussion and discipleship. These exist in partnership with larger-format weekly club meetings for Church services.

e. Our ultimate Hope is to see every student:

- i. Experience Jesus' love;
- ii. Hear and share the Gospel;
- iii. Build a relationship with Jesus; and
- iv. Become a part of church community.

¹ In fairness to LIFT, it should be noted here that LIFT identifies itself as a church, which goes beyond a Christian fellowship club. For example, as a church, LIFT can celebrate sacraments. LIFT's submissions on this point are addressed below.

6. LIFT's schedule of events and activities identifies its activities as church services, simple church meetings, worship nights, exam care packages, retreats, conference, and city outreach. For reasons that will be expanded upon below, it is helpful here to quote the description of church services and simple church meetings.

1. Church Services

LIFT Church - Western has larger-format weekly club meetings (Church Services) every Sunday on campus. We worship Jesus together by singing worship songs and listening to a sermon. Anyone is welcome to attend Church Services regardless of their faith, beliefs and/or view of Christianity.

The intention of these weekly Church Services is for students to learn more about Jesus, ask questions and find community within LIFT Church - Western. Church Services give students the opportunity to serve and lead in different ways, including helping to set up equipment, playing on the worship team, organizing our potluck dinner, MCing and more.

2. Simple Church Meetings

Our church is made up of small groups called "Simple Churches." Every week, Simple Churches meet to read the Bible together, share snacks or a meal, form friendships, serve both the Western and broader community and more. Just like Sunday Church Services, everyone is invited to join Simple Church meetings.

Through these meetings, our hope is to see members learn more about the Bible and who Jesus is.

7. On March 7, 2025, the CGB provide LIFT with its notice of ratification decision denying ratification as a USC club. The sole reason identified was an alleged violation of section 2.4.6 of the *Clubs Ratification Procedure* (the "**Procedure**") on the basis that LIFT duplicated services offered by Western Christian Students, Power to Change – Western, Western Campus Ministry, numerous USC-ratified Christian fellowship clubs, and other USC services.

8. It is from this decision that LIFT appeals

PART III: ISSUE

9. The issue is whether the CGB's decision to deny ratification was reasonable. The chief question to be answered is whether the CGB's conclusion that LIFT is duplicative of other USC or Western University services was reasonable.

PART IV: SUBMISSIONS

10. In oral submissions, LIFT explained why it is seeking ratification. Ratification would allow LIFT to cut down on costs (such as costs for tabling), which would allow it to use more of its funds for charitable purposes (such as care packages). Ratification would also allow LIFT to advertise on campus through posters, and it would allow it to be part of the Western Christian club network.

11. As to the issue of duplication, LIFT's submissions focussed on differentiating the club in two main ways.

- a. As a church, LIFT is able to offer sacraments such as baptism and communion. Other Christian fellowship groups are not churches and do not offer sacraments.
- b. LIFT's beliefs and practices are informed by its protestant Pentecostal heritage, and it is part of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada. This sets it apart from other Christian groups and churches with different faith traditions.

12. The CGB's submissions began with an acknowledgement that its members are not experts on denominations within the Christian faith. The CGB pointed to numerous examples of other Christian fellowship clubs on campus whose goals, values, and activities were similar to those

described by LIFT. These examples included, *inter alia*, excerpts from the constitutions of Power to Change – Western, Western Christian Students, and African Student Fellowship.

13. Without recounting the various examples given, the CGB’s submissions may be succinctly summed up as follows: “LIFT Church - Western’s application did not provide adequate evidence that the club offers unique services or fills a gap that is not already addressed by other USC-ratified clubs.” In other words, while LIFT may in fact be distinct from other USC and Western services, its applications materials did not sufficiently address this.

PART V: ANALYSIS

i. The Framework for Appeals Regarding Decisions not to Ratify

14. The CGB has significant discretion with respect to the ratification of proposed student clubs (*AIM to Educate Western v Clubs Governance Board*, 2022:1, para 20).

15. In an appeal of a decision by the CGB not to ratify a club, the role of the Appeals Board is to ensure both the presence of fairness in the decision making process and the adherence to the relevant policies and by-laws. The discretionary power to determine whether a proposed club should or should not become a part of the USC community is ultimately within the purview of the CGB. The Appeals Board does not determine whether any proposed club deserves ratification, as this lies beyond the scope of an appeal to the Appeals Board (*Western Clay Club v Clubs Governance Board*, 2023:6 Clubs, para 14).

16. Regarding the merits of a decision by the CGB not to ratify a club, the Appeals Board will look to see whether the CGB’s decision was reasonable based on the material that was before it at the time that the decision was reached (*AIM to Educate Western v Clubs Governance Board*,

2022:1, para 32). The Board must determine if the CGB's decision was transparent, justified, and intelligible and fell within a range of acceptable and defensible outcomes (*AIM to Educate Western v Clubs Governance Board*, 2022:1, para 25).

17. With respect to section 2.4.6 of the procedure, where there is clear and significant overlap between a prospective club and an existing club, a prospective club is likely to be duplicative. Where a prospective club is able to distinguish itself in a meaningful way from its comparators, the fact that there is some duplication will not be grounds to deny ratification (*Speak Western v Clubs Governance Board*, 2024:5 Clubs, para 29).

ii. The CGB's Decision was Reasonable

18. To be clear, the question on this appeal is not whether LIFT is generally able to distinguish itself in a meaningful way from its comparators. Without deciding that question, we observe that LIFT's appeal materials go much further toward answering that question than its application materials. Rather, the question on this appeal is whether the CGB's decision that LIFT was not able to distinguish itself in a meaningful way from its comparators was reasonable based on the information in LIFT's application materials.

19. We find that LIFT's application materials do not meaningfully distinguish it from the comparators identified by the CGB.

20. This is exemplified by LIFT's mandate as quoted at paragraph 5 above. The elements of that mandate are common across Christian fellowship groups generally, e.g., creating a supportive and inclusive environment where students can explore their faith, develop meaningful relationships, and find personal and spiritual growth; creating a community where students can

explore faith and Christianity while being given the opportunity to serve their campus and community; and hearing and sharing the Gospel while building a relationship with Jesus.

21. As part of the written statement included in their ratification application packages, clubs are required to identify how they are distinct from existing USC clubs or services. Many of the elements LIFT identified here are also common across various Christian fellowship groups, such as having a holistic faith-centric model, being integrated with a broader church, focussing on leadership and evangelism, and having accessible and inclusive programming.

22. The CGB's decision that LIFT was duplicative of the services offered by the comparators identified was justified based on the materials before the CGB at the time of its decision.

23. In making that finding, we have considered the three main aspects of LIFT's application that it asserts distinguished it from other Christian fellowship groups: the fact that LIFT identified itself as a church in its application materials, the fact that LIFT identified itself as being unique because its model "revolves around Simple Churches", and the fact that LIFT identified its denomination as being a member of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada with "[C]hristian traditions and theologies that are specific to the Pentecostal denomination." We will address each of these assertions in turn.

24. LIFT submits that, as a church, it is able to offer sacraments such as baptism and communion, which sets it apart from other Christian fellowship groups. LIFT submits that the ability to offer sacraments is implied by the fact that LIFT is a church.

25. However, the CGB is not, and is not expected to be, an expert on the nuances of what groups can and cannot offer sacraments. While the ability to offer sacraments may be a

distinguishing factor, this ability is not mentioned in LIFT's application materials. Accordingly, the CGB was not required to consider whether LIFT's ability to offer sacraments is a service that distinguishes it from other ratified Christian fellowship clubs.

26. Moreover, LIFT's description of events and activities describes weekly church services, but that description refers to singing worship songs and listening to a sermon, with the intention of allowing students to learn more about Jesus. This description is similar to activities common across Christian fellowship organizations, including other USC-ratified clubs. LIFT's described church activities did not distinguish it from its comparators.

27. LIFT submits that its Simple Church model distinguished it from other Christian fellowship clubs. However, LIFT's mandate, as quoted above, describes Simple Churches as "a vehicle for smaller format Bible study, prayer, discussion and discipleship". Similarly, Simple Churches are described as part of LIFT's description of events and activities as follows: "[e]very week, Simple Churches meet to read the Bible together, share snacks or a meal, form friendships, serve both the Western and broader community and more." Without any intention of disparaging the Simple Church model in any fashion, LIFT's description of this model as written in its application materials does not distinguish it from a Bible study such as may be held by any other Christian fellowship club. It was reasonable for the CGB to understand the Simple Church model as being comparable to Bible studies as practiced by other Christian fellowship clubs.

28. LIFT submits that it identified its Pentecostal heritage as a distinguishing feature as part of its written statement. There is no evidence that the comparators identified by the CGB are also shaped by a Pentecostal heritage, and thus this may be a grounds on which LIFT can reasonably distinguish itself. However, the problem for LIFT is that the significance of this Pentecostal

heritage, and the “traditions and theologies” that specifically arise from this, are not explained in LIFT’s application materials, nor are they reflected in the description of LIFT’s mandate and activities. Without LIFT providing more information, it was reasonable for the CGB not to ascribe much weight to LIFT’s Pentecostal heritage as a distinguishing factor.

29. In saying this, we are sympathetic to the fact that LIFT quite reasonably does not desire to exclude anyone from membership. LIFT intends to be open to all students, regardless of whether they share Pentecostal (or even Christian) beliefs. As a result, LIFT needs to strike a balance in its application materials between showing that it is open and welcoming to all while also explaining why its particular Pentecostal traditions and theologies distinguish it from other Christian fellowship clubs. *Prima facie*, it seems possible for LIFT to craft its application materials to strike this balance. However, its application materials this year did not do so, and we find that the CGB’s decision was reasonable.

PART VI: OUTCOME

30. For the reasons outlined above, the CGB’s decision not to ratify LIFT is upheld, and the appeal is dismissed. As it appears likely that LIFT will seek ratification again next year, let us be clear that we have not found that LIFT is in fact duplicative of other services offered by Western and the USC. We have only found that it was reasonable for the CGB to conclude this based on the materials that were before it this year. Should LIFT seek ratification in the future, any such application would need to be reviewed on its own merits.

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A. Sony

A. Kupchand