

# FORUM LETTER

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## Such touchy tinder

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It's hard to believe: Two people can be the closest of friends for years, till one of them does something that really irritates the other, who puts the worst possible construction on the incident. Now his heart becomes embittered, and it is the devil's shameful cunning that uses such an incident to gradually destroy a synod/district. Sometimes it may be nothing more than a single glance. A person does something clumsy while someone else is watching. The bumbler gets the impression that the other person is laughing at his clumsiness and is immediately filled with resentment. He thinks to himself, "He's laughing at me! He's showing his contempt for me!" whereas such a thought may not even have occurred to the observer. But the devil shoots that poisonous arrow into the bumbler's heart. That is why we must always be vigilant, because the devil is constantly sneaking up on us in an attempt to rob us of what we have. As Luther says, Jerome and Rufinus disagreed so sharply about a preface that they never again became friends. And if Augustine had not been so wise, the same thing would have happened between Jerome and Augustine. But Augustine was able to save their friendship.

Two men in a synod/district may disagree about something, and that disagreement can easily become a fire that inflames the entire synod/district, for both of them often try to gather support for their own position. We cannot prevent bitter thoughts from arising. Unfortunately, our hearts are such touchy tinder that such sparks can immediately start a fire; but we should immediately get water and put it out.

"To begin to love is not very difficult, but abiding in love," says Luther. Let us note that carefully, dear brethren! That we *now* love one another requires no skill. But it "is truly an art and a virtue" to abide in this brotherly love. . . . Finally, let us also note this extremely important axiom of Luther: "*Where there is no love, there doctrine cannot remain pure.*" —C. F. W. Walther, "Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod" [1879], in Matthew Harrison, ed., *At Home in the House of My Fathers: Presidential Sermons, Essays, Letters, and Addresses from the Missouri Synod's Great Era of Unity and Growth* (Lutheran Legacy, 2009), 320.

## "Mission accomplished" – qualified



Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod President Matthew Harrison wanted the 2013 convention in St. Louis to be a calm and outward-focused event notable chiefly for forging new international relationships, dedicating the synod to works of mercy at home and abroad, and solidifying support for the Koinonia Project, which has a long term goal of getting the

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synod more or less on the same page.

Most people would probably give it a qualified “mission accomplished.” Though President Harrison’s harshest critics might characterize it as more backward focused than outward focused (a criticism Harrison himself tacitly embraced by claiming that the source of strength for moving forward comes by looking back – back to Scripture and Confessions, back to Walther and Luther, etc.) and might suspect the calm was achieved in a heavy-handed fashion at the expense of genuine debate (different president, different complainers, same complaint), there is general agreement that the convention was fairly free of drama, though as usual matters of polity remain the Achilles heel of the LCMS (more on that below).

### **Struggling for surprises**

The synod declared fellowship with Lutheran churches in Liberia and Siberia and heard very edifying reports from representatives of those bodies. Harrison expects more and more international Lutheran groups to rethink their fellowship agreements in the coming years and to seek relationships with more conservative, confessional partners like the LCMS, something for which we must ready ourselves because we aren’t used to being much of an international player.

But had it been a book or a movie, the 2013 edition of the LCMS in convention would be reviewed as a yawner. I suppose for the average person that is true of most church conventions; but even though *Forum Letter’s* readers are enlightened folks for whom things ecclesial are generally interesting, this convention struggled mightily to generate any surprises or address anything momentous.

With the exception of the minor elections of people most delegates had never heard of to positions they didn’t know existed prior to getting the convention workbook, I never waited with any degree of suspense for the vote results to appear on the big screen; in every case I already knew who had won and had already typed it into my online report before the numbers came up. Just to add some artificial suspense I would type in the first digit of the percentage in favor, nearly always an 8 or a 9, to see if I would have to correct my guess in light of the actual total before posting the results online.

### **Neutered and declawed resolutions**

One reason for the lack of drama was the new presidential election procedure adopted in 2010, which meant the election of synodical president was already over and announced before the delegates convened, and, as expected, President Harrison was easily re-elected. Another reason may have been that President Harrison wanted to have a calm convention, so the floor committees worked overtime to craft the overtures into resolutions to which nobody but truly objectionable people could possibly object.

So nearly all the resolutions were neutered and declawed in committee, and they all passed or failed with huge and predictable majorities. Mostly, the delegates expressed gratitude for gifts, commended people for their efforts, acknowledged agreement with those with whom we agree, made arcane bylaw changes necessitated by the votes of prior conventions, and tried to keep from nodding off.

### **Undercurrents of interest**

But for those in tune with the psychology of the LCMS, there were undercurrents of genuine interest – though you have to be able to read clues to understand it. For example, in his blog after the convention former President Kieschnick said that the prevalence of clergy collars at the podium this time around illustrated the danger of a clergy-dominated church. Of course the percentage of clergy at the podium was the same as when he last presided over the convention, but the difference was that his preferred clergy didn’t flaunt it by dressing like clergy. For Harrison’s “side” of synod the preponderance of clergy was not a problem to be solved, while for Kieschnick’s “side” a clergy-dominated church is a problem solved with casual clothing.

Another big difference at this convention was the style of worship. In 2007, the last time I covered an LCMS convention, the worship and devotions were musically “blended” and included straight up traditional hymns, contemporary praise songs, and some blended music, meaning medleys of traditional hymns sung to electronic Casio rhythms in a “Light Hits of the 80’s” style – apparently in deference to the fact that we are a synod in which contemporary and traditional worship

styles coexist. This time there was no acknowledgment of the division. The worship was uniformly “high church” and traditional, using liturgies from our hymnal with nary a praise band or synthesizer in sight. It was also reverent, theologically deep, and steeped in the best history has to offer, so a fair number of LCMS folks, especially of the younger generation, would have found it entirely foreign to their experience.

### What’s in a name?

Perhaps nothing better illustrates the psychological subtleties of LCMS politics than the debate at the convention over the resolution to rename “circuit counselors” as “circuit visitors.” The non-LCMS barbarian might well ask, “Who cares?” while the student of literature reading the convention as a story might understandably assume that an impassioned debate over a slight change in nomenclature must herald the protagonist’s descent into madness. Even a circuit counselor turned circuit visitor like me might be tempted to focus on the fact that we were paying \$8,000/hour to rent a convention center in which to discuss it. But on further review, I think this was an important debate.

For those not in the know, circuit counselors in the LCMS are pastors elected by circuits (about a dozen or so congregations in geographic proximity to one another) to be the representative of the district president for that circuit. The synod’s constitution already calls for district presidents and circuit counselors to do all kinds of oversight, but in practice this has often been done sketchily if at all. So first there was a resolution to clarify the expectations of the constitutional office of visitation (with a lengthy preamble explaining its historic and theological roots within Lutheranism) followed by a resolution (7-02A) to change the title of circuit counselors to circuit visitors. Since it required a change of wording in the constitution and bylaws the resolution needed two thirds to pass (which it did, eventually garnering 73.3% of the vote, one of the closest votes of the convention), and now has to be ratified by two-thirds of the congregations in synod that respond (no quorum needed—just two-thirds of those that bother to vote).

President Harrison even relinquished the chair and went down on the floor of the convention

as the assistant pastor of Village Lutheran Church in Ladue, MO, to speak in favor of the change, while others spoke against it on the theory that it would cost a lot of money to reprint everything for no reason. Others proposed substitute resolutions to change other terms and were accused by a later speaker of mocking the proceedings, and the chair rebuked that speaker for impugning the motives of the previous speaker. There were many somewhat emotional and impassioned speakers for both sides. The discussion focused on the constitutional requirement that district presidents, assisted by circuit counselors, “shall visit, and, according as they deem it necessary, hold investigations in the congregations.” But that had been in the constitution from the beginning; this effort by President Harrison was not to change anything except to actually start doing the things that we were supposed to be doing all along. Going back to go forward and all that.

### More than changing the typeface?

So why did anyone bother to propose the change? And once it became clear that it really mattered to some people, why did anyone bother to resist, especially since it wasn’t really a substantive change? The resolution literally called for nothing more than to scratch out “counselor” and substitute “visitor” while leaving the job description the same as it always was. As one resident of the peanut gallery told me, we may as well have been voting to change the typeface of the bylaws. But is that really so? I don’t think so.

The change to “visitor” spoke directly to the key question that has been at the heart of a tremendous amount of controversy and angst in the LCMS over the last decades and also addresses the hopes and fears people have about the Koinonia Project, namely, to what extent is it anyone else’s business what another pastor or congregation does? A “circuit counselor” has the flavor of someone you call on to get advice or to put out fires. A “circuit visitor” seems much more like an official inspector, someone whose job is to approve or not approve of the goings-on and duly note it in his report, someone who is taking his constitutional duties a tad too seriously. And that is something many people fear. The idea was that we should go back to the reasons we have a synod and constitution in the first place,

which includes regular visitation and oversight. But not everyone is keen on that idea.

Congregations that practice “loose” (heaven forbid we call it “open”) communion, have women vested to assist in leading worship, and are on the forefront in using contemporary forms of worship not recognizable as Lutheran, are very suspicious of some “visitor” snooping around and possibly calling for an investigation. Their hyper-suspicious attitude on this score usually takes the form of accusing everyone else of being too suspicious. It is one side’s “If you trusted me you wouldn’t need to visit,” vs. the other side’s “If you trusted me you wouldn’t mind a visit.”

### The irony of it all

This dynamic also added a layer of irony to an already ironic situation, and irony can make even a boring story interesting. President Harrison opposed the changes in 2010 that gave more power to the president of synod. Those who accuse him of having a heavy hand are the ones who fought for giving the president a heavier hand. Just not a president like Harrison. And those in the LCMS who tend to pooh-pooh our Waltherian congregationalism were the ones most prepared to defend it this year, while those most comfortable with the real pope were quickest to use “popish” as a bitter accusation against Harrison in side conversations. But since the convention was voting nearly unanimously for practically everything that came up for a vote, it was hard to blame it all on Harrison. There did seem to be a general sense of agreement on a lot of things, or at least a sense that disagreement was futile.

But as mentioned before, the Achilles heel of polity remained, and no amount of cleaning up the bylaws and changing the nomenclature could heal it, especially regarding the definition of clergy. While most of the overtures were being toned down to near meaninglessness for the sake of achieving unanimity, the issues related to clergy classifications dominated most of the unofficial discussions happening outside the main hall.

### The Latin dance

We have hundreds of ordained men on what is called “CRM status.” According to the LCMS website, “CRM is the abbreviation for ‘candidatus

reverendi ministerii,’ that is, ‘candidate for the reverend ministry.’ It is generally referred to as ‘candidate status’ and basically means that this pastor is a member of the Synod and is a candidate, that is, is available and open to receive a call.” We also have a rapidly growing number of men classified as SMP (“Specific Ministry Pastors” – I guess no one knew the Latin for it or, trust me, it would be there) who are ordained before they finish their training but are ineligible for calls except to specific ministry contexts. We also have “Licensed Lay Ministers” who lead Word and Sacrament ministry but for some reasons have not been ordained.

The military word for this situation is unfit to print. (Hint: it is a three-syllable word that starts with cluster.) Is there a difference between clergy and laity, and, if so, is it a matter of call or ordination or both? Our approach is to say that if you’re ordained but not called to Word and Sacrament ministry, you are CRM; if you are called to Word and Sacrament ministry but not ordained, you are a Licensed Lay Minister; and if you are ordained while in training to be a pastor, you are SMP and can only serve in places like the one you’re in now. And if you’re called to assist the office of the ministry as a teacher or DCE (*director christiani educationis* – just kidding) then you are a Minister of Religion – Commissioned, as distinct from pastors, who are Ministers of Religion – Ordained. So you’re called, but not to the ministry *per se*, unless you say you are, in which case whatever. It is, after all, extremely important to follow AC XIV on this.

### Making sense of ministry

But this incessant tinkering with the difference between clergy and laity has severe downsides. The men on CRM often feel swept under the rug and forgotten. They can be returning missionaries or chaplains whose enlistment term has ended, pastors returning from medical or personal leaves of absence, or pastors who have taken time away from ministry to further their education or work a secular job. But they can also be problem pastors who were removed or forced to resign for some reason, so there is often a stigma attached to being CRM and few congregations look to that list to fill their vacancies. It is a list on which people tend to languish. The CRM men wanted the synod to do something forceful and definitive about their plight, but it was

hard to say what that could be.

The SMP men are often defensive about their status as pastors because they take a different (and arguably easier) route to ordination but then can only serve in a particular context. Some people think that if they want to be pastors, they should go to seminary like everyone else, while others think that since they're pastors, they should be eligible for calls like anyone else, and either way many people thought the convention should fix it. As for Licensed Lay Ministers – well, I'm not sure why it is important that they be called "lay" ministers, but I'm sure there is a Latin explanation for it. At any rate, you can see how there is some confusion on AC XIV among us.

The convention did tentatively address these issues. They voted to urge congregations to consider CRM pastors on their call lists, and after much agonizing and accusation of heavy-handedness they voted to have some oversight of the SMP program by the synod rather than just the seminaries. This didn't fix it, but we can limp forward without the Achilles tendon actually snapping.

Perhaps President Harrison will turn out to have been right, and this convention will be remembered as the time the LCMS began to take a greater role within international Lutherandom even as we continued to come together in Koinonia. If not, it isn't likely to be remembered at all.

– by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

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## Counterpoint: a lay delegate's reflections

By Marie Meyer



The 2013 Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod convention was the seventh I attended as either an elected delegate or a committee member, and it differed in many ways from previous conventions in which I participated. One notable contrast was how the LCMS was carefully portrayed in pre-convention communications as the confessional Lutheran church to which other Lutherans are looking for leadership in pastoral education. Another was the degree to which the synodical staff and the president's office directed floor committees to adopt resolutions consistent with the president's agenda of re-establishing the ecclesial supervision of congregational practice and theological training at seminaries, colleges and universities. The lack of any involvement of laity in leading worship led to a perception that the synod is moving toward a sacerdotal understanding of the pastoral office. Finally, the desire to project the image of unity led to greater top down control than was evident in past conventions.

Affirmation of the synod's global reputation in theological education began with Resolution 1-01, "To Highlight and Strengthen the Global Seminary Initiative." In his report to the convention President Harrison did not shy away from claiming the LCMS has "the best seminaries in the entire world preparing men to be Lutheran pastors." Delegates, having

been informed of the synod's leadership role among confessional Lutherans worldwide, resolved that the LCMS respond to the plea of other Lutherans for LCMS professors to teach at their seminaries and to welcome their students to our seminaries. Past conventions were less bold in claiming the synod was doctrinally qualified to assume leadership in training pastors of our partner churches.

### Mandating evangelical visitation

In his May 17<sup>th</sup> report to floor committees the president expressed strong support for mandating evangelical visitation within the LCMS. The message was clear: ecclesial supervision would be necessary to demonstrate the synod was qualified for its teaching witness to Lutherans worldwide. "This is one of the more important resolutions at this convention," President Harrison wrote. "It encourages and requires . . . officers of the synod to engage in evangelical visitation from bottom to top. We would like to see [Overture] 7-01 pass reasonably intact; you can improve it, but don't take anything away."

The president's request for evangelical visitation became the basis for a resolution dealing with congregational practice (i.e., "the bottom"). Resolution 4-10, "To Encourage Proper Oversight in the Administration of the Lord's Supper by Visitation from Ecclesiastical Supervisors," decreed that "The

practice of inviting all baptized believers who merely affirm the real presence while neglecting to address the necessity of unity of confession is not consistent with the biblical and confessional position of the synod." The resolution, approved by 78% of delegates, urged district presidents to address how congregations administer the Lord's Supper and exhorted the president of the synod to see that district presidents apply themselves faithfully to the task.

### Challenge to education

Another resolution called for Concordia University System institutions to submit reports to the CUS Board of Directors and to the president of the synod in his role as ecclesiastical supervisor [see "Missouri high jingo," July 2013 *FL*]. The institutions were to report on the development of strategies dealing with unbiblical cultural challenges that face synodical schools and on policies that commit student life to principles of Christian discipline. Still another resolution called for a bylaw change that would require the CUS Board of Directors to provide prior approval for all initial full-time theology appointments to college/university faculties. A similar resolution dealt with a process requiring the prior approval of initial appointments to seminary faculties.

These resolutions proposed by floor committees led to an unprecedented response from the presidents and board chairs of LCMS colleges and universities, the president of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and the CEO of Lutheran Hour Ministries. At open floor committee hearings persons representing various boards and commissions came forward to address how proposed resolutions would negatively impact their institutions. These hearings demonstrated that the claim to unity within the synod lacked substance if only one voice was heard and that was the voice of synodical leadership and selectively appointed floor committees. Because laypersons and clergy spoke to resolutions on licensed lay deacons and the Specific Ministry Program, several resolutions did not come before the convention in the form requested by the president and staff, but were reworked, withdrawn, or held for further study – thus avoiding some serious wrangling that might have occurred on the floor of the convention.

### "Achtung! Remain impartial!"

Delegates to this convention were overwhelmingly first time attendees who did not recognize subtle differences in the management of convention debate. Repeatedly the voices of speakers opposing resolutions were cut off when supporters quickly took the floor with a motion to end debate. In several instances the chair, based on his knowledge of the number of pro and con speakers, asked for a motion to end debate before more than one or two opposition delegates spoke. Although calling the question is always permissible, the manner in which it was done at this convention resulted in few speakers against resolutions being heard. The expressed concern of lay delegates for what they regarded as a top down management style was dismissed.

In one of the two instances where the president asked to speak from the floor and state his strong support for a resolution, he was given permission to speak before others already in the queue. A note was passed to him which read "Achtung! remain impartial!" and whether that was intended as a joke or expressed a word of caution is a matter of opinion. In any event, the note elicited considerable laughter.

### Exclusions

What to some may seem an insignificant change from the past was the synodical staff decision to deny Valparaiso University permission to sponsor a booth at the convention. Given that three 2013 Valparaiso graduates will be attending the St. Louis seminary – more students than from several synodical schools – this change is strange. Also, the Valparaiso-based Lutheran Deaconess Association received an invitation to be at the convention and sent in the form and required fee, only to have both returned and permission to have a booth denied.

Worship services that excluded lay leadership at every level reflected yet another change. In the past lay men and women carried consecrated elements to the various stations for distribution by the clergy. At this convention, all parts of the service were performed by pastors – including the reading of all lessons and bringing the elements to the stations. The worship services as a whole did not reflect that the majority of LCMS congregations allow for greater lay participation, including that of

women, in leadership of worship.

### A pinnacle moment?

Initial post-convention communication from synodical staff expressed joy and gratitude for the unity evident at the convention and the civil nature of discussions. Chief Mission Officer Gregory K. Williamson, commenting on his first LCMS convention, wrote, "The past week was a pinnacle moment of life together as Synod. In convention, men and women from every district and circuit met to share in worship and prayer, engage in discussion and collaboration, and define processes and procedures to enhance walking together as one people united in baptism. This unity of so many is cause for celebration. . . . Few in Christendom share such a profound unity." In a post-convention interview President Harrison stated, "I hope and pray that, in many years hence, people will look back at this convention as the place in which the church, which has been divided for many decades over various issues, really began to coalesce, despite existing in a very antagonistic culture, and move forward in a very determined way."

There is no question that this convention was more united and less rancorous than previous conventions. There is, however, reason to question whether that unity will be realized as adopted resolutions are implemented. Who will be responsible to see that proposed circuit visitation takes place? Currently hundreds of LCMS congregations use communion statements that will now be subject to ecclesial supervision. How will they respond to circuit visitors who must report their "erroneous practice" to the district president? What will be the consequences if a congregation allows women to serve as elders? To what degree will the synod recognize the responsibility of the man and the woman in the pew to judge whether the synod's theology is consistent with Scripture and the confessions?

### How shall we be saved?

Luther was careful to balance the authority of the clergy with the solemn right and privilege of laity to judge the doctrines they were taught. He wrote, "This is why all teachers and their teaching should and must be subject to the judgment of the listeners." The 2013 LCMS Convention was heavily weighted on the side of the clergy. One delegate noted that although 50% of the voting delegates were lay persons, their participation in the convention was at times subject to the dominant voice of clergy. It is not insignificant that only 8% of the voting delegates were women, fewer than at recent conventions.

In Resolution 3-01 the convention "[gave] thanks to the Lord of the Church for preserving His pure and saving doctrine among us and [prayed] for God-given courage to resist the danger of shrinking back from the difficulty of the Koinonia Project." As a lay woman delegate, I would submit that the LCMS must not misplace trust in any effort on our part to achieve unity in doctrine through the Koinonia Project or top down ecclesial supervision rather than in the saving grace of God. God's gift of unity in the teaching of pure doctrine is not the gift that saves us, but the grace of God in sending His Son and the power of the Holy Spirit in granting us knowledge of God's good and gracious will.

*Marie Meyer graduated from Valparaiso and was consecrated as a deaconess in 1960. After three years of fulltime service, family commitments led her to request that she be removed from the official LCMS Commissioned Minister roster. Her career became that of a volunteer in various areas of the church (including several years on the board of ALPB), with time to pursue an avocation in theology. She lives with her husband Bill, a retired LCMS pastor, in Bethel CT, and was a lay delegate to the convention from the New England District.*

## Omnium gatherum



**Sustaining print journalism** • It's no secret that print journalism has fallen on hard times, both in the secular arena and in religious publishing. Earlier this year one of the most venerable of U. S. religious papers, *The United*

*Methodist Reporter*, closed its print operation. An independent publication with roots going back to 1847, *UMR* had been a model of creative news publishing and at one time boasted a subscription list of over a half-million. They will continue to have an

online presence. Another venerable independent publication, *Christian Century*, has announced the launching of what it is calling “The Martin E. Marty Legacy Circle.” This is a program which will seek donors to what is in essence an endowment which will provide “a solid income stream to supplement subscriptions, advertising and annual contributions, ensuring the future vitality of [the magazine], whether that future is in print or digital form or both—or something yet to be imagined.” [*Christian Century*, July 10, 2013]. It is named for Marty, the Lutheran pastor and historian who wrote a regular column for the *Century* for many years.

**Speckhard calls it** • In the end (well, actually, in the beginning) LCMS President Harrison was reelected with 65% of the vote, and we would like to make good on associate editor Peter Speckhard’s guarantee in a previous issue of a Harrison reelection with 55% of the vote. So if you bet on Harrison, you’re welcome. And if you took the under and lost, let this lesson on the dangers of wagering make you a better person. And you’re welcome.

**Episcopal advice** • The ink was hardly dry on the U. S. Supreme Court’s recent decision overturning California’s ban on same-sex marriage before California’s ELCA bishops issued a statement of “pastoral guidance.” Signed by bishops Mark Holmerud (Sierra Pacific), Murray Finck (Pacifica), Dean Nelson (Southwest California) and bishop-elect Guy Erwin (Southwest California), the statement’s bottom line is that “we believe that where authorized by state law, ordained ministers in

ELCA congregations have the authority to offer same gender marriage ceremonies, as long as there has been consultation and endorsement of this act by congregational leadership. The decisions of how to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable same gender relationships is entrusted to pastors and the congregations they serve.” It goes on to note that the ELCA has (as yet) provided no liturgical resources for such a rite, so pastors should feel free to draw “from other Christian denominations and advocacy ministries” (read: Lutherans Concerned) for use in ELCA congregations. This is about what you’d expect from bishops who were already, in various ways, very public about their support for same-sex marriage. I suppose in a way it is less disingenuous than the statement released by one of California’s United Methodist bishops; noting that the United Methodist Church specifically prohibits its pastors from officiating at such ceremonies, Bishop Warner Brown recommended that United Methodists who want to marry someone of their own sex ought to seek out pastors of other denominations who are ecclesiastically permitted to perform the rite. Apparently that would include ELCA Lutherans. At the same time, several scores of retired United Methodist pastors have hung out the “marrying parson” shingle, saying they will happily violate their church’s policy.

**Next up** • I’ll be at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Pittsburgh covering what promises to be another boring event. Look for our wrap-up and analysis in the October issue of *Forum Letter*. — roj

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