

IT'S TIME

LCMS UNITY AND MISSION

The Real Problem We Face and How to Solve It

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Dear Reader,

The LCMS President's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synod Structure and Governance has now proposed for discussion extensive and sweeping changes in the way our life together as a Synod is ordered. The Task Force has also asked for input. District President Herb Mueller has requested my written opinion on this matter to be presented to and discussed by the Board of Spiritual Care and Supervision (Circuit Counselors, District Vice Presidents, and President) of the Southern Illinois District. I humbly offer what follows as one response to these suggestions for change. The views expressed in this paper are my own and are not meant to represent those of any Synodical board or entity.

I am convinced that what is proposed does not finally get at the heart of what is the greatest challenge to us and our sacred mission “to seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10) in this time. I offer these thoughts from the perspective of one who has served the church in numerous capacities over the better part of two decades. While in the parish—like so many pastors—I scratched my head trying to comprehend how and why the Synod functions as it does. My vocation within the Synod's corporate structure at LCMS World Relief and Human Care has brought a whole other perspective, though I have not served in this capacity so long that I've forgotten what it was like to be in the parish.

The following is submitted by one who was raised in a large suburban parish and has served pastorates in rural and inner-city congregations. I have the deepest love and respect for, and some modest knowledge of, just how much this church body has meant to so many, for so long.

I thank the Task Force for raising the issues as it has. There are many thoughtful and more or less valuable suggestions. But, as I argue in this paper, It's Time for us to confront the more fundamental issues which prevent us from fulfilling the divine vocation which is before us.

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The Good Ship Missouri

CAN YOU IMAGINE A SHIP out on the high seas in which 20% of the crew are determined to take the vessel in one direction, about 20% want the boat to go in the very opposite direction, and a majority are simply ignoring the boat altogether? The captain is on the bridge, but he's being shot at by mutineers from several directions at once. Occasionally he turns and fires back, and as he does so, he can't help but pull the wheel and alter the course of the vessel. [NOTE 1]

Some jump ship, tired of the confusion and dissent, and set out on their own—sometimes accomplishing great things, and sometimes not. The navigators are arguing over the charts. Some don't see the need to look at the charts at all. The officers can't agree on the longitude and latitude of the boat, and worse yet, there is no consensus on which direction to sail, though everyone is well aware that the swells are already imposing and rising, the sky is blackening, and the wind increasing. Younger and well-trained officers and seamen chafe as the "old salts," who have brought the ship through a hundred squalls, the very men who trained them, stand at their posts unable or unwilling to loosen their grip and trust the "youth" (now aging themselves) they've trained for the very challenge they face. She's a good ole ship, tried and true. She's sailed through hurricanes aplenty, but supplies are low and morale is lower. Worst of all, there are thousands upon thousands counting on her to get through the storm and come to their aid.

What shall be done? If we were speaking of a real vessel, the answer would involve consolidating control, driving out the opposition and dissenters, and jettisoning any and all crew and cargo which would prevent sailing a chosen course. But here is where the metaphor breaks down. All of that has been tried for decades. The good ship Missouri is not, and will not finally be coerced, despite all the efforts of the last fifty years to do so. She can only function—she does only function for her sacred mission—to the extent that there exists a consensus wrought by the Word of God. Unfortunately, the parties in the struggle for this boat and her mission have each been convinced that if only they could garner 50.1% of the crew's support, the boat could be sailed smoothly toward her vital mission. But that vision has failed, repeatedly. Our problem is not the structure of the ship. Her beams and basic structure are solid and resilient. It is not time to re-arrange the deck furniture. Much less is the solution the repainting of the ship, nor stenciling a new name on her bow. We must finally make the time and effort to come to a broad consensus on who she is, and what is her mission—that is, who we are and how we shall live and work together sailing confidently under the clear Word of God into the sea which is this postmodern world. By God's grace, it can be done, and now is the time to do it.

I. The First Thing Necessary: Honesty About What We Face

Let's be honest. There are enduring divisions in the Synod, and these divisions not only make our life together bitter, they consume our energy, and they cripple our ability to share the Gospel in its fullness with a world that has never been so open to what we have in Christ as Lutherans.

Our disunity is killing us and our mission effectiveness—and at just the wrong moment!

I see it everywhere I travel around the world. The invitations and open doors are everywhere. And yet, as much as the LCMS has accomplished (and it is a wondrous thing!), we are accomplishing only a mere fraction of what is possible for the sake of Christ and his Gospel. Our divisions rob of us courage and capacity, and they hamper our ability to dare to step into new opportunities. Our divisions often find us bawled up, wrestling with each other in the dust while the gate stands wide open before us.

These divisions are publicly minimized or maximized depending upon one's particular theological persuasion. They are artfully capitalized upon by various factions for political ends. These divisions rob us of joy in our churchly work, place barriers between brother pastors and others, breed distrust, and even throw many into camps bent on exterminating the power and influence of the other. Many simply try to do their work, quietly ducking the bullets flying overhead. Many have simply "checked out" of participating in synodical life. A veritable industry of an "unofficial press" and Web activity thrives, rife with information often inaccurate, and scandalously so. Elected or appointed officials are mercilessly and sometimes egregiously vilified. But all this is not the problem. These are merely symptoms of the problem. Despite the noblest of intentions, these divisions shift the institution's attention away from the congregation as the primary locus of mission and mercy, to itself—to the preservation of the bureaucracy, to structure and bylaws. *Sola structura!* And we behold the results of our failure. And it is our failure, including mine. Until we all recognize our part in this morass, God will continue to allow us to suffer exactly what we choose and richly deserve.

Dollars Down

"Always live within your income, even if you have to borrow money to do so." 1

Unrestricted receipts to the national office for mission and ministry continue their decades-long decline, despite best intentions.² The Synod's national office just does not have the dollars to cover what it once covered. [This document was written before the Wall Street financial collapse of 2008.] The dollars sent to the Synod via the districts as "unrestricted" support have ceased to be used to provide any support for the work of LCMS World Relief and Human Care, for instance (though dollars designated by individual donors for specific uses has increased greatly). Only a pittance is provided to the seminaries (1.9% of both seminaries' budgets this year). Dollars from congregation to district to LCMS World Mission continue on a long, precipitous decline. The Synod Treasurer struggles mightily and daily to keep it all afloat. As I write (August 2008), Synod, Inc. has a net worth of only \$160,000! The Synod's net worth has been reduced by about \$7,000,000 in the past five years. While many congregations and individuals happily participate, national programs and campaigns are met with ambivalence throughout broad stretches of the church. The worst possible construction is put on all matters by all sides. Congregations and pastors already borne along by a post-modern decline in denominational loyalty, behold one inscrutable and preposterous controversy after another, and quite happily altogether ignore what happens in St. Louis. I really can't blame them. Dissention exists at the local level. Circuits divide and fail to be the locus of unity in faith and life, of mutual

brotherly consolation and encouragement, precisely when brother pastors and sister congregations need each other the most, and when the pastoral task has never been more challenging.

I could tell a story (a real palinode) of trying, while suffering my own many weaknesses and shortcomings, to keep our international work of mercy focused on the task, while at the same time serving at the geographic epicenter of so much controversy and nonsense during my entire tenure in my current office. Who do I blame? *“We all played poorly. It wasn’t just one guy’s fault. It was a real team effort.”*³

II. Now Is the Time for Courage . . .and to Get Our Act Together for the Sake of the Mission Given Us

My friends, today is a glorious day! Despite all of our manifold warts, sins and weaknesses, we—the Missouri Synod—are still here, and we still confess the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ. Despite decades of internal controversy and division, we still publicly confess the Gospel and all its articles exactly as Luther confessed it in the Small Catechism, and as faithful Lutherans have confessed it for centuries in the Book of Concord. We have Walther’s crystal clear teaching of Law and Gospel and church and ministry as our own heritage (a heritage we sorely need to revisit and creatively re-apply to our day!). We confess this faith not because of tradition or how much we love Luther or Walther. We confess the Lutheran faith because it is simply the New Testament faith in the very best sense. We still confess that God’s Word is in all matters. We have clear positions on the great moral questions of our time involving abortion and human sexuality. This is no small blessing. In fact, it is an amazing gift of God given the challenges faced by so many other churches. In short, we have Christ, or rather, Christ has given himself to us. And he is the future of the church. We have a future because we have Jesus, despite ourselves.

The Wonderful Gifts of the LCMS

And what fabulous gifts God has given us in addition! Our two magnificent seminaries are, bar none, the finest Lutheran seminaries in the whole world. We have ten universities.

Concordia Plans hold \$3.5 billion for the church’s benefit. LCEF makes possible one marvelous new structure after another, at home and abroad. The LCMS Foundation stewards three quarters of a billion dollars to benefit the ministry of the church. The resources and relationships of the LLL stretch world wide! All the blessed mites (millions of them!) from the LWML have brought the mercy and mission of the Gospel to every corner of the earth. We have some thirty partner churches around the world. We have expanding relationships with many other Lutherans who want to be faithful. We have a \$20 million World Mission effort. A brand new hymnal has now been purchased by a whopping 70% of our congregations. Concordia Publishing House produces and sells mountains of the most faithful and fabulous Lutheran literature in the history of the English language. Our social ministry institutions serve millions

(2.5 million people served by LCMS recognized agencies last year). We have fabulous organizations like Orphan Grain Train and Lutheran Heritage Foundation. And so very much more could be mentioned. This is exactly *the* moment for Missouri Synod Lutherans to be exactly who we are!

“Be what you are. This is the first step toward becoming better than you are.” 4

That’s right. This is the moment for us to be exactly who we are. So it is past time for us to come to an agreement about exactly who we are. There is too much at stake for us, by God’s grace, not to make every attempt to get this moment right. Oddly enough, Lutherans of the world, many holding fast and in growing churches in Asia and Africa, are reaching out to the Missouri Synod even as the liberal Lutheran establishment, centered in Europe and the U.S., is encumbered with debates on sexuality and having doubts about the exclusive nature of Christianity within the context of world religions. Our seminaries are having extraordinary and increasing influence all over the world. But with the right support, it would not be at all impossible to multiply that influence tenfold. Our seminaries have capacity.⁵ **Our Synod’s national office should find every way possible to enhance and vastly increase the capacity of the seminaries to do what they do best—teach the faith and strengthen Lutheran communities all over the world in proclaiming the Gospel.** A goal of having 100 international students at our seminaries every year would not be too lofty. These students would return to their home churches and become forces for a clear confession of the Gospel and for vibrant mission.⁶

One fact is clear. The people of the Synod want the seminaries to be supported, and generously so. They demonstrate this by their giving (directly to the seminaries) and by their voting at Synod conventions. I’ve dreamed of an institute for international Lutheranism housed at both seminaries, staffed by an additional dozen professors, including perhaps also deaconesses. This institution would simply send its resident professors and many others to teach all over the world. **A goal could be to achieve interaction with every single Lutheran seminary in the world,** introducing people and churches to the solid confession we have, building local capacity for theological education, strengthening local Lutherans for the work of the church (mission and mercy), and strengthening the Gospel-confessing character of the Lutheran world. Our scholars can stand toe to toe with the best current scholars in any European seminary or university. And there are people in surprising places hungry for exactly the kind of faithful, creedally-committed scholarship which is the forte of the LCMS. I know this for a fact. I meet them all the time, all over the world. The seminaries, particularly the St. Louis seminary, suffered great devaluation in the church’s life as a result of the controversy in the 1960s and 70s. It’s time clearly and actively to reverse that trend. **The seminaries are both teachers for the church and teachers of the church.**

The institution of national Synod and its programs or activities cannot, never have, and never will prove to be an adequate epicenter for Synod unity, particularly to the extent that theology is not at the heart of the Synodical institution’s life. Dollars, bylaws, structure, legal matters, day to day nuts and bolts concerns about keeping the lights on, controversies, and political divisions,

the constant need to raise funds—all inevitably, like centrifugal force, drive the heart of the church (Christ and the Gospel—theology!) to the periphery, despite all our best intentions. I know whereof I speak. I've seen it. I've lived it. I've suffered it. I've been guilty of it. That is why the structure of Synod should defuse power away from the International Center to congregations and districts, with strong partnerships with the seminaries.

The Local/Congregational Emphasis of the LCMS

The genius of the LCMS from the beginning was its clear recognition that a powerful, centralized bureaucracy was exactly what had managed to squeeze out the Gospel in Germany. *“The gentiles lord it over one another . . . Not so with you”* (Luke 22:25). It is the duty of the Synod to ensure the Lutheran character of its members, to protect and encourage both congregations and church workers, to support the seminaries, produce edifying and beneficial literature, and to support and facilitate mission and mercy. When the “ministry” is viewed as something carried out more by the central institution than by the congregations and partner churches on the front line of mission and mercy, then we've got it precisely backward.

The Synod should exist to serve and increase local capacity (the funds, the people and the program to get it done). But the way the Synod funds its programs makes this very difficult. The ELCA and the LCMS actually have similar national budgets (around \$80 or \$90 million). Only about one fourth of the LCMS national budget comes from the local plate to the district to the Synod. In the ELCA about 50% of the national budget comes from local “districts.” (They call them “synods.”) In the LCMS, this means that national programs, in many cases, have to beat the bushes to raise the money to do what they've been told to do. **That's why there is such a barrage of material mailed in triplicate to every warm body in the LCMS with an address and a pulse (and even to his/her former address).** That's why “gift officers” are sweeping across the U.S. looking for funding. Under these circumstances the national offices are under great pressure to show donors “what we are doing!” There is pressure internally to do more, to demonstrate more effectiveness, to raise more money, to communicate more, to talk more about “Synod” and St. Louis and its programs, to add more staff, etc. But it is painfully evident that, like the federal government, many national programs cannot be sustained while remaining fiscally solvent and responsible. Those programs that do bring in significant dollars (LCMS World Relief, LCMS World Mission, among others) end up paying heavy proportions of the cost of the national operation of Synod via “cost allocations,” and “general and administrative costs” charged to each unit (i.e. paying for costs of doing business in the building). We need to live within our means, and we need to spend dollars according to the stated purposes for the Synod's existence. The Synod Treasurer has been singing this mantra and acting on it internally. But we have a very long way to go.

In the work of relief and development, there is a cardinal rule (easier spoken than practiced): **The answers to local problems are local.** That is, local Lutherans have the answers to applying the faith responsibly where they are. They have the answers, not we who have the

privilege of working for them nationally. It is very, very hard to remember this when one is called to a national office, usually in part because of what is perceived to have been local success.

The genius of the LCMS structure was that the Synod helped assure theological accountability (via visitation by the Synod and District Presidents), while local Lutherans were granted the responsibility of living out the faith in ways appropriate to their circumstances. It worked quite well until the dissensus in Synod began in earnest after World War II, peaked in 1974, and then subsided slightly until the mid 1980s.

Time to Get Our Act Together

But after a half century of wrangling, it is time, now, to get our act together. It is also the moment to be *merciful* Lutherans. The world is dying, spiritually and physically, before our very eyes. Yet because of the decades of declining dollars sent to St. Louis via the districts (who have their own real challenges), **the Synod is deeply dependent upon using funds restricted for other matters for cash flow until those designated funds are spent by the ministries for their designated purposes.**

We must finally make the time and effort to come to a broad consensus on who we are and how we shall live and work together.

To the great credit of the Treasurer and the Synod Accountant, the donor's designation of funds is always honored. (If it were not, I would have resigned in protest long ago.) This temporary use of designated funds saves the Synod millions of dollars over time. How so? During this past year, the Synod has been in a position of borrowing over against such designated funds up to \$14 million for operations. Those are dollars on which, if borrowed from a bank or from LCEF, the Synod would have to pay interest. But this savings to Synod amounts to a cost borne by the ministries (particularly by LCMS World Relief and Human Care) which already pay for space and services in the building. It's quite legal. It's "always" been done this way. The ministries are, after all, "LCMS Incorporated" and do benefit greatly from the LCMS "brand." To be fair and up front, this "cost" born by the ministries which bring in significant funding, benefits other ministries which do not do so, or are in a deficit situation. This is good stewardship from the perspective of "Synod, Inc." But it also greatly hampers the capacity of the Synod's own LCMS World Relief and Human Care to do its mandate. It needs to change. "World Relief [and Human Care] is pretty much fully funded. Should they be simply 'cut loose' as a 'corporate entity'?"⁷ Yes, but it won't happen because the Synod is severely cash-strapped, and there is no indication that it will not remain so.

I believe our financial situation is strongly affected negatively by our divisions, and so do others.⁸ It is no accident that the decline in dollars to the national office began already in the early 1970s amidst the terrible doctrinal controversies. The legacy of those times still besets us

in many ways, but also financially. The more the central offices become like a corporation, think like a corporation, act like a corporation, are governed like a corporation, dominated by constitution and bylaws instead of the pulsing heart of theology (Christ), the less funding will come to the national offices. By the same token, when the national office begins to realize and act like every office, every position, from the president to the cleaning staff, is an adiaphoron, there will come a clearer more edifying perspective on the role of the national offices. These offices are neither commanded nor forbidden. They are not of the essence (*esse*) of the church, but so that she may be benefited (*bene esse*). They are here to serve and not to be served. Ironically, the more the Synod has sought to control (since the 1970s), the less control it actually has and will continue to acquire. People follow conviction, not coercion. That's why theology, the Gospel and all its articles, is and has to be the force which binds us. Missions are not the binding center of the church's life. The Gospel is. And where this is actually so, there is mission aplenty. Dale Meyer has nailed the issue in a recent brief, but penetrating, editorial titled, "Where is the Center?"

There, I believe, is the Center: A theological enterprise centered in the Scriptures of Christ. Such a Center is manifest in congregations walking together because we talk together about our shared confession of the doctrines of the Gospel. There are very few reasons left to perpetuate the Synod except that we want to bind ourselves together around these doctrines and voluntarily hold ourselves accountable to one another for the theology we preach and teach. . . . We need each other, not so much for structured work as for nurture and growth in the full Word that leads to salvation. . . . Theology can't just "underlie"; it has to be our Center.⁹

A Time for Courage

The challenges we face are many, and it will take courage to face them. There is a great deal of fear and discouragement these days in the church. Believe me, Luther's knees were knocking when he gave his "Here I Stand" speech before the world. And ours will be too. **But courage is simply fear that has been baptized.**

Luther noted three things that gave him courage:

1. **First, repentance**, because repentance is the path to a good conscience before God. And a good conscience frees one to act, to dare something for Christ and the Gospel. "*A good conscience fills a man's heart with courage and boldness.*"¹⁰
2. **The clear Word of God**, because we are not left wondering what the will of God is, paralyzed and unable to act. If I know clearly that my action is consonant with God's Word, I can have courage that he shall bless, come what may. "*Christian faith is ready to rest completely on God's Word with all confidence and courage, and then to go joyfully on its way*" (Luther).¹¹

3. Sacred vocation, because we can have courage that the Lord has placed us in this place, in this Synod, for this moment. Now is the time for courage, and to get our act together. The situation is ripe and brings to mind a statement of Luther:

When the situation is hopeless and all plans and efforts are in vain, then be courageous, and beware of giving up; for God calls all things from the dead and from nothing. When no resource or hope at all is left, then at last God's help begins.¹²

III. A Simple, Non-Bureaucratic Proposal Toward Re-establishing Unity in the LCMS for the Sake of Mission and Mercy

"Bureaucracy is the art of getting nothing done . . . very slowly."

It is possible to unify 85% of the Synod in doctrine, practice and mission, I'm convinced. There is certainly much to be said for advocating civility and charity, and for following the procedures of Matthew 18. I, for one, have not always done this and do regret it. Yet I have also rejoiced to be forgiven by the very ones I've wronged. But our fundamental problem is not, I believe, so much ethical as it is spiritual. Luther famously stated, *"Doctrine and life must be distinguished. Life is bad among us, as it is among the papists, but we don't fight about life and condemn the papists on that account."*¹³ No one group in the Synod has moral hegemony or superiority. We are all pure sinners, in need of pure grace. Our fundamental problem is unbelief. We do not believe the Word of God actually can and does unite us. Only if we are united by the Word of God can we begin the long journey of becoming the community of faith and love we so desire to be.

For some time I have thought about the parallels between the period from Luther's death to the Formula of Concord (1547–77) and our own great struggle for unity after the near death of Concordia Seminary with the Walk-Out in 1974 (1974-present). The upheaval of the loss of Luther as the theological leader threw the leadership to Philip Melancthon who vacillated on almost every possible issue, particularly the issue of the presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament. Controversy after controversy raged among the Lutherans. They involved issues of public worship, liturgy, compromise with the civil government, the Christian life, justification, sanctification, and others. Melancthon died in 1560, but his students continued their program, often concealing their views, while doing their level best to move the church into a more moderate position over against the issues of the day, particularly with respect to Calvinism, the Lord's Supper, church fellowship, etc. The chief antagonist was Matthias Flacius who more than matched Philip's authority with his brilliance and sheer tenacity. The controversy included loads of ethically questionable practices, clandestine meetings, and anonymous and pseudonymous documents published against opponents. (Flacius wrote under many pseudonyms, including "Peter Pan.") Flacius died in 1570. Though friends (like Moerlin and Chemnitz) had tried while Flacius and Melancthon were still alive, no reconciliation between

the men for the sake of unity in the church was ever achieved. The doctrinal issues were too heavily mixed with personal antagonisms, sad to say.

Today the leading protagonists and antagonists of the Seminex era are passing rather quickly. Yet divisions rooted in that era remain with us. For many, the emotional pain lays just beneath the surface. We have pastors and thus laity in one and the same church who have been taught and have for decades practice contradictory and diametrically opposing positions on various matters, particularly doctrinal matters having to do with church practice, communion practice for example. I have verily wept while personally witnessing leaders in our church commune where an ELCA female bishop was co-presiding—and this after my personal and face to face plea not to do so. I have been overcome with sadness hearing a church leader assert that the Reformed have the Lord's Supper—in the face of my references to the contrary teaching of our public confession in the Formula of Concord; 14 or another assert that women should be ordained to the ministry. These are otherwise well-meaning, mission-minded folks who truly want the best for the church and truly believe they are acting in her best interests. Such disagreements only drive each side to recalcitrant and entrenched positions, often as unreasonable as they are unbiblical.

As the 1970s mercifully ebbed, the 1980s and 90s might have opened the door for a new level of internal unity in the Synod, but unfortunately, on top of old challenges, came the Church Growth Movement and the new challenge of the turning away from traditional liturgy and hymnody. It is possible to unify 85% of the Synod in doctrine, practice and mission, I'm convinced. No one group in the Synod has moral hegemony or superiority. We are all pure sinners, in need of pure grace. Our fundamental problem is unbelief. We do not believe the Word of God actually can and does unite us. We have had two locomotives powerfully moving on the tracks in opposite directions, pulling on the same freight train, and if the train has not already snapped, it is close to doing so.

While a very strong and increasingly sophisticated contemporary worship movement has gained a very significant following in the LCMS, at the same time there has been a concurrent liturgical revival. My own preference (I believe based on the parameters of the Book of Concord) is for the use of the pattern and parts of the liturgy and for the use of the hymnal. But I do clearly recognize that each side's move to the next level of flight to or from "traditional" practices has only seemed to drive the other side further away in reaction. What to do?

Let's Vote?

Let's vote our way out of it! Well, that's what we did in the battle for the Bible in the 1970s, for better or worse. But often, I fear, it has been for the worse, though the church did come out at the right place on what the Bible is. The problem is, majority votes don't change hearts; much less do they reconcile. Other approaches have been tried in recent years, including the most recently resolved effort to have members of the Board of Directors and the Council of

Presidents lead the effort to deal with the tough issues. I wish it well. With all due respect, however, I don't expect much to be gained, and I've yet to speak to any one else who honestly does either. One problem with this approach is that it is located within a realm perceived to be politically charged and strongly affected by and subject to the influence and use of power. That does not mean the attempt should not be made, and precisely there. It does mean, however, that any expectations for significant, nonpolitically-influenced processes and outcomes must remain very low. And so far, I've heard little to nothing of the involvement of the seminaries.

And Now for Something Completely Different

How about something completely different? How about following the pattern used to produce the Formula of Concord, which brought unity to hopelessly divided Lutherans after Luther's death (1546)? The situation then was just as controverted and confused, if not much more, than what we currently face. There were liberals, moderates, and conservatives. There were folks who concealed their real views by duplicitous language. There were conservative hardheads and hotheads who refused to sign on to the Formula of Concord because Melancthon was not condemned by name along with his errors. There were attempts at compromise statements which didn't gain a following sufficient for unity. There were leaders who represented different constituencies. Some had been closer to Melancthon but also realized he had made serious theological mistakes.

There were two distinct attempts at unity—1568–72 and 1573–77. The first attempt was spearheaded by Jacob Andreae. Andreae noted that the continued squabbling over doctrine was deeply corrosive to the church, convincing many that even the possibility of doctrine and doctrinal unity was only a mirage. Such controversy, Andreae recognized, made people indifferent to doctrine. He believed that peace in the church was most vital so that the church could give a unified witness to the world over against its opponents. Yet he suggested following a model similar to one used to obtain political peace, and was convinced that “therefore peace is primarily a problem of organization [i.e. structure!].” But his approach failed. He “beat around the bush” and “left most of the basic problems unresolved.”¹⁵

The second attempt succeeded when, under the influence of Martin Chemnitz, points of controversy were set out not only in positive terms (theses) but also in negative terms (antitheses)— that is, the clear rejection of errors.¹⁶ Chemnitz was part of “a rising opposition to Andreae's efforts in behalf of concord at that time, and led to an outright rejection of any unification “based on generalities.”¹⁷ While Andreae, proceeding politically, was “very sensitive about any kind of criticism” of his work,¹⁸ Chemnitz by contrast, invited extensive discussion with and between those who disagreed, although “in a certain sense he was more intolerant. [Yet] he never dictated! Instead, he discussed until the disputed points were so clear that either his opponents could agree with him or they at least had to respect his judgment.”¹⁹

So the Formula of Concord proceeds like this (for instance, on the Lord's Supper):

Status of the Controversy: The question is, In the Holy Communion are the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ truly and essentially present if they are distributed with the bread and the wine and if they are received orally by all those who use the sacrament, be they worthy or unworthy, godly or godless, believers or unbelievers, the believers for life and salvation, the unbelievers for judgment? The Sacramentarians say No; we say Yes (Formula of Concord, Epitome VII, 2).²⁰

Affirmative Statements: 1. We believe, teach, and confess that in the Holy Supper the body and blood of Christ are truly and essentially present and are truly distributed and received with the bread and wine. 2. We believe, teach, and confess that the words of the testament of Christ are to be understood in no other way than in their literal sense, and not as though the bread symbolized the absent body and the wine the absent blood of Christ, but that because of the sacramental union they are truly the body and blood of Christ (Formula of Concord, Epitome VII, 6–7).²¹

Negative Statement: [We reject] 5. That in the holy sacrament the body of Christ is not received orally with the bread, but that with the mouth we receive only bread and wine and that we receive the body of Christ only spiritually by faith (Formula of Concord, Epitome XII, 26).²²

It wasn't until all sides agreed to proceed in this manner with each controverted issue that real agreement could be forged. It was an approach both doctrinal and honest about real differences. And this is how we must proceed to deal with the matters which beset us now. It is time for us to move beyond political efforts and especially "generalities." It is time to stop "beating around the bush." It is time for a serious, decade-long effort—a non-politically organized and driven effort to regain theological and practical unity in the Synod.²³ This route is the hard route. It will take time and effort. It will take courage. It will take men and women of integrity. It will also result in a Synod 85% united and on the path to even greater unity, precisely at a moment when such unity is needed like never before—so that we can cease the incessant, internal wrangling, and take advantage of the open doors which the Lord is holding before us. The Lord's mission of the Gospel will advance toward eternity, despite us. He'll get it done with or without us. If we turn from that sacred mission, he will raise up others to accomplish it. Will we be part of it?

How Did Missouri Avoid Political Parties in the Past?

*"The more you observe politics, the more you've got to admit that each party is worse than the other."*²⁴

Unity existed in the Synod for decades despite enormous challenges. How was it established and maintained? How did the Synod for almost a century avoid "political parties"? President Friedrich Pfotenhauer tells us in a Synod address from 1923:

Our Confessions, therefore declare: "We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with all teachers should be estimated and

judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written Psalm 119:105: 'Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path,' and St. Paul: 'Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed,' Galatians 1:8" [Formula of Concord, Epitome, Summary Rule and Norm; Triglotta, 777].

Hence, if a church-body wishes to be preserved from party spirit or be cured of this malady when it has broken out, the only remedy is diligent study of God's Word. The Word of God has the property of unifying and preserving in unity.

Those who say that doctrines should not be discussed in order to avoid divisions within the church do not know what they are talking about. Luther writes in the Smalcald Articles:

"Therefore the church can never be better governed and preserved than if we all live under one head, Christ, and all the bishops, equal in office (although they be unequal in gifts), be diligently joined in unity of doctrine, faith, Sacraments, prayer and works of love" [Smalcald Article II/IV, 9; Triglotta, 473].

Our Synod has so far been preserved from party spirit. Although its members are scattered over distant lands and differ much as to conditions and manner of living and external interests, still there are no different tendencies, no divisions, among us despite our many frailties and weaknesses. **It would be unheard of within our Synod to speak of a liberal party in opposition to a conservative party.** We are all joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. One and the same spirit prevails in all our district conventions and in all our educational institutions. That such is the case we owe not to ourselves, but to the Word of God, which has been diligently preached and studied in our midst ever since the organization of our Synod and is still preached and studied in our churches and schools, at our conferences and synodical meetings. In our midst the Word of God has revealed its power to create and preserve unity. **On the one hand, in divine matters, it permitted no other voice than that of Jesus to gain authority among us; on the other hand, it prevented the adiaphora from becoming so prominent as to estrange and to divide us inwardly, so that they were decided, often after a spirited debate, either by the 10**
It is time for a serious, decade-long effort—a non-politically organized and driven effort to regain theological and practical unity in the Synod. minority's submitting to the majority or by the majority's yielding to the minority when that was demanded by charity.

May the faithful God restrain and ward off from us all doctrinal indifference which seeks to insinuate itself into our midst, so that we may confess with the fathers of our Synod: "Thy testimonies are my counselors." Then we shall continue peacefully in one mind in spite of the fury of the devil, the world, and our flesh; we shall prove ourselves a salt in this unionistic age and be able to do the great work of the church in a God-pleasing manner. To this end may the Lord bless our present convention!

Let our prayer be the closing sigh of the authors of the Formula of Concord: “May Almighty God and the Father of our Lord Jesus grant the grace of His Holy Ghost that we all may be one in Him and constantly abide in this Christian unity, which is well-pleasing to Him! Amen” [Formula of Concord, Epitome XI, 23; Triglotta, 837].²⁵

How the mighty are fallen! Pfothauer’s description of what once was is incredibly moving, but also reason for hope and courage at what can be now. Human nature was the same in 1847 or 1923 as it is in 2008. But more importantly, the Word of God is the same: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). The Synod remained united by diligent study of the Word of God. Where the Word of God is, there are nothing but new possibilities. “Why even try! Those people will never get it!” Such a statement is tantamount to saying, “I don’t believe the Word of God is what it is, and does what it says it does.” **We must finally admit that going the route of political coercion to secure Synod unity has failed, is failing, and will always fail. Our only hope is repentance, and then looking to the Word of God.**

The Koinonia Project—Bringing Unity to Synod

I have thought for some years that the way forward would be to bring together respected and capable people representing various constituencies and viewpoints. There are a number of ways such people could be gathered, and I will not bore you with specifics here, but it can be done nonpolitically. Seminary representation will be very important because both of our seminaries remain the most broadly respected institutions in the Synod, and diverse viewpoints on issues that trouble us are also represented to some extent within our faculties. The group (or groups, since a number of local efforts were the prerequisite for the great result of the Formula of Concord) would have to be of modest size, perhaps a dozen or so. Those present would have to be highly regarded by individuals sharing their general viewpoints, and known by the Synod at large to be principled, but also pious and reasonable. In fact, given the current status of things, it might even be best if this group were to form of its own accord, and thus without the accusation or even suspicion of machination. The seminaries, which have been virtually absent from decision-making tables in the LCMS for decades, might find this a unique area where they could facilitate the dialogue. These people would meet perhaps every quarter in a secluded venue. The meeting would begin with worship. There would be a commitment to a level of discretion agreeable to the group. One meeting a year might last a week and occur in a place which would allow the participants to form relationships, friendships, and levels of accountability. I’ve admired the LCMS Council of Presidents’ ability to keep difficult matters as matters discussed “in house.” I’ve often noted the great reluctance of any member of the Council to speak anything ill of another member, though there be strong disagreement. When we know we will face and be held accountable to those of whom we speak, it raises the level of discussion to

substantial matters and diminishes “spouting off” (of which we are all capable and often guilty). District groups could mirror the national effort, and work on specific theological problems.

The goal of the first year would be simply to identify the issues that trouble—to begin to formulate the “status of the controversy.” The dialogue must agree that there are two texts which must be dominant in dealing with the issues: the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions, in that order. Given the near confessional authority granted several writings of Luther by the Lutheran Confessions, and the official status of some of C. F. W. Walther’s writings in the Missouri Synod, these documents would also have to be dealt with. Admittedly, the even more fundamental question of what any biblical or confessional text can mean in this post-modern world, would have to be met head-on. The goal would be to draw as many as would listen and learn into the discussion toward concord via articles and Bible studies, at times stressing this or that viewpoint, but working toward honesty and finally unity.

The second year would simply be devoted to formulating the “affirmatives” and the “negatives.” What in fact can be, and actually is affirmed and or rejected by all, or nearly all parties at the table? As the affirmations and the status of the controversy (points at issue) are identified, so also then the points of disagreement will become all the clearer. A yearly report (via an inexpensive, Web-based delivery) would present to the Synod the progress of the dialogue for critique. The national effort could seek input from local efforts and find the best work on the local level. The goal would simply be to come to a point of doctrinal agreement which is God-pleasing and sufficient for both God-pleasing Christian freedom and also God-pleasing uniformity of doctrine and practice: **Unity in and for Mission**. I would not call the new document a formal confession, much less desire to put it on the level of the Confessions of the Book of Concord, or even give it the status of other quasi-confessional documents in the history of our Synod. It would simply be a document which would describe the unity we have already expressed in the Bible and Book of Concord and how we shall affirm that unity by the way we live together in love and mutual support.

This will take time. The Formula of Concord was not produced overnight, but its blessings have endured for centuries. We must have the same foresight. Christ may return tomorrow, and we must strive to live, work and proclaim the Gospel as if we knew that were the case. But he may not return for 500 years! Our forefathers laid the groundwork carefully for a unity in the Synod which only began seriously slipping away about a century after the Synod was founded.

Missouri at Her Best Is Doctrinally Missional and Missionally Doctrinal

Walther beheld the chaos of St. Louis in 1847 and thought the end of the world was imminent too. Do we seriously think our times are unique in history such that we could minimize the New Testament’s mandate for doctrinal fidelity for the sake of mission? “But eighty souls are dying every second and headed to hell!” In 1849, there was a cholera epidemic in St. Louis, and some 8,000 out of 64,000 residents died! There were as many as 200 funerals a day at times! The genius of Luther and Walther was exactly that of St. Paul, and Jesus for that matter. There is no

acceptable sliding scale between “missional flexibility” and “doctrinal rigidity.” **“Going** therefore, **MAKE DISCIPLES** of all nations by **baptizing . . . and teaching** them to observe all things . . .” (Mt. 28:19). Faithful Lutheran doctrine is missional, and true Lutheran mission is doctrinal. I often hear our LCMS fathers and their times described in wholly inaccurate and superficial ways. Their life and times are portrayed as far less complex and confusing than our own, so they could afford to be more concerned about doctrine. They allegedly did not need to be so concerned about the salvation of souls as we have to be. They could afford to be sticklers about Lutheran particulars. While this argument sounds enticing, it is not only false and demonstrates a complete lack of knowledge of both what our LCMS fathers actually said and did within the context in which they lived, embracing this argument is also the sure guarantee of a perpetually weak and divided LCMS today. Walther kept “pure doctrine” and “mission” together—the former precisely for the sake of the latter. When these two began spinning apart in the 1960s, the Synod began (and continues) its precipitous decline in both membership and the number of career/ordained missionaries. The prescription for separating doctrine and mission has wholly failed the LCMS over the past forty years. The church actually grew and grew steadily while it maintained doctrinal unity and clarity of confession. Just listen to Dr. Walther’s genius on this issue! At the founding of the Synodical Conference in 1872, he preached on the importance of both doctrine and mission zeal:

As you know, my brethren, it is a common saying in our time that the continual urging of doctrine is a most pernicious tendency, only hindering, yea, destroying the kingdom of God. People say: “Instead of disputing so much about the doctrine, you ought rather to think of taking care of the souls and of leading them to Christ.”

But all who speak this way certainly do not know what they say and what they do. As it would be folly to chide the tiller of the ground for his diligence to obtain good seed, and to demand that he should be eager only to obtain good fruit, so it would be folly to chide those that take heed unto the doctrine above all things, and to demand of them that they should rather endeavor only to save souls. For as the tiller of the ground must be eager to obtain good seed above all things, if he wishes to reap good fruit, so must the church care for sound doctrine above all things, if she wishes to save souls. . . . Oh, how important it is, therefore, my brethren, that we make the salvation of souls above all things the chief object of our joint labor of the kingdom of Christ! Then it will be impossible but that we “keep a close watch on the doctrine,” and we will thus be kept from ever violating our faithfulness toward the Word of God.²⁶

If I Tighten Up, Will You Lighten Up?

The perpetual challenge we seem to have with today’s divisions in the church is not new. It has been greatly exacerbated by challenges in recent decades, to be sure, but the basic tendencies and divisions between “open mindedness” and “rigidity” are perennial. There is a real problem with being only “doctrinal” and finding a new or old heresy under every bush whenever anyone tries something a bit creative. How easily “doctrinal concern” can become an excuse for lack of

zeal for mission! Let's admit it! It's all too easy to blast away at anything creative or new, as an excuse for our own failing. President Schwan, the fourth president of the Synod, already long ago spoke of this challenge of avoiding both "faddishness" and "sluggishness." He could have spoken it yesterday:

Does the circumspection, the wisdom, the redeeming of time to which he [St. Paul] exhorts us perhaps consist in this: that we in word and deed avoid each and every thing that is not timely, that does not agree with the spirit of the times, even though in every other respect it be ever so correct, wholesome, and necessary? Are we here perhaps told always to go with the times in such manner that we never need swim upstream? Many seem to think so. **There is always an unthinking group which permits itself to be blown to and fro by all kinds of doctrinal winds as a feather is blown about by air currents. This group always falls all over itself adopting innovations, as though the most modern were always the best. . . . There are also the religious politicians, great and small, who never ask, "What is true?" or "What does Scripture say?" but only ask, "What is up-to-date?" "What will bring results?" . . .** All of these from time immemorial appealed to the words of Paul just quoted. If you confront them with their disgraceful temporizing, they answer, "Indeed!

Does not St. Paul himself say, 'make the best use of the time'" [Eph. 5:16]? **But these words of Paul are misunderstood, or better yet, misused by another group whose number is equally large. They live in the past and are really satisfied only with that which is past and gone. They do nothing but praise the "good old days." They have convinced themselves that the present generation is absolutely worthless, and, therefore, they stand idly by with resentful hearts, letting everything take its own course.**

We can neither live in the past nor flow freely with the times. Schwan holds forth a third way, while admonishing both parties.

Let us not consider it too unimportant, even in temporal things, so far as conscience permits, carefully to avoid everything that might disturb the unity of the whole. But let us now also beware of immediately seeing signs of a discordant spirit in every harmless endeavor, in every difference of opinion, or in every harmless departure from established custom. That would really make the situation bad!²⁷

Amen and Amen! If I tighten up, will you lighten up, so that all of us can live together in this fellowship we love? Can we agree on the reasonable parameters of our life together and then get to work "to seek and save the lost" without distractions?

Are Mission and Structure the Answer to Unity?

The institution (in part, for very noble reasons!) will be prone to hold up mission and structure as the keys to unity. Actually, the key to unity is agreement in teaching and on the reasonable freedoms and limits in practice, for the sake of local mission and ministry. Under the Word of

God, we can and must find the “sweet spot” (“neither faddishness or sluggishness”) where we can live together in unity in Christ. Where that is the case, we shall find that solutions to our problems of mission, money, and structure will open before our eyes. Our fathers in the faith knew this. Only the Word of God will “elevate spiritual life” among us. President Pfothenauer, who was himself a zealous and effective mission pastor on the prairies of Minnesota, the Dakotas, and into Canada, and who himself presided over great growth in our Synod, said:

First, we must guard against trying to elevate this spiritual life with means that cannot accomplish what we seek. An attempt has been made to elevate spiritual life in the home congregation while rousing the church to missions and directing her sight to the misery of the churchless and especially the poor non-Christians. To be sure, the work of mission is a glorious and invaluable thing. But to speak and act as though it were through participation in the work of mission that the Word of God must be made living and powerful is simply wrong. To forsake at home the confession of the external Word and the heavenly doctrine while rambling afar in the opinion that the church must be saved and enlivened with mission is Schwarmgeisterei. Another confusion was that of the Pietists. In order to elevate spiritual life, they taught that spirit and life flowed out of our personal life of sanctification. The more holy a person, the more spirit. But we can't produce spiritual life. We live from that which God gives. When spirit and life are made dependent upon our work, from this false doctrine all of God's Word and action are devoured and nullified. It is a wretched experience that the pietistic compulsion toward works and toward a method of sanctification devalued God's Word, pure doctrine, truth, and the Gospel, and instead opened door after door to an indifference to doctrine.

Others would heal Joseph's wounds with tighter church governance. They say, if our Presidents, visitors, and commissions had more authority, if they could proscribe things to congregations and the congregations had to obey, then life would be brought to these dead bones. Without question, if such a yoke were laid upon the necks of the children, many external works would be produced. Indeed, it wouldn't even be that difficult to get the money to begin flowing. But that would in no way elevate spiritual life. In fact, it would suffer a terrible retrogression.

The Gospel tolerates no hierarchy. Where hierarchical thoughts hold sway, we recognize the papacy, in which the hierarchical idea has been followed to its logical conclusion. . . . Indeed, today everyone thinks he can help the church somehow! Music, liturgics, all sorts of things are proposed as medicine for young and old.

When it comes to the elevation of spiritual life in our midst, let us therefore, dear brothers, completely forsake the above mentioned means and steadfastly maintain that the Word of God alone can elevate spiritual life. This is taught with absolute clarity by the Word of God. Our Savior says, “The words which I speak to you are the Spirit and life” (John 6:63).²⁸

Structure Is Not Our Fundamental Problem

“No more good should be attempted than the Synod can bear.” 29

Ideally, during any proposed period of dialogue, the Synod would have a moratorium on significant constitutional change. Structure is not our fundamental problem. Our fundamental problem is one of repentance and lack of faith in the power of the Word to unite even us. Because we cannot hear God’s Word, we cannot hear one another.

We must first repent, listen to the Word of God, and then begin listening to each other. I recall Bill Hoesman (President of the Michigan District) once preaching that when we refuse to listen to our brother or sister, we refuse to listen to Christ, who speaks his Word to us through others. Bonhoeffer puts it in a profound way:

The first service one owes to others in the community involves listening to them. Just as our love for God begins with listening to God’s Word, the beginning of love for other Christians is learning to listen to them . . . **But Christians who can no longer listen to one another will soon no longer be listening to God either; they will always be talking even in the presence of God. The death of the spiritual life starts here, and in the end there is nothing left but empty spiritual chatter and clerical condescension which chokes on pious words. Those who cannot listen long and patiently will always be talking past others, and finally no longer will even notice it.** Those who think their time is too precious to spend listening will never really have time for God and others, but only for themselves and for their own words and plans.³⁰

Until we have listened to God, and heard one another, we should also refrain from new positions on old, contentious matters. Some will argue: “Well then! The Synod would be at a standstill, not able to move forward effectively in mission!” I beg to differ. If we fail to stop and listen to God and to each other, what Paul prophesied would (and did) happen to a certain boat on the Mediterranean will surely happen to the good ship Missouri: “Paul advised them, saying, ‘Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.’ But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said” (Acts 27:9–12). The aggravation that has been and will continue to be caused by continued change only exacerbates the divisions, decreases the trust, joy, and participation of congregations in our synodical life, and, most sadly, closes ears. Bylaw and constitutional matters should come to the floor of the convention only if they have been previously recognized across the broad spectrum as non-political, and not given to exacerbate an already tense situation. And once on the floor they should be adopted only by a minimum 85% approval. If “the gates of hell shall not prevail against [the church]” then holding off on a few constitution and bylaw changes of the Missouri Synod probably won’t hold her up much, either.

The Word Can Bring Us Together Again

These are a few of my thoughts about the real problems we face. The Synod will never be united by political means. But we have the Word of God, and that Word unites. The Word can bring us together, again. I am rather hopeful, in an ironic sort of way. I think that across the board in Synod, folks are coming to the realization that we have something very precious, and that it is steadily slipping away from us. It's time for us to heed the first of Luther's 95 Theses, and the first public words out of Jesus' mouth: "Repent." None of us shall make this Synod into his or her own image. None of us is going to coerce unity out of her, and certainly not by any structural remedies. (Although the bylaws do present some problems, they are mostly to the extent that they were formed in this period of deep political struggle). As we all (beginning with me!) recognize our great guilt, our many sins, our horrible failure to treasure the gift given us in the LCMS; as we all, through repentance, begin again to long for the unity which is wrought by the Gospel—perhaps such a realization will cause us to seek out and treasure the kind of unity, for the sake of the mission of the Gospel, spoken of by Friedrich Wyneken, our Synod's second president. He preached these words when the Synod divided itself into four separate districts in 1855:

Then why, beloved brothers, do we stand by each other? Why can't we leave one another? It is because we cannot let go of the one truth, which we, in fellowship with all the saints, have acknowledged, do believe and confess, as it is in the confessions of the Lutheran Church. These confessions bear witness to the truth clearly, plainly, and powerfully on the basis of the Holy Scriptures, against all the desires of Satan, to the whole world.

And why do we hold so firmly to our confession, that we happily endure the hatred of the world and also of the rest of Christianity, which is difficult to bear? Why, with God's help and grace, would we suffer persecution and death before we would give up even a small part of that confession? **We do so because we have come to make the truth set forth in that confession our own, not in times of good leisure and rest, like we might appropriate other natural or historical truths. The Holy Spirit has revealed this truth to us in the midst of the burdens of troubled consciences, as our only salvation.** The Spirit has through the Word borne witness to the truth in broken and troubled hearts. Our consciences are bound to the Word, and therefore to the confession of the church. As poor, forlorn, and condemned men, we have learned to believe in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. **The peace of conscience, the peace of our souls, the hope of eternal blessedness, our very being and life, hang on this truth. To surrender it would be to surrender our salvation and ourselves for time and eternity.**

Therefore neither can we let go of the most insignificant portion of the confession, because the entire series of the individual teachings of the faith are for us one chain. This chain not only binds our understanding in the truth, it binds our consciences and lives. The loss of an individual part of the same would break this chain, and we would be torn loose from Christ,

tumbling again into the abyss of anxiety, doubt and eternal death. **Therefore we hold fast to our confession, as to our very life. 31**

Mission and Mercy: It's Time!

"The Peacemaking meeting scheduled for today has been canceled due to a conflict." 32

Our fathers in the faith appreciated what they had because they realized what they might lose. Do we? Take me to task. Disagree. Come up with something better.

Call me crazy, but I'm actually rather optimistic. The church will live on, hidden under the cross (tectum sub cruce), come what may. But let's dare to try something different! It's time for the Missouri Synod to be missionally doctrinal and doctrinally missional. And I think the vast majority—perhaps even a good 90%—of the Synod would agree. It's time to come together and get to work.

Would that we were as concerned to keep the ship's crew together as a man named Paul once was on a rough journey at sea. "And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, 'Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved'" (Acts 27:30).

It's time for us to be united in doctrine and mission, doctrine for mission in order "to seek and save the lost." **It's time to be about mission and mercy.** It is time to tend the fellowship (koinonia) we have been given in Christ, and to care for one another. Christ is with us, and the world is before us. It's time to face the real problem and to address it once and for all. "Let's go!" (Mark 1:38). It's time!

"Hence it is up to you to dare something in this matter, since you see that time and the Word of God demand this." 33 Martin Luther

"Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time . . ."
." Ephesians 5:16

APPENDIX

Insights from M. Scott Peck on Community Building & the LCMS (Is the LCMS a Pseudo-Community?)

WARNING: STRONG SOCIOLOGICAL CONTENT

MERELY FOLLOWING THE PROCESS which produced the Formula of Concord probably won't get us too far, absent a little sanctified sociology. M. Scott Peck, the author of *The Road Less Traveled*, has also written extensively on the topic of community and community building,

based on years of experience working with people and organizations. While there are significant aspects of his writing that I do not find particularly helpful and with which I disagree, he makes some very compelling observations on the sociology and pathologies of unhealthy communities and what it takes to change them. The LCMS, for all its great strengths and blessings, is in many respects an unhealthy community, and has been for decades. Unhealthy groups, Peck argues, generally find themselves in one of several stages of dysfunction. Peck's analysis largely applies, I'm convinced, to the LCMS.

Let me just state up front, that like the community Paul addressed in Corinth, we are in fact the body of Christ, despite our warts. The church is "hidden under the cross" also in the LCMS. **And despite all her weaknesses, the LCMS is still the best thing going.** But by the grace of God, we can do much better at living this fellowship we have in Christ.

Stage 1: Pseudo-Community

"Honesty is the most important trait in life. If you can fake that, you have it made." 34

"The first response of a group in seeking to form a community is most often to try to fake it. The members attempt to be an instant community by being extremely pleasant with one another and avoiding all disagreement. This attempt—this pretense of community—is what I term 'pseudo-community.' It never works."35 "Pseudo-community is conflict-avoiding; true community is conflict-resolving." 36 "What is diagnostic of pseudo-community is the minimization, the lack of acknowledgement, or the ignoring of individual differences. Nice people are so accustomed to being well-mannered that they are able to deploy their good manners without even thinking about what they are doing. In pseudo-community it is as if every individual member is operating according to the same book of etiquette. The rules of this book are: Don't do or say anything that might offend someone else; if someone does or says something that offends, annoys, or irritates you, act as if nothing has happened and pretend you are not bothered in the least; and if some form of disagreement should show signs of appearing, change the subject as quickly and smoothly as possible—rules that any good hostess knows. It is easy to see how these rules make for a smoothly functioning group. But they also crush individuality, intimacy, and honesty, and the longer it lasts, the duller it gets."

"The basic pretense of pseudo-community is the denial of individual differences. The members pretend—act as if—they all have the same belief. . . . One of the characteristics of pseudo-community is that people tend to speak in generalities."37 "Once individual differences are not only allowed but encouraged to surface in some such way, the group almost immediately moves to the second stage of community development: chaos."38

Stage 2: Chaos

“We started off trying to set up a small anarchist community, but people wouldn’t follow the rules.” 39

“The chaos always centers around well-intentioned but misguided attempts to heal and convert.”⁴⁰ “By and large, people resist change. So the healers and converters try harder to heal or convert, until finally their victims get their backs up and start trying to heal the healers and convert the converters. It is indeed chaos. Chaos is not just a state, it is an essential part of the process of community development. Consequently, unlike pseudo-community, it does not simply go away as soon as the group becomes aware of it. After a period of chaos, when I remark, ‘We don’t seem to be doing very well at community, do we?’ someone will reply, ‘No, and it’s because of this.’ ‘No, it’s because of that,’ someone else will say. And so we are off again. In the stage of chaos individual differences are, unlike those in pseudo-community, right out in the open. Only now, instead of trying to hide or ignore them, the group is attempting to obliterate them. Underlying the attempts to heal and convert is not so much the motive of love as the motive to make everyone normal—and the motive to win, as the members fight over whose norm might prevail.”⁴¹ [This precisely describes life at the national intersection of the LCMS.]

“Frequently, fully developed communities will be required to fight and struggle. Only they have learned to do so effectively. The struggle during chaos is chaotic. It is not merely noisy, it is uncreative, unconstructive. The disagreement that arises from time to time in a genuine community is loving and respectful and usually remarkably quiet—even peaceful—as the members work hard to listen to each other. . . . Not so in chaos. If anything, chaos, like pseudo-community, is boring, as the members continually swat at each other to little or no effect. It has no grace or rhythm. Indeed, the predominant feeling an observer is likely to have in response to a group in the chaotic stage of development is despair. The struggle is going nowhere, accomplishing nothing. It is no fun.”

“Since chaos is unpleasant, it is common for the members of a group in this stage to attack not only each other but also their leader. ‘We wouldn’t be squabbling like this if we had effective leadership,’ they will say. . . . In some sense they are quite correct; their chaos is a natural response to a relative lack of direction. The chaos could easily be circumvented by an authoritarian leader who assigned them specific tasks and goals. The only problem is that a group led by [such a figure] is not, and never can be, a community. . . . In response to this perceived vacuum of leadership during the chaotic stage of community development, it is common for one or more members of the group to attempt to replace the designated leader. . . .”⁴²

Then, says Peck, what is proposed, “one way or another, is virtually always an ‘escape into organization.’ [Note the non-stop, decades-long attempts; note all the special task forces on structure which have proposed this or that constitutional and bylaw change.] It is true that organizing is a solution to chaos . . . But an organization is able to nurture a measure of

community within itself only to the extent that it is willing to risk or tolerate a certain lack of structure. As long as the goal is community-building, organization as an attempted solution to chaos is an unworkable solution.”⁴³

“The proper resolution of chaos is not easy. Because it is both unproductive and unpleasant, it may seem that the group has degenerated from pseudo-community into chaos. But chaos is not necessarily the worst place for a group to be. Several years ago I had the opportunity to consult briefly with a large church that was in chaos. A few years before, the congregation had chosen a dynamic new minister to lead it. His style of leadership turned out to be even more assertive than they had bargained for. By the time I visited, over a third of the congregation had been deeply alienated by this style, but the majority was delighted with it. The disagreement was quite vocal, and the membership was in real pain over the schism. Yet in their outspokenness, their open suffering, and their commitment to hang in there as they struggled with each other I sensed a great deal of vitality. I was hardly able to suggest any immediate solution. . . . ‘Your chaos,’ I explained to them, ‘is preferable to pseudo-community. You are not a healthy community, but you are able to confront the issues openly. Fighting is far better than pretending you are not divided. It’s painful, but it’s a beginning. You are aware that you need to move beyond your warring factions, and that’s infinitely more hopeful than if you felt you didn’t need to move at all.’”⁴⁴

Stage 3: Emptiness

“I feel so miserable without you, it’s almost like having you here.” ⁴⁵

“‘There are only two ways out of chaos,’ I will explain to a group after it has spent a sufficient period of time squabbling and getting nowhere. ‘One is into organization—but organization is never community. The other way is into and through emptiness.’”⁴⁶ “More often than not the group will simply ignore me and go on squabbling. Then after another while I will say, ‘I suggested to you that the only way from chaos to community is into and through emptiness. But apparently you were not terribly interested in my suggestion.’ More squabbling, but finally a member will ask with a note of annoyance, ‘Well, what is this emptiness stuff anyway?’ . . . Emptiness is the hard part. It is also the most crucial stage of community development. It is the bridge between chaos and community. When the members of a group finally ask me to explain what I mean by emptiness, I tell them simply that they need to empty themselves of barriers to communication. And I am able to use their behavior during chaos to point out to them specific things— feelings, assumptions, ideas, and motives—that have so filled their minds as to make them impervious as billiard balls. . . .”⁴⁷

Peck asserts that among those things which members of an unhealthy community need to “empty themselves,” are:

Expectations and Preconceptions—“false expectations of what the experience will be like.” “We . . . try to make the experience [of talking to each other] conform to our

expectations. . . . Until such time as we can empty ourselves of expectations and stop trying to fit others and our relationships with them into a preconceived mold, we cannot really listen, hear, or experience.” [Thus: ‘They will never change.’ Or, ‘We will never have unity in the LCMS on this or that issue.’]

Prejudices—which takes time! [Very often have we not simply pre-judged that “they” can’t and won’t hear the Word of God? We have done this for so long that we cannot listen to, or even hear each other.]

The Need to Control—“I am constantly tempted to do things—manipulations or maneuvers—that will ensure the desired outcome. But the desired outcome—community—cannot be achieved by an authoritarian leader who calls the shots. It must be a creation of the group as a whole. . . . The need for control—to ensure the desired outcome—is at least partially rooted in the fear of failure.”⁴⁸

Peck’s analysis of the impediments to the building of a healthy community are remarkably applicable to the LCMS, and at several levels. This is simply good sociology (a good, created gift of God when used in subjection to the Word of God).

Bob Kuhn once told me just after an LCMS convention, “Enjoy this year because the second year after the convention will be much worse, and the year before the next convention is always terrible.” Why? The LCMS pseudo-community mode of polite avoidance of the real and troubling issues predominates the institutional life of the Synod, while hardball politicking pervades the “back room” life of the institution. What Peck describes as “chaos” peaks, leading up to and through the LCMS convention. The “opposition” complains to high heaven about increased “powers” of the Synod president and bureaucracy, only to run right to “organization” (the “bylaws”) to maintain control and bring about “unity,” or rather, “pseudo-unity” if elected. Then the process repeats itself. But after a half century it has become intolerably “boring” and unhealthy. It’s never going to unite. Many (on opposite sides of issues) have fallen into “despair” regarding the “Synod.” Perhaps we are inching forward to the point of recognizing that this perennial/ triennial vacillation between pseudo-community and chaos is as futile as it is unhealthy.

The road to what Peck calls “emptiness” will only come with repentance. And community among us will only be healthy, will only reflect the true “koinonia” (which is a gift, and ours despite ourselves), when it reflects the community of Acts 2:42, “And they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the fellowship [community], the breaking of bread, and the prayers.”

Kyrie eleison . . .

NOTES

1 I contemplated this metaphor for the church after Leonard Sweet made effective reference to it at the recent LCMS Theological Convocation sponsored by the CTCR.

1 Mardy Grothe, *Oxymoronica: Paradoxical Wisdom and Wit from History’s Greatest Wordsmiths* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2004), 161. I’ve thrown in a few oxymorons in this paper (which deals with a

serious subject), but I believe we could all use a little humor along the way. I certainly don't mean to offend anyone. I just believe we can all benefit from taking ourselves a little less seriously.

2 The Lutheran Annual (2008) notes on page 758 that in 1976 the national Synod's budget (that is, dollars given via districts to the national office) was \$21,556,309. In 2006 the number was \$20,339,175. If adjusted for an annual inflation rate of just 2.7964%, the dollars received today as compared to 1976 would be \$60,280,062. Over the same period the number of the baptized in the Synod declined from 2.85 million to 2.41 million. From 1976–2006, we have gone from a peak of 85,000 baptisms in 1985, to only 28,000 in 2006.

3 Arnette Hallman after a team loss. Ozymoronica, 215.

4 J. C. and A. W. Hare. Ozymoronica, 163.

5 By "capacity" I mean simply the people, the expertise, and the program to get the task done.

6 Consider the example of Bishop Walter Obare, who studied at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, during the 1990s and has since had a tremendous, positive impact on the Kenyan Church, the Church in Africa, and the worldwide community.

7 Report of the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Funding the Mission (July 2006), 16. Available At http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/Office%20of%20the%20President/Blue_Ribbon_Task_Force_for_Funding_then_Mission_Report_2006.pdf.

8 "Over and over as our Task Force met we were confronted with a significant roadblock put up in front of every 'Funding The Mission Model' we discussed. We were confronted with the division in our Synod and the resultant mis-trust that seems to permeate and impact every level of funding decisions. Individuals, congregations and districts are making funding decisions partially depending upon 'who is in control' at district and Synodical levels of authority. Our Task Force has a recommendation later in this report (Recommendation #3) that may move us forward toward a more unified church body. And we have gone ahead with other recommendations understanding that the current state of division in our church is an 'assumption' we will have to live with until it is dealt with." Report of the Blue Ribbon Task Force for Funding the Mission, 7. Emphasis added.

9 Dale A. Meyer, "Where's the Center?" Concordia Journal 34 (July 2008): 153. This entire special edition of the Concordia Journal is its own positive and persuasive argument for the seminaries to be at the heart of our discussions of the future of the Synod.

10 Martin Luther, "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved" (1526), AE 46:93.

11 Martin Luther, "Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter" (1522), AE 30:28.

12 Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis" (1541), AE 4:362 (on Genesis 25:23).

13 "Doctrine and life must be distinguished. Life is bad among us, as it is among the papists, but we don't fight about life and condemn the papists on that account. Wycliffe and Huss didn't know this and attacked [the papacy] for its life. I don't scold myself into becoming good, but I fight over the Word and whether our adversaries teach it in its purity. That doctrine should be attacked—this has never before happened. This is my calling. Others have censured only life, but to treat doctrine is to strike at the most sensitive point, for surely the government and the ministry of the papists are bad. Once we've asserted this, it's easy to say and declare that the life is also bad. When the Word remains pure, then the life (even if there is something lacking in it) can be molded properly. Everything depends on the Word . . ." Martin Luther, "Table Talk" (1533), AE 54:110.

14 “Following this protestation Luther, of blessed memory, listed among other articles the following: ‘In the same way I also say and confess that in the Sacrament of the Altar the body and blood of Christ are truly eaten and drunk in the bread and wine, though the priests who distribute them or those who receive them do not believe or otherwise misuse the sacrament. It does not rest on man’s faith or unbelief but on the Word and ordinance of God—unless they first change God’s Word and ordinance and misinterpret them, as the enemies of the sacrament do at the present time. They, indeed have only bread and wine, for they do not also have the Word and instituted ordinance of God but have perverted and changed it according to their own imagination” (FC SD VII, 32 [Tappert]).

15 Jobst Ebel, “Jacob Andreae (1528–1590) as Author of the Formula of Concord,” translated by Everette W. Meier from *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 89 (1978): 78–119; unpublished manuscript at Concordia Historical Institute.

16 Inga Mager, *Die Konkordienformel im Fürstentum Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel: Entstehungbeitrag – Rezeption – Geltung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 165–174.

17 Jobst Ebel, “The Origin of the Concept of the Formula of Concord: The Roles of Five Authors Besides Andreae in the Creation of the Formula,” translated by Everette W. Meier from *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 91 (1980): 237–282; unpublished manuscript at Concordia Historical Institute.

18 Ebel, “The Origin,” 22.

19 Ebel, “The Origin,” 24.

20 Tappert, 481. “Sacramentarians” was a term frequently used by Lutherans in the sixteenth century to designate opponents of their teaching concerning the Lord’s Supper.

21 Tappert, 482.

22 Tappert, 485.

23 With the July 2008 issue of *Concordia Journal*, the St. Louis seminary has shown that it is ready, willing, and able to contribute toward that end. The Fort Wayne seminary brings considerable resources to the table as well.

24 Will Rogers.

25 *Proceedings of the Thirty-Second Regular Meeting of the Ev. Luth. Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, Assembled at Ft. Wayne, Indiana, June 20–29, 1923* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1923), 3–5. Translation by Matthew C. Harrison.

26 C. F. W. Walther, “Opening Sermon” [On Pure Doctrine for the Salvation of Souls], translated by August Crull, *Lutheran Standard* 30, no. 19 (October 1, 1872): 145–47. This sermon was preached before the first, official meeting of the Synodical Conference held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, July 10–16, 1872. The German original is found in C. F. W. Walther, *Lutherische Brosamen: Predigten und Reden* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1897), 567. Crull’s translation has been lightly edited for the sake of the modern reader.

27 H. C. Schwan, “On Preserving Unity While Avoiding Either Faddishness or Sluggishness,” translated by Everette Meier (Synod Address, 1890). Unpublished manuscript at Concordia Historical Institute.

28 F. Pfothner, “Ansprache Dr. F. Pfothners gehalten vor der Fiskal- und Visitatorenkonferenz in River Forest, Ill., am 3 September 1936,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 15 (March 1944): 174–79. Translated by Matthew C. Harrison.

29 Adapted from *Oxymoronica*, 105.

30 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible* in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 5:98. *Life Together* is perhaps the best and, in many ways, most Lutheran work of Bonhoeffer.

31 "Predigt zur Eroeffnung der Sitzungen der deutschen evang. Luth. Synode v. Missouri westl. Districts am 25. April 1855, in Chicago, Ills., gehalten von F. Wyneken, und auf Beschluss genannter Synode mitgetheilt," *Der Lutheraner* 11, no. 22 (June 19, 1855): 169–173. Translation by Matthew C. Harrison.

32 Oxyronica, 217.

33 Martin Luther, "To Wenceslas Link, Wartburg, December 18, 1521," AE 48:359.

34 Quotation adapted from Oxyronica, 121.

35 M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 86–87.

36 Peck, 88.

37 Peck, 89. I find an interesting parallel to the failed attempt at Andrae for concord, which attempted to solve doctrinal issues by speaking in "generalities," as this paper notes elsewhere.

38 Peck, 89.

39 Oxyronica, 24.

40 Peck, 90.

41 Peck, 91.

42 Peck, 92–93.

43 Peck, 93.

44 Peck, 93–94.

45 Stephen Bishop in Oxyronica, 25.

46 Peck, 94.

47 Peck, 95.

48 Peck, 98–99.