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Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Northwest District,

“...in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.” *2 Corinthians 5:19–20 (ESV)*

Our God has called us all to be His ambassadors in this world. Our words and actions should all be measured and chosen insofar as they reflect the love of Jesus to each other and to those who don't know Him yet. It is also important for us to present an accurate reflection of who He is and how He relates to us as the objects of His love.

In the past few weeks, there has been a lot of interaction around the Synod about a member of the Synod and whether that membership should continue. On Monday, January 26, Synod President Matthew Harrison posted a message on Facebook that addressed this situation before the Synod, where he expressed his opinion that this person's membership should not continue. This message was then copied to the LCMS blog site that same day. This short message has generated a lot of conversation and concern across the church and across our District. Two open letters have been written and distributed, one coming from within the Northwest District. The situation has been the subject of many subsequent blog postings. Some have written me directly with questions and concerns. Now the Southern Illinois District has passed a resolution calling for this worker's repentance and for this District President to exercise ecclesiastical supervision as they see it. I am writing this letter as an effort to share a report of the conversation the Council of Presidents had about this matter and to respond to these questions and concerns within the boundaries of the agreements we have made with one another in the handling of situations such as these.

During the week of February 9-12, the Council of Presidents (the 35 District Presidents, the 6 Synod Vice Presidents, and the Synod President) had a regularly scheduled meeting and devoted considerable time and energy to discussing the issue. The result of that conversation was a statement that affirmed the following:

1. The Council of Presidents remains committed to the teachings of the Synod.
2. The Council of Presidents pledges itself to maintaining sound doctrine and practice.
3. The Council of Presidents remains committed to upholding the Synod's bylaws that guide the process of ecclesiastical discipline.
4. The Council of Presidents will continue to seek restoration and repentance through the agreed upon process which honors our Synod's constitution and bylaws.

In addition, the Council of Presidents affirmed the following regarding the practice of ecclesiastical supervision and discipline:

1. the doctrinal integrity of the members of the Council of Presidents as we carry out the role of ecclesiastical supervision
2. the need for the present process of discipline to follow the existing bylaws of the Synod
3. our desire to evaluate the current procedure of discipline

The Council of Presidents cautions members of the Synod to exercise care in their evaluation and analysis of matters of ecclesiastical supervision.

I want to clearly state that ecclesiastical supervision has been done and responded to by the worker in question. The policies and procedures of the Synod have been followed carefully and carried out to the best of my ability. I also reaffirm that I will continue to do so for any worker or ministry in our District. This is a promise I made when I was installed as District President, and it is a promise I intend to keep.

When our Synod was formed, it was founded on the notion that influence would be our commodity rather than authority. While some Christian churches have a hierarchical structure where individual people are given authority, that is not the case in the LCMS. Congregations are the basic unit of authority, and leaders in the church are called upon to stand upon the Word of God and use their voice for influencing one another through conversation and dialogue. This dialogue is healthy for the church and allows each of us to prayerfully consider God's Word and respond to it faithfully. As we engage in these conversations, careful listening and thoughtful responses are essential for the health of the church and the ministry we share.

Much of the conversation taking place in this situation –open letters, Facebook postings and comments, blogs and comments, even actions taken by at least one District convention – have been made without knowledge of the particular situation and the facts of the case in question. In contrast to our Lord's teaching in Matthew 18, people are forming opinions from a distance and speaking as though they had intimate knowledge of the situation. The process that the Synod has put into place is designed to strike a healthy balance in seeking truth and protecting the reputations and ministries of those involved. While this and any process we might put into place is imperfect, it is the one to which we have agreed. I ask that, as spiritual leaders in the Northwest District, we all exercise patience, be slow to condemn, and be quick to offer mercy and care to one another. This does not mean we shouldn't talk about matters such as this one. It does mean that we should do so charitably and with concern for one another – especially those with whom we disagree.

We are called to reflect the love of Jesus to each other and to a world that is in need of His love. We are at our best when we make this the priority. I continue to pray for God's wisdom and His guidance as we seek to negotiate these stormy waters together. Let it be said of us, "See how they love one another."

Lord Jesus, We are in a challenging time. We humbly ask that You would be our guide and leader. Send us Your Holy Spirit that we might discern the path You have set before us to walk, and we pray, O Lord, that we might walk this road together. In Your precious Name, Amen.

Serving Jesus and His People,

*Rev. Paul Linnemann*

President of the Northwest District of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod