

“Congregations Matter” Exposed

By Martin R. Noland

In November 2018, congregations of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod received a glossy mailer from an organization called “Congregations Matter.” The purpose of the mailer was to promote two candidates for the president of the Synod during the nomination period. Nominations are made by congregations of the Synod and were due February 20, 2019.

“Congregations Matter” has made a number of false accusations against the current administration of the Synod. These false accusations are sinful. Even if the candidates endorsed by “Congregations Matter” had nothing to do with the making of these accusations to begin with, their names are now being linked to these false accusations. It is their duty as brothers in Christ of those being wrongly accused to disavow “Congregations Matter” and call those responsible for it to repentance. If they do not do so, their churchmanship must be called into question.

I have no problem with individuals, groups, or organizations encouraging others to nominate specific persons for office. How else can leaders be nominated or elected? We have a democratic system of government in the Synod and no one should be ashamed of that, or any of its parts. C.F.W. Walther defended the Missouri Synod’s structure and government against Lutherans in both Europe and America who thought that the only legitimate form of church government was episcopal (i.e., rule by bishops of unlimited tenure). Our Synod has been well served by its democratic structure for over 171 years.

I am concerned, however, with individuals, groups, or organizations who sin against officers or board members of the Synod by violating the Eighth Commandment. Lutherans understand the Eighth Commandment according to Luther’s explanations in his *Small Catechism* and *Large Catechism*. Such sins against the Synod’s officers or board members are also sins against the Synod itself.

Does the November 2018 mailer from “Congregations Matter” sin against officers and board members of the LCMS according to the Eighth Commandment? Yes. Is the intent to have these officers and board members removed from office at the 2019 convention? Obviously, it is. It was mailed to about 6000 congregations which include about 2 million baptized members.¹ The LCMS President’s intended replacements are advertised in living color on the mailer, and other officers’ replacements can be found at their website.²

Where is my proof? One side of the mailer has four questions that *misrepresent* the work and actions of present leadership in the Synod and so bring *undeserved discredit* to them. If that isn’t a sin against the Eighth Commandment, I don’t know what is. I will address each question individually.

The first question in the “Congregations Matter” mailer argues that there is a “loss of congregational autonomy as current Synod leadership gobbles up more control into national headquarters.” That is not true. There has been no change in our congregations’ relationship to the national Synod, its agencies, or officers, as defined by the LCMS Constitution in Article VI “Conditions of Membership” and Article VII “Relation of the Synod to Its Members.”³ That relationship has remained constant, with no changes since 1854 when the Missouri Synod adopted its revised Constitution.⁴

It is true that there was a centralization of authority *within* the national offices at the convention in 2010. In that year, the former convention-elected “program boards” were eliminated in favor of a structure that gave the President of the Synod the ability to hire and fire almost everyone in the national office. In addition, since that time the two “mission boards” are really only responsible for making policy. These changes within the national offices, and some other centralizing changes, were heavily promoted by the “Blue Ribbon Task Force for Synodical Structure and Governance,” by President Gerald Kieschnick—who appointed that task force, and by the “Jesus First” organization.⁵ These same changes were opposed by me⁶ and many others.⁷ “Congregations Matter” should blame President Kieschnick, his Blue Ribbon Task Force, and the “Jesus First” organization for this centralization of authority, not President Harrison or the current LCMS Board of Directors who have to follow what that 2010 convention adopted.

The second question on the “Congregations Matter” mailer argues that the incumbent President and Secretary of the Missouri Synod are proposing that “your regional Concordia University President and Board of Regents be replaced by Synod headquarters control.” That is not true. Whatever President Harrison,

Secretary Sias, and the Concordia University System (CUS) board are doing to strengthen cooperation is in compliance with Resolution 7-02B of the 2016 convention whose title states that its purpose is “To Preserve Concordia Colleges and Universities as Institutions of the Church and *Strengthen their Structural Bonds with Synod*”[emphasis added].⁸ The 2016 convention also adopted Resolution 7-03A, which included a number of revised bylaws to enhance the cooperation between the CUS board and the individual colleges and universities.⁹ The President, Secretary, and the CUS board have to follow these resolutions. If they don’t, they are not doing their convention-mandated job.

The third question argues that our Synod’s college in Selma was “secretly closed” and the Synod’s Hong Kong mission properties were “secretly put up for sale.” It is certainly not true that these things were done in secret. It is certainly not true that President Harrison made these decisions. The LCMS Board of Directors is “the custodian of all the property of the Synod,” which includes mission properties and college campuses.¹⁰ The closing of any of the CUS campuses is the work of the Concordia University System Board of Directors, which must have prior approval from a 2/3rds majority of the LCMS Board of Directors, PLUS either a 2/3rds majority of the affected college Board of Regents OR a 2/3rds majority of the LCMS Council of Presidents.¹¹ All of this was done in order, according to bylaws, due to financial reasons.

With regard to the Selma college, its troubles have been known and published for some time. In the September 2012 *Lutheran Witness*, the Synod reported that out of a student body of 719 students at Selma, only 6 were enrolled as Lutheran teacher candidates, and there were no other students enrolled for other church vocations.¹² In the November 2017 *Lutheran Witness*, the Synod reported that out of a student body of 378 students at Selma, none were enrolled in church vocations.¹³ In the March 2016 *Reporter*, the Synod reported on meetings between the LCMS Board of Directors and the Board of Regents of Selma:

In December [2015], the Board of Regents for Concordia, Selma [CCA], submitted requests and two options to the Synod Board of Directors [BOD] for financially supporting the college. According to the BOD resolution, one of the options proposed by the CCA board was that CCA would “continue as a college under the auspices of the LCMS Bylaws and requirements of the CUS.” The other option proposed “that CCA would be divested from the LCMS and seek status as [an LCMS] Recognized Service Organization.” Both options called for the LCMS to provide CCA with \$12-18 million “over the next four years.” In response, the BOD resolution makes it clear that “in light of [limited] LCMS revenues, expenses and other missions that need financial support, ... the [national office of the] LCMS does not have the financial resources to provide or commit such financial resources requested by CCA [Concordia College, Selma] over the next four years.”¹⁴

Concordia College, Selma also reported in 2016 to the Synod in Convention that:

Each year Concordia needs an additional \$2–3 million of unrestricted gifts to balance its operating budget. The college is extremely dependent upon such gifts and the Line of Credit. Until these gifts are greatly increased, the college will require additional financial support. All the attempts to depend on tuition revenue, as most of the CUS schools do, is not feasible in Alabama as our student demographic and economic disparity will not support such a business plan.¹⁵

In his *Joy: Fully Lutheran: 1 Thess 5:16-24. A message to the Church* booklet, distributed to the Synod’s districts at their 2018 conventions, President Harrison reported about the closing of Selma. That report noted that the President, the LCMS Board of Directors, and the CUS Board had done everything possible to preserve Selma, but even our Synod’s best financial people said that the school was not financially viable.¹⁶

As to the Hong Kong mission properties, the move of our Asia mission offices from Hong Kong to Taiwan was also made for financial reasons. This decision was also made by the LCMS Board of Directors, not by the President, and was duly reported. The February 2018 *Reporter* observed:

Regional Director [Charles] Ferry said, “The Luther Building [in Taiwan] will serve the entire region and support the operations of [the Synod’s Office of International Mission in] Asia in a way that will be cost effective and make use of the gifts God has given through His church.” The move from Hong Kong also will benefit the missionary families relocating to Taiwan. Hong Kong is one of the most expensive places in the world to live and work. At the same time, the financial and business news website *Business Insider* ranks Taiwan among the top places to live for expatriates, based on quality of life, affordability and excellence of medical care. And with two major airports on the island, Taiwan

also provides very cost-effective travel throughout the region. In short, Taiwan will reduce the financial burden on our missionaries, who now will spend less time raising their support and more time doing the work of the church.¹⁷

And this is why we are supposed to be opposed to the leadership of President Matthew Harrison? Are we supposed to elect someone else because our missionaries will be getting better care at lower cost? This was not even the President's decision, for blame or credit.

The fourth question on the "Congregations Matter" mailer argues that LCMS officers, board members, and other leaders are "tap-dancing" around issues of transparency, finances, and membership loss nationally. That is not true. In Spring 2011, President Harrison and his staff initiated an annual "State of the Synod" report, which comes out annually in the *Lutheran Witness*.¹⁸ These issues contain *the best reporting we have ever had* in terms of finances, statistics, operations, challenges, opportunities, membership gains and losses, etc., etc. They are filled with graphics, charts, etc., that report and explain much better to the "man and woman in the pew" than anything we have published in the past. I know. I used to be the Director of the Concordia Historical Institute, and I supervised its archives and library, which contains everything the Missouri Synod has ever published. "State of the Synod" is the *best* we have ever done in reporting and transparency, bar none! My thanks to all the editors, authors, and staff who do this work! I keep every issue for reference.

In addition to the "State of the Synod" issues, President Harrison and his staff furthered their efforts to be transparent and informative to the members of our synod by initiating *Lutherans Engage*,¹⁹ which is a quarterly magazine chock-full of great photos and text, illustrating the wonderful stories of mission, charity, and outreach that congregations, individuals, and agencies of our Synod are doing together for the Lord's Kingdom. Then there are the improvements to the *Lutheran Witness* and *Reporter*, especially the color inserts in the *Reporter* that have been frequent during Harrison's administration. Plus everything that you can imagine about the Synod—board minutes, board reports, periodicals, statistics—can be accessed for free, and easily, at the Synod's website: www.lcms.org

As to gradual membership loss, this is a significant example of how our president has been open and honest, as he has been confronting a malady that affects all denominations in the United States. Our LCMS leaders are addressing this pressing issue carefully and wisely. *Concordia Journal*, our Saint Louis seminary's journal, just published a research paper on the topic.²⁰ In the previously mentioned *Joy: Fully Lutheran* report in 2018 by President Harrison, he spent about a third of his report on the matter of demographics and how that is affecting our congregations.²¹ Prior to that, President Harrison and his staff worked with Pastor Heath Curtis to do or contract out original research in this area. The results were published in the December 2016 *Journal of Lutheran Mission*²² and are available for free online. This is not "tap-dancing." This is facing the "elephant in the room," taking that "bull by the horns," and wrestling him to the ground. President Harrison gets full credit for that!

It is clear, then, that "Congregations Matter" has misrepresented a number of issues and situations, in order to bring undeserved discredit to LCMS officers and board members. If the two candidates whose faces and names are on the "Congregations Matter" mailer were truly worthy of office, they would publicly renounce that mailer, its "Congregations Matter" authors, and publicly correct the misrepresentations. They need to do this in order to maintain their own reputation as Christian gentlemen, as competent leaders, and as pastors of Christ's church.

¹ Statistics from *The Lutheran Annual* (2019), page 793.

² See <http://congregationsmatter.org/first-vice-president-and-regional-vice-president-nominees> (all websites and web-pages in the present article were accessed on January 30, 2019, except for those listed in endnote #5 because that website is defunct).

³ For the Constitution, Bylaws, and Articles of Incorporation of the LCMS, see the 2016 Handbook here: <https://www.lcms.org/Document?src=lcm&id=4507>

⁴ See C.S. Meyer, ed., *Moving Frontiers* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 149-151 (1854 Const. Chap. II and Chap. IV.A.9).

⁵ For example, the following articles were published at the "Jesus First" website: Jonathan Coyne, "Task Force Reports Work to Date," *Jesus First* (Oct. 2009); Jesus First Publication Team, "Task Force on Structure Listens to Feedback," *Jesus First* (November 2009); David S. Luecke, "Re-structure has no 'Hidden Agenda'" (January 2010); Charles S. Mueller, Sr., "Changes in Congregations Should

Lead to Changes in Synod's Structure" *Jesus First* (March 2010); David S. Luecke, "Proposed Constitutional Changes Clarify That Mission is Fundamental" *Jesus First* (March 2010); David S. Luecke, "A Wise Change in Constitution and Bylaws," *Jesus First* (April 2010); Jonathan Coyne, "Synod Has Had Effective Mission Leadership" *Jesus First* (June 2010); and Charles S. Mueller, Sr., "Change in the LCMS Has Had a Noble History" *Jesus First* (June 2010). The "Jesus First" website (www.jesusfirst.net) is now defunct and to my knowledge the articles are no longer available online. The printed newsletter form of these articles should be available in some Lutheran libraries and in the archives at Concordia Historical Institute.

⁶ See for example my articles: Martin R. Noland, "Delegate Representation and the Blue Ribbon Plan," *Lutheran Clarion* 1 no. 2 (November 2008):2-3; Martin R. Noland, "The Secret History of the Blue Ribbon Plan (updated)," *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 5 (April 2010):5-6; and Martin R. Noland, "The Blue Ribbon Plan #18 and the Spoils System," *Lutheran Clarion* 2 #6 (May 2010):1-2 (see www.lutheranclarion.org/newsletter.html). Other articles that I authored on this topic were published on the website of *Brothers of John the Steadfast* from January 2009 to July 2010 at www.steadfastlutherans.org.

⁷ For articles in the *Lutheran Clarion* opposed to the Blue Ribbon Plan, see for example: Christian A. Preus, "Task Force on Structure: Don't Get Rid of the Program Boards," *Lutheran Clarion* 1 no. 2 (November 2008):3-4; Richard A. Bolland, "The Appearance of Impropriety: How the Process of Changing the Constitution and Bylaws of the Synod Truncate Real Discussion," *Lutheran Clarion* 1 no. 2 (November 2008):6-7; David Adams, "Beware of the Unintended Consequences of Electing Synodical Delegates at District Conventions," *Lutheran Clarion* (January 2009):4; Ronald Feuerhahn, "A Temporal or Ecclesiastical Structure?" *Lutheran Clarion* 1 no. 4 (March 2009):1-2; Christian A. Preus, "Delegate Selection: An Exceptionally Simple Solution," *Lutheran Clarion* 1 no. 4 (March 2009):2-3; Jon C. Ferguson, "Consolidation of Power is the Main Thrust of Task Force Proposals," *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 2 (September 2009):6-7; Christian A. Preus, "President Kieschnick's Task Force Recommendation: Power to the President," *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 3 (January 2010):1-2; Jon C. Ferguson, "Top Down Work on a Bottom Up Denomination: A Look at the Final Report of The Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synod Structure and Governance," *Lutheran Clarion* special issue (February 2010), 1-5; Edwin S. Suelflow, "Musings from a Retired Pastor and District President, Our Church Fathers, and the BRTFSSG," *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 4 (March 2010):1-2; Christian A. Preus, "President Kieschnick's Task Force Recommendation: Ambiguity v. Clarity," *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 4 (March 2010):3-4; Thomas Queck, "Circuit Realignment: What Is There to Restore?" *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 5 (April 2010):1-2; Christian A. Preus, "President Kieschnick's Task Force Recommendation #18: 'But that is not what it does'" *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 5 (April 2010):2-3; James A. Douthwaite, "Flawed Assumptions Produce Flawed Results," *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 5 (April 2010):4-5; David Hawk, "Political or Pastoral Viewpoint?" *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 7 (June 2010):1-2; Christian A. Preus, "President Kieschnick's Task Force Structure Proposals: Now What Do We Do?" *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 7 (June 2010): 1-3; Richard A. Bolland, "The 2010 Synodical Convention: A Voter's Guide," *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 7 (June 2010):7-8; Christian Preus, "Task Force on Structure Recommendations: A Summary of the Problems," *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 8 (July 2010):1-2; and David Mueller, "A Delegate's Reflections on the Blue Ribbon Task Force Proposals" *Lutheran Clarion* 2 no. 8 (July 2010):5-6 (see www.lutheranclarion.org/newsletter.html). The website of *Brothers of John the Steadfast* also ran many articles opposing the Blue Ribbon Task Force. The most hard-hitting article was, in my opinion, this one: Mollie Ziegler-Hemingway, "Not a Consolidation of Power?" *Brothers of John the Steadfast* (April 24, 2010), see <https://steadfastlutherans.org/2010/04/not-a-consolidation-of-power>. A summary of other articles on the web opposing the Blue Ribbon proposals can be found here: <https://steadfastlutherans.org/2010/05/great-stuff-found-on-the-web-stand-firm-index-of-brtfssg-articles>.

⁸ See the 2016 Convention Proceedings, pp. 173-174 at: <https://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=4344>

⁹ See Resolution 7-03A, in 2016 Convention Proceedings, pp. 175-177 at: <https://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=4344>

¹⁰ See 2016 Handbook, *The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod* (Saint Louis: LCMS, 2016), p. 114 (bylaw 3.3.4.7) and p. 23 (bylaw 1.2.1 (q)).

¹¹ See 2016 Handbook, *The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod*, p. 128 (bylaw 3.6.6.5 (h)) and p. 163 (bylaw 3.10.6.4 (i) 6).

¹² N.a., "Concordia University System," *Lutheran Witness* 132 no. 9 (September 2012):29.

¹³ N.a., "Concordia University System: Against the Tide," *Lutheran Witness* 136 no. 11 (November 2017):26.

¹⁴ See Paula Schlueter Ross, "Board Adopts Resolution 'to Support Concordia College, Alabama,'" *Reporter* (March 3, 2016), see <https://blogs.lcms.org/2016/resolution-to-support-concordia-college-alabama>

¹⁵ See 2016 Convention Workbook: Reports and Overtures. 66th Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, July 9-14, 2016 (Saint Louis: LCMS, 2016), 80; see <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=4086>

¹⁶ See Matthew Harrison, *Joy: Fully Lutheran: 1 Thess 5:16-24. A message to the Church about the challenges we face and how to face them* (St. Louis: LCMS, 2018), 40-41.

¹⁷ See Roy Askins, "Whether in Hong Kong or Taiwan, the Synod's Asia mission doesn't change," *Reporter* (February 5, 2018), see <https://blogs.lcms.org/2018/whether-hong-kong-taiwan-synods-asia-mission-doesnt-change>

¹⁸ So far, these issues in the *Lutheran Witness* are: May 2011, September 2012, September 2013, November 2014, November 2015, November 2016, November 2017, and November 2018; they can be viewed online here: <https://blogs.lcms.org/category/lutheran-witness/lutheran-witness-archives>

¹⁹ For online issues of *Lutherans Engage*, see: <https://engage.lcms.org>

²⁰ Mark Kiessling and Julianna Shultz, "The Search for Young People: 2017 Research of Millennials and the LCMS," *Concordia Journal* 44 no. 4 (Fall 2018):19-32.

²¹ See Harrison, *Joy: Fully Lutheran*, 18-33.

²² See special issue of *Journal of Lutheran Mission* 3 no. 3 (December 2016) here: <https://blogs.lcms.org/2016/journal-of-lutheran-mission-december-2016>