

# **Report on 2019 LCMS Triennial Synodical Convention**

By Tom Halvorson

Lay Voting Delegate, Eastern Circuit, Montana District  
Trinity Lutheran Church, Sidney, Montana

## **Overview**

The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod holds a synod-wide convention every three years. The convention receives reports, elects leaders, votes on proposed resolutions, worships, hears essays, receives greetings, gives recognitions, and brings people together in both formal and informal social functions.

## **Pre-Convention Work**

The work of the convention begins long before it convenes. This is true in many respects, including reports being written and circulated, nominations for offices being made in writing and submitted, and overtures that propose synodical resolutions being written and submitted.

Resolutions arise at district conventions held the year before the synodical convention. A proposal from a district that the synod adopt a resolution is called an overture. Districts send overtures to the synod. The overtures are sorted according to the subject areas of 13 synodical floor committees. The floor committees consider the overtures, recommend some to the convention floor, combine and revise others for recommendation to the convention floor, recommend referral of many to various officers and agencies of the synod, and recommend that many be declined.

## **Convention Workbook and Today's Business**

Two important documents that are central to conducting the convention's business are the *Convention Workbook* and *Today's Business*.

The workbook is over an inch thick and this year contained about 600 pages. It contains the reports and overtures.

*Today's Business* is published in a multi-part series, one for each day of the convention. The first edition is mailed to delegates before the convention begins. Then, each morning of the convention, a new edition is published and set at the assigned seat of each voting delegate and distributed at the meeting hall doors to everyone else attending. These successive editions contain late overtures, late

resolutions, late reports, resolutions newly submitted, and many amended resolutions that contain changes that result from open floor committee meetings and convention floor debate.

### **Floor Committees**

The floor committees meet ahead of the convention to gel the large mass of overtures into a much smaller body of resolutions reported by the committees to the convention floor. They also hold open meetings where anyone may attend, ask questions, speak, and make suggestions for amendments to resolutions. In my experience of two synodical conventions, these meetings truly are open. Comments truly are taken to heart. Comments frequently do result in amendments to resolutions.

### **Biographical Synopses & Statements of Nominees**

A third important document is the *Biographical Synopses & Statements of Nominees* for various positions of leadership. This publication provides an equal amount of core information about every candidate and is mailed to delegates before the convention.

### **Handbook**

A fourth important document is the *Handbook* that contains the constitution, bylaws, and article of incorporation of the synod. This is a fairly involved document with many moving parts. This document received a great deal of use at the convention in regulating the proceedings and considering the substance of resolutions.

Delegates put in hours ahead of the convention to study the *Convention Workbook*, the first edition of *Today's Business*, the *Biographical Synopses*, and the *Handbook*.

### **Daily Worship**

The convention worships several times each day. This year the services followed the orders of Divine Service, Matins, Midday Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Responsive Prayer I. The liturgy was conducted by Rev. William Weedon, Convention Chaplain, who also presided in a chapel that was open throughout the convention. Sermons were preached by the Synod President, District Presidents, and others.

## **Convention Essays**

Each day the convention heard a Convention Essay on the convention theme of being Joy:Fully Lutheran, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

## **Election of Synod President**

The election of Synod President was held ahead of time. It was conducted electronically online and the results were announced ahead of the convention. That election constituted the President-Elect as Chairman of the convention. The Synod President is Rev. Dr. Pr. Matthew C. Harrison.

## **Election of Officers of Synod**

The convention elected officers of the synod including First Vice President, regional Vice Presidents, ranking of the regional Vice Presidents, and Synod Secretary. Of special interest to my district, the convention re-elected Rev. Dr. John W. Sias as Secretary to a second term. At the time of his first election, Dr. Sias was pastor of a multi-congregation parish in rural Montana and a Montana District officer.

## **Elections for Synod Agencies**

The convention conducted a large number of other elections, including: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, regents of seminaries, regents of Concordia University System schools, directors of Concordia Historical Institute, and directors of Concordia Publishing House.

I had been nominated by Carol Hack Broome to be a director of Concordia Publishing House and was elected to a 6-year term.

## **Greetings, Recognitions, and Reports**

The convention received various greetings, recognitions, and reports including:

- Missionary work in various regions
  - 125 years in Latin American & Caribbean region
  - 125 years in Asia region
  - 125 years in Africa region
  - 125 years in Eurasia region
- Anniversary of Concordia Publishing House
- Various agencies of the synod (LCMS Foundation, LCEF, LWML, Lutheran Hour Ministries)

- Military chaplains
- Commemoration of faithful departed
- Church body guests

## **Resolutions**

Over the course of several days, the resolutions were presented by the following 13 floor committees:

1. National Witness
2. International Witness
3. Mercy
4. Life Together
5. Theology & Church Relations
6. Pastoral Ministry & Seminaries
7. University Education
8. Finance
9. Structure & Administration
10. Ecclesiastical Supervision & Dispute Resolution
11. Church & Culture
12. Retention: Schools, Family, Youth & Young Adults
13. Registration, Credentials & Elections

Several resolutions approved establishing fellowship with Lutheran bodies overseas. Agencies of the synod had examined the confessions and other documents of those bodies and conferred with leaders of those bodies to learn whether the proper grounds for fellowship existed. Through such fellowship, sending professors to teach in seminaries overseas, and bringing seminarians from overseas to our two seminaries in the United States, along with much other work, has produced much fruit for the Gospel.

Ahead of the convention, I had made a table of all the resolutions with the numbers and titles in a left column and blank space in a right column for my hand written notes on my intended vote and the reasons for my vote. This proved invaluable when amendments to resolutions were published. I was able to easily see if a reason I was planning to vote “No” had been cured in an amendment, warranting a change of vote to “Yes.” It also helped a lot during debate and voting.

## **Exhibit Hall**

The convention enjoyed a sizeable and bustling exhibit hall with booths for various ministries, publishers, universities, and schools.

Concordia Publishing House had a large area that amounted to a store. It was well staffed and had capacity to answer questions, help visitors identify and locate publications, and efficiently check out their purchases. CPH also had several authors of its recent publications on hand to talk with visitors, autograph books, and take photographs. It is charming to see how down to earth and easy going even the most distinguished and accomplished among them are, such as for just one example, Rev. Dr. John T. Pless, who does so much with the Catechism, theology, and training pastors overseas. He has been a vital instrument of the Holy Spirit in the significant advance of the Christian faith in Africa. He talks with people as if he were just one of the guys down at the grain elevator, and he humbly deflects praises.

## **Social Functions**

The social functions were wonderful opportunities to catch up with people we know, meet in person people we previously knew only by their writings or online, and make connections that can be useful to extend the work of the church.

For example, I was able to meet people who have formed foundations that support Lutheran seminaries overseas, and they can be helpful in considering a new foundation to support the strategic and excellent seminary in the Dominican Republic.

These functions included: the delegate dinner, LCEF ice cream social, the President-Elect's reception, and the St. Louis and Fort Wayne seminary alumni reception.

Two highlights for me involved the Gottesdienst Crowd. Gottesdiest benefitted in the exhibit hall from "Location, location, location." Its booth was right by one of the entrances to the hall. It was the first thing a visitor would see coming into the hall. The outgoing and hospitable personalities of Rev. Fr. Burnell F. Eckhardt, Jr., Ph.D. and Rev. Fr. Jason M. Braaten were magnetic, and by the way, they know how to sell books! Between them and CPH, it was a good thing there was a UPS Store in the convention hall where I could ship home all the books I bought, or I never would have gotten them through the airport.

Gottesdienst held a dinner in an Irish pub a few blocks away and the place was packed. I had met a lay delegate who is considering applying to seminary, and the Gottesdienst Crowd was the perfect way to encourage him. I introduced him to Fr. Eckhardt, who generously and joyously invested more than 20 minutes of undivided attention with the delegate, which, given the setting, occasion, and Fr. Eckhardt's duties as host was a lot of time.

## **Outcomes**

Nearly all the elections turned out in accord with the votes I cast. Among the dozens of elections, the outcome of only one gives me serious concern. Overall, that is very good.

Generally speaking, the outcome of the votes on resolutions was good.

## **Division**

In certain respects, our synod is divided, and it shows in recommended voting lists from different groups within the synod circulate. I had received three such lists. Two of them were directly opposite of each other. It was almost as if the second one to be created was made simply by recommending the opposite candidates from the ones on the first-created list. At the beginning of the convention, there was a motion from the floor to ban all such lists from the convention. This motion went down in flames. My impression is that it was especially the lay delegates who voted that motion down. Conferring with the lay delegates seated near me and that I met in various other places through the convention, I never met one who wanted to vote a so-called straight party line on any of the lists, but they thought the lists were information to add to the *Biographical Synopses*, personal acquaintance, familiarity with candidate writings, and collegial comparing of notes with other delegates. Lay delegates seemed hungry for information to make good, conscientious votes.

The division of our synod also shows in the floor debates on resolutions. Some had a tactic of trying to prevent certain resolutions from passing by bogging down the proceedings. By frivolous motions to amend resolutions, frivolous points of order, frivolous points of inquiry, and other parliamentary manipulations, some threw sand into the gears. By throwing enough sand, the tail end of the scheduled business would not reach the floor, and that would in effect defeat without discussion the tail-end resolutions. This did not work, however, because the lay delegates tracked the floor debate pretty well, and

could tell when enough had been said on both sides of a question to make a proper decision. The Chair repeated a memorable quotation: “Everything has been said, but not everyone has yet said it.” Then when a delegate called for the question, the vote usually was overwhelmingly in favor of closing debate and voting.

### **Closing of Concordia school in Alabama**

This report would not be complete without mentioning one disgraceful low point in the convention.

A committee brought to the floor a resolution about the closure of our Concordia school in Alabama. Over a long period of years, this school tragically suffered enrollment and financial failure. The synodical leadership had for years done many things to try to turn it around. Unfortunately that never worked, and the school was closed. The sorrow over the loss of the school is very much like bereavement over loss of a loved one.

Under the circumstances, for charitable reasons, the leadership was discreet regarding the amount of information published concerning the financial and enrollment failure. Opponents of the leadership leveraged that charity against them, making accusations about withholding information. Some delegates, of course, innocently just wanted more information. But others were taking free shots for political opportunism. It made me feel very much like I was at a convention of something other than the church.

The Rev. Dr. Scott Murray was the temporary Chairman of the convention while this horrible debate took place. He wisely, humbly, and charitably let the opponents fully have their say. He let them exhaust their complaints and unfounded accusations. It was the right thing for him to do because the context of the accusatory political action was bereavement over the loss of the school, and because letting the opponents carry on exposed to the lay delegates the character of what they were doing. With something more than 1,000 delegates, in the end, I doubt there were more than 100 who were fooled.

### **Conclusion**

Not wanting to end this report on a down note, take heart that generally, the decisions of the convention were good and delegates were strengthened for our walk together in the advancement of the kingdom of heaven. All church bodies have division, and our synod has a solid core of sound people and sound leaders.