



NEBRASKA DISTRICT  
P.O. Box 407  
152 South Columbia  
Seward, Nebraska 68434-0407  
Phone 402 643-2961  
FAX 402 643-2990

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH--MISSOURI SYNOD

[www.ndlcms.org](http://www.ndlcms.org)

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Delegates and Electors of the Nebraska District,

### **In Deed, It Is Time**

As we prepare for the 2023 Synodical Convention, and as we look beyond at the work we want to address as a Synod, it is interesting to me to look back at a document authored in 2008 by President Harrison entitled "It's Time LCMS Unity and Mission—The Real Problem We Face and How to Solve It." It was written as he was being promoted for synodical leadership. In the midst of the recommendations by the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synod Structure and Governance, President Harrison made a number of insightful points that deserve recounting. <https://media.ctsfw.edu/Chapter/ViewDetails/9310>

I recommend you read the entire document. Below are some pertinent quotes, with my italics added to several sections for emphasis.

*"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... 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." (p.3)*

*"Our disunity is killing us and our mission effectiveness—and at just the wrong moment!" (p.3)*

*"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!" (p.4)*

*"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." (p.6)*

*"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." (p.6)*

*"While Andreae, proceeding politically, was 'very sensitive about any kind of criticism' of his work, 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.'" (p.9)*

*"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." (p.10)*

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

"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... I have thought for some years that the way forward would be to bring together respected and capable people representing various constituencies and viewpoints." (p.11)

"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 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? ...*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." (p.12)

"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." (p.14)

"*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.*" (p.14)

"Until we have listened to God, and heard one another, we should also refrain from new positions on old, contentious matters." (p.15)

"*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.*" (p.15)

"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." (p.16)

These words are as true now as they were 15 years ago. Again, I recommend you read Harrison's entire document. As we consider resolutions and more bylaw changes, I hope this document can help guide our decisions.

As we seek to realize the unity we have in Christ, seek consensus, and build trust, I hope we can implement the vision outlined in this document. Indeed, it is time. **In Deed, It Is Time**—to put this vision into practice. It is time to come together and do the hard work. Healthy conflict leads to better decisions.

The quotes I have shared above are critical in my mind for the future of our beloved Missouri. Drawing from this document I would emphasize four priorities:

- We are the body of Christ and need to deal broadly, under the Word and our Confessions, with the issues that bring tension and division. My frequent refrain in Nebraska is, “We cannot walk together if we don’t talk together, and we cannot talk together if we don’t meet together.” Though challenging and slow, this is where the fruit of unity is produced as we live under the cross.
- Our focus needs to be directed to the local congregation as the primary locus of life together, mercy, and mission; and the local circuit as the fundamental building block of walking together (synod) for equipping and encouraging congregations and their workers. Most of our energy needs to be in service to the local congregation.
- Relationships formed around the Word and our Confessions will lead us to doctrinal fidelity and faithful mission. These relationships will guide our bylaws. Unity will not come with more resolutions and tightened bylaws.
- Finally, one area not addressed is worker wellness: spiritual, physical, vocational, intellectual, and, especially, relational health. Too often in caring for the Bride of Christ, we neglect our own bride and family. We want to encourage Sabbath rest, connection to God, time for self, marriage, family, and primary friendships.

None of this is original. This is the hard work of being Church, of being the Body of Christ. Ministry happens when people spend time with one another in a discipleship posture around the Word of God. And when something disrupts those relationships, we need to double down our efforts toward repentance and reconciliation. There is no quick solution or easy answer.

Throughout history, the Church is “hidden under the cross.” There is no golden age of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod that we need to rediscover. Despite all the prognosticators of her demise, I firmly believe the LCMS is still the best thing going and has an important role in the future of Christ’s Church on earth. We expect doctrinal fidelity and mission priority. As the Body of Christ, it is critical that we remain committed to both and to one another.

These are the principles by which I seek to serve the congregations of the Nebraska District, and though I have no desire for another office, the need for these changes is why I have let my name stand as nominee for Synod president. I expect you to hold me accountable in their application. God grant it for Jesus’ sake and God bless you as you carry out your duties.

In Christ,



Pastor Richard Snow  
President, Nebraska District LCMS