



Walking Together – The LCMS Future *Proposals and Possibilities for Consideration and Discussion*

Presented by
Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synod Structure and Governance

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“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:1-4 ESV).

The Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synod Structure and Governance offers the following proposals and possibilities for consideration and discussion. In so doing, the task force desires to be Christ-minded as together we strive to be like-minded, lowly minded, love-minded, and others-minded.

The following proposals/possibilities are not final by any means. The task force considers its work to be under construction. With the expectation of ongoing feedback, the Synod’s members and leaders are participating as valued and active partners in this work-in-progress.

In order to advance Christ’s mission, it has been the intent of the task force that all the proposals/possibilities be aligned with the Synod’s theological principles, such as those discussed in the task force document *Congregation – Synod – Church* (April 2007). (See also the listing of theological principles in another task force document, “Who Is The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod?”)

As together we participate in Christ’s mission, acting in support of and on behalf of local congregations, we present these proposals/possibilities with the attitude described by St. Paul, who urges, “...conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” and “...stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27).

Foundational

Aligned with the Synod's theological principles and to advance Christ's mission, these proposals/possibilities amplify, affirm, and clarify that the reason for the Synod's existence under Acts 15 and 1 Corinthians 12 is for congregations to walk together in God's mission and to serve one another for His purpose of saving all people through Jesus Christ. With God's mission as the very ground of our being, these proposals/possibilities affirm and clarify that Christ — His person and justifying work — is the center of our common confession. Our confessional basis remains unchanged (LCMS Constitution, Article II).

Congregations and Districts

Relationship between Congregations and Districts: Congregations are the primary mission centers for reaching our communities and the world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Faced with ministry challenges in an ever-changing world, congregations are looking for encouragement, support, and resources. Since the districts are the closest source of resources to the congregation, the task force has been looking at ways to strengthen the relationship between congregations and districts.

Brought forward for consideration are the size and functions of the districts for more effective service to congregations. Here are some possibilities for discussion:

- Increase the number of districts from 35 to 100 with approximately 60 congregations in each district. This would allow district presidents to become well acquainted with each congregation, its staff, and its leadership, so that they could better support and encourage the mission.
- These smaller districts could be organized into regions for staffing and for resourcing congregations.
- Decrease the number of districts from 35 to 20 with approximately 300 to 350 congregations in each. These districts would then be large enough to provide staff and resources to support the congregations.
- Keep the district structure as is, but encourage districts to collaborate with neighboring districts and to organize their staffs and resources for the mutual strengthening of their congregations' mission.
- Instill flexibility so that congregations and groups of districts could reorganize as they feel best meets their missional needs.

The task force has focused considerable attention on the role of electoral circuits, visitation circuits, and circuit counselors. In most cases, the concept of visitation circuit and electoral circuit has become synonymous. In order to empower circuits so that they can be seen as places where pastors and congregations are supported, encouraged, and resourced through the interaction of lay and professional leadership, the task force discussions have included the following:

- Restore visitation circuits to their primary purpose, which means omitting the action of electing convention delegates (eliminating "electoral" circuits).
- Since circuit counselors assist and are the representatives of the district presidents, involve the district president in the selection of circuit counselors.
- Allow flexibility in providing access of pastors one to another. For example, circuits could be formed geographically, by affinity group, by size of congregation, or by any other method deemed most appropriate by the congregations of the district.

Congregations and the National Synod

Relationship between Congregations and the National Synod: With congregations as the primary mission centers, the key issue becomes how the national Synod can best serve congregations so as to enhance their mission and do for us all what we cannot do—or do as well—by ourselves.

So that we might be faithful to our mission and be good stewards of the resources God has given us, the task force has discussed a variety of possibilities, including the following:

- Determine which boards and commissions should be retained at the national level and which would more effectively resource congregations if located at the district level. Deploy staff and resources accordingly.
- Within such a restructuring, appoint task forces as necessary for such projects and initiatives as the National LCMS Youth Gathering, hymnal projects, transformation of congregations, urban ministry, and the like. Some national staff may be needed to accomplish these tasks, but not at an executive level.
- Regarding executive staff at the national level, follow the lead of our districts and allow for a minimal number of executives who report directly to the president of the Synod, with advisory boards to encourage and support the ministry. (Currently, all district executive staff report directly to and are evaluated by their respective district presidents.) In effect, this change would mean that all program boards, where needed, would function in an advisory rather than an administrative role.
- Standardize terms of office for all elected officials. (Currently some officials are elected to three-year terms and some to six-year terms.)

Congregations, Membership, and Conventions

Membership: In order to advance Christ’s mission, the task force proposals/possibilities clarify who we are by underscoring the essentially congregational character of the Synod, the role of the ordained and commissioned members, and the participation of the laity in the life and work of the Synod.

- The task force brings forward for consideration and discussion as one such proposal that commissioned ministers of the Synod be eligible to be chosen as voting delegates to the conventions of the Synod and its districts. While the pastoral office is by divine right or arrangement (*de jure divino*), the ministers of religion-commissioned are recognized as associate members of the Synod to be in a service position by human right or arrangement (*de jure humano*) but certainly eligible to serve as a congregation’s non-ordained delegate (as is the laity). (See Article V and Bylaws 1.2.1 (k); 1.3; 2.1ff.)

Congregations, District Conventions, and Representation: For purposes of representation, the task force brings forward the following for consideration and discussion:

- Establish at least two voting representatives—one who is the called pastor and the other who is a non-ordained person—for each congregation.
- Ensure that each congregation in a multi-parish is represented by its pastor and one non-ordained person.
- Ensure that vacant congregations are represented by the vacancy or interim pastor and one non-ordained person.

- Allow congregations with more than 750 confirmed members to be represented by two additional delegates for each additional unit of 750 confirmed members or majority thereof, with each pair of additional delegates to be one ministerial (ordained or commissioned) delegate and one non-ordained delegate.

Congregations, National Conventions, and Representation: For purposes of representation, the task force brings forward the following for consideration and discussion:

- Determine whether a reduced number of voting delegates—either 625 or 850—would provide more effective representation.
- Determine each district’s number of delegates according to that district’s exact percentage of the total number of congregations and communicants in Synod.
- Elect national convention delegates at district conventions (where all congregations are represented) from a list of congregational delegates to the district convention that immediately precedes the national convention. Allow each district to determine how these candidates would be selected and elected, involving all congregations within the district and based upon criteria established by the national Synod.
- Whatever the system of election, maintain an equal number of ordained and non-ordained voting delegates.
- Discontinue the practice of designating advisory delegates and reduce the number of advisory representatives.
- Allow in subsequent conventions for fluctuation in the number of delegates from each district based upon the most recent percentage of congregations/communicants.

Note that as aligned with the theological principle of Christian stewardship (stewardship of resources), the Synod’s mission and ministry would benefit from a savings of nearly \$1million in national-convention expenses by reducing the number of voting delegates to 625, eliminating advisory delegates, and reducing the number of advisory representatives.

Frequency, Function, and Overtures: For purposes of the frequency and function of the conventions, the task force brings forward the following for consideration and discussion:

- Hold a national convention every three years, alternating between a *focused* convention and a *general* convention in years three and six.
- Hold district conventions every three years, alternating between a *focused* district convention and a *general* district convention in years two and five.
- Features of a general convention:
 - ✓ Regular business and reports
 - ✓ Six-year, staggered terms of office, including officers
 - ✓ The Divine Call of the president, vice presidents, and secretary, and the election of the vice president—finance/treasurer
 - ✓ Overtures (see below)
 - ✓ Agenda determined according to current provisions
 - ✓ Communication with delegates in the interim via secure electronic communication technology
- Features of a focused convention:
 - ✓ Focus on theology, contemporary issues, common confession and mission, nurture, inspiration, and celebration
 - ✓ Limited business and reports

- ✓ Overtures (see below)
- ✓ Six year, staggered terms of office, including officers
- ✓ Agenda is determined by the president in consultation with officers of the Synod and the Council of Presidents
- ✓ Communication with delegates in the interim via secure electronic communication technology

For purposes of overtures to the conventions, the task force brings forward the following for consideration and discussion:

- Eligibility for the submission of overtures according to the current provisions with the addition of the officers of the Synod in relation to their responsibility for a national convention
- Eligibility for the submission of overtures according to the current provisions with the addition of the officers of the district in relation to their responsibility for a district convention
- For the sake of effective leadership and for broad, generative influence (persuasion), as well as broad participation and in-depth study, the individual member congregation is strongly encouraged to channel its overture(s) to the district convention (which is the assembled congregations of a district) through a circuit forum.
- For the sake of effective leadership and for broad and generative influence, as well as broad participation and in-depth study, the individual member congregation is strongly encouraged to channel its overture(s) to the national general convention through the district convention.
- Overtures to a district convention from individual member congregations that have been channeled through a circuit forum will receive priority consideration at the district convention.
- Overtures to a national convention from individual congregations that have been channeled through a district convention and any other overtures from a district convention will receive priority consideration at the national convention.

Doctrinal Resolutions and Statements: The current Bylaws provide excellent summary statements of the Synod’s confession of faith, doctrinal resolutions and statements, and a dissent process.

The task force brings the following forward for discussion:

- Doctrinal resolutions of special significance (such as those initiating, modifying, or repealing specific positions or practices of the Synod) require a two-thirds vote for adoption.
- All adopted doctrinal resolutions are to be honored and upheld by the members of the Synod in accordance with each resolution’s intended status until such time as the Synod amends or repeals them.
- Doctrinal statements (formal statements of belief) submitted by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations to the Synod in convention for further consideration and possible adoption require a two-thirds vote for adoption.
- Clarification of Constitution Article VIII to provide for the above.

The task force proposal clarifies and affirms that the Synod expects every member congregation of the Synod to respect its resolutions and to consider them of binding force on the assumption that they are in accordance with the Word of God and that they are applicable to the condition of the congregation.

Other: For purposes of clarity, the task force brings forward for consideration and discussion the following addition to the constitution [There is no such current provision. Cf. Bylaw chapter 7, “Amendments to Bylaws” (2007 *Handbook*, page 201) and Articles of Incorporation, Article VII, “Bylaws” (2007 *Handbook*, page 204).]:

- The Synod in convention may adopt Bylaws that are consistent with and do not contradict the Constitution of the Synod, which controls and supersedes the Bylaws and all other rules or regulations of the Synod. Bylaws, which may be adopted, revised, or eliminated by a simple majority vote of a Synod convention, are binding regulations for the Synod and its conduct and governance.

Items for Further Attention

In addition to the proposals/possibilities presented above, the task force has discussed many other items. However, they require additional time and extensive research. That said, the task force is very interested in what the people of the LCMS have to say concerning the following issues:

- Expanding responsibility for the certification of pastoral candidates to include district presidents and congregations being served by such candidates
- Changing the name of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to better reflect who we are today, a church body that serves throughout North America and in partnership with 30 other Lutheran church bodies around the world
- Electing Synod vice presidents by region, thus enabling each region to be represented within the Praesidium
- Electing members of the Synod’s Board of Directors by region so that each region is represented
- Amplifying, confirming, and clarifying the mission and purpose of the Synod (Article III).
- Clarifying the meaning of membership in the Synod, including the historic advisory relationship of the Synod to its members (Articles VI and VII).

Based on feedback received, the task force will determine whether or not to continue study on these issues. In the meantime, they inform the church of the topics the task force is wrestling with and the topics for which the task force seeks the comments of the church.