

Date: June 2, 2016

Open Letter to: Members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

From: Former members of the Commission on Constitutional Matters

Subject: The Election of the President

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

Grace and peace to you through our Lord Jesus Christ!

The undersigned, former members of the Commission on Constitutional Matters (CCM) of the Synod, representing almost 30 combined years of service through the 2013 Convention, are compelled by Christ's love and a life lived for Him (2 Cor. 5:14-15) to write to you words of encouragement and words of concern as you prepare to cast a vote for electing the President of the Synod:

- **We encourage all congregations to sense the urgency.** The Synod is facing the danger of a shift in ecclesiastical supervision authority that would jeopardize what the Constitution says are the primary objectives of the Synod. Included in those objectives are to "provide evangelical supervision, counsel, and care for pastors, teachers, and other professional church workers of the Synod in the performance of their official duties" and to "provide protection for such members of the Synod and the maintenance of their rights." (Art. III) The Dispute Resolution Task Force, created unilaterally by the President and whose members were named by him, recommends the President or the Praesidium be given Ecclesiastical Supervision over individual members instead of the District Presidents as provided in the Constitution Article XII.
- **The urgency** is reflected in other Articles of the Constitution: Art. II, the Confession of our church; Art. III, the objectives and purpose (such as unity, witness and missions in addition to the above); Art. XI, the duties of the President; Art. XII, the jurisdiction of the Districts of the Synod and the District Presidents (Ecclesiastical Supervision); Art. XIII, expulsion from the Synod.
- **We are concerned** that President Harrison, having initially expressed concerns about the concentration of power in the Office of the President caused by the structural changes adopted by the Synod in 2010, has now abandoned that position and is actively attempting to aggregate even more power in the Office of the President.
- **We are concerned** about President Harrison's encouragement of attempts to restrict the right and responsibility of congregations and individual members to engage in mission work without interference, obstruction and even prohibition by the Synod, when the role of the Synod as set forth in our Constitution is to encourage and facilitate such witness.
- **The urgency** is demonstrated by 2010 Convention Res. 8-30B requiring a Synod-wide study of Article VI, acquiring and holding membership (important in disputes, dissent and expulsion) and by Res. 8-32B requiring a study of Article VII, the advisory nature of Synod and the self-government of its congregations. These studies (biblical, confessional and historical) are needed for the unity and harmony of the Synod and to undergird present and future actions of the Synod, its congregations, pastors and commissioned ministers that are in accord with the Synod's Constitution. Regrettably, these studies, remanded to the President of the Synod, have not been implemented.

The urgency of these studies was apparent to the President as he requested a consultation with the CCM regarding the studies on September 4, 2011. The urgency was made palpable in the resolution of an urgent and potentially explosive matter in the 2013 convention, as the CCM set aside the application of an opinion (Opinion 11-2598 by adopting Opinion 13-2682) based on the commitment by President Harrison that he would prioritize the studies mandated by 2010 Res. 8-30B and 8-32B, and assured their completion by the 2016 convention. That commitment has not been fulfilled.

- **We are concerned** that President Harrison is actively supporting efforts to impose a form of "closed communion" inconsistent with Synod's historical practices even before completing the study of Article VI of Synod's Constitution. This is in direct contradiction to the President's promise to the CCM, as part of the discussion leading to the CCM's decision to suspend its Opinion 11-2598, that the Synod will fully study Article VI before this issue of "closed communion" would ever be presented to a convention for consideration.
- **We encourage all congregations (two votes) to vote.** As ones who spent countless hours understanding the history of our Synod as well as interpreting and reviewing the Constitution, Bylaws and Resolutions of Synod, we realize fully that voting for the President engages the congregations and pastors in determining the mission direction of the Synod. For the first 25 years of our Synod every congregation was engaged directly in voting. From 1874 to 2010, only representatives of a group of congregations were engaged in voting for a President. Now through modern technology, the congregations are engaged directly again.
- **We encourage all of us to pray** (including prayers this Sunday in worship) that whoever will be elected as President by the congregations of the Synod will not only have [Letters From] a Pastor's Heart (a book written recently by Matthew C. Harrison, with a cover letter listing its transmission as Easter 2016, but which was mailed just a few days ago by *Balance Concord* to every congregation in the Synod to arrive just before the election of our President) but an evangelical Christ-centered mission heart that will also act in accordance with Synod's Constitution (our covenant), see to it that the Resolutions of the Synod are indeed carried out, and provide leadership for the unity and mission of the church.

As former members of the CCM, we lived these urgencies, concerns and burdens as we served with gratitude a church that desires to be faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ and His mission. Thank you for the privilege of pouring out our hearts.

In Christ's love,



Rev. Dr. Wilbert Sohns



Rev. Philip J. Esala



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