

About our Synod Convention

As a new pastor, I am not yet well-versed in Missouri Synod politics. However, it behooves me to pay attention to what is happening in our synod, and keep my congregation informed.

Missouri Synod conventions have historically been held every three years. However, the Covid pandemic forced the postponement all district conventions and the synod convention by one year. Therefore, last month on July 30, the 68th convention of the Missouri Synod began in Milwaukee, one year behind schedule.

Historically, elections for synod president were held during the convention. But according to a recent procedural change, presidential elections are now held before the convention. This year the election for synod president was held electronically in June, and President Matthew Harrison was re-elected on the first ballot with a 52% majority. We give thanks for his faithful service as our president since 2010, and we pray that God would grant him wisdom in all he says and does in this new term.

The first order of business once the convention began was the election of synodical officers. There was very little changing of the guard, and every incumbent vice-president was re-elected to serve. Rev. Peter Lange was re-elected as the first vice-president of synod, and Rev. Benjamin Ball was elected as second vice-president. I have met both of these men, and along with President Harrison, I believe they are excellent servants of the church.

International church relations was the first major topic at the convention. Synod delegates voted to recognize altar and pulpit fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Sudan/Sudan and the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland. The convention then declared fellowship with the Lutheran Church of Uganda and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ukraine. Finally, the convention recognized the Ceylon Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sri Lanka as a self-governing, full partner church of the LCMS. In a stirring moment, Bishop Serge Maschewski of Ukraine presented President Harrison with a damaged military helmet, originally donated by the LCMS, which had saved his life while traveling in a convoy that was attacked.

However, for only the second time in LCMS history, delegates also recognized that altar and pulpit fellowship with another church body had been broken by false doctrine and practice. By an impressive majority vote of 94.5%, delegates recognized the end of fellowship with the Japan Lutheran Church (JLC). Despite repeated calls for repentance in recent years, the JLC has persisted in ordaining two female deacons and teaching and practicing open communion. By rejecting sound doctrine, the JLC has effectively already broken fellowship with us, so that we are now forced to recognize the division.

The most controversial debate at the convention dealt with issues surrounding Concordia University Texas and the broader Concordia system. Concordia Texas is currently attempting to separate its governance from the synod, contrary to the bylaws of synod, in an apparent move to avoid the synod's doctrinal oversight. In April of this year, President Harrison conducted an official visit of Concordia Texas, finding that the university has become Lutheran in name only. It prefers to follow its own path of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion, inviting non-Lutheran chapel speakers, and focusing on church growth rather than Lutheran identity. Therefore, 72% of the delegates voted to rebuke Concordia Texas, calling it to repent and reconcile with the synod.

More broadly, the entire Concordia system has been dealing with demographic changes. A majority of Concordia students and faculty are no longer Lutheran, and their social culture has drifted away from their original Lutheran identity. Therefore, several resolutions dealt with providing proper ecclesiastical oversight to the Concordia universities and addressing their financial and governance structure. A major revision to the synod bylaws was passed to strengthen the connection of the universities to the synod and their confessional Lutheran identity. Our synod has every right to maintain doctrinal oversight over its universities, and we give thanks that it is continuing to do so.

Several convention resolutions also dealt with the aftermath of Covid. A resolution was passed that strongly endorsed the return to in-person corporate worship, and another resolution condemned the awful practice of online communion which was introduced during Covid by some congregations.

In the past year, there has been an extensive online debate about white nationalist individuals in the Missouri Synod. A couple of resolutions were passed regarding online civility and conflict resolution, and racism of all forms was condemned, including white nationalism, critical race theory, and Black Lives Matter. Other contemporary issues were also discussed, and the synod's teachings on closed communion and biblical sexuality were strongly reaffirmed.

The last major focus of the convention was pastoral formation. Resolutions were passed to strengthen the synod's commitment to the proper seminary training of clergy, in the face of a severe shortage of new pastors coming from the seminaries compared to the number of vacant congregations. Resolutions focused on improving the pipeline of candidates and alternative paths to ordination (like the Specific Ministry Program and distance-learning programs). The emphasis was on encouraging prospective pastors to pursue on-campus residential programs at the seminaries, rather than looking for shortcuts to ordination.

In conclusion, although it may often seem like our synod is a cumbersome and slow-moving bureaucracy, and although the actions it takes are often symbolic, it is clear from the recent synodical convention that our current leaders are faithful churchmen who seek to walk according to the word of God. We should continue to pray for them and support them in their work. And we should give thanks for God's grace to our church, praying that he would preserve us steadfastly in our confession for many years to come.

Yours in Christ,

Pastor Wagner