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Quo Vadis, LCMS? Wine Women Worship Witness Warfare

Gerald B. Kieschnick

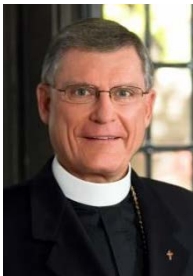
Editor's Note: This article was first presented as a sectional workshop February 26, 2015 at Best Practices for Ministry Conference at Christ Church Lutheran in Phoenix. It has been revised and updated for publication in this periodical.

Abstract: During the past 53 years, I've served The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as elementary school teacher, vicar, pastor, mission developer, development officer, foundation chief executive, district president, and national president. Those responsibilities have brought joy, fulfillment, frustration, and disappointment.

Throughout those years, I've experienced the strength, beauty, and weakness of our church body. In this article I share, from my heart, my perspectives on matters that hinder the health and growth of our beloved synod. I pray this offering will stimulate healthy, responsible, evangelical conversation among us, to the glory of God and the building of His Church on earth.

Throughout much of our Synod's almost 170-year history, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has been a living and vibrant church. But are we as alive and vital today as we ought to be? Will the church we hand down to our children and grandchildren be as strong as the one our parents and grandparents gave to us?

For more than the past half century, our church has been shrinking in size and relevance. Total membership in the congregations of our Synod has fallen by some



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700,000 people over the past fifty years. This decline appears even more significant in light of the statistical realities. For example, the fewer than 2,000,000 LCMS members comprise:

- Approximately 3% of the world's 74 million Lutherans
- Approximately 0.6% (6/10th of one percent) of the U.S. population of 324.6 million
- Approximately 0.1% (1/10th of one percent) of the world's 2.25 billion Christians
- Approximately 0.03% (3/100th of one percent) of the world's 7.3 billion people

Essentially, when the LCMS speaks, not many people are listening or even know we exist!

In this article I'll share with you my thoughts about the future of our church body, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, in light of the question “Quo Vadis, LCMS?”

Those in my generation and perhaps some younger than I will recall that *Quo Vadis?* was a 1951 epic film starring Robert Taylor and Deborah Kerr in roles originally cast in 1949 with Gregory Peck and Elizabeth Taylor.

The action takes place in ancient Rome from AD 64–68, a period after Emperor Claudius' illustrious and powerful reign during which the corrupt and destructive Emperor Nero ascends to power and eventually threatens to destroy Rome's previously peaceful order.

The main plot is the conflict between Christianity and the corruption of the Roman Empire. The characters and events depicted are a mixture of actual historical figures and situations and fictionalized ones.

While saying nothing more about the movie, I hasten to note that it is the title of the movie that intrigues me greatly: *Quo Vadis?* Where are you going?

When I hear that question, I think about the church body of my birth, baptism, elementary education, confirmation, marriage, seminary education, ordination, and, some day, my rite of Christian burial. And I ask the question: “Quo Vadis, LCMS?” “Where are you going, Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod?”

Let me begin with my grandparents. Both my maternal and paternal grandfathers and grandmothers lived in this country at a time when its claim to be a Christian country was much different and perhaps much more accurate than that same claim today. They belonged to South Texas LCMS congregations full of faithful people of God who did not face the multifaceted challenges that confront congregations today, including the ones to which you and I belong.

Lots of things have changed in the past fifty years. And more changes are sure to come! Those changes will continue to have significant impact on our church of tomorrow.

Succinctly stated, I believe the greatest challenge we face in the LCMS is transitioning from an orthodox, evangelical, confessional, Christian, Lutheran church in what once was a *heterodox Christian culture* to what I believe we must become, namely, an orthodox, evangelical, confessional, Christian, Lutheran church passionately engaging with the Gospel *a culture indifferent or even hostile to Christianity*.

One example should suffice: Terry and I are active members of Zion Lutheran Church in Walburg, Texas. When Zion was first organized 137 years ago in 1880, the founding pastor gathered all the German Lutherans he could find and helped organize them into a Lutheran Christian congregation. His message to the newly formed congregation was expressed in these words: “The greatest enemy we have to face is German Methodism!”

While we could articulate a number of differences we still have today with our Methodist friends, I submit they are not our greatest enemies today. How about Islam, Hinduism, Atheism, Gnosticism, Mormonism, Narcissism, and apathetic indifference for starters?

When considering the future of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and how our church body needs to acknowledge, face, and accomplish this transition, no topic is of greater importance than what we believe, teach, confess, and practice. In this article, I intend respectfully and humbly to identify and briefly discuss five topics of greatest significance in that regard. I’m calling these topics Wine/Women/Worship/Witness/Warfare.

The greatest challenge we face in the LCMS is transitioning from an orthodox, evangelical, confessional, Christian, Lutheran church in what once was a *heterodox Christian culture* to what I believe we must become, namely, an orthodox, evangelical, confessional, Christian, Lutheran church passionately engaging with the Gospel *a culture indifferent or even hostile to Christianity*.

I. Wine: The Practice of Admission to the Lord’s Supper

How we view the Lord’s Supper is one of the greatest difficulties we face in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod when it comes to achieving internal harmony and reaching people outside our church. The Sacrament of Holy Communion, also called

the Lord's Supper, the Last Supper, and the Sacrament of the Altar, is a sacramental meal in which God's grace is freely offered to those who receive it.

It saddens me greatly that this means or vehicle in which the body and blood of our Lord are received has become a source of division and offense rather than the expression of unity and the powerful force for conversion and spiritual sustenance it is intended to be.

While there is widespread agreement in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod regarding the *doctrine* of the Lord's Supper, there is also significant *disagreement* regarding its *administration*, specifically, who should be allowed at, invited, and even encouraged to approach the altar of our Lord. Such disagreement hampers the growth and threatens the unity of the LCMS.

It saddens me greatly that this means or vehicle in which the body and blood of our Lord are received has become a source of division and offense rather than the expression of unity and the powerful force for conversion and spiritual sustenance it is intended to be.

Holy Scripture speaks about the blessings of the Lord's Supper, warns against receiving the sacrament unworthily, and places the responsibility for proper reception upon the individual communicant. Holy Scripture says, "Let a man examine himself and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup."

Consider these simple statements regarding this precious sacrament:

1. The body and blood of Christ are truly and miraculously present in, with, and under the bread and wine of Holy Communion. (Real Presence)
2. The Lord's Supper is a wonderful gift of God through which forgiveness and undeserved love in Christ are received by each believing communicant. (Means of Grace)

These biblically based understandings are widely affirmed in the LCMS. Yet application of these principles varies widely among us.

Here's some of what the LCMS in national convention has said on the practice of what once was mostly called "close" but in recent years has been called "closed" communion:

- (1967 Res. 2-19) "Pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, except in situations of emergency and in special cases of pastoral care, [should] commune individuals of only those synods which are now in fellowship with us."
- (1981 Res. 3-01) "The LCMS has long encouraged its congregations and pastors in extraordinary circumstances to provide responsible pastoral care, including the administration of Holy Communion to Christians who are members of denominations not in fellowship with the LCMS."

- (1986 Res. 3-08) “The practice of close communion seeks to prevent both harmful reception of the Sacrament as well as a profession of unity in confession in faith where this unity does not exist.”
- (1986 Res. 3-08) “Pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod [should] continue to abide by the practice of close communion, which includes the necessity of exercising responsible pastoral care in extraordinary situations and circumstances.”
- (1995 Res. 3-08) The LCMS should “beseech one another in love to remember that situations of emergency and special cases of pastoral care or extraordinary situations and circumstances are, by their nature, relatively rare.”
- (2007 Res. 3-09) The Synod in convention has recognized the continuing need for a uniform practice in keeping with our declared commitments to the positions of the Synod and that “the contemporary application of our historic position necessitates continued practical guidance for the faithful administration of the Sacrament.”

Is anything unclear about these convention resolutions? Unfortunately, yes. Simply stated, the vacillating perspectives of these and other resolutions clearly reflect the differing opinions of the particular men and women who are elected as delegates to each of our national conventions every three years. The resolutions quoted were adopted by a simple majority vote. In some cases the majority was stronger than in others. In all cases, roughly 1,200 delegates have essentially established our Synod’s position on a number of matters of doctrine and practice that the remaining minority of delegates, together with all LCMS congregations, ordained ministers, and commissioned ministers of the Gospel are expected to honor, uphold, and practice. That’s not a good way to establish doctrine and practice in matters of importance such as Holy Communion.

The LCMS Constitution says: “All matters of doctrine and of conscience shall be decided only by the Word of God. All other matters shall be decided by a majority vote. In case of a tie vote the President may cast the deciding vote.” (LCMS Const. Art. VIII. C.)

The Constitution also says: “In its relation to its members the Synod is not an ecclesiastical government exercising legislative or coercive powers, and with respect to the individual congregation’s right of self-government it is but an advisory body. Accordingly, no resolution of the Synod imposing anything upon the individual congregation is of binding force if it is not in accordance with the Word of God or if it appears to be inexpedient as far as the condition of a congregation is concerned.” (LCMS Const. Art. VII.1.)

Much of the disagreement in our church body results from differences in individual and congregational understanding of what Scripture does or does not say about requirements for communing at altars of our LCMS congregations and from

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differing interpretation of statements in our Synod's governing documents and convention resolutions. Consider that reality in light of what I wrote in *Waking the Sleeping Giant* (CPH-2010):

- “Unfortunately, the desired uniform practice [in the administration of Holy Communion] has not been achieved, mainly, in my humble opinion and broad experience, due to the different understanding of individual pastors and congregations of our Synod regarding the meaning of ‘responsible pastoral care,’ ‘extraordinary situations and circumstances,’ and under what circumstances pastors and congregations of the Synod should involve themselves in ‘the administration of Holy Communion to Christians who are members of denominations not in fellowship with the LCMS’ (48).
- “We must be very careful in the administration of this Holy Sacrament. We certainly must not ‘cast pearls before the swine’ (Matt. 7:6). We must also constantly consider and always recognize that it is a means of God’s grace in the lives of repentant sinners, not a reward to be given or withheld for reasons that go beyond the clear teaching of Holy Scripture” (50).
- “We believe, teach, and confess that the Spirit works, whenever and wherever He chooses, through the means of grace. Our task ultimately is not to keep people away from the means of grace, but to connect people to those means, faithfully bringing people into contact with God’s Word and Sacraments” (50).
- “A responsible practice of admission to the Sacrament avoids two errors:
 1. *Opening* LCMS altars to anyone who wants to commune, regardless of what an individual personally believes, teaches, or confesses; or,
 2. *Closing* LCMS altars to anyone (including an LCMS member) who is not a member of a specific congregation or to an individual, who may be a non-LCMS Christian, in a situation requiring the exercise of ‘responsible pastoral care’” (50).

My respectful request is that we reexamine and reconsider the specific biblical requirements for proper reception of the Lord’s Supper. Consider this example: A Christian person, whether or not a member of the LCMS, *participates sincerely*, with a believing heart, in a worship service at an LCMS congregation. That service includes confession of sin (which is in actuality self-examination), absolution (which pronounces forgiveness of sin), proclamation of the Word of God, public creedal profession of faith, and an explanation, printed or verbal, of the nature and benefit of the sacrament. What biblical basis exists for that person to be told that he or she is not welcome at the table of the Lord?

Historically our Synod has said that proper reception of the Lord's Supper by the person described above requires agreement with LCMS doctrine and practice. I believe it would be very difficult for many pastors to state with absolute assurance that every member of their congregation, even those in good standing, agrees with every aspect of LCMS doctrine and practice.

The key scriptural requirement for proper reception, as stated above, is 1 Cor 11:28–29: “Each one must examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup without honoring the body of Christ, eats and drinks God's judgment upon himself.”

Paul goes on to say that God's judgment falls upon a person for “not discerning the body.” He quickly adds that such judgment includes weakness, sickness, and even physical death but does not include eternal condemnation (v. 32).

Martin Luther summarizes this matter well in these quotations from his Large Catechism:

- “We do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come.”
- “We go to the sacrament because we receive there a great treasure, through and in which we obtain the forgiveness of sins.”
- “He is worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: ‘Given and shed for you for the remission of sins.’”
- “We have a clear text in the words of Christ, ‘*Do this* in remembrance of me.’ These are words of precept and command, enjoining all who would be Christians to partake of the sacrament.”
- “Those who are shameless and unruly must be told to stay away, for they are not fit to receive the forgiveness of sins since they do not desire it and do not want to be good. The others, who are not so callous and dissolute but would like to be good, should not absent themselves, even though in other respects they are weak and frail.”
- “He who earnestly desires grace and consolation should compel himself to go and allow no one to deter him.”
- “They alone are unworthy who neither feel their infirmities nor admit to being sinners.”
- “He is truly worthy and well prepared who believes these words: ‘given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.’” (Martin Luther, “Fourth Part: Concerning Baptism” in *The Large Catechism* in Kolb-Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000], 456–467.)

Consider also this statement: “We believe, teach, and confess that no true believer—as long as he has living faith, however weak he may be—receives the Holy Supper to his judgment. For the Supper was instituted especially for Christians weak in faith, yet repentant. It was instituted for their consolation and to strengthen their weak faith [Matthew 9:12; 11:5, 28].” (Formula of Concord, Epitome, VII: “Concerning the Holy Supper of Christ.” Affirmative Theses 9 [paragraph 19] in Kolb-Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000], 506.)

Recall also the words of Franz August Otto Pieper, fourth President of the LCMS: “Christian congregations, and their public servants, are only the administrators and not lords of the Sacrament. . . . On the one hand, they are not permitted to introduce ‘Open Communion’; on the other hand, they must guard against denying the Sacrament to those Christians for whom Christ has appointed it.” (Christian Dogmatics, III, p. 381).

Finally, these words from St. Paul: “*So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another—if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come*” (1 Cor 11:33–34 ESV).

Unless and until we resolve the issue of what is called “close” or “closed” communion among us, the LCMS will continue to be seen as a group of separatistic sectarians and will continue to bring unnecessary offense to repentant Christian sinners who hunger and thirst after the miraculous and life-giving blessings offered in this precious sacrament.

Stay tuned for an exegetical paper on this topic currently in the process of completion.

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II. Women

The 1969 decision of the Synod to grant woman suffrage summarized the Synod’s historic position on the ordination of women with this statement:

Those statements of Scripture which direct women to keep silent in the church and which prohibit them to teach and to exercise authority over men, we understand to mean that women ought not to hold the pastoral office or serve in any other capacity involving the distinctive functions of this office.

With specific reference to this statement, the Synod has reaffirmed its position on this issue at no fewer than five of its conventions (1971, 1977, 1986, 1989, and 1998).

- 1969 Res. 2-17 “To Grant Woman Suffrage and Board Membership”
- 1971 Res. 2-04 “To Withhold Ordination of Women to the Pastoral Office”
- 1977 Res. 3-15 “To Reaffirm the Synod’s Position on Women with Reference to the Pastoral Office”
- 1986 Res. 3-09 “To Reaffirm Position of LCMS on Service of Women in the Church”
- 1986 Res. 3-10 “To Reaffirm Position of Synod on Ordination of Women”
- 1989 Res. 3-13A “To Study and Clarify Services of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices”
- 1998 Res. 3-25A “To Affirm Position of Synod that Only Men May Hold the Pastoral Office”

On a slightly different note, the 2004 convention adopted Res. 3-08A: “To Encourage Service of Women in the Church.”

In *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, adopted as an official doctrinal statement in 1973, nearly forty-five years ago, the Synod referred to the issue of women’s ordination (The Gospel and Holy Scripture). The Synod rejected as a distortion of the relationship between the Gospel and the Bible the following: “That the Gospel, rather than Scripture, is the norm for appraising and judging all doctrines and teachers (as, for example, when a decision on the permissibility of ordaining women into the pastoral office is made on the basis of the ‘Gospel’ rather than on the teaching of Scripture as such)” (3).

With respect to the role of women in general, the Synod rejected the following view (The Infallibility of Scripture): “That the Biblical authors accommodated themselves to using and repeating as true the erroneous notions of their day (for example, the claim that Paul’s statements on the role of women in the church are not binding today because they are the culturally conditioned result of the apostle’s sharing the views of contemporary Judaism as a child of his time)” (5).

Interestingly in that regard, Synod in convention has not officially said much, if anything, about other also verbally inspired statements from the pen of the apostle Paul regarding the authoritative nature of those “culturally conditioned” statements of the apostle about the length of women’s hair, the wearing of excessive jewelry, etc.

The same is true with the meaning of his injunction that women be silent in church and to ask their husbands if they have any questions. We obviously have not literally complied with that directive, seeing that women are allowed and encouraged to pray, to sing, and to confess the creeds in church, to attend voters’ assemblies, and

to serve in various congregational offices. In addition, as is quite obvious, not every woman in the church has a husband.

If Paul's statements on the role of women in the church are binding today, why then would not his statements on other aspects of the attire or behavior of women also be binding today? Throughout the history of the church, including the LCMS, many have undertaken the task of answering this question, including reference to other portions of Scripture. The reality remains that the question of how to interpret what Paul says about women is one that continues to be begged.

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An additional thought on this topic: For years I've been saying, publicly, that the LCMS should explore the clearly biblical (both Old and New Testament) office of prophetess. My conviction is that if a prophet is a spokesman for God, a prophetess must be a spokeswoman for God. So, what would the office of prophetess, whether it's specifically called that or not, look like in today's church and world?

How the LCMS answers these questions could have a direct and significant influence on the health and growth of the Synod in the years ahead. We must carefully examine all of what Holy Scripture says about the role of women in the church, not simply appealing to "the order of creation." That concept is difficult to reconcile with other Scriptural statements such as: Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Consider also the crystal clear words of Peter in Acts 2: "This [the outpouring of the Spirit that you have just witnessed at Pentecost] is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; *even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.*'" (Joel 2:28–29, emphasis added)

Those "last days" must have referred to what was happening at the Festival of Pentecost just after the ascension of Jesus into heaven. Peter uses the Old Testament reference to explain the biblical reason for what the devout Jews living in Jerusalem perceived was the result of early morning inebriation. His response was an effort to dissuade the Pentecost critics from believing that those who had received the gift of the Holy Spirit (sons and daughters, male servants and female servants) were drunk already at nine o'clock in the morning.

What I'm arguing for is not a *de facto* reversal of our Synod's long-standing position against ordination of women to the pastoral office. I'm simply saying that women in Holy Scripture appear to have been entrusted with greater responsibility than our Synod has thus far given to women today. Consider the significant roles of Deborah, Mary Magdalene, Anna, Lydia, Priscilla, Euodia, Syntyche, and, arguably, Junia.

We simply cannot and must not ignore the exodus from our church body of spiritually gifted women who see our position of limiting the role of women as, at best, not clearly supported by Scripture and, at worst, misogynistic.

Recognizing that God has bestowed unique gifts "upon both men and women of the church, the priesthood of believers" and that "the Synod has not yet utilized the service of women to the fullest extent in the life and work of the church," the Synod stated in 1989 Res. 3-04A: "That the Synod recognize with thanksgiving all of God's gifts to His church, in particular the gift of people" and "That the Synod encourage districts and congregations to make full appropriate use of the ministry and service of women."

Many would say, and I would agree, that we have a long way to go in this regard.

III. Worship

So-called "worship wars" have been going on for a goodly number of years in our church body. During my childhood years at St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Houston, we used exclusively The Lutheran Hymnal of 1941, which was published only two years before I hit the ground. It was the "new" hymnal back in those days. I could, and still can, sing without the aid of the book itself all the major orders of worship, including the Order of Service without Holy Communion on p. 5, the Order of Service with Holy Communion on p. 15, and the Order of Matins on p. 32. That's all we ever used as I was growing up.

While I still to this day have a healthy respect and love for those orders of worship, as I look back upon that experience, I have to admit recalling a sense of monotony with the constant repetition of the same liturgy virtually every Sunday of my life. Notwithstanding the highly qualified musicians with which our congregation

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was bountifully blessed in those days, I simply found the repetitive order of worship a bit less than exciting or spiritually refreshing.

In 1982 the introduction of Lutheran Worship, the so-called “new” hymnal, was intended to spice things up a bit but had many drawbacks. Later, as Synod president, I presided over the 2004 national LCMS convention at which Lutheran Service Book was officially accepted, as well as much of the process preceding its publication and adoption. I’m happy to say it has been widely received and is being widely used. Truth be known, sales of LSB added greatly to the fiscal stability of Concordia Publishing House!

During the years between TLH and LSB, other less formal worship rites began to be used in our circles. “Contemporary” worship had its roots in folk music, the Chicago Mass, etc., and has transitioned in and out of several musical genres, mostly utilizing non-organic musical instruments like guitar, drums, keyboard, and, in what are called “Bluegrass” or “Gospel” services, banjo, fiddle, and harmonica. That trend has grown in recent years.

Frankly, my personal taste in forms of worship is a bit schizophrenic. I still love a well done traditional liturgy. I also love a well done contemporary or blended service. Notice the common ingredient? Well done!

The factors that satisfy that requirement include hymn or song selection and tempo of instrumentalists, whose primary task is to aid group or congregational singing, not performance or entertainment, whether the musicians in question comprise an orchestra or a praise band. Trying to sing a hard or difficult or impossible hymn, whether from LSB or not, is downright frustrating! Singing what has not-so-lovingly been referred to as a “7/11” song—seven words repeated 11 times—is equally frustrating!

For the record, it’s my firm conviction that whether traditional, liturgical, blended, or contemporary in form, a Christian worship service absolutely needs to integrate certain essential elements. That includes reading of Holy Scripture, confession and absolution, prayer, proclamation, and public creedal statement of faith. It’s also a pretty good idea to include opportunity for the people of God to present gifts that represent an offering of thanksgiving to God for His bountiful blessings. Whether via a traditional offering plate or using any of many electronic forms, people need to be encouraged to enjoy the hilarity of giving God says He loves (2 Cor. 9:7).

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Toward the end of my time in the International Center, my staff and I put together a document titled “This We Believe—Faith and Practice in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod” (CPH–2010). It provides a succinct summary of formal actions taken by the LCMS in convention on forty-eight topics, from Abortion to Worship. Here’s what the Synod has said about the subject of worship:

The Synod has encouraged its congregations (1992 Convention Proceedings, Res. 2-02) to give their “worship life . . . the highest priority” and has urged that “all worship (liturgies, sermons, songs, prayers, etc.) conducted within the Synod . . .

1. be Christ-centered and not human-centered;
2. distinguish properly between Law and Gospel;
3. emphasize the Gospel of Christ’s forgiveness; and
4. be faithful to the Word of God and in harmony with our Lutheran Confessions” (109–110).

Three of the five resolutions since 1992 that deal with worship refer to an “Objective” of the Synod in the LCMS Constitution that deals with worship practice. Article III.7. states:

“The Synod, under Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, shall . . .

7. Encourage congregations to strive for uniformity in church practice, but also to develop an appreciation of a variety of responsible practices and customs which are in harmony with our common profession of faith.”

The other two resolutions call for further study, discussion, and guidance regarding the use and development of diverse worship resources and practices that are consistent with “our common profession of faith.”

So what’s the big deal? Simply this: Some in our Synod maintain that the only true and pure worship must come exclusively from officially approved Synod hymnals. In LSB that includes a number of renditions of “Divine Worship.” Others obviously disagree.

The disagreement is not always collegial or congenial. It has even come to the point that candidates for appointment to certain positions of significance in the Synod, its agencies and institutions are not approved for service if they are affiliated with congregations that use anything but officially adopted worship resources.

Of significant import is the statistical reality that congregations utilizing a variety of worship formats are experiencing an amazingly high percentage of all new adult confirmations in the Synod. The implications of such objective facts cannot be ignored.

For me, the issue of worship is resolved in passages of Holy Scripture such as Psalm 150:

- ¹ Praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens.
- ² Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness.

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- ³ Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet; praise him with the harp and lyre;
⁴ praise him with tambourine and dancing; praise him with the strings and flute;
⁵ praise him with the clash of cymbals; praise him with resounding cymbals.
⁶ Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!

IV. Witness

Witness is one part of the current LCMS emphasis: Witness, Mercy, Life Together. Witness is a word that means different things to different people. The New Testament is full of a variety of uses of this word. The most powerful is in the words of Jesus to His apostles just before His ascension: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Some of our pastors and congregations spend much time and energy in motivating parishioners to speak boldly and to give witness of their faith. That was a huge part of the Ablaze movement, officially approved by the LCMS convention in 2004 as a synodical emphasis until 2017. Not much mention of this movement has been made in recent years.

What has made headlines, both parochially and publicly, is the matter of witness being offered by two LCMS pastors, both following times of unthinkable tragedy in our nation. Dr. David Benke offered a public prayer at an event called “A Prayer for America,” convened by then Mayor of New York City, Rudolph Giuliani. The event was held at Yankee Stadium on September 23, 2001, just twelve days after the terrorism of 9/11.

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Then, more than a decade later, Rev. Rob Morris, pastor of Christ the King Lutheran Church in Newtown, CT, was told to apologize to those who were upset or offended by his participation in a December 16, 2013, vigil at Newtown High School. The vigil was held following the traumatic shooting of twenty-six young elementary school children. Pastor Morris’ participation was offering a benediction that came straight from the pages of Holy Scripture.

Needless to say, the reaction of many people in both instances was incredulity. Most were embarrassed and offended that high-ranking officials and others, almost all clergy, found fault with pastors who were trying to bring hope and healing to some of the millions of people whose hearts were shattered by the manifestations of evil that took the lives of innocent men, women, and children.

Neither pastor was told before the event in which they participated what to say or not to say. Both pastors reflected in their words the comfort of the God we worship—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Not insignificantly, both pastors were acting well within the parameters of a document commended by the 2001 LCMS convention for “use and guidance.” I was not in office at the time Pastor Morris gave his witness, so I can’t speak directly to that circumstance. But I was in office when Dr. Benke gave his witness. Having received his assurance not only once but twice that the invitation to pray did not in any way include a restriction on his Christian witness, I offered my counsel that our pastors “may for valid and good reason” participate in such an event.

My counsel was based, in large part, on “The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship: A Report on Synodical Discussions.” This document was part of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations end-of-triennium report to the 2001 LCMS Convention (Appendix R3-01A, pp. 48–51 of the 2001 Convention Workbook).

At that 2001 Convention, the “Report on Synodical Discussions” and its accompanying “Study Materials” of 2001 were “commended by the Synod for use and guidance” (Res. 3-07A). That Convention action provided specific guidance for my position on Dr. Benke’s act of public witness. Here are the pertinent portions:

Pastors, teachers, and other officially recognized church workers are often asked to participate in activities outside of their own and other LCMS congregations. Some of these are civic events. Offering prayers, speaking, and reading Scripture at events sponsored by governments, public schools and volunteer organizations would be a problem if the organization in charge restricted a Christian witness. For instance, if an invitation requires a pastor to pray to God without mentioning Jesus, he cannot in good conscience accept.

Without such a restriction, a Lutheran pastor may for valid and good reason participate in civic affairs such as an inauguration, graduation or a right-to-life activity. These occasions may provide opportunity to witness to the Gospel. Pastors may have honest differences of opinion about whether or to what extent it is appropriate or helpful to participate in these or similar civic events. In these cases charity must prevail.

There are also ‘once-in-a-life-time’ situations. It is virtually impossible to anticipate all such situations or to establish rules in advance. Specific answers cannot be given to cover every type of situation pastors and congregations face. These situations can be evaluated only on a case-by-case basis and may evoke different responses from different pastors who may be equally committed to LCMS fellowship principles. The LCMS has always recognized this.

In November 2001, the President of the Synod (yours truly) asked the CTCR to prepare guidelines for participation in civic events that would specifically address the “participation of LCMS pastors, teachers and church workers in ‘civic events’ . . . which also involve participation from non-Christian religions.” The CTCR, in April 2004, adopted and distributed to the Synod its report titled “Guidelines for Participation in Civic Events” [GPCE].

At its 2004 convention (Res. 3-06A), the Synod took the following position regarding this report: “That we [the Synod in convention] commend the CTCR’s report, ‘Guidelines for Participation in Civic Events’ for study to help pastors, teachers, and church workers make decisions about participation in civic events.”

Following this “Resolved,” the Synod commended the CTCR’s report for study to help the members of the Synod make decisions regarding participation in civic events:

1. That faithfully reflect our unqualified commitment to the absolute truth of the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God;
2. That seek to take full advantage of every legitimate opportunity to proclaim clearly in the public realm that “only in and through Jesus do we have the definitive revelation of the true and only God,” that God “is known as Father and Savior only through Spirit-wrought faith in Jesus Christ,” and that “only the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is the object of our worship and the hope of our salvation” (GCPE, p. 8);
3. That honor and uphold the free and willing commitments we have made by virtue of our membership in the Synod;
4. That demonstrate concern and sensitivity for how participation (or non-participation) in civic events may be perceived by those inside and outside of the LCMS; and
5. That recognize that “clarity in doctrine and practice and charity in our dealings with one another are both essential to the church’s life and witness” (GPCE, p. 23). (“306-A To Commend CTCR Report on Guidelines for Participation in Civic Events” [GPCE], 2004 Convention Proceedings [St. Louis, MO: LCMS], 132–133.)

It is clear to me from Holy Scripture that faithful public Christian witness is God-pleasing and can be eternally life changing. Biblical examples abound, including the three men in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3), Daniel in the lions’ den (Daniel 6), the apostles Peter and John (Acts 4–5), and the apostle Paul before Agrippa and Festus (Acts 26). These are powerful examples of many stories in the Bible of God-fearing people who literally risked their lives by testifying publicly to the truth that there is only one God, who has revealed Himself in Holy Scripture as the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Does the Christian faith have anything to say to people, both Christian and non-Christian, in such times? Of course, it does! Do we Christians have the God-given responsibility to share our faith, with both Christians and non-Christians, in such times of difficulty and disaster? Of course, we do! Will God-fearing Christians differ in their understanding of how, when, and where such faith sharing and witness giving should occur? Quite obviously, yes, indeed! Do we compromise our faith when we pray at gatherings in which individuals from other denominations or religions also pray? Not if our prayer is clear, faithful, and unequivocally Christocentric and/or Trinitarian!

I have an unwavering conviction regarding the absolute necessity of being prepared to share our faith in all circumstances, especially at public gatherings, in a way that leaves no doubt or question about the nature of that faith. There must be no compromise, no apology, no confusion about our Christian witness whenever we have the opportunity to share it by “offering prayers, speaking, and reading Scripture” in public gatherings.

To the argument that praying *in the presence* of members of non-Christian religions implies praying *with* those non-Christians to the deity they are addressing I simply but significantly point to the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18. The 450 false prophets prayed to their god, who never answered. Elijah prayed to the true God, who answered immediately and powerfully!

It makes no sense to maintain that Elijah was guilty of syncretism or praying to a false god because he prayed in the same gathering at which the prophets of Baal were also present! Does anyone really believe Elijah was praying to Baal simply by being at the same place at the same time as those who absolutely were praying to a false god?

I hasten to state my additional conviction that to avoid or bypass opportunities like Dr. Benke and Pastor Morris had is unthinkable. Do we really want to yield the microphone and the platform to representatives of other denominations or even other religions when given the opportunity to provide a clear, unequivocal, unapologetic

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witness to our great, almighty, sovereign, merciful, triune God? I say that to do so is diametrically opposed to the witness of Peter and John in Acts 4, who said, after being imprisoned and beaten for their witness to the resurrection of Christ: “We cannot help speaking about the things we have seen and heard!”

Although these two incidents are “yesterday’s news,” I believe the principle illustrated in both is one faced every day by pastors and people in our church and in other expressions of the Christian faith. The weakness of our witness is manifested in the widespread absence of numerical growth and even epidemic decline in the number of people in our congregations.

It’s obvious that a church body with average age of over 60 years will not accomplish significant growth and expansion through prolificacy. Having more children is simply not a realistic option for a huge number of folks in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Nor will it accomplish the objective of proclaiming the saving Gospel of Christ by restricting serious Gospel proclamation primarily or even exclusively to the ranks of clergy. Evangelistic witness is the privilege and responsibility of every Christian person, not only a man in a clerical collar.

Unless and until we in the LCMS get over our reticence and reluctance to give witness to Christ anytime, anywhere, under any circumstance, using the forms or testimony, dialog, prayer, preaching, or any other means of communication, we will fail to demonstrate the boldness and compassion so desperately needed by people in our country and world who live in darkness, desperation, and despair.

Those who read this article may or may not agree with my exegesis, but I believe this is exactly what Jesus meant when He said: “Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 10:32–33). Jesus mentioned no restriction regarding the venue or circumstances in which such witness should be offered.

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Public prayer to the Triune God in the Name of Jesus Christ, Savior of the world and Lord of the universe, is a classic example of acknowledging the only true God “before men” and an opportunity to give public witness to our Christian faith.

V. Warfare

One spring at a pastors’ conference in the Midwest I talked about the report of what then was a convention-mandated Task Force on Synod Harmony, specifically, the seven “Aspects of the Present Disharmony in Synod.” As I listed them, the men in the room sat silently, some with heads bowed. I think what made them so pensive was that they realized just how much truth was contained in these points.

Here are those seven aspects of disharmony among us:

1. An inability to deal with diversity in such issues as admission to Holy Communion, worship substance and style, the Office of the Public Ministry and the role of laity, and the service of women in the church.
2. A lack of civility that leads to rumors, lies, slander, sarcasm, and cruel satire, doing violence to the Eighth Commandment and sorely wounding our church.
3. A politicized culture that has turned our Synod into “a denomination of parties.”
4. These problems “are primarily a clergy problem. Pastors are in the forefront of practices and attitudes unbecoming God’s people.”
5. Poor communication across the lines that divide us hampers the ability, or the will, to listen to one another.
6. A lack of accountability for sinful attitudes and behaviors, falling on the shoulders of district presidents and circuit counselors to counsel, admonish, teach, encourage, and model churchmanship.
7. Distrust, particularly among clergy, resulting in increasingly partisan politics.

As disconcerting as these aspects of disharmony are, it is important that we acknowledge them. For only by naming our problems can we hope to begin to fix them. Unity, harmony, and concord among us are not what they ought to be and need to be improved significantly.

The spirit of dissension among us is not yet physically violent, like battlefield warfare itself. But I can tell you from personal experience that the spirit demonstrated by LCMS clergy who believe the end justifies the means is nothing less than emotional and spiritual combat, sometimes downright evil and demonic in nature.

Weapons of neither individual nor mass destruction in a military sense have to date been used in the LCMS. Yet in more than just a few battles over wine, women, worship, or witness, the weapons of judgmentalism, allegation, accusation, gossip,

caricature, blasphemy, litigation, and character assassination are regularly utilized by certain groups of theological zealots among us.

My dear friends in Christ, such activity simply has no place in our beloved church body. It does not reflect the biblical injunctions:

Galatians 5:19–26: “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: . . . hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy. . . . I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.”

1 Peter 3:15–16: “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.”

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, when the unbelieving world sees and hears how disrespectfully we treat one another, they want nothing to do with us. All the insistence in the world about pure doctrine pales into insignificance when outsiders fail to see what we proclaim, namely, that we love one another.

Some observe that in recent years the church appears to be at peace. The reason for this appearance is simple. Historically, those who have demonstrated the behavior cited above have done so only when they were not in positions of leadership. Such is true today.

In our case, under a peaceful façade, there lies a broad sense of frustration, chagrin, disappointment, even embarrassment at positions and actions of fellow church members and leaders.

Our very real problem today is one Martin Luther recognized among his opponents five hundred years ago. He said to one of them: “You have a different spirit than we.” That’s true in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and it’s what greatly contributes to the warfare that still goes on, visibly or invisibly, in public or under the radar. It simply must stop.

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Conclusion

Today, congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod are comprised of and surrounded by a great diversity of cultures, calling for an appropriate measure of resilience in how we communicate the Gospel. In most cases, the church of our grandparents didn't face such cultural diversity, at least not in this country.

The setting back then was the farms and small towns and burgeoning suburbs of largely Anglo America. The setting today is that and much more. It's the big city, the barrio, the Muslim in Dearborn, the Somali in Iowa. It's the immigrant from Croatia, China, Ghana, Nigeria, Bolivia, Mexico, and many other lands. It's the youngster plugged into his iPod, the high school freshman sending thousands of text messages every month on her iPhone, the college student on the secular campus, the young man displaced from the auctioned-off family farm. It's the unmarried couple living together, the gay, the lesbian, the transgender, the homosexual, the bisexual, the single mom or dad, the lapsed Christian family.

We can't productively share the Gospel with such vastly differing people unless we get to know them, develop relationships with them, demonstrate Christian care and concern for them, and figure out ways to communicate effectively with them. They're not automatically coming to the church. So we must go to them, becoming "all things to all men (and women) so that by all possible means [we] might save some. [We] do all this for the sake of the Gospel, that [we] may share in its blessings." (1 Cor. 9:22b-23)

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Tomorrow, the church we leave for our descendants must be many things:

- A church that provides safety and security in troubled times;
- A church where wholesome relationships can be established as a balance to the anonymity and sterility of a high-tech/low-touch world;
- A mission-focused community where people can live out their passion for mission personally and corporately;
- A church that invites people to use their God-given gifts in tangible and creative ways; but most of all,
- A church where the authority of God's Word is honored and taught and where forgiveness in Christ is freely offered through Word and Sacraments.

So there you have it, my dear friends in Christ: Wine/Women/Worship/Witness/Warfare. The future of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as a national church body is directly connected to the way in which we come to a greater consensus on how we will deal with these currently divisive issues among us. *Quo Vadis, LCMS?* The answer remains to be determined!

Pray with me this portion of a Closing Prayer by George Ridding: “Dear Lord, In times of doubts and questionings, when our belief is perplexed by new learning, new teaching, new thought, when our faith is strained by creeds, by doctrines, by mysteries beyond our understanding, give us the faithfulness of learners and the courage of believers in you. . . . Give us boldness to examine, and faith to trust, all truth; and in times of change, to grasp new knowledge thoroughly and to combine it loyally and honestly with the old; free us from stubborn rejection of new revelations, and from a hasty assurance that we are wiser than our forebears.”

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And a prayer for guidance in our calling: “Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing exactly where you want us to go or where the paths of life may take us, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.”

Soli Deo Gloria!