

**2016 LC—MS CONVENTION  
REPORT TO THE EASTERN DISTRICT  
PRESIDENT REV. DR. CHRIS WICHER**

Please permit me your patience and thank you for your concern about the welfare of the Eastern District and of our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The nature of this report is to share with you my observations of the July 2016 LC—MS convention in Milwaukee. These are just my observations. There is nothing inspired about my words. You can probe more deeply into the specifics of what I'll share and I would encourage you to do so. Don't just take my word for it. Others have reported. Bob Foerster, for example, did a great job keeping our District up to date through his daily reporting from the "convention floor". Your circuit's delegates may have a few thoughts to share of their own. Ask them. And/or you can go directly to the convention website on the LCMS homepage for primary sources (<http://www.lcms.org/convention>). It's all very simple to find and read and what Synod in convention decided in July, only it's not the same as living it out by being there.

**FIRST AND FOREMOST, WHY ARE WE HERE?**

To begin with, a quote from St. John's Gospel, 1:14 "and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." In Jesus Christ, God came to the world to save the world in the flesh. Through the church, the body of the living Christ, God continues to come to the world, our communities, towns and homes. Jesus said "You are the salt of the earth...the light of the world" (Matthew 5:13,14). The church is as a "city on a hill", a gift of God by His Holy Spirit to "proclaim [Jesus] from the rooftops" (Matthew 10:27 and the theme of the 2015 Eastern District Convention). Our privilege, our duty is to share the Gospel to all the earth, that is to everyone, because it is God's intention "that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 3:10).

This same Gospel-generated Gospel-sending theme is iterated in the mission of our Synod: ***"In grateful response to God's grace and empowered by the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacraments, the mission of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is vigorously to make known the love of Christ by word and deed within our churches, communities and the world"***. And again, it is the foundation of the Mission Statement of our Eastern District: ***"To encourage, nurture and link congregations...to strengthen themselves and each other as we carry out the ministry of Christ together."***

Looking over again at what I wrote above, it seems pretty clear to me that the purpose of the church is to be a mission agency for Jesus Christ in our families, communities and world. While "we are in the world and not of the world" we are to share Jesus Christ where we are planted, for this is to "love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves."

**MILWAUKEE**

When we met for six days in Milwaukee, the convention adopted, and some with modifications, 134 resolutions while it also cast ballots for over 90 elected positions. We heard papers and reports, honored individuals from within our ranks (notably Terry Dittmer and Ray Hartwig for their years of service) and recognized church dignitaries from around the world, and thanked God for His many blessings through worship and prayer, and much more. One night we toured and enjoyed our magnificent Concordia University Wisconsin (Mequon, WI) campus.

**NOT EVERY CIRCUIT IS EQUAL**

Our delegate selection system is such that one pastoral and one lay delegate each is elected and sent from the nearly 600 circuits of Synod. No matter what the shape or how large the sizes of congregations are in that circuit, or how they all add up, every circuit has the same representation. Electoral circuits are not all equal. In the Eastern District, for example, we have electoral circuits with well over 3000 communicants and another that was granted exception to the rules having fewer than 1700 communicants. No matter the shape or the size, equal representation is given to our electoral circuits. The Eastern District, with 13 Electoral Circuits, was eligible to send 26 delegates to Milwaukee. The number of voting delegates at the convention was nearly 1200. There also were advisory non-voting delegates and others. I was one of the "others."

## **RESOLUTIONS**

I mentioned 134 resolutions were adopted. Not all resolutions are the same in content or purpose. Many were about simple housekeeping matters, cleaning up the wording in our Synod Handbook, making some adjustments to a few Boards or Commissions, or tweaking the flow of information or accountability for this group or that. A lot of resolutions were polite and cordial in that we gave “thanks” for this person or organization or gave “support” for the same. Even some that addressed an International subject were not extraordinary. We extended church relations with the church of Norway, which I understand is a church body with just one congregation. I may be wrong on this, but that’s how I understood it. So, of the large number of resolutions at hand, many of them were simply of a “rubber stamping” variety. We even, at times, group bunches of them into “bundles” for a one vote approval to them all. Frankly, that was the first time I ever experienced a “bundling of resolutions”. But time being a factor at our national convention, there is a high price tag to just about everything we do. It was pointed out to the convention that synod pays \$500 for every minute of convention time (by comparison the Eastern District pays very roughly \$65 for every convention minute). So it seemed reasonable to me to move along with the resolution process expeditiously and save time for debate on the issues everyone knew needed honest and frank discussion on the floor.

## **THE GOOD AND THE BAD**

Keep in mind that many wonderful and good things are happening on a national scene in the LC—MS and you are part of this too. The new Federal Lutheran Credit Union is in operation. The University System is going strong. Lutheran Church Extension Fund has been a wonderful blessing. And there were a few resolutions focused on strengthening families, supporting Parochial schools and addressing church worker indebtedness.

## **“WHERE’S WALDO”/MISSIONS?**

In all, 7 resolutions were actually about missions, “to encourage immigrant and refugee outreach”, “to encourage church planting throughout Synod and supporting the ‘Mission Field: USA’ initiative”, “to encourage and support Hispanic ministry initiatives”. There was one about reaching out to the Muslim community and another giving thanks for the Hmong Ministry. That was about it.

Other than the three “hot button” issues delegates faced going into the convention, which I will mention momentarily, you will no doubt hear about, if you haven’t already, 17-04 “To encourage regular sermon evaluation by District Presidents and Circuit Visitors” and 4-04A “To appeal to the LCMS congregations, workers, and institutions within Christian freedom and for love’s sake to retain a common order of service for the Lord’s Supper”, and 5-14 “To reaffirm Biblical teaching on man and woman in the church”, and 5-15 “To Address questions RE: the Sacrament of the Altar”. In light of the Lord’s mission mandate mentioned at the beginning of this report, I heard the convention’s answer to sharing the Gospel in our day and age and in a world that is pulling further away from God is the following: our LC—MS women to do less in public worship and congregational leadership; the checking of congregational pastor’s sermons by District President’s/Circuit Visitors; every congregation worshipping the same way; and checking the credentials of those coming to our altars.

## **“HOT BUTTON” RESOLUTIONS**

Now for the three “hot button” issues: Ecclesiastical Supervision, Licensed Lay Deacons, and a Congregation’s right to be involved in and to give directly to foreign Missions.

Ecclesiastical Supervision, Resolution 12-02 was tabled. As the matter now stands in the bylaws of Synod, the ecclesiastical supervisor of a church worker is his/her District President. This resolution, however, would allow for the Synod President to supersede the District President’s decision in an appeal process. The resolution received the most debate energy on the convention floor and was finally tabled, essentially withdrawn from the convention. Instead Resolution 12-14 passed, thereby assigning the decision to Synod’s Board of Directors, in consultation with the Council of Presidents.

Resolution 13-02A, limiting the work and responsibilities of Licensed Lay Deacons (LLDs) passed. LLDs will still exist in the LC—MS; however, by January 1, 2018 LLDs may no longer be certified by the District President for “Word and Sacrament” ministry. We have 13 LLDs in the Eastern District. This resolution

will alter the work of 9 of them, a transition the Eastern District President will arrange over time with those congregations.

The third “hot button” issue had to do essentially with the congregation’s right to send missionaries or mission teams or servant event teams outside of the U.S. and the congregation’s to support foreign mission groups, initiatives, or individuals (LC—MS or other) directly. This topic never made it to the convention floor, which basically and by default retains the status quo in our synod, discouraging congregations from congregationally based foreign mission efforts and direct support of foreign mission work.

## **ELECTIONS**

When it came to the elections, after some questionable electioneering which took place during the Synod President’s official Report to the Convention, the current 6 Vice Presidents were re-elected. Pastor Chris Esget is the Vice President for our region. It would appear that “the United List” is very popular among many delegates by comparing the election results to the names recommended on that list.

## **WHAT’S THIS? GENUFLECTING IN WORSHIP?**

Finally, a word about my worship experience at the convention. Worship was definitely of high church style, complete with liturgies “out of the book” and chanting throughout on top of full liturgical garb, chasubles and the like. This is my second convention which was run and organized by our current administration. The same style at this convention held true at our last convention, which is also true when I attend chapel at the International Center in St. Louis. The message to me is plain. High church is the preferred worship style given to the churches of the LC--MS. I get it, I can even do high church liturgy if I wish but which I don’t. But what is completely foreign to me and a bit unsettling, being a life-long LC—MS Lutheran, is what appears to be genuflecting going on in the chancel. This is something I hope will not continue (if genuflecting is what indeed is taking place) which in some strange way is reverencing the host as if the pastor, because he is a pastor, has some magical power and has instantly before our eyes magically changed the substance of the bread into the body of Christ. Really?

## **WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?**

When people ask me how do and how will decisions made in synod convention affect church workers and our congregations, I have to stress what is stated in Synod’s constitution.

Article VII of Synod’s constitution reads: ***“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.”***

As your District President, however annoyed some of the decisions may make me, my hands are tied. I need to work with you in the best spirit possible to “walk together” with Synod. But, our congregations are free to shape their ministry as they see fit. This is Synod’s principle of a congregation’s “self-determination”. Congregations determine for themselves what is “meet, right and salutary” as a Christian community of faith deciding what is in their best interest and for the good of their ministry. My hope and prayer is that our congregations will not be offensive in the process, but strive to truly be a team with other congregations.

Let me also stress the wording in the titles of just about all of the 134 Resolutions. In every title the word “commend”, “promote”, “encourage”, “give thanks”, “clarify”, “extol”, “affirm”, “appeal”, “reaffirm” and the like appear. These words honor the advisory nature of synod to our congregations. Note well, the words NOT used such as “command”, “must”, “mandate”, “compelled”, “obligate” and I can go on. This distinction is incredibly important because the resolutions of synod are not new laws or legislation coming from St. Louis. We encourage one another in Synod. We try to persuade one another with the Word of

God. And I pray that too will be your spirit walking together with me as we work to apply the appropriate resolutions to our situations.

Finally, let me finish off where I began this report, and that is about the mission of Christ's church. I believe Christ has put us here in this place and at this time for a reason, that we might extol His name in all the earth so that the saving message of the Gospel might be heard by everyone, for "faith comes by hearing". Still, I wonder if our Synod in convention lived up to Christ's mandate or did we simply make adjustments to our internal workings and organization? While I have my opinion, I'll let you be the judge of that. A very slim number of resolutions and convention talk were about the mission of the church. This convention, however, was no different in that regard than most all conventions I have known, and that is most unfortunate. In my experience, people and congregations get "on fire" when talking about doing mission work and helping people and hearing about the good things God has been doing when we share the Good News. But we don't talk enough "that talk" when we are in convention which is why **many congregations check out on Synod and have been checked out for decades** and why it's **terrifically difficult to find volunteers to serve in a District office or attend a synod convention.**

Again, thank you for reading this far. Feel free to pass this information along.

***"Now to God who is able to do incredibly more than all we can ask or conceive by the Holy Spirit at work among us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forevermore. Amen"***