



THE
LUTHERAN CHURCH
Missouri Synod

Office of the President
The Reverend Doctor Matthew C. Harrison
President of the Synod

Ambrose of Milan, Pastor and Hymnwriter, A.D. 2020
December 7, 2020

Dear congregations, pastors and church workers of the LCMS,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our nation has faced many challenges in 2020. The fractious and contentious issues surrounding COVID, economic challenges, educational challenges, political upheaval, racial tensions, religious freedom issues, and more are all reflected in the life of the LCMS in one way or another. From the beginning of the outbreak of the pandemic, we have taken the approach that local congregations and districts know best how to respond to local circumstances and restrictions. Where congregations and districts have resisted overly burdensome restrictions because they believe them to have been inconsistent, unfair, extreme or unconstitutional (Acts 5:29), we have supported their push for reasonable laws and legal redress, often with the aid and input of organizations like the Alliance Defending Freedom and First Liberty.

The Problem

Now the Synod faces another challenge. 2021 is the district convention year in the Synod's normal three-year cycle. Conventions, district and Synod, are important. They are the congregations' principal chance to get together, to grow together in the Word of God and confession of the Synod, to review and discuss how they've carried out their common mission, and then, on that basis, to govern everything they do together through the Synod and its agencies. Much depends on conventions happening — and happening well! The districts are and have been deeply involved in convention preparation, which is quite complex and begins much earlier than one might realize. The recent spike in COVID cases has elevated the planning challenge for districts.

There are two main problems: The hotel/hospitality/restaurant/convention industry is barely functioning in many places, making preparation difficult or even impossible; and government restrictions on public meetings are placing in doubt the possibility of even holding a district convention. There are currently many states in which our districts cannot legally meet.

This is not about undue fear of COVID. We face a situation in which a number of districts may only be able to meet barely long enough to get a minimum amount of business done, or they may be unable to meet at all. At this time, we just don't know when and how much the various vaccines will be able to alleviate this situation. The older demographic of LCMS convention goers in general is weighted toward the high-risk category for the virus, and so we are likely to see lower participation in district conventions.

What happens if a district is simply unable to meet for its convention? Congregations would miss out on their triennial opportunity — restricted to the calendar year prior to the Synod convention — to govern their districts in regular convention by selecting officers, reviewing approaches, setting directions, and growing together in one Lord, one Word, one confession, and one mission. For districts and congregations already experiencing challenging days, this would be a significant lost opportunity. Our Synod's Commission on Constitution Matters recently noted that if a district cannot meet, elected officers and the like will remain in office until the

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next year a district convention is to be held. For such districts, this would, in effect, result in a six-year term for elected officials (unless a special session would be held to accomplish the delayed elections). Because district conventions provide a valuable forum for every congregation of Synod to participate in the future of the Synod, this would also greatly hinder the ability of these districts to contribute overtures and direction to the national Synod Convention. While it is possible for the Synod Convention to take place even if some districts cannot meet, and possible for congregations to have national input by other means, the national Synod Convention benefits from the full engagement of congregations in, and full produce of, the prior district conventions.

A Potential Solution

Article XI, B, 8 of the LCMS Constitution provides a mechanism for congregations to make decisions on very significant issues that come up between conventions. It is a provision rarely used and was employed once to deal with difficulties holding the 1944 Synod Convention on schedule. This article of the Constitution allows the President of the Synod, after consulting with the Synod's Board of Directors (BOD), to put a vote directly to the congregations of the Synod, after properly informing them of the issues. At least 25% of Synod's congregations must vote for the result to be effective.

In accordance with the process outlined in Article XI, B, 8, our Synod's BOD was consulted at their November meeting, where members were able to provide counsel and voice any concerns. This matter was also discussed at the November Council of Presidents' (COP) meeting. One of the important functions of the COP is to provide a forum for counsel between the Synod president and district presidents. At their meeting, the COP voted unanimously to encourage the President of Synod to take this issue to the congregations for a vote. After consultation with the BOD, and with the encouragement of the COP, I am now bringing this matter to the congregations of Synod for their consideration.

The Proposal

Here is the simple question that will be sent to the congregations of Synod to consider:

Shall the Synod add a year to the current 2019–2022 triennium, allowing districts to hold their conventions in either 2021 or 2022, and moving the upcoming national Synod Convention from 2022 to 2023? [Thereafter, the triennium cycle will continue forward from 2023 in three-year increments, as before (i.e., with district conventions held in 2025, 2028, etc., and Synod Conventions held in 2026, 2029, etc.).]

Vote: Yes or No.

Financially, there would be some significant costs for moving the Synod convention from July 2022 to July/August 2023. However, the additional year in the cycle would provide a one-year holiday from convention costs.

There will be some administrative challenges if the convention schedule is changed. Terms, elected and appointed, at the district and Synod levels, would be "stretched," meaning another year asked of our elected and appointed officers and members of various boards, commissions

and committees. We will all have to keep a careful eye on deadlines for pre-convention processes and bear with one another as plans are adapted in districts and at the Synod level to get the important work of our conventions done.

It is also possible (though today it does not seem likely) that the COVID situation will improve more quickly than anticipated, and that districts might yet be able to meet in 2021 (though in many cases perhaps later than customary) and the Synod in 2022, and the delay of a year prove unnecessary. As we have learned through the course of 2020, this depends on probabilities none of us can estimate well in advance — but in my estimation it is better to let you, in the congregations, assess the situation yourselves. The conventions belong to you. Adding a year might add an opportunity for, the good Lord willing, *all* the districts and Synod to meet — and meet without significant and maybe confounding complications. Only you can determine if that's how you want to manage your conventions.

It is also worth noting that the Synod has recently twice turned down resolutions calling for a four-year convention cycle. I will continue to oppose a four-year cycle. The proposal presented here is due to a very rare circumstance and will in no way enact a four-year cycle going forward.

We will continue to inform the church on this matter. There will be a period of electronic voting extending from the first part of January through February 15. Electronic voting will be facilitated through credentials that will be mailed to the congregations shortly after the New Year. Stay tuned!

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call — one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph. 4:1–6)

While this is an important matter to consider for our walking together as Synod, it is not a church-dividing issue. Let's hear each other out, act in good conscience, and together make a decision, one way or another, for the good of our Synod and our shared commitment to proclaim Christ crucified, the hope of the world. Blessed Advent!

Yours in Christ,

Pastor Matthew C. Harrison
President, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

PS: Additional information on this proposal is available online at:

- [FAQ on the Proposal to Add an Extra Year to the 2019–2022 Triennium](#)
- [CCM Op. 20-2960, minutes of Nov. 23, 2020](#)