

DISTRICT PRESIDENT'S REPORT

“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful”

The heat was on. King Nebuchadnezzar was pressuring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to give up their confession of the true God. “Fall down and worship my gods or be thrown into the fiery furnace.” Their reply was cool, “...We have no need to answer you in this matter....Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king. That we will not serve your gods...”

I. Let us hold fast to our confession.

The fiery furnaces have not been quenched. They may no longer be physical but there is still plenty of pressure to give up our confession. As we begin the 31st convention of the Montana District LCMS it is good to be mindful of that pressure and the gift God has given us in keeping us faithful. In some circles those who emphasize holding fast the confession are mocked for not being “missional”. I remind you that holding fast the confession does not mean turning inward, or ignoring the lost. The act of defiance on the part of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in holding to the confession brought glory to God. It also resulted in a very public proclamation of the good news.

The purpose of holding fast to the confession is so that the Gospel may be heard and that people may be brought to and strengthened in the faith by it. The Lutheran confessions tell us that the chief article of the Christian faith is justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Another way of saying this is; Lutherans believe that the main thing is the Gospel of Jesus. When Lutherans say, “Let’s keep the main thing, the main thing” it means that we should hold fast to our confession. God is faithful. He will see to it that the Gospel does its work. The “main thing” could never be something we do, or a manner in which we respond. The main thing is not our participation in the mission of God. To speak in this way is to replace an act of justification, (God’s act to save us), with an act of sanctification, (God’s act in us to lead holy lives). If our actions, even those by which God is at work in us, become the main thing then the Gospel will not be heard in its truth and purity.

Another aspect of our confession that is important to hold to is our attitude toward the Scripture. The constitution of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod states that, “The Synod, and every member of the Synod, accepts without reservation: The Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice.” If the Scripture is the Word of God then what it says is true for all people, for all time, for all circumstances. God has given us His holy Word so that the Gospel may be heard. This is what we believe, teach and confess.

A third aspect of our confession that I would like to draw to your attention concerns what is known as the Lutheran Confessions. Again, the constitution of the LCMS speaks to us, “The Synod, and every member of the Synod, accepts without reservation: All the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God...” The Lutheran Confessions, those writings contained in the Book of Concord, define how Lutherans have agreed to teach what the Word of God says. They faithfully teach and expose what the Word of God says so that the Gospel may be heard.

As you can see Lutheran doctrine is carefully structured for the sake of the Gospel. We believe, teach and confess in such a way that the Gospel may be heard and people brought to and

strengthened in faith by it. In today's world the Gospel is under attack. Jesus, if He is regarded at all, is taught to be just one among many good teachers. Even many who claim to be a part of the Church do not confess Him as God and Savior. In today's world the Scriptures are under attack. The Scriptures, if they are regarded at all, are taught to be words of men. Even many who claim to be a part of the Church do not confess the Scriptures to be the Word of God. If the Scripture is attacked the Gospel is attacked. In today's world the Confessions are under attack. If they are regarded at all, they are taught to be wise sayings. Even many who claim to be Lutherans do not confess them to be correct expositions of the Word of God. If the Confessions are attacked the Gospel is attacked.

How shall we respond to these attacks? Let me encourage you not to panic. The response of fear is idolatry. It is a fearful, idolatrous response to suggest that we are responsible to "save" the true confession. Such a response means that we are afraid that God is not able to preserve His Church. Witness the brotherhood of the fiery furnace. They did not panic. They acted in faithful accord to the Word and left the result in the hands of God. So the proper response to the attacks that the Church is experiencing now is a confident, bold, faithful proclamation of the Gospel. We need not search for worldly success in terms of the response. God calls us to hold fast to the confession of our hope, and to let Him take care of the results, for He who promised is faithful.

There was a time in the history of the Church when the world and many of the people of God rejected the Gospel and the Word of God that delivered it. God responded with devastating but poetic justice. "Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord God, "when I will send a famine on the land- not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord." (Amos 8:11) His point: if you don't want to listen to my Word, I will take it away from you. God did, of course save a remnant, by keeping them faithful. I encourage you to pray that we are not in such a time today. "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful."

II. The Church in America is experiencing decline in membership and attendance.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that we are experiencing a famine of the Word. Many other Christian confessions are abandoning a pure proclamation of the Gospel. And in the United States, at least, every Christian confession is experiencing decline or plateau in membership and attendance. There are places in the world where Christianity is growing, but not in the United States. I commend to your study the [U.S. Religious Landscape Survey](#), issued by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in 2008. Among the key findings of this study are: We live in a time of incomparable religious competition. There are more "spiritual" options, and they are more accessible than ever before. People are in a constant state of flux as they move from one religious affiliation to another. In general those who are dropping out of established religious affiliations are the young. It is not that they are finding one or another religious affiliation more attractive. They are becoming agnostics, atheists or independents, (piecing together their own personal "spiritual" beliefs).

This trend is also a reality for the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. We have experienced a decline in membership and attendance since the 1970s. We have gone from 2.89 million baptized members in 1971 to 1.92 in 2001. Our average worship attendance has declined from 1.1 million in 1971 to 964,000 in 2001. The fact that other "denominations" are also experiencing decline would suggest caution in analyzing these figures. It may not be wise for us to conclude, for example, that there is something wrong with the way we present ourselves, or that our worship styles drive people away. It may be just as reasonable to conclude that satan is attacking the Church, and as people abandon the true Word, God is bringing a famine of the Word upon our nation.

We have also experienced declines in Montana. In 1971 our baptized membership was 15,244. In 2006 it was 14,994. In 1971 our average worship attendance was 114. In 2006 it was 90. There are a few demographics that you should be aware of in analyzing these figures. People in the United States are having fewer children, to the point that our birthrate barely replaces those that die each year. That means there are fewer kids around than in past generations. Furthermore, while the population of the state of Montana has grown in the last few decades, most of that growth has taken place in specific population centers. Much of the rural, particularly the eastern part, of the state, is experiencing population loss. Thirty percent of Montana District congregations are in declining population centers.

How shall we respond to the challenges and opportunities that face the Montana District? Let me remind you again of the difference between a panicked and a faithful response. When Jesus sends the seventy-two out two by two there was no hint of panic or even urgency. In fact, He urges absolute dependency upon God. He does not tell them that it is up to them to come up with a program, or process. He doesn't even have them develop a set of goals. Listen to His words from Luke 10:2. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Certainly the harvest is still plentiful. In every community in the Montana District there are unbelievers who need to hear the saving message of Jesus Christ. The first thing that Jesus tells us to do when He sees a plentiful harvest is to pray that God would send laborers into the harvest field. The laborers He refers to are believers, us! Then He instructs us to "Go your way..." in the absolute confidence that God is at work in and through us.

The Church is not dying. God has promised that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church. The Church will remain to all eternity. Do not panic. God is at work. The work of the Holy Spirit is demonstrated in the Church when it holds fast to the confession so that believers and unbelievers alike can hear His Word.

Programs come and programs go. Goals are set and met or unmet. The Church goes on. The people of God continue to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send it out into the harvest fields that the kingdom may grow and that God may be glorified.

III. Walking together in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod.

The strain of witnessing the decline in membership and attendance may produce some unhealthy results. Chief among them is division in the Church. Disagreements are bound to come. They can be dealt with as long as we continue to speak with each other under the authority of the Word of God, our confession. Division, however, reaches a deadly stage when we refuse to speak to each other. The only kind of speech that can heal division is the kind that God commands come out of our mouths. "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Ephesians 4:15) To speak the truth means that we bind ourselves to the Word of God which is the truth. We refuse to overlook errors in doctrine. To speak in love means we speak for the purpose of building each other up in the truth, not for the purpose of winning the argument.

The truth is that the LCMS is experiencing serious theological as well as political division. What is required now is substantive theological discussions on topics such as worship, the divine call, pastoral authority, evolution, closed communion, how the Church relates to the unbelieving world. It will not benefit us to pretend that differences in these areas do not exist. It will benefit us to continue to speak with each other under the Word of God until we all submit to it.

There are also political divisions within the Synod. By political I mean disagreements with respect to issues that are not dealt with in the Scripture. For example some of the issues that the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synodical Structure and Governance, (BRTFSSG) will bring to the convention cannot be solved by quoting the Scripture or Confessions. [See the task force

report at: lcms.org>Walking Together>Other Resources- Presentations>Current District Convention Report.] Honest, sincere Christians may disagree about what the name of this institution should be, or about how many districts it ought to have. Though we may not be able to quote chapter and verse to answer these questions the method is the same. We must speak the truth to one another in love.

It is my firm conviction that the Montana District has much to say to the rest of the LCMS. As you study the overtures in this workbook you will find many that deal with substantive theological issues. I encourage you to come prepared to grapple with difficult issues and to call one another, and the whole Synod, to speaking the truth in love as we hold fast to the confession of our hope.

If we have much to say to each other we have even more to say to the world. The majority of people in this world do not know Jesus as their savior. To speak to them about Jesus is the most significant Word that we can speak. As we speak to each other during this convention we dare not lose sight of the fact that the world will be eavesdropping. The world, in one way or another, is dying to hear what we have to say. We must learn to speak the truth in love to them as well. The Montana District should be a part of the Synodical discussion regarding how the Church relates to the unbelieving world.

IV. Walking together in the Montana District LCMS.

Our discussions during the convention must take place under the authority of the Word of God. They must also take place in the recognition that God has established each of our 66 congregations in a specific context. Just as no two people are alike, so also no two congregations are alike with respect to the talents, skills, abilities, and the context in which they exist. Lutherans talk about these differences as part of our vocation. That means that it is God who has called congregations into existence by bringing people of various gifts together in a specific location for the sake of the Gospel. God has built your congregation and made you a part of it. Each of you has been sent by your congregation. Each of you is a valuable part of this convention.

As member congregations of the Montana District God has given you to each other. We are here to work together for the sake of the Gospel. That means that we are given by God to cooperate, not to compete. As odd as this may sound it is a way of life in this culture. Congregations subtly think in terms of competing with one another for members. Pastors think in terms of competing with one another for popularity and power. Small congregations envy or despise large congregations. Large congregations ignore or envy small congregations. Brothers and sisters, this ought not be so. As the people of God, working under the same confession, we can find ways to uphold, strengthen and encourage one another. We can be sensitive to the context in which each of our congregations live because they are God-given vocations.

During the course of this convention we may discover creative ways in which we can be of service to one another. Perhaps larger congregations can help smaller congregations by other than solely financial means. First, let's pray. Let's pray for our fellow members and congregations for faithfulness, wisdom, courage, protection and boldness in proclaiming the Gospel. Let's make prayer for each other a regular part of our lives.

That prayer time can be filled with thanksgiving for all that God has done among us. I encourage you to carefully read the reports of the eight standing committees of our District. The members of these committees are truly leaders of the District and have helped accomplish some amazing projects during the last triennium. Just note of few of the things they are doing or have done. Thank God for all this work done to His glory.

Missions: Church planter workshop, program for congregations in need of help, help Indian congregations with work projects, starting a mission in western Montana.

Education: Assisting schools and early childhood education programs, Sunday schools, VBS, School administrator conferences.

Youth: Camps and youth gatherings.

Campus: Managing information for students on Montana campuses, supporting ministry to campus students.

Human Care: Disaster response, prison ministry, parish nurse and deaconess ministries, internet abuse, mercy missions.

Stewardship: Every member visitation program, Fan into Flame Synodical fund drive.

Evangelism: Ablaze, Harvesters for Christ, Rural outreach, Church planting workshop.

Indian: Supporting congregations and Pastors reaching out to Indian people, support for Indian student to become pastor.

High School Task Force: Studied the possibility of a Lutheran High School in the Montana District. Please carefully read its recommendations.

We also have special reason to give thanks to God with regard to our schools. We already have K-8 day schools in Kalispell and Billings where the Word of God is proclaimed everyday, in every subject. We already have many dedicated teachers in these two schools faithfully serving the Gospel. Now we also have six other congregations working hard to establish schools for their communities so that the Gospel can be heard. Please keep these congregations in your prayers that God will bless their efforts to establish schools as service and

outreach arms of their ministry. They are: Mount Olive, Billings- First, Missoula- Trinity, Miles City- Trinity Great Falls- First, Helena- Grace, Hamilton. In these schools our teachers are holding fast to the confession of our hope. In this convention we should discover new ways to support our schools.

God did save Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the fiery furnace. He is always caring for His Church and providing “interesting” ways for the Gospel to be proclaimed. He will do the same for us in our day. Therefore, let us rejoice in the full confidence of His love. He has promised to care for His Church. He will do it, for He who promised is faithful.

S.D.G
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