

Session #3: Ecclesiastical Supervision
As Conceived and Practiced by the LCMS

Our constitution by no means makes us a consistory,
by no means a supreme court of our congregations.

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It rather grants them the most perfect liberty in everything, excepting nothing but the Word of God, faith, and charity. According to our constitution we are not above our congregations, but in them and at their side...

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And the more our congregations will realize that we do not desire to employ any other power over them than the divine power of the Word, the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth, the more will also our counsel find an open door among them.

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Thesis I

Its primary duty is to be faithful to the Confessions in word and deed, and therefore it must

- a. without reservation confess the creeds of the Evangelical Lutheran Church;
- b. accept only pastors, teachers and congregations that are faithful to the Confessions

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Its primary duty is to be faithful to the Confessions in word and deed, and therefore it must

- a. without reservation confess the creeds of the Evangelical Lutheran Church;
- b. accept only pastors, teachers and congregations that are faithful to the Confessions;
- c. supervise the confessional faithfulness of its members;

It is not even enough that it receive only such pastors and teachers as prove themselves faithful to the Confessions. It must also see to it that they remain that way...”

We must not despise the importance of the office of Visitor, even if its value is not always immediately apparent. For example, let us say that a dear brother who visited us perhaps gave us some good advice, cheered us up, or lifted our spirits simply by coming.

Thesis II

A second major duty is that it faithfully treat its congregations in an evangelical way, and therefore

a. not assume a dictatorial role over them but only help them in an advisory way;

When the Word of God has neither commanded nor prohibited something, then the congregation must decide, no synod, no pastor, no presbytery, no consistory.

Thesis II

A second major duty is that it faithfully treat its congregations in an evangelical way, and therefore

- a. not assume a dictatorial role over them but only help them in an advisory way;
- b. assist them in acquiring upright pastors and teachers:
- c. protect them against pastors who err in doctrine, follow an offensive life-style, and are domineering in their office.

Of course, the Synod can indeed take him under discipline. Any Christian can do that; i.e., any Christian can rebuke him with God's Word. In fact, the Synod not only can [do] this, but, you see, it has from the very outset established the agreement that every pastor must be willing to be admonished and even excluded if he errs and fails.

This theologian knew that wherever there are genuine Lutherans, they also favor proper visitations, as Luther testifies, “without them it is impossible or hardly possible to maintain unity of faith and life.” That is what our theologians meant, when they said, “The congregations must be protected.” The District President is not there to prescribe rules and regulations, but rather to protect the congregations against pastors who are tyrannical, dissolute in their way of life, or heretical in their teaching.

Thesis III

A third major duty is that it support its pastors and teachers, and therefore

Synod must defend faithful pastors, when they are being mistreated either by the congregation or by individual members.

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A third major duty is that it support its pastors and teachers, and therefore

a. counsel them;

What the pastor needs to know is, “What do the Scriptures say? What has been the historical position of the church on this matter?” It is immaterial to him, what my personal opinion in this matter is. He wants to know, “What does the Scripture say?”

Thesis III

A third major duty is that it support its pastors and teachers, and therefore

- a. counsel them;
- b. support them in the proper conduct of their office;
- c. defend them against unjust treatment.

But if that congregation is a member of Synod, then Synod's representatives can tell them, "My dear people, you are mistaken; your pastor 's position is absolutely right. There is no way he can yield."

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Thesis IV

A fourth major duty is that it promote the growth of its members in the knowledge of the truth in every way possible, and therefore

- a. give priority to doctrinal discussions in arranging its conventions and conferences;

God forbid that we ever get to the point where we merely put on a big show and then have a convention in which we discuss all sorts of peripheral piffle about ceremonies, rules, and insignificant trifles. Instead of that, may we always concentrate on the study of doctrine.

If the study of doctrine is not the number one priority at synodical conventions, then one of two things will happen: either the convention will be manufacturing laws, or even worse, it will degenerate into an affair of mutual praise, love assurance, and life-insurance.

Thesis IV

A fourth major duty is that it promote the growth of its members in the knowledge of the truth in every way possible, and therefore

- a. give priority to doctrinal discussions in arranging its conventions and conferences;
- b. arrange for both pastoral and teacher conferences, review their minutes, and evaluate them;

I. Reasons for forming a synodical organization

1. The example of the apostolic Church. (Acts 15:1-31.)

2. The preservation and furthering of the unity of pure confession (Eph. 4:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:10) and to provide common defense against separatism and sectarianism. (Rom. 16:17).

3. Protection and preservation of the rights, and duties of pastors and congregations....

IV. Business of Synod

1. To stand guard over the purity and unity of doctrine within the synodical circle, and to oppose false doctrine.

2. Supervision over the performance of the official duties on the part of the pastors and teachers of Synod.

11. To have concern for the faithful execution of all the duties of the ministry, especially of the truly evangelical cure of souls in all its branches;

V. Execution of synodical business.

7. Synod requires of the President to report on the visitations he has made by instruction of Synod, in the foregoing year, to supervise the pastors and teachers in respect to their doctrine, life, and performance of their duties.

(Cf. VI, Á, 5.)

If it should happen that the President reports a pastor who after having been reprimanded several times by the President, by the particular congregation, and by the ministerium, yet continues in wrong doctrine or in an offensive life, then Synod in its entirety shall make the last attempt to turn him from the error of his ways. If, having been thus reprimanded, he does not listen to Synod, he shall be expelled, and his congregations to carry out the command of Christ in Matt. 18, 17

7. He is to exert all energy to visit each parish of Synod at least once during his three years of office. At the annual synodical convention he is to deliver a report about this.

13. In his supervisory capacity he is to follow strictly the written instructions which he has received from Synod for this purpose.

a. listen at least once to the sermon of the pastor in the public service.

b. In doing this, he shall, above all, observe whether the pastor rightly divides Law and Gospel and proclaim the way of salvation truly and purely; whether in his sermons he uses simple clear, and distinct language; whether doctrine and admonition are in correct proportion to each other; whether he combines with pure doctrine also the correct warning and reproof of existing errors; and whether he does this really out of love for the truth and not out of carnal zeal.

10. Concerning the person of the pastor visited, the President shall confer with him in a brotherly manner about the needful taking heed unto himself and concerning the manner of his continued studies.

12. It is to be recommended that in all these functions of his office he shall avoid all appearance of legalistic authoritarianism but strive to conduct his office in an evangelical manner.

3. The whole (or the general) Synod is divided into District Synods, whose geographical boundaries are determined by the Synod and can be altered by it according to circumstances.

4. The Synod holds a convention every three years; the District Synods every year in the interim but at different times. Every third year the members of the District meet during the time and at the place of the sessions of the Synod in order to attend to their current business matters for the respective year.

5. The Synod and the individual District, during the sessions of the former, shall each elect by a majority vote from among the ministers of the church for a three-year term a President, a Vice-President, a Secretary, and a Treasurer, who may also be elected from among the delegates. An individual may be elected to only one of these offices.

1. Watching over the purity and unity of doctrine within the Synod.

2. Supervision over the performance of the official duties on the part of pastors and teachers of Synod.

6. Concern for the faithful execution of all the duties of the ministry, especially of truly evangelical cure of souls in all its branches;

A. Affairs of the District

7. The District requires of its President a report of the results of his visitations in the previous year, according to instructions, in order to watch over the doctrine, life, and work of pastors and teachers.

10. The general President shall report on the results of his official visits in the congregations of all the Districts during the past triennium; thereupon the assembly shall seriously consider what shall be done in consequence of the information about the condition of the synodical congregation as a whole.

E. The President of Synod

1. He has the supervision over the doctrine, practice, and the respective administration of all synodical officers, all pastors and teachers within the entire Synod, over the individual Districts of Synod as such, over the pastoral conferences, and over the individual congregations of the District Synods.

6. He has the duty during his three-year term to visit every parish of all synodical Districts at least once.
He shall report on these experiences also to the sessions of the Synod He shall also be obligated on the occasion of his presence in the congregation to preach if possible.

Article III Objectives

The Synod, under Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, shall—

1. Conserve and promote the unity of the true faith (Eph. 4:3–6; 1 Cor. 1:10), work through its official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies, and provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism (Rom. 16:17), and heresy;

8. Provide evangelical supervision, counsel, and care for pastors, teachers, and other professional church workers of the Synod in the performance of their official duties;

9. Provide protection for congregations, pastors, teachers, and other church workers in the performance of their official duties and the maintenance of their rights;

Article XII Districts of the Synod and Their Regulation

7. The district presidents shall, moreover, especially exercise supervision over the doctrine, life, and administration of office of the ordained and commissioned ministers of their district and acquaint themselves with the religious conditions of the congregations of their district. To this end they shall visit and, according as they deem it necessary, hold investigations in the congregations.

1.2 Definition of Terms

1.2.1 The following definitions are for use in understanding the terms as used in the Bylaws of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod:

(i) Ecclesiastical supervision: The responsibility, primarily of the President of the Synod and district presidents, to supervise on behalf of the Synod the doctrine, life, and administration of its members, officers, and agencies. Such supervision, subject to the provisions of the Synod's Constitution, Bylaws, and resolutions, includes visitation, evangelical encouragement and support, care, protection, counsel, advice, admonition, and, when necessary, appropriate disciplinary measures to assure that the Constitution, Bylaws, and resolutions of the Synod are followed and implemented.

Thus, ecclesiastical supervision is also the presenting, interpreting, and applying of the collective will of the Synod's congregations. Ecclesiastical supervision does not include the responsibility to observe, monitor, control, or direct the day-to-day activities of individual members of the Synod, whether in the conduct of their work or in their private lives (cf. Bylaw 2.14.1 [a]). Further, those constitutional articles and bylaws pertaining to ecclesiastical supervision shall determine the full definition of ecclesiastical supervision.

1.3 Synod Relationships:

Congregation, National, District, Circuit

1.3.4.1 Members agree to uphold the confessional position of the Synod (Constitution Art. II) and to assist in carrying out the objectives of the Synod (Constitution Art. III), which are objectives of the members themselves. While congregations of the Synod are self-governing (Constitution Art. VII), they, and also individual members, commit themselves as members of the Synod to act in accordance with the Constitution and Bylaws of the Synod under which they have agreed to live and work together and which the congregations alone have the authority to adopt or amend through conventions.

4.4.5 Each district president, in accordance with the Constitution of the Synod, shall supervise the doctrine, the life, and the official administration on the part of the ordained or commissioned ministers who are members through his district or are subject to his ecclesiastical supervision, and shall inquire into the prevailing spiritual conditions of the congregations of his district.

5.2.3.1 The circuit visitor shall, when requested to do so by the district president, serve as his representative in the triennial visitation of the congregations of the circuit.