

About ecclesiastical supervision:

A task force has proposed “To replace referral panels by restoring the right of accusers to appeal district president decisions to the president of synod” (Workbook, page 301).

I was privileged to serve as a synodical vice president under President A.L. Barry. A similar bylaw was in place at that time, as the task force correctly reports, and I can tell you from experience that the presidium spent an inordinate amount of time dealing with intractable issues that were referred to us from the people in the districts. Who were we, sitting in a room in St. Louis, to judge generally local issues? It was highly frustrating and the removal of this bylaw in 2004 was definitely the right thing to do. My experience aside, there are serious reasons why passage of this bylaw will harm our Synod.

This proposal is biblically questionable. In Matthew 18 Jesus tells us that one Christian should talk privately with his accuser. That may involve many conversations over a period of time, and private means that it shouldn't be spread abroad on the internet. It should be enough at this stage for third parties to know it's being addressed in the way Jesus directs. However, should there be no resolution, “take one or two others along with you” (18:16). If that fails, again it may well require several conversations over time, “then tell it to the church” (18:17). Now we have moved from closed door attempts at reconciliation to public knowing that reconciliation has failed thus far. But who is the “church”? Because the district president is the ecclesiastical supervisor of the area from which the situation arose, the district president represents the church, the Synod, in his area. The district president is not a sole actor. “Church” implies he consults, with circuit visitors and others. Should the district president's decision be received as unsatisfactory, the task force notes the current provision of a panel for appeal. God willing, all this will bring a positive conclusion to the matter, but “If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (18:17). Our Lord did not say, “If he refuses to listen even to the church, take it to the synodical president.” As the final ecclesiastical supervisor, the synodical president should see that the processes are being followed, not give every judgment himself. What fallible human could get that right? This proposal would change the very nature of our “walking together.” Jesus' prescription keeps issues as local as possible, and so should we.

This resolution would be divisive. The Council of Presidents would inevitably form groups who agree or disagree with the synodical president's interposed actions. Our colleges, universities and seminaries, with their regents, administrations and faculties would know that the president can intrude in any matter on their campus, effectively disrespecting the governance of those institutions already spelled out in other bylaws in the Handbook. And imagine the fear of a pastor who knows that an informant in the area can bring heavy muscle to a situation that most needs fraternal talk among local brothers. Again, this changes the nature of our “walking together.”

This is not to cut the president out. A president of the synod should have a relationship with all district presidents individually and with the Council of Presidents collectively that leads them to feel safe speaking with him about a troubled situation and he feels free to talk with them about concerns he has. That's the collegiality that has been a hallmark of the Synod for many decades, a fraternal “walking together” that is enshrined in various ways in the Handbook, and should be modeled by any president.

Finally to this question, I return to the book “The Fractured Republic” by Yuval Levin. Remember, he’s writing about America’s present dysfunction; he’s not writing about the church. However, the church, our Synod, reflects American culture more than we like to admit. While we are not of the world, we are very much in the world (John 17:15). Levin writes, “As individualism further erodes the bonds that hold civil society together, people conclude that only a central authority can pick up the slack. That dangerous feedback loop keeps us from seeing the possibility of other sorts of solutions to the problems we face” (186f.). I believe this task force proposal for our church is “a dangerous feedback loop.” The only “central authority” in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is supposed to be the Word of God as we subscribe to the Word in the Lutheran Confessions. Doctrine and practice should be decided by fraternal talk under obedience to the Word, not under compelled obedience to a person. Walther noted in his “Law and Gospel” that forced obedience is no obedience. Yes indeed, there are issues of doctrine and practice that need attention. They’ll always exist. The best way to address them is patient and prayerful attempts at persuasion by brothers and sisters who are ever careful about the church and ever conscious of the fear and love of God. To repeat Luther, “Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is fear in every work.”

In conclusion, I have written longer than I intended, and if you’ve read this far, thank you. God’s will be done. St. Paul speaks about church workers in 1 Corinthians 3:11-13. “No one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. If someone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it.” At this stage of my life I know the Judge is imminent, and I’m desperately looking to Him, to Jesus, as my only Savior. “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you” (Psalm 73:25). That’s where I’m at.

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