

Ecclesiastical Supervision in the LCMS

Date: May 23, 2016

Memo to: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

From: Dr. Gerald B. Kieschnick, President Emeritus

Subject: Ecclesiastical Supervision in the LCMS

Dear Friends in Christ:

Grace and peace be with you, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

This fraternal memo is written a few weeks prior to the election of the president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Such elections are normally preceded by a series of questions to the candidates, their answers published in our national LCMS media. As of this date I have seen no such publication. Even if it subsequently appears, not much time remains for it to be helpful, although the candidates have addressed some questions online.

While the position of each candidate on a number of topics that are very important for the future of our beloved Synod should be considered by those who will cast a ballot for this important office, one subject is worthy of special attention at this summer's convention—ecclesiastical supervision.

Reports and recommendations in the 2016 Convention Workbook on this topic, if approved, would grant the LCMS president excessive power, authority and control over pastors, commissioned ministers and congregations of the LCMS. This potential is causing great concern throughout our beloved Synod.

*For details on this matter, see my *Ecclesiastical Supervision in the LCMS* commentary below.*

While I do not have email addresses for every LCMS congregation, ordained and commissioned member and have neither the manpower nor the budget to snail mail this memo throughout the Synod, it has been sent to the Council of Presidents and is now being sent to many members of the Synod for whom email addresses are available. Please feel free to share it with the congregations in your district and circuit.

Thank you for your kind attention and for your faithfulness to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sincerely, in Christian love,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gerald B. Kieschnick". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "G" and "K".

*Dr. Gerald B. Kieschnick, President Emeritus
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*

Ecclesiastical Supervision in the LCMS

For ten years as president of a district of the LCMS, I served as ecclesiastical supervisor of pastors, commissioned ministers and congregations. In those 10 years I experienced the headache and heartache of dealing with allegations, accusations and charges leveled against rostered members under my ecclesiastical supervision by individuals who had not followed the mandate of Matthew 18. Anyone from anywhere could charge anyone else with anything and the charges had immediate standing.

During that period of time, the district president of the accused LCMS member was mandated to investigate and rule on the charges. His decision to dismiss the allegation was subject to appeal by the accuser to the president and vice-presidents of the Synod, which created imbalance in favor of the accuser and double jeopardy for the accused. Such formal charges, a number of which turned out to be

frivolous, wreaked havoc in the lives of faithful pastors and commissioned ministers. People who had no calling to meddle in the life or ministry of fellow ministers of the Gospel had license to file charges against anyone with whom they disagreed, even on non-essential matters. Many did just that.

The 2004 LCMS convention amended that process, defining with greater clarity the constitutional responsibility and authority of the office of district president. This is the office charged with carrying out the objectives of the Synod to provide "evangelical supervision, counsel, and care for pastors, teachers, and other professional church workers of the Synod in the performance of their official duties" and "protection for congregations, pastors, teachers, and other church workers in the performance of their official duties and the maintenance of their rights." (LCMS Constitution Art. III)

Under that revised and current system, any charges filed against a member of the Synod must first be evaluated by the district president of the accuser. Only after unsuccessful reconciliation efforts between the accuser and the accused may the charges be brought by the accuser to the district president of the accused. If the district president of the accused finds no validity in the charges, the case is dismissed.

With minimal exceptions, that current process has worked very well. The core values and principles set forth in 2004 have proven the validity of the current process, centered on evangelical, Gospel-centered ecclesiastical supervision without participation of those not constitutionally charged with this authority.

If approved, a recommendation to this summer's convention from a special presidential task force would change that process. The task force had only one member with any previous experience in ecclesiastical supervision. Its report is printed in the 2016 Convention Workbook (R-65: Task Force on Dispute Resolution Report, pp. 297-307).

The report proposes consolidation and centralization of national presidential authority in a number of ways, including direct involvement of the Synod president in the ecclesiastical supervision of congregations and individual members of the Synod. Such spiritual and theological oversight is granted by the LCMS Constitution and Bylaws to the Synod's 35 district presidents who are elected by district conventions.

Only these 35 men have constitutional responsibility for ecclesiastical supervision of the congregations, pastors and commissioned ministers who hold membership in the national church body in or through their respective districts. The national president has ecclesiastical supervision over those 35 district presidents. That simply but significantly means that if a district president is not faithfully performing the duties of his office, the Synod president has the duty and responsibility to hold him accountable, even if that means taking steps to remove him from the LCMS roster of ordained ministers of the Gospel.

Recommendations to be considered at this summer's convention would give the national president and vice-presidents authority to review every case of ecclesiastical supervision involving congregations or individual members already dealt with by a district president. In addition, these proposals would grant authority, at any time, for the President of the Synod to initiate action to remove any individual member or congregation from the Synod.

If approved, that action would create national centralized presidential authority over individual congregations, pastors and commissioned ministers. It would also mean double jeopardy for the accused member whose case had already been thoroughly reviewed and declined by that member's ecclesiastical supervisor. And if this recommendation were to be approved, the president of the Synod could actually impose himself into every dispute resolution matter.

Throughout the 169 year history of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, particularly since the creation of districts in 1854,

constitutional ecclesiastical supervision has been delegated to district presidents. For the national president's office to assume a greater role in that responsibility would foster and foment a lack of trust between district presidents and the national president and vice-presidents and would clearly vest centralized authority where it does not belong.

This is a very important matter! For the sake of the Synod and its individual members, the three candidates for election to the office of national president, an election that will take place in a few short weeks, should have no hesitancy to declare publicly their position on these recommendations.

Accordingly, respectfully and sincerely I encourage such public declaration from each of the nominees:

- Rev. Matthew Harrison, president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*
- Rev. David Maier, president of the Michigan District of the LCMS*
- Rev. Dale Meyer, president of Concordia Seminary St. Louis*

The method of response from the candidates above will need to be determined by those men themselves.

This communication is written and distributed out of love and respect for the congregations, pastors and commissioned ministers of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gerald B. Kieschnick". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "G" and a long, sweeping underline.

*Dr. Gerald B. Kieschnick, President Emeritus
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*