The Missouri Synod Convention—Following Walther or Not?

The 61st regular convention of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod was held at America's Center in St. Louis on July 10-16, 2001. The undersigned had the privilege of attending as the official observer of the WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations.

This convention was billed as a "watershed convention," in large part because of the elections. With the sudden death of Pres. Alvin Barry on March 23 and the retirement of First Vice-President Robert Kuhn, the top two positions in the synod were up for election without any incumbents.

On the fourth ballot Rev. Gerald Kieschnick was elected to a three-year term as president over Rev. Dean Wenthe by a vote of 600-582. Rev. Kieschnick, 58, was graduated from Concordia Seminary in Springfield in 1970. Since 1991 he has been president of the Texas District, and since 1998 he has served as chairman of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations.

What will the new presidency be like? In his acceptance speech, Rev. Kieschnick confessed his belief in the inerrant Word of God and in the teachings of the Lutheran Confessions. He reassured delegates that he holds to the historic position of LCMS. Yet it can be assumed that he will want to chart a course different from Pres. Barry in some respects. He was the candidate supported by the "Jesus First" group in LCMS. This group began in 1999 and campaigned for a change in LCMS leadership. Rev. Wenthe on the other hand was the candidate supported by the "Affirm" group, a long-time voice for conservative issues in LCMS.

Of special interest in Rev. Kieschnick's acceptance speech were his comments about the service of women in the church. He made clear he does not believe in the ordination of women to the pastoral office. However he believes the synod "should explore the clearly acceptable biblical role of prophetess and its implications for women in the church in the 21st century." One wonders what he has in mind with this statement.

The course of Kieschnick's presidency will certainly be affected by the other elections of the convention. Elected as the full-time First Vice-President was Rev. Daniel Preus, who was favored by "Affirm." His election over Rev. William Diekelman was also by a razor-thin margin, 601-577, showing almost equal support for the "Affirm" and "Jesus First" candidates. Elected as secretary and treasurer were men sup-

ported by "Affirm," as were most of the part-time vice presidents and members of the Board of Directors. So it seems the majority of major elected positions went to candidates favored by the conservatives, except for the presidency. One recalls how curious events like this have happened before in LCMS convention history. In 1969 the LCMS elected a conservative president and then went on to approve fellowship with the ALC. Of course, the campaigning and the voting lists of "Affirm" and "Jesus First" strike a WELS observer as a regrettable evidence of the lack of unity in Missouri and of the tendency of many in Missouri to look for political solutions to problems in the church.

The convention passed many resolutions that dealt with the structure and operation of the synod. For example, it decided to combine the functions of the Commission on Organizations with the Commission on Theology and Church Relations. It decided to provide deaconess training at the two seminaries, in addition to Concordia, River Forest. It decided to go ahead with the field testing of worship materials for a new hymnal, slated for publication in 2007.

The convention also spent time on mission work. Pres. Barry's slogan, "Tell the Good News about Jesus" was the theme of the convention, and three convention essays developed this idea. The convention resolved to work harder at cross-cultural ministry. The "Pentecost 2000" program was affirmed, which seeks to launch 1,000 new cross-cultural ministries.

The majority of convention time, however, was spent discussing issues that had to do with doctrine in one way or another. Some of these issues were discussed in a way that would be similar to WELS. The convention passed fine resolutions on abortion, sexual purity, the baptism of infants, and the use of wine in the Lord's Supper. Throughout the convention there was a steady emphasis on the inerrancy of Scripture, the atoning work of Jesus Christ, and the authority of the Lutheran Confessions. For this witness one is grateful.

Even the three convention essays on church fellowship, though they didn't say everything there is to say, were strong statements for an LCMS context. The convention essays did not promote the idea of "levels of fellowship." The "levels of fellowship" approach was publicly promoted in LCMS during the late 1980's and early 1990's. During the nine-year presidency of Pres. Barry, however, it was not. Undoubtedly Pres. Barry was involved in the selection of essayists, and the essayists presented the doctrine as conservatively as one could expect in LCMS.

In this regard the convention also approved the CTCR statement "The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship" by a vote of 782-343. Predictably this statement is misguided on prayer fellowship (cf. WLQ, 97:4, p. 302). But there is much else that is good in the statement.

Things got most interesting from a WELS point of view in other matters dealing with church and ministry. After about an hour and a half

of debate, the convention resolved by a vote of 791-291 to reaffirm C. F. W. Walther's book, *The Voice of Our Church on the Question of Church and Ministry* from 1851 as the official position of LCMS. The theses on church and ministry from this book were distributed to all delegates in English and in the original German. One suspects this issue arose in part because there currently are some in LCMS who are advocating thoughts more like Grabau's than Walther's on church and ministry. Others are promoting the ideas of the Church Growth Movement. The conscious decision of the convention to re-identify the synod with the theology of C. F. W. Walther is, of course, a source of joy for a WELS observer, even though Walther's writings do not necessarily clarify all the issues that have arisen in the past century and a half.

One wonders what C. F. W. Walther would think of some of the other church and ministry actions of the convention, however. The convention formally entered into church fellowship with four other Lutheran church bodies: the Lanka Lutheran Church of Sri Lanka, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Haiti, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Lithuania, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia. Sri Lanka and Haiti are churches that have grown out of LCMS-related mission work. Lithuania and Latvia trace their histories back to the Reformation. What is startling is that three of these churches (Sri Lanka, Lithuania, Latvia) are presently members of the Lutheran World Federation. The church in Latvia also has four women pastors, although not ordained by the current bishop.

LCMS leaders explained that these churches do not really consider themselves in fellowship with LWF. These churches agree with the doctrine of LCMS and not LWF. They are members of LWF only for "historical, geographical, and political" reasons. The Latvian church, for example, did not sign the Porvoo agreement with the Anglicans and did not sign the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification with Rome. About the women pastors in Latvia, the convention added this amendment to the fellowship resolution: "This declaration of fellowship does not acknowledge that those women who have been ordained are recognized as ordained clergy who can serve in the capacity of ordained clergy in the LCMS."

One needs to ask: Is this following C. F. W. Walther? When the Synodical Conference was being established, it was taken for granted that any synod coming into fellowship with LCMS and entering the Synodical Conference would have to sever relations with the General Synod and the General Council first. Would Walther have entered into a synod with women pastors with the understanding that it's OK as long as they do not serve in the Missouri Synod? This observer senses that Missouri, though it claims to walk in the heritage of Walther, has weakened from his position on church fellowship.

Ironically, on the day when some of these fellowship resolutions were passed, one of the convention essayists made the point that one cannot ride two different horses at the same time going in two different directions when it comes to church fellowship. It seems this is what Missouri is allowing with its affiliates increasingly. According to internet lists, there are now nine church bodies that have full membership both in the International Lutheran Council (the international organization of LCMS affiliates) and the Lutheran World Federation. Even though the Latvians may say they are not in fellowship with LWF, they are listed as full members on the LWF webpage and LWF promotes itself as an international church fellowship. Certainly a blunted confessional witness is being given by Missouri with these actions.

Then there are Missouri's relations with ELCA. After an hour and a half debate on the last day, the convention passed by a 706-343 vote a resolution that among other things said ELCA is "not an orthodox Lutheran church body." Earlier a report had been given by a participant in the recent ELCA-LCMS theological dialogues. These dialogues reached an impasse after three sessions, when the 10 LCMS participants came to the conclusion that ELCA is not orthodox, and the 10 ELCA participants came to a similar conclusion about LCMS.

With statements like these in the air, it is interesting to see Missouri's continued involvement with ELCA in some joint church projects. It was announced at the convention that there are 34 LCMS school associations that have ELCA churches or churches of other denominations as members. Seven of these schools have official "Affiliated School Status" in ELCA together with "Recognized Service Organization" status in LCMS. A task force had recommended that such school associations be required to drop one of the affiliations. The convention, however, did not follow the task force recommendation. The convention decided that existing schools may continue as they are, as long as they comply with LCMS standards. The LCMS district presidents will monitor the schools. New associations with ELCA congregations can be formed, as long as the associations do not seek official status in ELCA.

Similarly, there was a strong floor committee resolution to end all joint pastoral ministry with ELCA, including the military chaplaincy and campus ministries. But the convention softened this resolution and steered away from mandating a separation. It was decided that all such joint ministries will be evaluated by the synod praesidium with a report to be brought to the next convention.

In addition, the Missouri convention was eager to continue dialogues with ELCA. This was in spite of the impasse reached in the 10 + 10 dialogues. The convention even went a step further and resolved to pursue official dialogues with the Roman Catholic Church. One gets the impression, curiously, that Missouri feels the need to be in dialogue with other

churches in order to fulfill the Great Commission, even when there is no reasonable hope for the establishment of doctrinal unity.

Again, one wonders: is this the path of Walther? It's hard to imagine Walther allowing LCMS congregations to operate schools together with congregations of the General Synod. It's hard to imagine Walther dialoguing indefinitely with the General Synod or the Roman Catholic Church, after the differences had been clarified.

Perhaps the most difficult discussions to follow were the discussions on the ministry. Missouri simply does not enjoy the unity of doctrine on this point that was characteristic of Walther's era. For example, to help with the pastor shortage, the convention resolved (603-533) to allow lay deacons to carry out pastoral duties in the absence of a pastor under the supervision of a pastor, without insisting that they pursue a program toward ordination. This obviously was contrary to the desire of many, however, who wanted all pastoral duties to be carried out by men who are ordained or pursuing ordination. But the convention also voted to phase out the "Consecrated Lay Workers" category in the synod yearbook. So such lay deacons will no longer be listed in the synod yearbook. There was discussion as to whether or not "Directors of Family Life Ministry" should be placed on the official roster of commissioned ministers. In the end, they were not included because the resolution did not receive two-thirds majority. But "Directors of Parish Music" will be placed on the official roster. It is not easy to sort through the doctrine and practice of Missouri on the ministry, and this convention did not make things easier.

It was a definite eye-opener to read the *Convention Workbook* to see the variety of overtures that came in from the grassroots congregations and districts. There were numerous overtures urging the ordination of women. There were numerous overtures urging the synod to let congregations chart their own course when it comes to doctrine and practice. There were entire districts that petitioned the synod to rethink its position on fellowship and communion practices. Here one sees the diversity of thought in Missouri in full bloom.

It was also very interesting to see what floor committee resolutions never made it to the convention floor. There was a floor committee resolution to ask Renewal in Missouri to disband. Renewal in Missouri is the group that supports the charismatic movement in LCMS. There was a resolution to commend "Admission to the Lord's Supper" to the synod, a CTCR document arguing forcefully for close communion. There was a resolution to accept and commend the report of the Church Growth Study Committee that gave a negative review of the Church Growth Movement. In six full days of sessions, none of these resolutions were discussed. As an outside observer, one wonders if this isn't a silent testimony to the fact that there is considerable disagreement on these topics in LCMS. Very likely it would be difficult to achieve a consensus on these matters.

What is to be the final evaluation of the convention? Perhaps it is like other previous LCMS conventions. Conservatives will find enough encouraging signs to continue to pursue their goals eagerly. Moderates and liberals will find enough encouraging signs to continue to pursue their goals eagerly. Missouri as a whole will present itself as the champion of confessional Lutheranism following in the heritage of Walther. Some of us, however, see considerable doctrinal disunity and a weakness in church fellowship doctrine and practice. We rejoice to see Christ preached, but we will not look to Missouri as the strong confessional heir of Walther.

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