



The Mid-South District, LCMS

Rev. Dr. Roger Paavola, President
Presidential Address to the Convention
June 27, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, delegates, friends, and honored guests. In the last three years, I have had the privilege to serve Christ and His Holy Church in a way that is somewhat unlike anything men learn in their seminary education. I wish to share with you what the gracious Lord has led us to do as the Mid-South District in support of our member congregations, our pastors, teachers, DCE's, workers, and the precious Church God has entrusted to our stewardship. St Peter wrote in his first Epistle, *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you (I Peter 1:3-4).*

It is appropriate, therefore, that as we celebrate this Nineteenth Triennial Convention of the Mid-South District, and as we prepare for our Fiftieth Anniversary, that we chose the theme, **"O God, our Help in ages past, our hope for years to come."** He has led and guided the leaders and dedicated people who formed this District in 1966, and I pray that He will continue to guide and bless our efforts in these years to come. Our theme for the mission and ministry of the Mid-South District for the next three years must necessarily be grounded on our gracious God, His Word, and the Confessions of our Church.

The printed President's report to the Convention speaks about the "Lutheran DNA." What this means is that in the subject of world religions, and in Christianity specifically, Lutheran Christians are distinctly and uniquely identifiable. We have something to offer that no one else can or will offer to those who live with no hope in Christ Jesus. Many of us have seen tears of joy and relief when an adult is Baptized or confirmed in our church. They've been given the free gift of faith, won for them by our Savior Jesus Christ... just as we teach and preach in the Lutheran Church. That's why, every time we're asked, "What is a Lutheran," we have an open invitation to explain, "What it means to be Lutheran." Just as science has identified specific markers that are unique to our individual DNA, being a Lutheran Christian is as just as unique and distinct from every other DNA of Christianity or world religions.

We teach the Lutheran confession of faith because it's all about the foundations of what is best for the soul and eternal life. We teach and confess the Holy Trinity - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - one God in three Persons. We Confess the Person and work of Christ Jesus who bore our sin, who knew no sin. In Him, we're made righteous and holy in God's sight. We teach that Christ on His cross paid our debt for sin paid in full by His innocent death. We fully confess His glorious resurrection, proving our justification before God. We teach Christ gives Himself in the proclaimed Word, in the water of Baptism, in Holy Communion... giving us His righteousness in the joyous exchange for our wretchedness.

Doesn't everyone believe these Scriptural truths? No! The world stands opposed to and our Savior Jesus Christ our Confession. Some inside Christianity even teach that a person must do good works to earn salvation. Some teach that Christ accomplished only some of our salvation, but we have to do the rest, and prove ourselves worthy of salvation. Some teach that Jesus is one way to heaven, but not the only way. Some teach that the Bible contains the Word of God, rather than that the Bible IS FULLY the Word of God. Scripture warns us, that if anyone takes away or adds to the Words of Holy Scripture, their salvation is in question.

Confronted with the difficulty of reason over Scriptural truths in our doctrinal teachings, Jesus had to ask the twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" And Peter said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." God's Word is without error. It was, it is, and it always will be the Holy Word of God, inspired by His Spirit, that sounds a clear condemnation to the sinner, but raises the repentant to new life by His grace.

We Lutherans embrace God's Word as absolute truth! We believe that, we're saved by grace alone through faith alone, revealed in Scripture alone, in Christ Jesus alone. We believe Christ Jesus will come on the Last Day to judge the living and the dead. We believe that we're called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, who gave us the gift of faith to apprehend God's overflowing grace every day. We believe the gift of faith was given to us by God's Promise, joined together with simple water when we were crucified in Christ's death, but raised to new life in His Promise by His means of grace. Our accountability to God for our sinful estate, isn't about some elusive, non-scriptural chronological age as some would teach, but what Holy Scripture teaches, that in our conception, we're born into sin (Psalm 51). Scriptures teaches that Baptism saves us – and that it is for everyone – even our little children (Act 2). In Baptism we're washed clean of our sins.

We Lutherans embrace what the Apostle St. Paul calls "the stewardship of the mysteries of God." (I Corinthians 4:1) Sacraments are the saving acts of His favor, instituted by God, which joins His Word of promise to visible elements, and enjoin the sacrifice of Christ, for the forgiveness of sins. The Sacraments are our staple for our Christian walk of life. The Sacraments are the work of God toward us, not the work or duty of a person toward God. In the Sacraments, God pours Himself to us.

In this, we embrace and lift up the truth that Christ is "God with us." His presence condemns the impenitent, but heals, forgives, and regenerates the repentant child of God. Since such doctrine is foreign to the growing numbers of our neighbors, along with Martin Luther, we're bold to say, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise." We embrace the entire Lutheran Confessions, contained in the Book of Concord because they're the faithful exhibition and exposition of the Scriptures. We don't pick and choose what makes sense to our reason. Rather, as Lutherans we say, "Here I stand."...standing firmly in each dot and tittle of God's Holy Word... I can do no more."

In my report in your convention Workbook, you read that there's a paradigm in American religious thought. Young people are searching for... craving something of substance. They don't want entertainment or whipped up emotions. They're gravitating to a church that believes what they say they believe.

That's what it means to be a Confessional Church. The 2015 Pew Report substantiates this corollary. While ALL mainline denominations continue a precipitous decline in their membership – including some in steep double-digit free fall – at the same time that we witness an increase in those who have NO CHURCH AFFILIATION – what the PEW Report calls the “nons” – that is, no affiliation. The Pew Report, however, listed four denominations that have stemmed the tide. They stopped the hemorrhaging of the exodus of members from their roles. Included in those four denominations is our Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. While some denominations have gone into double-digit decline, the LCMS -- while acknowledging its membership has also fallen - with its Confessional stance, is moving forward by serving our flocks, gathering in the unchurched, the unattached, and the de-churched to be fed and nourished by God's Word faithfully to our Church's Confessions.

The young searchers are looking for God's Service to us... rightly understanding His gifts of Word and Sacrament in Divine Worship. Like us, they're in need of everything God offers by His grace. But, by the same token, our Confessions and God's liturgics don't force any one form or another of worship. It simply means our worship is founded on Christ, His gifts and grace to His people. The Augsburg Confession states, “Therefore, since the liturgy among us follows the example of the Church, taken from the Scripture and the fathers, we are confident that it cannot be disapproved. This is especially so because we keep the public ceremonies, which are for the most part similar to those previously in use.” Being a Christ-centered church is a part of our Lutheran DNA.

Being Christ-centered is a part of this Lutheran DNA. It remains voluntary for each person and congregation. Yet, pastors and congregation agree to walk together as a part of Synod. No doubt, walking together sometimes looks more like a three-legged sack race than organized, systematic steps. When the Christian world looked at the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod 50 years ago, we were called a sleeping giant. We had a zeal for missions and the ministry. Churches from Tanzania, Asia, Madagascar, and Ethiopia have millions of Lutherans, yet they come to the LCMS to teach their pastors, missionaries, teachers, and laity. Other Church bodies around the world contact us, saying, “We want what you have, theologically.”

This means we're a Missional Church. Being missional does not define Christ; Christ defines our mission. Being missional does not define our Confessions; our Confessions define our missions. Being a Missional Church is simply our love toward our neighbors. It's our mercy care outside the safety of our sanctuary's walls ... at home, in our community, and all around the world. This is privilege and responsibility every Christian's vocation as a child of God, and a member of the priesthood of all believers. Being missional will continue to be the ongoing work of our Synod and our District, as described in our Church body's constitution.

Based on this vision and these beliefs, I will propose that we embrace and lift up these mission and ministry initiatives for our District.

- 1) Our Mid-South District Vision Statement says, “**We see every ministry reaching the lost and discipling the found.**” Every circuit will coordinate congregations in a series of outreach programs for our communities. For our Fiftieth Anniversary, we will establish an objective for “*Each One – Reach One*”... following the Synod’s 2013 initiative for personal witness by each member of the District.
- 2) Our Mid-South District Mission Statement says, “**As an alliance of congregations and schools, the Mid-South District provides leadership, resources, and encouragement for reaching the lost for Christ’s Kingdom, and equipping the found for service in their congregations, their communities, and the world.**” A task force of our District will take the 2013 Synodical Convention Resolutions to find ways to encourage people to engage in sharing the Christian faith, witnessing to the Lutheran Confessions, and explaining Lutheran doctrine in a loving way.
- 3) We will develop a cadre of trained church workers in each region, to assist congregations in their pastoral, teaching, educational, stewardship, and outreach efforts, and temporary coverage.
- 4) We will recruit volunteer leaders and launch effective tools for evaluating congregations and schools for optimal operations, and resources to enable “Witness, Mercy, and Life Together.”
- 5) We will expand and enhance our COMPASS and C.A.R. resources to provide the most up-to-date information for congregations, schools, and our church workers to grow healthy congregations and schools for the Kingdom.
- 6) We will offer the resources needed, and requested from the professional church workers, for supporting, mentoring, and assisting our professional church workers in the discharge of their responsible ministries.
- 7) We will work with circuits and cooperating congregations to continue to plant churches, re-defining the demographics and objectives of our missional work for the most effective means to carry out the Great Commission given to us by Christ Jesus.
- 8) We will provide appropriate assistance to congregations, schools, ECC’s, and professional church workers through a collective assembly of regional coordinators for the most effective and efficient use of District’s resources.
- 9) We will continue to build the Small and Rural Congregations Network to maximize the possibilities of mission and ministry in their communities.
- 10) We will offer resources to increase our congregations’ abilities to develop, grow, and strengthen children and youth ministries.
- 11) We will continue Town Hall Meetings, whereby, we will gather ideas, cares, concerns, and resource ideas for services from the District.

- 12) We will develop means for formal educational and continuing educational opportunities in the District for our professional and para-professional church workers.
- 13) We will assist in the development of circuit-wide and cooperative alliances with congregations, schools, and ECC's for the optimal benefit of financing, professional utilization, staffing, and outreach opportunities.
- 14) We will develop and provide a stewardship council in the District, as directed from the 2013 Synodical Convention, that will allow congregations and schools to bring optimal understanding of Christian stewardship to the members of our Mid-South District Congregations.
- 15) We will develop District-wide coordination of our Fiftieth Anniversary that we may grow in our faith, and grow the Church in accordance to God's will and purpose.
- 16) We will assist congregations to develop their relationships with the students attending colleges, universities, and technical schools for campus ministries.
- 17) We will ask every congregation, school, and professional church worker to identify young people who can be encouraged to seek educational means to become professional church workers.
- 18) We will conduct Mission University training for interested people throughout the District for outreach and mission development.
- 19) We will offer assistance to congregations for data management assistance, and financial management record keeping for interested congregations and schools unable to acquire fiscal management on their own.
- 20) We will expand "Funding the Ministry" opportunities to help congregations and schools grow toward stronger financial well-being, and planned giving.
- 21) We will assign a work team to develop ways for us to share our Lutheran identity, in our communities, for the Quincentenary Celebration of the Lutheran Reformation in 2017.
- 22) We will re-tool COMPASS and the former Revitalization efforts to become less prescriptive and more descriptive toward strengthening grass-root efforts to rebuild ministry and mission.
- 23) We will, where necessary, and by congregation requests, develop multi-parish arrangements and alternative arrangements of worship, to insure a continue presence of our Lutheran congregations in specific areas throughout the Mid-South District.

I pray that my time in the office of District President is known as a time where I can be a Pastor to pastors, teachers, DCE's and all our members. I ask for your continued prayers and support for the mission and ministry of the Mid-South District. I offer thanks to God for the co-workers in our District offices and the hundreds of professional and volunteer workers of our District.

May our gracious God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless us and preserve us in the one true faith. May we all leave this convention with a great zeal and witnessing integrity – that we BELIEVE what we say we believe... AND WHO we are – members of this great District, this beloved Synod, and children of the family of God and inheritors of His eternal blessings!

Rev. Dr. Roger Paavola
Your servant in Christ Jesus