

“The District President... provides leadership and vision for the common work of the congregations, District, and District staff.” --Kansas District Bylaws, Art. III.1.(a)

Toward a Vision for the Kansas District

Part One – The Big Picture: From Jesus to Us

It’s all about Jesus—the eternally begotten Son of the Father, sent in the fullness of time to take on human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, in order to redeem God’s fallen creation from sin and everlasting death by His own holy life and innocent suffering and death.

It’s all about Jesus—who, together with the Father sends forth His Spirit to call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify His Holy Christian Church, and to keep it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith, until He comes again in glory to take us to heaven, where we will once again enjoy full and unhindered communion with our Lord as it was in the beginning.

It’s all about Jesus—whose forgiveness I need to hear anew, each week, through the mouth of His minister. Jesus—whose gracious and forgiving presence we all, like Peter and the Emmaus disciples, are blessed to experience each time the Lord meets us in the breaking of bread. Jesus—whom many in our own communities so desperately need to hear about and trust for the forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation.

It’s all about Jesus!

But who *is* Jesus? “What do you think about the Christ?” Jesus asked His disciples.¹ “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”²

Is Jesus the Savior who came to seek and to save all people, or only some, as fits with a logical understanding of predestination? Is Jesus’ atoning death alone that which justifies men before God, or do our works or our decision play a part in that? Are all humans truly lost and condemned creatures—enemies of God from conception—or is there a remnant of goodness in us that Jesus only supplements? Is Jesus truly present in the waters of Holy Baptism to create faith in the baptized *ex nihilo*? Is Jesus truly present, in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, with the very body and blood that He gave into death on the cross for our sins, or are the bread and wine merely symbols of His body and blood? Did Jesus’ sending of His disciples mean that it is the Lord of the Church who today continues to send laborers into His vineyard, by His divine call, through the congregation, and that the public ministry of God’s Word and Sacraments isn’t merely a human thing or self-appointed work?

¹ Matthew 22:42

² Matthew 16:13

It's all about Jesus. But who is Jesus?

These questions, and others like them, take us from the Holy Trinity, and the Holy Christian faith that we confess in the creeds in unison with the Holy Christian Church, and they bring us to the Evangelical Lutheran Church—the Church of the Lutheran Confessions—which answers these questions in a unique way. And these questions bring us to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, of which the Kansas District has been “the synod in this place” known as Kansas, since 1888—or really since Pastor F. W. Lange preached his first sermon in rural Junction City, on August 17, 1861.

The LCMS Kansas District, as we are officially designated by the synod—along with 34 other districts of our church body—was organized by the synod, and is given its place in relation to the synod in the Constitution and Bylaws of the LCMS. Those bylaws state, for example, that:

- “A district is the Synod itself performing the functions of the Synod. [And that] Resolutions of the Synod are binding upon the districts.” (LCMS Bylaw 4.1.1.1)

They state that:

- “The Synod is not merely an advisory body in relation to a district, but establishes districts in order more effectively to achieve its objectives and carry on its activities.” (LCMS Bylaw 4.1.1)

Regarding District officers those bylaws state that:

- “Officers of the district shall have primary responsibility for district implementation of decisions of the Synod at the national level as they apply at the district level...”³ (LCMS Bylaw 4.1.7) and that,
- “Communications between national and district levels shall be maintained in order to carry out the most effective and coordinated program possible.” (LCMS Bylaw 4.1.7.1)

And, finally, with regard to the District President, those bylaws state that:

- “The district president shall see to it that all resolutions of the Synod which concern the district are made known to the district and are carried out by them.” (LCMS Constitution Art. XII, 9.a)
- [And again] “The district president...shall cause the resolutions of the Synod to be implemented in the district...” (LCMS Bylaw 4.4.2)

³ District officers include the president, vice-presidents, secretary, circuit visitors, and treasurer. (LCMS Bylaw 4.3)

Part Two – The Kind of District President I'd Like to Be

There are at least eight things that I hope will characterize my presidency of the Kansas District.

First, I pray that I will be faithful to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. That's a tall order! And it includes faithfulness to the missional themes of Scripture that are summarized by the words, "*making disciples of all nations.*" But it also includes the phrase from that same Great Commission which says, "*teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you.*" And so I pray for a faithfulness that is indeed mission-minded, but also comprehensive in its understanding of mission and ministry, and unabashedly Lutheran in its confession of the teachings of Scripture.

Second, I want to be, and be known as, one who is conciliatory, and a bridge builder. As I said in my first impromptu remarks at the convention, "I want to be a president to all the workers of the District." That means continuing the *status quo* where that is possible. But it also means adopting new ideas and new strategies, alongside of the current ones, so that there's something for everyone. There's more than one way of doing things! And as we continue the *status quo* wherever possible, and adopt new strategies, I want to foster, encourage, and facilitate respectful theological conversation about the issues that have caused tension in our district over the years.

Third, I want to be a pastoral district president. I'd like to begin each day with a significant time of daily, ordered, prayer for the district. I'd like to make pastoral phone calls and contacts to district workers a high priority. I'd like to keep reading and studying theology in a regular, disciplined way, then make theological education a part of what I do in my visits with congregations, and whenever I have the occasion. And, if the opportunity presents itself, I'd like to talk with the Board of Directors about my possibly accepting a call to be a pastoral assistant at some area congregation, where—for just a few hours per month—I could keep my hand in hospital or homebound visitation, or occasionally help out with services or preaching.

Fourth, I want to encourage increased transparency in governance and administration because I believe that this will lead to an increased appreciation of how the district staff and elected leaders serve our district. And it will lead to increased ownership and support of the district office. As examples of this, I'd like to discuss ways to make as much of our budget, as is reasonable, easily available to whomever would like to see or have it (which is also in keeping with Resolution 15-04-02 that was adopted at our district convention). And I'd like to discuss whether it's reasonable and feasible to make as many of our agendas and minutes as possible, promptly available to anyone who would like to see what our service boards and sub-committees are doing, as well as what our district Board of Directors is accomplishing.

Fifth, I'd like to lead our District in nurturing close cooperation with LCMS leaders and staff at the International Center in St. Louis because, as I noted before, the Synod is nothing less than the entity that established the Kansas District for its purposes. And we are "the Synod in this place." Furthermore, I'd like to approach these efforts toward closer cooperation in a way that

might be termed “trans-administrational,” meaning that I’d like to foster an increased cooperation that is based on the constitutional relationship between the Synod and districts, and thus would continue even should administrations change.

Sixth, I would like good communication to be a hallmark of my administration—good communication in all kinds of directions, and on all kinds of levels: between me and the workers of the district, between me and the congregations and lay leaders I’m working with, and between the entire district office staff and the workers and congregations of the district. And I’d like to look for ways to gather broad input from throughout the district on how best to go about improving our communication and responsiveness.

Seventh, I’d like to make increased, intentional visitation a priority—not only when Sunday opportunities present themselves, but also during the week. I’d like to get around to all of the circuit conferences or “Winkels” each year, because I see this as one of the most time-efficient ways to visit with many pastors. My purpose would be to share my thoughts, and to listen, as well as to address questions as best as I can. But I’d also like to work with the executive staff to do the same, on a regular basis, with both the workers and the laity of the district. I’d like to take seriously my constitutional responsibility to make “official visits” to each congregation, yet work together with our pastors, circuit visitors, and vice presidents—not only to manage the large number of such visits—but to go about them in a way that is welcomed as positive, beneficial, and edifying, and is not at all viewed as negative or threatening. And finally, in this regard, I’d also like to work with my staff to schedule school visits as time allows.

Lastly, I want to do much listening and learning. I know that I have a lot to learn—not only about being a district president, but also about the history of various aspects of our district administration, and about what our workers and laity are thinking. And because the thoughts of our workers and congregations will be evolving with the times and changing issues, I’d like this emphasis on listening also to be ongoing throughout my time in office. And I’d like to seek the input of others on how best to accomplish such listening on many different levels.

Part Three – The Great Commission in Kansas

Though I have specific thoughts about much of what our District is doing together, I think it’s especially important for me to share some thoughts about missions, for several reasons. First, telling others about Jesus is part of my baptismal identity as a Christian, just as it rightly should be part of the identity of every Christian, each of whom is called by God to “*show forth the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.*”⁴ Second, it’s important for me to share my thoughts about missions because the Kansas District has, for many years, been a recognized leader in mission efforts and has been known widely for its mission emphasis. And finally, it’s appropriate that I share my thoughts about missions because we’re at a crossroads in the area of missions in the Kansas District. In the last two years we’ve lost our

⁴ 1 Peter 2:9

Missions and Stewardship Executive. We've lost our Administrative Assistant for Missions and Stewardship. And more recently we've lost our Mission Awareness Coordinator whose dedicated service our district enjoyed for 18 years. And, as the Board of Directors is now wrestling with staffing questions, it's clear that we simply can't replace all these positions and still maintain all our other current spending priorities.

For these reasons, I invite your attention to these thoughts about missions as it relates to everything else we do.

Though I have concerns about the label, I am definitely a missional Lutheran, if by that we mean a Christian whose New Man in Christ cannot help but *"show forth the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Pet 2:9)."* If that's what we mean by the term missional—and what else could we mean?—then all Christians and pastors and lay people are missional!

Granted, some may be more gifted, or experienced in mission work than others. Some might find it easier than others to devote more time and energy to reaching out to those who don't know Jesus Christ just like others find it easier to devote more time and energy to developing and delivering good sermons, or visiting the sick and homebound. But each of these aspects of the Ministry is ultimately about Jesus and the chief article of the Christian faith—the article of Justification—that we are saved by grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ alone, on account of His merits alone.

But I believe that, sadly, many in our church have set up an unhelpful false dichotomy which is really more about mission strategies and tactics, rather than about some who care for lost souls, and others who don't. And there's room for more than one set of strategies! Granted, there are perhaps some, more than others, who need to be encouraged toward good works in the area of reaching out to the lost. Just like there are fine Christian brothers and sisters who need, some more than others, to be encouraged toward good works in Christian stewardship, or defending the unborn and those who can't defend themselves, and so forth. But let's be careful not to set up two classes of Christians, when a true and living faith cannot help but tell everyone what He has done, even if that faith dwells in a quiet and shy individual, or in a small, declining community.

I'm also a confessional Lutheran in at least three senses of the word: First, I confess Jesus before men, as Jesus said in Matthew 10: *"Everyone who confesses me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven."* Second, at my ordination, and again at each installation, and in fact every day of my life, I subscribe the Lutheran Confessions as contained in the Book of Concord of 1580. Third, more than leaving those confessions on the shelf like some dusty old confirmation Bible, I strive however imperfectly actually to confess the Lutheran Confessions—second only to the Holy Scriptures which are *"the only infallible rule of faith and practice."* I confess the Lutheran Confessions, with my mouth, in my preaching and teaching and daily life. And I understand them to be *"a true exposition of Holy Scripture and a correct exhibition of the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church."*

In these senses I am a confessional Lutheran. And just like I don't believe that the term missional should apply only to one group in the LCMS, so also I want to be charitable, and to start from the premise that all Lutheran pastors and lay people are, or want to be confessional in this threefold sense of the word. And yet, just like with the term missional, I acknowledge that some find it easier than others to articulate this as a priority. Some are more knowledgeable in this regard, or more gifted to teach the faith as confessed in Scripture and the Confessions. Some are perhaps more zealous to confess pure doctrine in the face of social pressure.

So I implore my brothers and sisters in Christ in the Kansas District, let's stop all divisive talk about "missional" and not missional, or "missional" and "confessional"! And let's put the best construction on one another's attitudes and motivations. Let's talk with one another—about missions and about *all* the things that Christ has commanded us to teach as we go and make disciples.

In summary, let's keep in the forefront that our work together in the Kansas District is always about Jesus... Jesus, as He is confessed by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. And let's take very seriously the fact that the Kansas District is a geographical subset of this great church body known as The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. But, even more importantly, that all of us in the Kansas District are united together through our Baptism into Christ. We are united together in the body of Christ, to share in His righteousness and holiness and love, and to work together harmoniously as each part does its work.⁵

Thank you for taking the time to read and consider with me these thoughts for the Kansas District. And thank you for the privilege you have given me, of serving as your District President.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12 & Ephesians 4