

The **LUTHERAN** **CLARION**



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Top Down Work on a Bottom Up Denomination:

A Look at the Final Report of The Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synod Structure and Governance

The thought of reading a Constitution and Bylaws is enough to make most of our eyes glaze over, including my own. But words matter, and, in my experience of the world, seemingly boring words usually matter the most. Bear with me as we attempt to wade through the main themes of 150 pages worth of words in this one paper*.

Part One – Starting from the Top

On page 38 of their final report, the task force says:

“At this point, it behooves the church to remember the **two major reasons President Kieschnick gave** for charging the task force with its ‘zero-based’ analysis of the Synod’s structure and governance. **The first is mission.** It is time to find new ways of assisting the Synod’s congregations in addressing the increasing challenges...of mission and ministry today. **The second is stewardship.** It is imperative that the Synod find ways to amend its currently complex and inefficient system...in a manner that achieves more efficient operations at less cost.” (Emphasis added.)

This paragraph holds the key issues of the work of the task force. In their ensuing comments, they say that the Synod cannot fiscally sustain its current structure, that there is overlap in duties at the synodical level, and that districts are disparate in funding and in their support of their congregations. President Kieschnick is right; some changes may be good for the system, and the task force has attempted to handle both mission and stewardship. However, the above statement about mission desires to help from ‘bottom up’, while the stewardship statement desires saving money from the ‘top down’. Both ends do need work, but where one begins makes a big difference as to where one ends.

Top Down: Fixing the Number of National Delegates

Though it is recommendation eleven, one of the core features of the final report of the task force is fixing the number of national delegates. Selecting a number that is small would allow the Synod to choose from many smaller venues and reap significant savings compared to the current costs of national conventions.

But fixing the delegates has far-reaching consequences. To fix the number of delegates, each district must be apportioned a number of delegates based on their

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* The BRTFSSG Final Report is at www.lcms.org under Structure and Governance.

national significance compared to the rest of the districts--the growing or shrinking of members and congregations will change the district's voice at national convention relative to its peers.

Currently, each district is broken down into circuits. Circuits must have a certain number of congregations and members to be valid. Each circuit in a district sends two delegates to the national convention. But a flexible number of delegates will probably not match up with the relatively fixed number of circuits in a district.

So, the task force proposes that each district instead choose its national delegates at the district convention from among the district convention delegates. To do this, the district board of directors will divide the district up into regions based on the number of delegates it is apportioned by Synod. Each region's delegates choose two of their own to go to nationals. No details are given for this regional division except that "such apportionment shall take into consideration geographical and such other factors as will provide reasonable and equitable congregational representation" (Proposed bylaw 3.1.2.1(a)).

This is a bit like the lady who swallowed the fly. To fix the national delegates we have to change the district's number of delegates. To change the district delegate numbers, we have to change how they choose delegates. To change that method, we have to change the purpose of the circuits. If we change the purpose of the circuits, then we can change how circuits are made.

The end result, though, is that congregations send delegates to a district convention as potential delegates to the national convention as determined by a 'region' that has no bearing on how the congregations actually operate and function within the district. There is efficiency in this system. However, the congregations and the circuits are diminished in the national delegate process. Will doing this strengthen and truly advance the work of the Synod?

Exacerbating a Problem: Blending Commissioned and Ordained Ministers Together

Fixing the number of delegates creates another dilemma. Currently, commissioned ministers (all professional church workers besides the pastors) can only be advisory delegates to conventions, meaning they can speak but cannot vote. This is a longstanding problem.

One solution is to allow three delegates (ordained, commissioned, lay), but this increases delegates and expenses. Another is to allow them to be lay delegates, but that might make for a church worker convention. Yet another option is to just leave things as they are for now and push the issue off again for another day.

However, the task force chose to propose a new idea. In Article V [Circuit Organization] of the Constitution they define a new category: "associate-member" of Synod, which is "ministers of religion – ordained and a minister of religion – commissioned." Then, they redefine delegates to conventions as "one associate-member of the Synod and one lay delegate." Therefore, any "minister of religion" is sufficient as a delegate. The task force supports this choice in the following way on page 26 of its final report:

"In a church body whose pastors constitute less than half of 1 percent of its baptized membership but exercise 50 percent of its voting authority, the task force questioned the wisdom of reducing the number of lay delegates...at a time when the church is striving to increase lay ownership of, and involvement in, mission and ministry...Theologically, the Synod regards commissioned ministers as 'ministers,' not 'laity.' The LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations has explained that commissioned ministers serve in 'an office that is auxiliary to the office of the public ministry and specifically to the uniquely ministerial functions of that office' (*The Ministry*, 1981, Page 34)."

Rather than decrease the voice of the laity, it wants to increase the general voice of the 'ministry' to more than "less than half of 1 percent of the baptized membership." **But the very same document, *The Ministry*, clearly states on the exact same page, that this view is theologically untenable:**

May teachers be franchised at synodical and District conventions?

“5. We see no theological reason why they may not be allowed to vote, *provided that this is not done to the exclusion of those who hold the office of the public ministry.* In that case the church would be making its decisions without the advice and registered voting opinions of those who are specifically trained, called, and charged with the spiritual and doctrinal oversight of the churches. *Likewise, to exert an egalitarianism that equates all “professional” offices in the church is to ignore the divinely ordained nature of the office of the public ministry and equate it with those offices that are auxiliary to it (The Ministry, 1981, pp. 34-35.)*” (Emphases added.)

The task force has confused our doctrine of vocation (everyone a minister in whatever roles they have each day) with the idea that all vocations are theologically equal, at least regarding “ministers of religion.” Conventions are theological enterprises. One of the task force recommendations (#17) even desires to “emphasize the importance of doctrinal resolutions and doctrinal statements.” And yet it wishes to diminish the presence and voice of those who are trained specifically in theological discernment. The point of having half of the delegates as pastors and half as laity is not to give all factions of membership equal voice. Rather, half the voice comes from those who are the under-shepherds of Jesus and the other half of the voice from those being shepherded and so the whole voice of the church is heard. The division of delegates is about theological faithfulness.

Part Two – Continuing From the Top: Changing Synodical Governance

The Addition of Regions

An interesting change is the addition of regions. The nation would be split into five regions, from which vice-presidents (2-6) would be chosen at convention. The vice-presidents have no new duties but are more evenly spaced across the country. Presumably, this means that rather than go directly to the President, the district presidents will be first referred to their regional Vice-Presidents, **adding another level of bureaucracy.**

Members of the Board of Directors will be elected at convention based on these regions (a pastor a layman from each region). The idea of regions is to give all parts of the country a voice in Synod, but it is unclear if such limitations will bring in the best people for the jobs.

The Structure at the Top

The top level of Synod continues to be the President and the Board of Directors, but the task force proposes some shifting of power, but the proposals allow him enormous added powers. Currently, the national convention elects the President and the fifteen members of the board. **The proposed changes have the President elected by the congregations of Synod before the convention. At convention, eleven (of seventeen) voting members of the board will be elected - ten from the regions and a commissioned minister. These eleven, along with the President, appoint five more lay people to the board.**

Directly under the President and the Board of Directors are three people who comprise the “National Office Operations Team.” They are the Chief Mission Officer, the Chief Administrative Officer, and the Chief Financial Officer. **The Chief Mission Officer is appointed by the President and the other two by the Board of Directors.**

The Chief Financial Officer is the new name for the Vice-President – Finance – Treasurer. He is no longer elected, but appointed by the Board of Directors. The duties remain unchanged.

The Chief Administrative Officer is the person who carries out the work given by the Board of Directors. This position is already a part of synodical structure and remains appointed by the Board of Directors, but rather than acting as liaison to “program boards, commissions, and synod-wide corporate entities,” he is to work

“closely with” the Chief Financial Officer and Chief Mission Officer in “carrying out...the functions of the Synod” (proposed bylaw 3.4.2.3).

Finally, the Chief Mission Officer is an all-new position, appointed by the President. He takes over the function of liaison with “chief executives of commissions and synod-wide corporate entities” from the Chief Administrative Officer.

Additionally, the Chief Mission Officer will supervise the **President-appointed Pastoral Education Coordinator** (who works on the roles and responsibilities of the seminaries), supervise fundraising activities of the Synod, and “supervise the content of communications, public relations, and news and information provided by the Synod” including its official periodicals (proposed bylaws 3.4.3 – 3.4.3.6).

This position is appointed by the President and answers to him, so anything the Chief Mission Officer does is also under the Office of the Synod President. This means that the President, rather than the Board of Directors, now presides over the “program boards, commissions, and synod-wide corporate entities.” Additionally, fundraising activities of the Synod and supervision of all official publication content now fall under the President.

Also under the Chief Mission Officer (and the President) are all missions offices. The Office of National Mission is in charge of all domestic mission work, including Recognized Service Organizations and parochial schools. The Office of International Mission is in charge of similar things on the international level. All of the staffing, policies, and direction for these offices come from the President (proposed bylaws 3.8.1ff).

These *Offices* are not to be confused with the *Commissions* on National and International Mission, comprised of regionally elected pastors and laity, representatives from the seminaries, and other parts of our denomination. **These commissions are policy advisors to the President, but have no vote or actual determining voice.**

There are certainly other powers now designated to the Office of Synod President that this paper has not mentioned, but these are sufficient to raise the question of the proper boundary between efficiency and power in a denomination whose congregations are “the basic unit of Synod polity” (The Final Report, 15).

Coercion From the Top: What is Our Confession, and to What are We Bound?

Finally, and importantly, comes the changes to Article II [Confession], Article IV [Requirements for Membership], and Article VII [Relation of the Synod and Its Members]. **The task force adds an actual statement of confession to Article II, which is generic enough that any denomination would agree with it, and moreover, does not describe who Jesus is nor the process by which He is Savior, nor how that objective justification becomes ours, all of which are central aspects of our confession of faith.** Their proposed confession reads:

Jesus Christ, the second person of the Triune God, alone is the Savior of the world, and that only through faith in Him is there forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. John 3:16-18; 1 John 2:2; Acts 4:12.

Article II already has confessions, that is, Scripture and its teachings summarized in the *Book of Concord*, which, conveniently, already *fully* articulate our confession of the faith.

Article IV [Requirements for Membership] creates a larger problem by saying that membership in Synod requires not only adherence to Article II but also to the Constitution. Now, the members of Synod should follow the Constitution and Bylaws. But the Synod describes itself as “an advisory body” with no coercive power but the Word of God. Mandating constitutional subscription is coercive power outside of God’s Word.

Further into the Constitution proposals, Article VII [Relation of the Synod and Its Members], B.1-3 states that all members of the Synod will voluntarily subscribe to Article II, the Constitution, and will “agree to abide by,

honor, and uphold the collective will of the Synod as expressed in its Constitution, Bylaws, and convention resolutions” and “pledge their active involvement and support of the Synod’s efforts to carry out its mission and purpose.” Technically, all of this means that Article II, the Constitution, the Bylaws, convention resolutions, and synodical mission efforts are all binding requirements for membership in the Synod, since this is all in the Constitution. **To emphasize this point, the task force wishes to add Article XIV [Bylaws] to the Constitution, which says that the bylaws “are binding regulations for the Synod and its conduct and governance.” For an “advisory body,” there is a lot of subscription and binding.**

Finally, the task force wishes to add in several places wording which refers to “the Gospel message,” “the Gospel mission,” and “the love and work of God,” without explaining these terms. In light of the gospel reductionism threat we avoided in the 1970s, this is not an idle criticism. As if to emphasize this issue, **they use Pentecostal terms about salvation in Article III [Mission and Purpose]**, saying, in part, that our Gospel witness is “so that all people come to a saving faith relationship with Jesus Christ, grow in an ever deeper relationship with Christ and with one another...” **This is not the theology of the Lutheran church.**

Conclusion: Transparency, Trust, and Actual ‘Bottom Up’ Thinking

The first page of the final report says that “the divine institution of the congregation, the priesthood of all believers, and the significance of the pastoral office as established by God” are the three aspects of the LCMS about which we should be thankful. But because of their top-down approach, **the proposed changes will make the congregations less involved with Synod, blur the distinction and theology of the Office of the Public Ministry, and increase stipulations on congregational membership in the Synod. These results are in direct contrast to those things they say we are to cherish.**

After criticizing the main points of the report, **a few suggestions may be in order: Have a different group try again**, but start by discerning the reason for having districts and how large they can be before they no longer effectively serve their function. Then, change districts so that they are correctly sized to best serve. From there, a better understanding will emerge on what to do at the synodical level.

Meanwhile, at the synodical level, begin with transparency. Make a pie chart on the Synod’s homepage and on each district’s website which show where every dollar given to Synod is actually going. Make each section a hyperlink for in-depth detail on that topic.

This could create some level of trust and accountability, neither of which are now present. Also (speaking of trust) all district and Synod executives should consider taking pay commensurate with the ordained and commissioned ministers of the district in which they work. This would certainly relieve some of our financial burden.

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“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” John 1:29

Don’t Forget to Support The Lutheran Clarion

As the pivotal Synodical convention in Houston looms in our immediate future, the need for conservative/Confessional unity in supporting efforts to help the delegates to the convention (and the Synod at large) be well informed of candidates and proposals which can redirect our church body back to faithful doctrine and practice, becomes quite critical.

We at *The Clarion* need your help to change the dangerous direction in which our Synod has been moving. Will you please consider assisting in this effort by sending your tax deductible gift to:

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Other faithful Lutheran individuals who are members of LCMS congregations are invited to submit articles of approximately 500 words for consideration to:

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Articles should be approximately 500 words in length. Inquiries are welcome. Manuscripts will be edited.

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