

# **Formal Unified District Convention Reaction to the Preliminary Report and Recommendations**

*Wednesday, May 14, 2008*

## **The Mission and Purpose of the Synod**

Summary: The preliminary report concurs with the Synod convention of 2005 and 2007 conclusion that the purpose of the Synod is for congregations to do together what the individual congregation could not do on its own. The report goes on to say that the Synod *"has not been established to duplicate all the tasks given to individual congregations, only on a larger scale."* In connection with this goal, the report identified four general objectives for the Synod. They are: 1. To assist and counsel the pastors and teachers and congregations identified as members of the Synod; 2. To establish and maintain the theological seminaries, colleges, and other institutions of learning for the training of pastors and teachers; 3. To establish and maintain home and world missions; 4. To provide for the printing, publishing, purchasing, selling and disseminating of literature that maintains Lutheran doctrine and practice and by furnishing appropriate literature to the congregations for their work.

**Reaction 1:** Does the District in convention agree with and support the identified purpose of the Synod and the four general objectives as the report states them?  
Agree/Disagree

## **Section 1: Expansion of Mission Efforts**

Summary: The ad hoc committee studied the home and world mission efforts of the Synod and applauded the efforts of the two mission boards to consolidate and combine their work as much as possible. The committee went on to recommend that the home missions develop a *"national strategy"* for new church openings throughout the country and that they make the new church openings their main focus.

**Reaction 2:** Does the District in convention agree with and support the recommendation that home missions focus their attention and efforts primarily on new church openings, shifting their attention and budget away from lesser ministry projects? Agree/Disagree

## **Section 2: Synodical Budget and Finances**

Summary: The Ad Hoc Committee endorsed the efforts of the administration of the Synod to recognize that the Congregational Mission Offerings (CMO) are the primary and foundational method of support for the Synod's various ministries. The committee also approved the efforts of the synodical administration to consolidate and reduce the number of funding appeals from synodical entities. The committee supported the *"budget process"* direction of the administration to bring all expenses of the Synod under the operating budget, to consolidate all capital debt into a single synodical debt with one interest rate and one schedule of amortization over 10 years, and to provide more

information in the printed *Report to the Twelve Districts* and *The Book of Reports and Memorials* rather than post significant amounts of information only on the Synod's website. Noting the staffing levels in the Synod office building have been increasing, the committee recommended that staffing levels should be reduced. Toward this end the committee recommended that the Synod president be given the final say in filling vacant positions or adding staff even when funding is available in existing budgets.

**Reaction 3:** Does the District in convention agree with and support the following budget and finance recommendations:

- a. The number of funding appeals from synodical entities should be strongly reduced. Agree/Disagree
- b. More detailed information should be provided in the printed *Report to the Twelve Districts* and *The Book of Reports and Memorials* rather than on the Synod website. Agree/Disagree
- c. The Synod president should be given final authority when it comes to filling vacancies or adding staff to the Synod administration. Agree/Disagree

### **Section Three: Strengthening Congregations and their Members**

Summary: In this section of the report, the committee noted the alarming challenges facing the congregations of the Synod. These challenges include a declining number of people in worship and Bible class; a declining membership in the congregations; a declining enrollment drop in the elementary schools, and the closing of elementary schools and sometimes even churches. Noting "*a spiritually strong Synod requires spiritually strong congregations,*" the report proposes action on the part of the Synod to assist the congregations in changing the directions noted. The report recognizes that the problem must be addressed through the power of proclaiming the Gospel alone. Toward this end, the report recommends the forming of a "*cooperative team approach to Congregational health.*" This "*team*" should be made up of the district president, the circuit pastor, mission counselors, Christian giving counselors, and parish services ministries all working together to support a system for "*congregational spiritual strengthening.*"

To accomplish this goal of forming a team that is closer to the congregation to provide it with assistance in improving the spiritual health of the congregation, the committee recommends that the larger districts go through a consolidation. They recommend that the three largest districts of the Synod in combination with the two adjacent districts of Michigan and Minnesota, reorganize to form eight districts where before there were five. This combination will have the effect of reducing the size of the largest districts, and that in turn will allow district presidents and their spiritual team to be closer to the individual congregations. The report also recommends that the circuit pastor system be strengthened by giving the district president the power to nominate individuals within each circuit to hold these offices. The circuit pastor as an arm of the district president would be more in contact with his member parishes and in this way be able to

establish a relationship in which he could hold congregations and pastors "*accountable*" (see page 20, paragraphs 3 and 4) for their work.

The committee recommends a complete reorganizing of the Parish Services division of the synodical administration. The Youth Discipleship and Parish Schools would be combined in a new committee called the Commission of Education and Youth. The goal of this reorganization is to strengthen the control of the Synod administration and the Conference of Presidents over the work of Parish Services and Parish Assistance. The budget for this segment of the synod administration would be named the "*District and Congregational Ministry*", identifying the target for the work of these divisions of the Synod.

Once this reorganization is complete, the district presidents will have the tools necessary to promote "spiritual health in the congregations" in a "proactive rather than reactive " way. The committee hopes the result of these changes will eventually lead to greater spiritual maturity in the congregations.

**Reaction 4:** Which of the following two statements more accurately reflects the thinking of the District in convention?

- a. Since the strength of the Synod as a federation is strongly affected by the spiritual health of the individual congregations, the Synod administration has the right to hold the congregations accountable for their "*spiritual health*" (as measured by numerical growth or decline) and to work to improve that "spiritual health of the individual congregation". Assuming this "right", the district president, the circuit pastor, the mission counselors, the Ministry for Christian giving, and parish services have the authority to play an active role in the Gospel proclamation of the individual congregation. Agree/Disagree
- b. Noting the congregations formed themselves into a federation to carry out work they could not do on their own, the administration of the Synod has no assumed role to play in the active daily ministry of an individual congregation as it carries out its work, beyond the oversight of "doctrine and practice in line with that doctrine." Results of the gospel work of an individual congregation must remain in hands of God who alone gives the growth. While the Synod can prepare "tools and assets" which might aid the work of a congregation, it remains the right of the congregation alone to decide which of those "tools and assets" would aid them in their work, and to invite the synod to assist them with the area of the work they choose. Agree/Disagree

#### **Section 4: Pursuing Excellence among our Clergy**

Summary: The Ad Hoc Committee concluded that there is a lack of consistent emphasis and acknowledgement on excellence in academics. The committee felt that this “*leads to a tacit acceptance of mediocrity.*”

A second and related concern is that our education system for pastors and teachers fails to incorporate a strong emphasis on developing “*lifelong learners.*” They go so far as to assert that there is an “*aversion to accountability, an absence of a program for continuing education for pastors, and the lack of a system to ensure the implementation of such a program.*”

To meet the problems in these two areas, the committee has proposed two approaches. Within our education system, the committee proposes a new emphasis on academic excellence. This emphasis would be heightened by incentives in the form of scholarships given to students who achieve high academic results. These scholarships would be available from the first year of college through the final years of seminary. The committee suggests that the Synod might even encourage some especially academically gifted seminary graduates to pursue advanced degrees under Synod supervision and with monetary support from the Synod.

The committee also proposes that the Synod create a “*flexible program of continuing education*” complete with “*minimum requirements*” for all pastors. This required continuing education would be overseen by a special committee of the Synod, reported on the circuit pastors, and tracked at the Seminary. All pastors would be “*required*” to be part of this program and “*accountable*” to the established hierarchy for their participation and progress.

**Reaction 5:** Does the District convention agree with and support the following thinking and proposals of the Ad Hoc Committee?

- a. Identifying an existing “*lack of commitment to academic excellence*” in our pastoral education system, the Synod would remedy this problem with a reward system of scholarships designed to promote academic competition among the student body, and eventually resulting in a student body of higher academic ability. Agree or disagree?
- b. The committee proposal for creating lifelong learners and enforcing that learning path is to require pastors to follow such a path and account for that path to circuit pastors and committees established to make sure all participate. Agree or disagree?

## **Section 5: Synod-wide Theological Study**

Summary: The committee concluded that the Synod continues to face doctrinal challenges in our modern world and it recommends that we unite in our circuits and districts to give attention to four areas of discussion and study over two years.

The four discussion and study topics recommended are: 1. Trusting the Means of Grace; 2. Vocation in church and ministry; 3. election and predestination; 4. and the sacramental life.

To prepare for these unified studies and discussions, the committee suggests that the Conference of Presidents appoint a committee to identify key issues for doctrinal and practical study and assign “*eminently qualified presenters from our fellowship*” to prepare presentations. The presenters should be directed to use a “*fresh approach*” to their presentation, utilizing a list of “*prepositional statements*” to give structure to the discussion.

**Reaction 6:** Does the District in convention approve of this unified study plan and procedure as outlined by the committee? Agree/Disagree

## **Section 6: Structure and Organization**

Summary: The committee studied the structure and organization of the Synod administration and addressed three areas of concern: the lines of authority and interaction between the Conference of Presidents and the Synodical Council; the President’s Advisory Council and its role; and the current manpower and staffing levels in the administration.

Noting the administration has encouraged the Synod to consider placing the power to call to fill Synod positions in the hands of the Conference of Presidents, the Committee stated that such an approach would not necessarily create clearer lines of accountability than currently exist. Therefore the committee opposes any changes to the system at this time.

The committee favors clarifying the duties of the Ministry Operations Team. They suggest the name be changed to the President’s Advisory Council and that their role be “*solely advisory, not decision-making or policy setting.*”

In regard to Synod administration staffing, the committee felt that current levels (excluding home and world missions) are too high and that these levels should be reduced. They also recommended that the position of Second Vice-President of the Synod be eliminated due to lack of identified duties.

**Reaction 7:** Does the District in convention agree with the thinking and direction of the Ad Hoc Committee in regard to the three areas listed above?  
Agree/Disagree

## **Section 7: Synod and District Conventions**

Summary: While noting that the Synod in Convention is the ultimate authority for the federated congregations, the Committee recognized “inefficiencies” in this approach. These “inefficiencies” include: 1. “*delegates to the convention ... assimilate a large amount of data in a short period of time*”; 2. with delegates serving in only one convention, there is little continuity of emphasis from one convention to the next; 3. the Synod in convention meets one month into the new biennium for which the budget is being proposed, leaving little budget flexibility to introduce any changes required; 4. and the Synodical Council is required to adopt a budget proposal five months prior to the convention itself.

In the case of district conventions, the only problem cited by the Committee was the fact that many conventions occur simultaneously, leaving little opportunity for synod representatives to be available to attend the district conventions.

To ease these “*inefficiencies*”, the Committee made several recommendations. They suggest that delegates to Synod convention be chosen jointly by congregations in circuits and be allowed to serve up to three consecutive conventions. They recommend that the Synod publish all “*necessary and vital information*” in the BORAM and in the Report to the Twelve Districts rather than posting much of this information on the synod website. Finally they suggest that Synod convention time can be shortened and scheduled at a time more appropriate to the adoption of the budget for the coming biennium.

**Reaction 8:** Does the District agree with the recommendation that delegates to the Synod convention should be elected to serve as delegates up to a maximum of three successive conventions? Agree/Disagree

**Reaction 9:** Does the District agree that every effort should be made to include all relevant and pertinent details in the BORAM and in the Report to the Twelve Districts, even though this incurs higher printing costs? Agree/Disagree

**Reaction 10:** Regarding District conventions, what do delegates to the district conventions wish to see as their role in the polity of the Synod? Should district conventions be given clear opportunities to react to Synod proposals by voting their preferences, so the delegates to the Synod convention can know the thinking of the “grass roots” of the Synod across the entire Synod? Agree/Disagree

## **Section 8: Synodical Communications**

Summary: The Committee in general approved of the various efforts the Synod administration is making to change and improve communication between the administration and the congregations. However, the Committee strongly recommended that the Synod website “*undergo a major re-working*” as part of an effort to “*unify and coordinate all WELS communication vehicles.*”

**Reaction 11:** Does the District in convention agree with the recommendation to re-work the Synod website so that the Synod “*sends the right kind of message about our Synod and its mission*” to the world? Agree/Disagree

## **Section 9: The Cost of Ministerial Education**

Summary: The Committee cited three areas of concern regarding the cost of education. The cost of education has been increasing at a rapid pace. Many students graduating from Martin Luther College carry a “significant debt load.” Prep school enrollment has been in a steady decline since 2001, some of which is probably due to the increase in costs and decrease in financial aid.

The Committee proposed several remedies. They recommended that costs for the prep school should be kept in line with local area Lutheran high school. They

recommended that the cost of Martin Luther College should be brought in line with the costs of local public universities. This reduction of cost was their first option. The second option they proposed was a “*reimbursement program*” based on years of service in the ministry. Graduates who accepted a call would receive gradual paybacks in the range of \$12,000 to \$15,000 over a period of the first ten years in the ministry.

**Reaction 12:** Does the District in convention agree that a concerted effort to lower costs for prep school and college to match area Lutheran high schools and local public universities is an acceptable and wise approach to the address the cost of ministerial education? Agree/Disagree

**Reaction 13:** Does the District in convention agree that establishing a tuition reimbursement program spread over the first ten years of ministry is an acceptable way of dealing with the cost of ministerial education? Agree/Disagree