



THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

Minnesota South District

...joyfully serving together in making disciples of Jesus Christ

October 26, 2023

Dearest Brothers,

Greetings to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!

It was a joy to see so many of you at the Fall Pastors Conference. Thank you for your patience and flexibility as we tried out a new venue. I want to thank Pastor Kurt Klaus and his team at Messiah for the tremendous job of hosting. I also want to thank my team at the district office for coordinating on all the logistics and ensuring we have good bodily sustenance available.

Fall Pastors Conference Feedback

Likewise, thank you to the 50+ pastors who filled out the evaluation form and gave feedback on what went well and what can be improved. Unsurprisingly, we discovered what some pastors appreciated (some intensely so), others found unappealing (some intensely so). Such is life when you gather nearly 200 pastors together in one room.

More importantly, we discovered we can do the Fall Pastors Conference at a local congregation, of which nearly all appreciated. We are continuing in our cost savings analysis, but should this be borne out as expected, our goal is to continue having the conference at a local congregation with it rotating around the regions of the district. Some brothers have already stepped forward and offered to host.

District Updates

My endeavor is to continue going first in offering a fraternal and compelling path forward for our life together. This is one built on a trust and inspire approach, where we trust and inspire one another to *Go First* to love the Lord and love people, all in the context of our robust Lutheran theology centered on the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. The goal is to move us toward greater unity and collaboration in our life together amid this chaotic world as we vigorously make known the love of Christ in our congregations and communities.

To that end, I offer extended district updates for your consideration below, including the announcement of district facilitated theological convocations for each region in 2024.

New Starts

The MN South district presently has 232 congregations. Two more were added this past year - one new Hmong church plant (Cornerstone Light of Life Lutheran Church, St. Paul), and one established congregation (St. James, West St. Paul) that was a formerly independent Lutheran congregation. We have two other multiethnic congregations in the process of applying for membership (Royal Family, Minneapolis and Peniel, Eagan), both who are part of the New

Church Incubator program of the district that ensures each are financially supported and sponsored by a mother congregation. Thanks be to God for the growth He gives! However, we are nearing the end of the funds for that program and will need to rely on your generous designated future contributions for it to continue beyond the present cycle.

Closures and Struggling Congregations

We had three congregations close (Christ, Rochester closed on 8/22/2022; St. James, Minneapolis closed on 1/09/2023; and Bethany, Wabasso closed on 4/24/2023). Additional closures are on the horizon and the viability of congregations remain a concern. There are 39 congregations who have an average of 30 people or less in weekly worship attendance. In many cases, this makes it difficult to adequately pay for a full-time pastor. As congregations are willing, we do our best to help them explore options as they consider the future. Through it all, we stand on the promise of Christ knowing the gates of hell will not prevail against His church!

Circuit Realignment Study

The minimum number of congregations for an electoral circuit is seven. We currently have four circuits that only have seven congregations. Should one close, they would no longer qualify as an electoral circuit and would be attached to a neighboring circuit to make one electoral circuit, thus losing a voting delegation at the synodical convention. With more closures and shrinking circuits on the horizon, plans to address this coming reality are necessary. There are two things that will need to be considered in any circuit realignment plan. First is how the Synod's bylaws differentiation between a "visitation circuit" and an "electoral circuit" could be maximized to our advantage for both local ministry and synodical representation. Second is the possible changes coming at the next synodical convention regarding the make-up of an electoral circuit per 2023 Synodical Resolution 9-06A.

District Visitation

My staff and I continue to visit congregations in multiple ways - at congregational call meetings, ministry collaboration opportunities, and for encouragement. Unfortunately, the most frequent visits are the numerous situations requiring assistance in conflict resolution and reconciliation either between a pastor and congregation or between pastors and/or fellow church workers. Additionally, I continue to address situations of moral failure by pastors and the collateral damage and scandal it causes. As Luther said, where the Lord builds his church, there the devil builds a chapel. Brothers, be diligent in guarding your own soul; be in the Word and prayer and find a brother confessor!

I visit brother pastors regularly in a variety of ways. Certainly, by phone calls and personal visits, to pray with and offer a word of encouragement, but also by circuit visitation. I visited twelve of the 24 circuit meetings the first year of this triennium while my executive assistant, Rev. Stefan Wismar, visited the other twelve. We have switched circuits for this year and have them all scheduled. I want to remind you the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren remains vital for our life together. Make every effort to attend your circuit Winkel. We need one another. Where differences of pastoral practice exist, patient fraternal conversation is needed. Where a doctrinal concern arises, I expect brothers to talk to one another first before coming to me, while I stand ready to engage in those conversations (and am presently doing) as needed. Where suffering and distress occur, bear one another's burdens. Our circuit meetings are important.

Board of Directors

The District Board of Directors voted to move toward a hybrid policy governance model to come into alignment with the practice of the Synod Board of Directors. Ted Kober from Ambassadors of Reconciliation and former longtime Synod board member was consulted for this proposed change. The Board of Directors plan to hold open forums across the district leading up to the 2025 district convention in order to be as transparent as possible regarding this proposed change. Those details will be forthcoming.

Theological Convocations 2024

Finally, many of you have expressed an interest in theological convocations to engage in robust dialogue about the matters of the day, perhaps like those given in my President's report at the Fall Pastors Conference. To that end, I am working with the vice-presidents of each region regarding plans for a theological convocation in each region during the 2024 calendar year. A pressing topic or two will be identified and a pro and con speaker from within each region will also be identified. I will facilitate each convocation and provide the framework of debate, asking speakers to note the three distinctions that shape our debates but are often not kept clear: 1) absolutes that are essential, nonnegotiable, and universal; 2) personal convictions; and 3) preferences/opinions. More information on these will be forthcoming. Stay tuned!

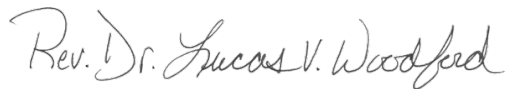
You are Appreciated!

In closing, as October is pastor appreciation month, I pray the members of your congregations publicly recognize and show appreciation for you, the under-shepherds of our Lord Jesus Christ. Please know my appreciation for you remains on a weekly and daily basis. Thank you for the work that you do!

You are stewards of the mysteries of God, who not only tend the souls of our Lord's beloved and precious sheep but reach out into your communities with the word of truth and love, to gather in, as Jesus says, "sheep that are not of this fold" (John 10:16). You, dear brothers, are appreciated!

The Lord bless you and keep you.

In Christ,



*Rev. Dr. Lucas V. Woodford, President
Minnesota South District, LCMS*