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Unity or Uniformity in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod?

“Our fundamental problem is one of repentance and lack of faith in the power of the Word to unite even us. Because we cannot hear God’s Word, we cannot hear one another....when we refuse to listen to our brother or sister, we refuse to listen to Christ, who speaks his Word to us through others.” Matthew C. Harrison, President of the LCMS, *It’s Time*, 2008¹

In 2008, before Matthew Harrison was elected president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, he wrote a paper entitled, “It’s Time: LCMS Unity and Mission, The Real Problem We Face and How to Solve It.” His stated intention for the paper was that it was “one response to these suggestions for change”² put forth by the Task Force for Synodical Harmony which was commissioned by Resolution 4-01A, adopted at the 2007 national convention to formulate a plan for restoring harmony to the Missouri Synod. In “It’s Time,” Harrison called “for a ‘Koinonia Project’ designed to engage the Synod in theological discussion regarding divisive issues.”³ Documents relating to the findings of the task force and the Koinonia Project can now be found on the LCMS website at <http://www.lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=1041> .

According to the Task Force Report,⁴ “the task force realized that we needed a common language for communication with the church and with one another. Three concepts that kept reappearing in our conversations were unity, concord, and harmony. We often used them interchangeably with some confusion and miscommunication.” They defined unity as “the oneness that all believers in Christ have with each other through Spirit-given faith in Jesus created through the means of grace.” The three terms were summarized in both the Task Force Report (p. 2) and Koinonia Project Concept Draft 9.0⁵ (p. 3). “[U]nity focuses on our oneness with Christians everywhere by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Concord focuses on our oneness in doctrine and practice. Harmony focuses our life together in Christ to be characterized by Christ-like attitudes, particularly love.”

In the opening quote above, President Harrison seems to have had in mind the unity and harmony of the people of the Missouri Synod. He quotes Bonhoeffer for emphasis: “The first service one owes to others in the community involves listening to them. Just as our love for God begins with listening to God’s Word, the beginning of love for other Christians is learning to listen to them...But Christians who can no longer listen to one another will soon no longer be listening to God either; they will always be talking even in the presence of God. The death of the spiritual life starts here, and in the end there is nothing left but empty spiritual chatter and clerical condescension which chokes on pious words.”⁶

I appreciate the work of the task force and of President Harrison and the proposed Koinonia Project. It will be a years-long and difficult project. Still, there are questions and as

¹ “It’s Time: LCMS Unity and Mission, The Real Problem We Face and How to Solve It” p. 14f, is linked from this campaign blog: <http://www.harrisonforpresident.wordpress.com/>

² Ibid. p. 2

³ “A Way Forward with the Harmony Task Force Report and the ‘Koinonia’ Project” p.1, www.lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=1041

⁴ <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=883> p. 1

⁵ <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=884>

⁶ It’s Time, p.15

acknowledged in the Koinonia Concept Draft 9.0, many people will have misgivings and doubt about the Project. Will it simply be a means of indoctrination and result in a new church document that will demand uniformity rather than promote unity (both within the Missouri Synod and with Christians of other denominations)? Is there not already reasonable cause for doubt and concern about the Project since rostered pastors and professors are currently being prosecuted and threatened with expulsion for holding positions differing from those in current LCMS political power on controverted matters of theology and practice (such as communion and the ordination of women)? President Harrison wrote, “It is possible to unify 85% of the Synod in doctrine, practice and mission...” and “It is time for a serious, decade-long effort – a non-politically organized and driven effort to regain theological and practical unity in the Synod...[that will] result in a Synod 85% united and on the path to greater unity...”⁷ Will 15% be eliminated before the process even begins, either through expulsion from the roster, excommunication, or simply denying people voice in the process who hold positions that disagree with those who hold current political power to choose which issues of disagreement will be included in the process and who will be allowed to participate? Or will it be 15% of whatever is left of the Missouri Synod ten years from now if the climate of fear and threat is allowed to continue?

Presently in the LCMS, it is impossible for anyone who even wants to discuss the ordination of women much less put forth a positive position for it to do so without threat of expulsion, the coercion denounced as non-productive and divisive by President Harrison and the Koinonia Concept Draft 9.0. For the Koinonia project to succeed there needs to be throughout its duration a cessation of prosecution, threat, and intimidation that makes honest, God-pleasing dialogue impossible. “We recognize that if this is perceived as a means to ‘purge’ the Synod of ‘undesirables,’ it will not accomplish anything.”⁸

Situations such as the persecution of retired Pastor Bob Stuenkel, “who communes with his wife in an ELCA parish where she is a member,”⁹ must cease at least until the matter of the Lord’s Supper and who among the unity of the body of Christ we may commune with is studied as part of the Koinonia Project. It has been a long and current practice among many LCMS congregations and individuals to commune with Christians who are not Missouri Synod Christians. Making an example of Rev. Stuenkel by expelling him from the roster will only cause many people to view the Koinonia Project as a disingenuous process for demanding conformity with the desires of those in current political power, which is odd because even the formulators of the Koinonia Project seem to side with Rev. Stuenkel in this matter. “In the broadest sense, we have ‘koinonia’ with all who are in Christ by faith...This one body of Christ is not the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, but encompasses all believers in Christ...Our confessions tell us we will find believers wherever the Word of God is proclaimed and the sacraments are given out according to Christ’s institution.”¹⁰

The persecution of Rev. Stuenkel works against the Koinonia Project even before it gets underway. “The study groups must be developed as ‘safe places’ for honest theological conversation...[because] people need to be able to participate in the conversations of the ‘Koinonia’ groups without fear of retaliation. Immediate accusations of false teaching within a

⁷ It’s Time, pp. 8, 10

⁸ Koinonia Concept Draft 9.0, p. 7

⁹ “The Future of Theology,” Robert Schmidt, The Daystar Journal, Spring 2012, p. 1
http://thedaystarjournal.com/Archive/2012/schmidt_future_of_theology.html

¹⁰ Koinonia Concept Draft 9.0, p. 1

group, for instance, will quickly lead to the breakdown of the group.”¹¹ Demands for uniformity do not allow for discussion, but discussion is what the Koinonia Project proposes. A point so important regarding discussion that it is written twice in Draft 9.0 insists, “The dialog must include all positions, at every level of the church; within our congregations, circuits, auxiliaries, Synod-wide theological convocations and smaller focus groups as well.”¹² The task force report listed as one of seven aspects of disharmony “distrust,” stating that “Often our attitudes and behaviors are unworthy of trust. Our workers feel threatened and unsafe in ministry.”¹³ How can open discussion and trust occur when people are threatened for speaking a word of dissent? The task force also identified Synodical disharmony as “primarily a clergy problem,” stating that “Belying, belittling, betraying, slandering and speaking evil of others is exemplified by clergy in the LCMS...” One solution they suggest to this problem is to “Intentionally bring together known opposing parties in the church for open dialogue to demonstrate helpful communication that seeks greater understanding of others’ positions.”¹⁴ Again, open dialogue and the Koinonia Project will only be possible if there is first an agreement to suspend threats of expulsion, excommunication, and charges of heresy, beginning now and continuing throughout the Koinonia Project.

Another of the “seven aspects of disharmony” identified by the task force is the “inability to deal with diversity.” There is currently “diversity among us in practices. ...[such as] admission to Holy Communion, worship substance and style, the Office of the Public Ministry and the role of laity, and the service of women in the church. ...Holding high the values of preserving uniformity and tradition, we have not learned how to address diversity among us...”¹⁵ This is highly evident in the current charges against Dr. Matthew Becker, who has written in favor of the ordination of women. The task force report states that an indication that we are successfully dealing with diversity will be when “Our ethnic and gender diversity is represented at all levels of synod.” On the path to resolution of this problem is “A Synod-wide study of Scripture and the Confession on God-pleasing diversity” with involvement of “diverse groups in the work on these issues.”¹⁶ How can such a study occur when all people who stand on one side of an issue are immediately harassed and threatened with charges, expulsion, and excommunication for expressing their position?

For the Koinonia Project to be seen as anything but a program of indoctrination, threats and intimidation for expressing a dissenting opinion must cease. I wholeheartedly agree with the idea of a Koinonia Project that involves open discussion and begins with the study of Scripture on controverted matters of theology and practice, but I am in equal measure opposed to such a project if it is merely a tool for exclusion, demanding uniformity of thought and practice in conformity with a political agenda disguised as a time for repentance and study with the hope of greater unity and harmony within the Synod. I have hope that the former will be the case as President Harrison summed up the current state of our Synod well: “Our fundamental problem is unbelief. We do not believe the Word of God actually can and does unite us. Only if we are united by the Word of God can we begin the long journey of becoming the community of faith

¹¹ Koinonia Concept Draft 9.0, p. 10

¹² Koinonia Concept Draft 9.0, pp. 6, 15

¹³ “Task Force for Synodical Harmony Report to the Board of Directors and Council of Presidents,” p. 14, (aka The Final Report of the Task Force on Synodical Harmony, <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=883>)

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 11

¹⁵ Ibid. p.3

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 8

and love we so desire to be.”¹⁷ Expelling or silencing by threat or exclusion from discussions those with whom the current administration disagrees before the Koinonia Project begins would be a sign that the project is a political maneuver aimed at uniformity rather than unity after all. My hope is in the Word of God to unite us and I trust that soon a moratorium on charges, harassment, threats of expulsion from the roster or excommunication for speaking a word of dissent will be in place in the LCMS. “The ‘Koinonia Project’ cannot be a political process, but must be a spiritual process centered in the Word of God, repentance and prayer, forgiveness and charity...[we need] a deeper understanding of the Scriptures and the Lutheran confessions as they apply to the issues that trouble our unity and motivate the formation of parties (turning various groups into ‘aggrieved minorities’).”¹⁸

Even though the Task Force Report named the doctrine of the ministry and the role of women in the church as subjects in need of study and discussion within the Koinonia Project, to even suggest discussing the ordination of women currently brings immediate vehemence that has gone so far that a Missouri Synod pastor declared several months ago that all women pastors who have died are now in hell. Where in the world did he learn to think such a thing? Yes, we need desperately to discuss the ordination of women in the Missouri Synod. It needs to be openly discussed in the Koinonia Project, without threat of prosecution and harassment. Only through the study of God’s Word and truly listening to each other will we be able to civilly and maturely discuss anything regarding diversity and the role of women in the church. As President Harrison stated, “Because we cannot hear God’s Word, we cannot hear one another...when we refuse to listen to our brother or sister, we refuse to listen to Christ, who speaks his Word to us through others.”¹⁹

Good reasons for including discussion of the ordination of women in the Koinonia Project can be found in the writings of President Harrison and in the CPH book, Women Pastors? Harrison wrote, “We have Walther’s crystal clear teaching of Law and Gospel and church and ministry as our own heritage (a heritage we sorely need to revisit and creatively re-apply to our day!)...Given...the official status of some of C.F.W. Walther’s writings in the Missouri Synod, these documents would also have to be dealt with” in the Koinonia Project.²⁰ In the book, Women Pastors? David P. Scaer, Chairman of Systematic Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, wrote that “C.F.W. Walther’s doctrine of the ministry, which gives every baptized Christian the office of the ministry, carried to its logical conclusion does regretfully allow for the ordination of women pastors.”²¹ About sixty years ago, Walther’s doctrine of the ministry seems to have been quietly dismissed in order to exclude women from ordained ministry.

In Authority Vested, Mary Todd gives some background that helps explain the shift from Walther’s doctrine of the ministry to a “philosophical argument from the ‘order of creation.’”²² In the early 1950s, Concordia Seminary professor Albert G. Merckens was in Germany and “stumbled onto” a book by Fritz Zerbst that was published in Austria in 1950 entitled The Office of Woman in the Church: A Study in Practical Theology. Zerbst was “a Lutheran clergyman concerned about the wartime critical-shortage-of-men decisions of most European churches to

¹⁷ It’s Time, p. 8

¹⁸ Koinonia Concept Draft 9.0, p. 15

¹⁹ It’s Time, p. 14f

²⁰ It’s Time, pp. 4, 12

²¹ Women Pastors? edited by Matthew C. Harrison and John T. Pless, Concordia Publishing House, 2nd Edition, 2009, essay by David P. Scaer, “May Women Be Ordained As Pastors?” (1972) p.244 footnote 46

²² Authority Vested: A Story of Identity and Change in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Mary Todd, p. 155, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000

allow theologically trained women (*Theolginnen*) into the practice of public ministry.” Merkens “found Zerbst’s argument ‘foundational’”²³ and translated the book into English. It was then published by Concordia Publishing House. “The uncritical and unconditional acceptance of Zerbst’s thesis by the Missouri Synod is curious not only in light of Missouri’s tendency to rely solely on its own fathers and their orthodox predecessors for guidance, but also in the fact that the question of the ordination of women had never been raised in the synod and was certainly not an issue in the 1950s.”²⁴ One of the orthodox predecessors would certainly have been C.F.W. Walther and his book, Church and Ministry published by Concordia Publishing House in which his doctrine of the ministry can be found. This is a writing and a doctrine of the ministry about which President Harrison wrote “would also have to be dealt with” in the Koinonia Project.

For unity, concord, and harmony in the church, the Missouri Synod must include the ordination of women among its topics for open discussion in the Koinonia Project. The LCMS has failed to listen to Walther regarding the ordination of women and refuses to listen to brothers and sisters who want to discuss it today. As President Harrison wrote, “Our fundamental problem is one of repentance and lack of faith in the power of the Word to unite even us. Because we cannot hear God’s Word, we cannot hear one another . . . when we refuse to listen to our brother or sister, we refuse to listen to Christ, who speaks his Word to us through others.”²⁵

I hope that the developers of the Koinonia Project and President Harrison are sincere in their stated intent to make honest theological conversation a reality in the Missouri Synod by eliminating “fear of retaliation” for the expression of honest theological positions.²⁶ I hope that open discussions in the Koinonia Project will “include all positions, at every level of the church; within our congregations, circuits, auxiliaries, Synod-wide theological convocations and smaller focus groups as well.”²⁷ I pray that God’s Word will be heard and that we will learn to listen to each other; that out of repentance and renewed faith will flow the love among us that will fend off deadly and isolationist uniformity, producing in us the unity, concord, and harmony for which we all long.

²³ Ibid. p.154

²⁴ Ibid. p. 155

²⁵ It’s Time, p. 14f

²⁶ Koinonia Concept Draft 9.0, p. 10

²⁷ Ibid. pp. 6, 15