

More Than 200 Gather in Three Districts to Discuss Our Ministry Together as LCMS Lutherans

By Rev. Scott Sailer, President, LCMS South Dakota District

At the end of August, church workers and laypeople came together in three locations in Nebraska, South Dakota, and Iowa West to “talk church.” About seventy people in each location (Seward, Sioux Falls, and Fort Dodge) considered the many blessings we have in the LCMS and the challenges and opportunities before us in joining Jesus in His mission of seeking and saving the lost (cf. Luke 19:10). We seek to do this blessed work as Christians who are faithful to God’s Word and the Lutheran Confessions.

The gatherings, called LCMS Leadership Gatherings, were the result of conversations the respective District Presidents, Richard Snow (Nebraska), Scott Sailer (South Dakota), and Steve Turner (Iowa West), have been engaged in as they have thought about the matters they’ve encountered in their seven years as District Presidents. They’ve had special concerns about the spiritual condition of congregations and the health of pastors, teachers, and other commissioned ministers, particularly in the last couple of years, when life in the Church and in the society at large has been so highly impacted by the coronavirus.

They have observed that, as people throughout this nation have become more isolated from others, God’s people in our congregations have also become more isolated. Worship services and other church activities have suffered from lower attendance, and, as the pandemic has waned, it’s been difficult to re-build worship attendance to pre-pandemic levels.

What’s true on the local level in that regard, has been true on the Circuit and District levels, too. Circuit events and District workshops and conferences, for example, were also curtailed during the days of the pandemic. The events that were held showed a downturn in attendance.

The three DPs have observed something else about life in the LCMS in their own Districts and in the Synod generally: We seek to walk together as LCMS Lutherans who have been given the gift of God’s Word, the Creeds, and the Lutheran Confessions. But walking together can be a challenge sometimes, since our churches are established in different contexts, with a great variety of people; the churches, therefore, have unique challenges and opportunities. Moreover, the church workers and the laypeople have a myriad of experiences and a variety of gifts, which the Holy Spirit has brought together in congregations.

We need to bring people together, the three DPs concluded. And they decided to do this as a team of presenters, in three separate meetings: in Seward, at Concordia University, on August 24; in Sioux Falls, at Zion Lutheran Church, on August 30; and in Fort Dodge, at St. Paul Lutheran Church, on August 31.

The Invitation and The Purpose

The three District Presidents worked primarily via email to extend invitations to the gatherings. DP Snow wrote this, and the invitations of DPs Sailer and Turner were similar:

The purpose of our time together will be to develop some key concepts about how we, together, can provide positive, collaborative leadership in an increasingly fragmented society and church body.

We have unity in Christ. We are the body of Christ. The Apostle Paul calls us to speak the truth in love and to grow up into Christ. Held together by Christ with each part working, the body grows so that it builds itself up in love. Disregard and division weaken the body. This meeting seeks to establish common ground among those with a “diversity of gifts” within the District.

Beyond that stated purpose, each DP had his own additional purpose in bringing people together, for the sake of advancing important work and hearing from the “grass roots” of the respective Districts as they provide leadership:

- President Snow wrote that the gathering in Nebraska “will help me as we review our District’s strategic plan and put together pastor conference themes for the coming triennium.”
- President Sailer stated that the gathering “will help me as we seek to develop our District’s new Mission and Ministry Council, bring on some new District staff, and, simply, as we work together in a variety of ways – old and new –in The South Dakota District to reach souls with the Gospel.”
- President Turner wrote: “The theme of our district convention was *Partners in the Gospel*. I see this as an opportunity for us to put this partnership in to practice. The need for leaders to partner together, has never been more evident. Cultural challenges and mission opportunities abound. We need to present a united front as we partner together. “

The Gathering Agenda

The agenda was identical at each gathering, running from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. in each location. DP Turner led off with a devotion based upon God’s choice of seemingly reluctant leaders, like Moses and Jeremiah, which is contrary to the kind of leaders often favored in our society – bold and brash. President Turner emphasized: God’s call to you, through your congregation, is what is important; God calls you and equips you to be a leader. He cited Jeremiah 1:9-10, in that regard: “I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”

DP Sailer was next to speak. After he reminded the participants of the purpose of the gatherings, he said, “If we are going to give a clear witness to the world, we must be able to give a clear witness to one another.” He also brought before the group some “ground rules” for the conversations, which included the necessity of dealing with one another collegially, putting the best construction on everything.

Then, DP Snow set the stage for the rest of the day, with his presentation, based on I Corinthians 12: “Working as the Body of Christ: Cultural Challenges and LCMS Opportunities.” Just as the human body needs each of its members to function properly, we need each other; each member is important, he said. “I need you, and you need me in the church; this is the Spirit’s design,” was his prevailing message.

After that, the gatherings featured table discussions and reports back to the plenary. The participants were asked to consider the following at their tables, for their congregation, for the District, and for the Synod overall:

- LCMS Challenges and Affirmations
- “I’m dreaming of an LCMS that...”
- Top 5 Uniting Concepts

What the Table Discussions Revealed

1. LCMS Challenges and Affirmations

The unity and the variety of people and their gifts in the body of Christ was Affirmed. The Challenge – It can seem that we do not embrace or even appreciate the variety of people and their gifts in the body of Christ. We tend to focus and search for disagreement instead of commonality, both within and outside our own circles.

Affirmed: God’s Word and His sacraments unite us. The Challenge – How do we deal with perceived doctrinal differences that lead to distrust? What can we learn from the early Church in Acts 15, and from the reformers, particularly from the Formula of Concord?

The importance of church worker health, life balance, and relational health was Affirmed. The Challenge – To define what worker health is.

Also Affirmed was the need to develop relationships in Winkels and conferences, and to develop the understanding that healthy conflict can be used by the Spirit to foster trust. Trust and unity begin at the cross. The Challenge – The lack of trust that exists among us.

Affirmed: We need each other, and we need to meet with each other. Our unity is a strong witness. The Challenge – Setting aside time for face-to-face interactions. When we meet, we need to make our goals and vision clear.

2. *“I’m dreaming of an LCMS that…”*

- Centers its identity in Christ, as His baptized sons and daughters, strengthened by Word and Sacrament, and renewed in our desire to study God’s word together.
- Connects with and meets real needs in our community.
- Has churches that are true sanctuaries, “grace” places.
- Demonstrates trust for and with one another.
- Is healthy, even if we are smaller and may have fewer resources than in the past; where partnerships prevail between church workers and congregations, and within circuits.
- Celebrates joys with one another.
- Has congregations that are beacons of truth, but that shine with gentleness and respect in a post-Christian culture.
- Has healthy, balanced families; where fathers are the spiritual leaders of their families.

3. *Top 5 Uniting Concepts*

Nebraska

- #1. Focus together on Divine Truth – Scriptures and Confessions. Honest, fraternal Conversations among the brothers on concerns of doctrine and practice.
- #2. Trust and Relationships. Greater trust and joyfulness under Christ with one another. Doing things to foster trust. We are the body of Christ and need each other. We are not enemies.
- #3. Discipleship. Empowering adults. Equipping parents. Lay leadership.
- #4. Lutheran Schools. Strengthening ministries. Creative school planting.
- #5. Community engagement and outreach. Empowering laity.

South Dakota

- #1. Standing steadfastly on Biblical and Confessional truth and maintaining our unity therein.
- #2. Sharing the hope we have in Christ by way of words of witness and loving actions.
- #3. Maintaining good relationships and getting together are absolutely essential to our work together.
- #4. Demonstrating the joy of our salvation (joy in Jesus) in worship and in church activities.
- #5. The Spirit-given confidence we have in our identity in Christ, formed by the Spirit via Word and Sacraments, in a culture antagonistic to Him and His Church. We are His redeemed people!

Iowa West

- #1. Our common confession of faith summarized in the three *solas* of the Reformation: Scripture alone, Grace alone, Faith alone.
- #2. Work at building relationships between the pastors of our district, by way of the study of God’s Word and fellowship with one another.
- #3. To have healthy churches we need healthy workers. We need to intentionally take care of our spiritual lives, our emotional well-being, and our physical health.
- #4. One of the hallmarks of Iowa District West is our support of Missions. This is both on the local level and in our continued strong support for District and Synod mission projects.
- #5. We are united in mercy. We are called to have compassion toward those who need our help.

An Evaluation of the Gatherings by Participants

The participants had the opportunity, at the end of each gathering, to respond, in writing, to the statement: “*Before we leave, I want to say...*” Their answers provided something of an evaluation of the gatherings. Based on their answers, it is clear that the participants came with their own sets of expectations; they left with a wide variety of opinions about their experience.

Some wanted a deeper dive into specific doctrines and practices that sometimes divide us, such as differing worship practices and admission to the Lord’s Supper. One pastor who felt this way wrote on the form:

While it was good to join together to discuss unity as LCMS leaders, it does nothing to solve the issues where we are NOT united: communion practice, the way we worship, and the like. The way to resolve these issues will be to discuss each issue together, using Scripture and [the] Confessions,....

Others expected to learn some specific, useful principles for helping them to be leaders in their congregations, which was not done in these gatherings. A commissioned minister noted:

Maybe this was a good start, but it would be hard to come away from here with anything concrete to actually work on. We threw out a lot of ideas, but nothing for working solutions.

One lay participant, who saw the benefit of this effort to bring people to talk and listen to one another, wrote in his evaluation:

I feel that an organized event like this is very beneficial to both pastors and laypeople alike - maybe do it annually? A lay perspective should be of benefit to pastors, as we see things differently at times, and there are many more of us (lay) than pastors. We also need complex topics broken down simply, so listening to the “theologian speak” and then asking for clarifications was helpful to me and hopefully to [the pastors] as well. This provided an opportunity to feel “safe” about asking questions and providing feedback to pastors about the various topics addressed. The discussions could have turned into a complaint-session, but the format allowed for good, small discussions to gather the feelings, without the gloves coming off. Healthy, respectful conversations of differing opinions should be able to happen naturally, without one side becoming too defensive. You succeeded in this!

That last evaluation illustrates what the three District Presidents had hoped to accomplish in planning and implementing the gatherings, in their region of the LCMS. Their aim was to have “an organized event” with “healthy, respectful conversations,” as the layman, above, noted.

Going Forward

At the gatherings, God’s people took a break in their busy lives to talk about the things of God’s Kingdom, specifically concerning our life together in this blessed church body, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Many conversations took place, often between people who had never met one another before. Rural church members met pastors from cities. Some folks met a deaconess or a DCE for the first time. New relationships were formed and old relationships were strengthened. Big town perspectives on ministry met rural perspectives. Those were the great blessings of the LCMS Leadership Gatherings held late this summer in Nebraska, South Dakota, and Iowa West.

It is the prayer of Presidents Turner, Snow, and Sailer that understanding and trust and a mutual commitment to God’s mission in this world have grown. They plan to use what they witnessed and heard at the gatherings in their ongoing efforts to lead well in their Districts. It is their hope that the pastors, the other church workers, and the laypeople who attended – servant-leaders one and all -- will take what they learned and experienced into their congregations and communities. May God richly bless them as they do!