

# ISSUES

IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

FALL 1996

VOL. 30, NO. 2

## POLITICS IN THE CHURCH



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Fall, 1996  
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# ISSUES

IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

A PUBLICATION OF CONCORDIA COLLEGE—SEWARD, NEBRASKA

## Politics in the Church

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## editorials

### Church Politics in the Best and Worst of Times

"IT WAS THE BEST OF TIMES; it was the worst of times." By changing just a few words, we can use these familiar lines from Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* to discuss the issue at hand. Definitions of "politics in the church" are perhaps as numerous as the people who try their hand at defining the concept.

In the best of times, or according to the best and loftiest understanding, politics in the church is nothing more or less than an open and honest effort to influence the thinking and acting of a brother or sister in Christ on some particular issue. It would be both outcome oriented and people sensitive, with the purest and most spiritual motivation. It would be faithful to the Scriptures in thought, word, and deed, and be pursued only for the benefit of all and for the edifying and growing of Christ's Church.

## reflections

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN once said, "If all printers were determined not to print anything till they were sure it would offend nobody, there would be very little printed." I reflect on Franklin's sage statement whenever an edition of *Issues in Christian Education* elicits constructive criticism from our readers. I would like to again remind our readers that this publication is called *Issues* because it deals with issues confronting our church, as together all of us attempt to find the most effective means of telling the world that Jesus Christ is the only way to eternal life.

One of our readers said in a recent letter what I often have tried to enunciate: "I always feel a sense of urgency not just for our academic institutions but also for the church as a whole to preserve a process of inquiry that has integrity. I understand that to include looking at aspects of an issue that may not be congruent with what we have always held dear is unsettling to some. Following such an inquiry, we may still hold to that view previously held, but with more informed resolve and more substantive support. We may also review our thought based on appropriate defense. For me, this process and its integrity are inherent in what it means to be Lutheran."

Those words seem appropriate as in this edition of *Issues* we address what many consider a controversial matter in our beloved Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The aim of this *Issues* is to explore the "what," "why," and "how" of political activity in the church today at the congregational, district and Synodical levels. As many Concordia-Seward graduates begin their ministry in congregations, they often express amazement regarding political activity in the local congregation. At times, pastors express surprise concerning political activities on the district level. Delegates and participants in Synodical conventions quickly become aware of organized efforts described as "political."

As you read this edition, I hope you will gain a new perspective on politics in the church. For certain, political activity is not something new in our Synod. While I do not know all of the details, one would have to be naive to suggest that Concordia College is located in Seward, Nebraska, rather than in Norfolk or Lincoln or Hampton, because of an absence of any political activity in these parts slightly over one hundred years ago.

It is my prayer that each of you will gain some new insights on politics in the church as you read the major articles, editorials and book reviews. Above all, I thank and praise our God that eternity in heaven has nothing to do with politics, but everything to do with His love for us in sending Jesus Christ to be our Savior!

Orville C. Walz, President



## editorials

In the worst of times, politics in the church is the conniving and manipulating efforts of arrogant, power seeking people, with the goal of promoting a particular person or agenda. It has little regard for integrity or charity; in fact, a callous disregard for "defending him, speaking well of him, and putting the best construction on everything." For after all, just as in the days of the Inquisition, the end justifies the means! If he/she doesn't agree with me, he is obviously wrong, and any means used to discredit or destroy must be okay.

Perhaps our own experience and understanding of "politics in the church" lie somewhere in between the best and the worst of times. It is not only permissible, but indeed required that we make every effort to influence the rest of the body, to speak and act with the mind of Christ, and for the well being of the whole church. It is not enough to stand off at a distance and throw stones. Our calling is not to curse the darkness, but to light candles. No one should be criticized for trying to influence others in the church. This is part of our calling as stewards of the mysteries of God. When we see the church in danger of veering off course, we need to bring Spirit-filled influence to bear, so that the church might be renewed in its confession and redirected in its mission. If this be "politics in the church," so be it.

Having said that, we know that a lot of efforts to influence others in the church represent "the worst of times" political scenario. The primary question as we try to distinguish between "best of times" and "worst of times" politics in the church is not, "What are we doing?" but "Where are we going, and how do we plan to get there?"

In 1988, our Synod's Council of Presidents issued an important document entitled, "The Ministry of Influence in the Church." I hope that study would become an important part of any discussion about politics in the church. If you haven't seen it, I urge you to get a copy of it from your District President or from the Secretary of the Synod. Let me quote just a few sentences to demonstrate:

For a Christian, the Ministry of Influence is to be an attitude and an act that flows from Christ, our Savior, the humbled and exalted One. Its very nature and function is not to be derived from the secular realm. The Christian mind-set flows from our intimate relationship with Christ and involves the service of admonishment, forgiveness, teaching, edification, nourishment, encouragement, comfort, fellowship, tenderness, and compassion. Such ministry flows from being saved. Christ and His gifts are the "flow in" or the "inflow".

A responsible "Ministry of Influence" in its purest sense should be for the purpose

of building up one another. As a member of the body belongs to all the other members, we serve, encourage, lead, and show mercy to one another. (cf. Romans 12:3-8)

The "Ministry of Influence" in its purest sense will demonstrate a hatred of evil as it demonstrates a devotion to one another in brotherly love. On the platform of honoring one another above oneself, responsible influence will bless and not curse and will seek to live in harmony. Such love in the Ministry of Influence will be careful to do what is right, wise, and helpful, will not use evil means to achieve its end, will not repay evil for evil but will attempt to live at peace. (cf. Romans 12:9-21)

No question about it—it's both proper and necessary to say out loud and forcefully, "I believe that this is the best course of action *because* . . . or I believe that this candidate is the best man or woman for the position *because*." It is precisely the *because* and the "how" in the church that separate the best of politics from the worst of politics in the church. The *because* must always be focused on the God who is honored and believed and served through our very word and deed; even the words and deeds of our efforts to influence others. And the "how" must never conflict with what Galatians 5 sets forth as the "fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Those "fruits" are the direct opposites of hate, bitterness, fear, quick-temperedness, unkindness, evil, betrayal, sharpness, innuendo, sarcasm, etc.

Bad politics in the church can be identified not primarily or always by what it seeks to accomplish, but by the "how" of its efforts. You can tell it's "bad politics" when:

- it employs sarcasm or ridicule to try to make a point
- it gives the impression that it delights in "exposing" what it considers to be evil
- it gives the impression that it's beginning to live under its own power, rather than only under the Holy Spirit-breathed power which is the Gospel of Christ.

When the above happens, not only is the perpetrator guilty of gross sin; the church-at-large dare not allow such activity to go unchallenged or unrebuked.

Perhaps it can all come under the admonition to "do good unto all, especially those who are of the household of faith." No where does Scripture give license to "do evil to those who are of the household of faith" no matter how right one thinks his cause might be.

**August T. Mennicke**

Vice-President *emeritus*  
The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

## Politics in the Church: Like a Four-Letter . . . ?

SOME YEARS AGO our Synod's Stewardship Department published the pamphlet, "Stewardship is a Four-Letter Word." Its point was well made. We all know about such words. The word "stewardship" certainly can be a word like that, carrying an immediate negative connotation, the very sound of it striking a defensive chord. As a result, the word often meets with resistance and a negative response, no matter how good it and what it stands for really are.

"Politics" is another one of those words, a "four-letter word," that today seems to evoke an immediate negative reaction. Recently a Washington, D.C., cabby shook his head in dismay during a conversation we were having about the goings-on in his city. His explanation for everything that was wrong (which he felt was considerable) was one word: "politics." "Politics?" I asked. "Politics," he repeated, with a clear note of disdain in his voice.

When we expand that word in the phrase, "politics in the church," then heads really begin to shake. The phrase immediately brings to mind an array of thoughts of conventions and elections and publications and lists and clandestine meetings and parliamentary maneuvers and all that goes with them. And since such things seem so out of place in the church and yet take place each time our Synod meets to do business, we can always expect to hear people in retrospect bemoan such activities, especially if their own druthers did not win the day, declaring the latest convention to be the most disgusting of all conventions, declaring never to return, and blaming it all on "politics," that ugly "four-letter word."

To be sure, there can be "four-letter" kinds of things associated with politics. Like the cabby, we too may shake our heads at times. But any problem, of course, really has nothing to do with the word or the concept. As with the word "stewardship," "politics" represents some very important and beneficial activity.

This is also very true of "politics" in the church which is such an important part of our life together as we make the corporate decisions necessary to function together. Establishing programs, electing leaders, addressing concerns, advancing ideas and being involved in our walking and working together cannot be accomplished without our Synod functioning as a body politic. One essential part of such functioning must be communication and pointed discussion. How else shall we make choices about program, or know who the potential leaders are, or benefit from the varied thinking and ideas which should be one of the blessings of being a Synod?

Any problems with such "four-letter words" therefore have to do with human nature. To use

"stewardship" again as an example, when we get past that first human nature response and the immediate reaction of guarding our pocketbook, and when we give the concept some Christian thought, we find it to be a beautiful word, one which speaks of good management and blessings and privilege and thanksgiving.

Likewise "politics," especially in the church. It is a beautiful word when it represents good activity which facilitates our life and work together in response to our salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ.

At times efforts are made to change words in order to be rid of a negative connotation. That attempt has been made time and again with "stewardship," though never very successfully. We might also try to improve on "politics." How about "positics"? With the change of a single letter we could lend a more positive sound to the word.

And yet we know that any such attempt would be wasted energy, because the word is not the problem. The change which must take place, always, is not one of spelling but of speaking, the kind of speaking which the apostle encourages in his letter to the Ephesians, "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). He has in mind a community of Christians in which true doctrine is accompanied by a loving manner. Truth and love are very important in any body politic, but they are especially so when the body is the Body of Christ. At stake in this Body is not only the health of the Body itself but also the promotion of the Gospel, the church's primary interest.

Such politics best takes place when each member of the Body takes personal care with truth and love, whether in publications or public meetings or the public promotion of a potential leader. Only then will we make some progress as a Synod in removing the good word "politics" from the "four-letter word" list.

God help each of us to take the necessary care in our own circles of influence to practice a "politics" which might very well be spelled "positics."

**Raymond L. Hartwig**

President, South Dakota District  
The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

## Does the Majority Rule?

LUTHERANS HAVE always been suspicious of political settlements and politics in the church. Politics concerned the Lutheran minority at the II Diet of Speyer. The majority religious coalition called for a majority ruling. But the minority would not be silenced, issuing the *Protestantes*, urging that the Word of God alone resolve disputes, not majority voting. Later with signatures attached the minority would submit their Confession at Augsburg before "kings and princes," offering their bold confession. Luther's solitary

stand at Worms was the paradigm for each. This conviction of Lutherans since Worms, Speyer and Augsburg has been mirrored in the structure of Missouri Synod (see *Government in the Missouri Synod* by Carl Mundinger and *Zion on the Mississippi* by Walter Forster). The Synod of Missouri deliberately distinguished itself from the model of Rome, giving its Chief Shepherd the title of President rather than Bishop or "Papa" (Pope). Moreover, the Synod in reflecting something of the democratic model intended to be thoroughly constitutional, with Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions its ultimate rule and guide in matters of faith and life.

But when it came to Synod conventions, it would depart from the model of the democratic society. Walther would insist, with others, that conventions were not legislative events in which laws were cast and established, silencing minorities. Rather conventions were designed to measure the degree of consensus on matters theological. The minorities were not to be silenced, but they were to be heard and allowed opportunity to "convince" and "persuade" others that their understanding and interpretation of Scripture and Confessions were consistent with the Word of God. When Walther as President of Synod found himself at odds with those who insisted that "usury" was not a "sin" for Gentiles, but truly a sin for Jews of the Old Testament era, he did not silence these few dissonant voices by power, political structure, and shunning (see the CTCR document, "What is a Doctrine?"). If this approach were Walther's style, who had unshakable convictions about the sin of lending money with interest, then political action would have immediately become the style of Synod. In the name of what is right and true, Synod could have legitimately forced consensus and conformity on this issue. But curiously, with all the power which was his by right and reputation, Walther did not compel the dissenters to "come in," ceasing to disagree and forcing them to "walk together."

In such clamor for power, the penetrating word of Jesus still reverberates, "He who would be greatest among you must be the servant of all." Abuse of power can be seen in former ELCA Bishop Chilstrom's suggestion that "mere tolerance of conservatives who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture" is enough (see *What's Going on Among Lutherans?* p. 57). His "tolerance" meant that such a theologian would be silenced, quietly tucked away in the theological woodwork, but never be a voice in the church's committees, boards, colleges and seminaries. In this two-party system pastors or potential faculty were labeled conservative or a liberal. In this two-party system, one is compelled to adopt a platform and designated leaders, candidates, and nominees. In a politicized church one votes the party slate and ticket while supporting unquestionably all policies, candidates, and programs of the party. Those who break rank and vote

a split ticket are counted enemies of the two-party system.

What shocks many laity and new pastors is the open espousal of a two-party system in Missouri Synod, complete with networks and candidates and easy to follow guides in voting the straight ticket.

What alienates many is the realization that neither Scripture nor the Lutheran Confessions are ultimate, but rather, the stronger political machine.

The true genius of Missouri is the conviction that laity are to be given a genuine respect for their judgments and an equal voice in Synod's conventions. Some years ago, laity played an important role in the early assessment of theological education at the seminary in St. Louis, discerning the difference between fundamental and non-fundamental issues. Through political maneuvering a true politician could have silenced all dissenting voices.

Lest theology become political, Synod brought into being the CTCR to deal with debated issues, providing study documents as tools for study and reflection, and procedures for Synod's members to dissent, even on three of Synod's most respected documents. The conviction was that dissent does not name your political affiliation, but your convictions concerning Scripture and Confessions over against the issues at hand.

Do we silence dissent on the basis of power, majority vote, or do we open an arena in which dissenters may seek to convince us by Scripture, Confessions, and sound reason that their judgment is within the scope of God's revealed will? (See the excellent article by Samuel Nafziger, "The Doctrinal Position of the LCMS on the Service of Women in the Church," *Concordia Journal*, 18/2 (April, 1992), 112-131, which traces the history of Synod's discussion regarding women suffrage in Synod.)

Luther viewed the church as an arena for such debate without threat of future and livelihood. His 95 theses, as well as his *Bondage of the Will*, expressed such a conviction. But the forum quickly became a coliseum for lions, with Luther as the main course. The question to be asked is, "Has such dialectic been terminated by a political model, with its caucuses orchestrated by the so-called liberal front or the so-called conservative front?" If dialectic is orchestrated by either, the prophet may urge a "curse" on both houses.

**David P. Meyer**

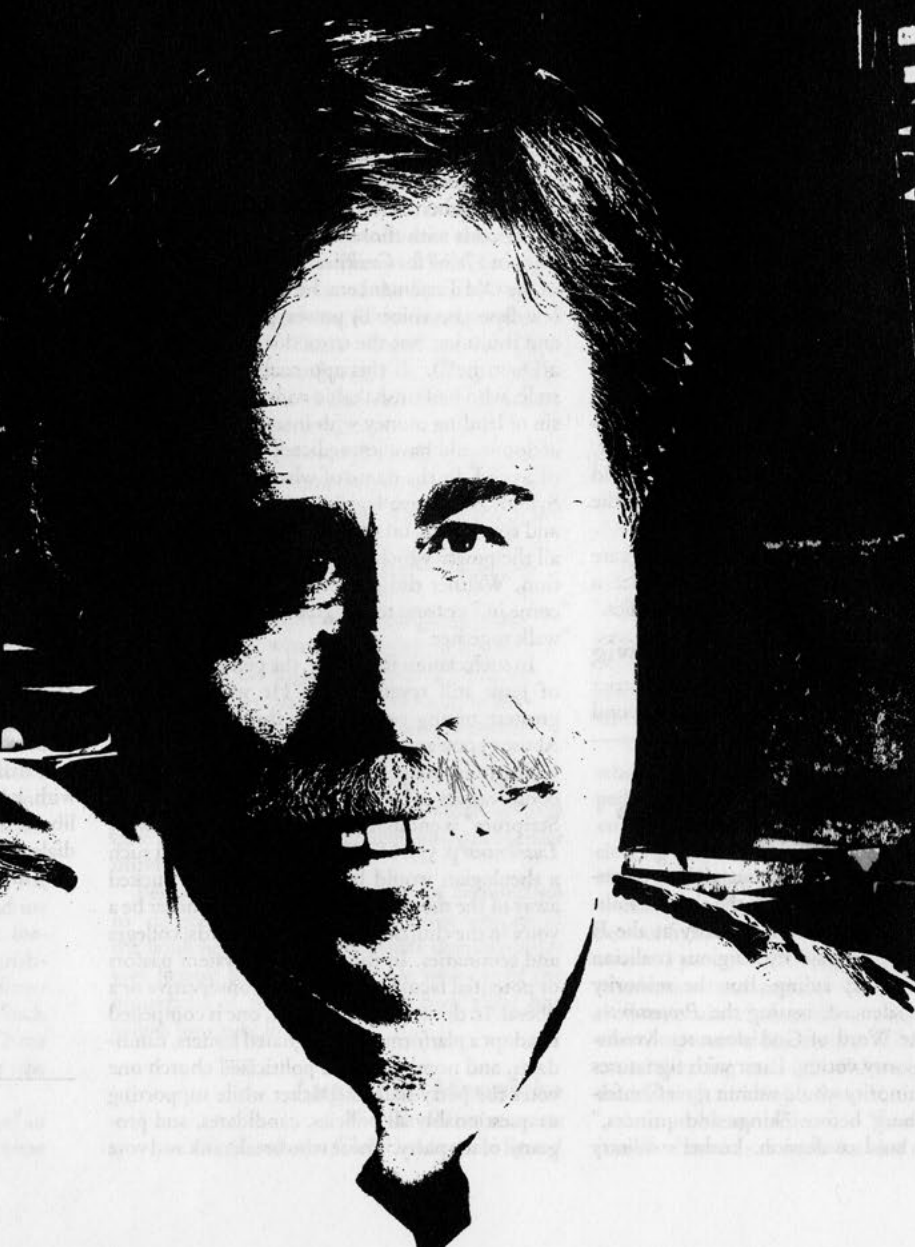
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# Politics in the Church: Theological Perspectives

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## Wilbert Sohns

**P**olitics in the church has been an interest and concern in our church body for many years. It has been practiced and abused, discussed and condemned. It is both misunderstood and creates misunderstanding. And it can be both unifying and divisive. For some it is good and for others it is all evil. Very often the concern about politics in the church centers in "unofficial publications," voting lists, "unofficial" caucuses, and power groups. But are such things the real issue? Are those things the *essence* of politics?

The first question to be asked is: "What is politics?" The origin of politics is a Greek word, *polis*, meaning city or city state. It has to do with cities, citizens and the *administration and government* of the same. Its focus is *caring for and overlooking the interests* of the citizens and cities. It is also related to the conduct of oneself as a citizen. Related words to "polis" are policy, polity and politician. In working for, with, and in the interest of the "citizens," *politics is the art of influence* involving the welfare of citizens, government, rulers and leaders. All are participants in one way or another.

The realms of politics include the family, the work place, the state, the church (congregations, church body) and organizations (in the secular world as well as the church). However, one must recognize that there are marked differences in the various realms. In the church, there is the administration of the *Law* (God's) and the *Gospel*. The Office of the Keys is the special power or authority given only to the church. The state does not have that power. However, *Christian* citizens in the context of the state, work place, the home, school or in organizations are to carry out the priesthood of believers. "The mutual conversation and consolation of brethren" ("The Smalcald Articles," *The Book of Concord*, Part III, Article IV) can and should be practiced. *Yes*, one must distinguish properly between the Kingdom on the Left and the Kingdom on the Right.

Dr. Wilbert Sohns, now living in retirement in Gatesville, Texas, served as a pastor and as President of the Wyoming District of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

## Background Perspectives

A STUDY OF POLITICS IN THE CHURCH deserves some background and historical perspectives in the history of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS). At the 1986 Synodical convention, Dr. August Mennicke, serving as chairman of the Council of Presidents, addressed the convention on behalf of the Council. He stated that "the Council of Presidents requests everyone's prayers as they address some of the major issues facing the church in the days ahead." One of the issues that he referred to was politics in the church.

After a "treatise" on the subject was prepared, presented, discussed and edited, a document entitled "The Ministry of Influence in the Church" was unanimously adopted by the Council of Presidents on November 17, 1988. This document was to be distributed by the individual District Presidents to the members of their respective Districts. Resolution 8-08 of the 1989 Wichita Convention of the LCMS read, "That we recommend the dissemination and use of 'The Ministry of Influence' document for guidance throughout the church."

The opening paragraph of the document stated:

Let's face it! There is a much needed Ministry of influence that takes place in the life of the church. To influence is a privilege, right and responsibility that every member, pastor, teacher, voter, delegate, etc., possesses. It must not only be recognized, but preserved, encouraged, facilitated and exercised. Influence is that dynamic that affects a person, a group or the course of events. It can be described as that which brings about a change in character, attitude, mind-set, thought, direction or action. At times this is called "politics." It can be the process of "input" and "making a contribution to" something. However it is defined, it is that responsible dynamic by which one (individually or collectively) "flows into" (influences) people, leadership, decisions, actions, and the life of any entity. It is "inflow" (influence).

The document also stated that "Politics is the art of sharing or promoting an idea, philosophy, candidate or opinion. For those who have the opportunity, it can thus be a wholesome responsibility to offer solutions for problems and to seek the support of and for others."

Philippians 2:1-5 (and the context) was the Scriptural touchstone for the document.

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being





We need to caucus...

like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interest of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

Basically, the document points out that politics in itself in its purest definition and form is not evil or wrong. Thus political activity can be wholesome, good and helpful. The issue is not politics *per se*. The issue is whether or not it is a politics of destruction or construction. A politics of construction is to be commended.

However, the usual view of politics is that it is unwholesome. Such perceptions can come from associating politics with people who conspire together to try to bring about God's will through man-made means, or when one's words and deeds are only for one's own partisan needs or personal gain, or when one attempts to garner the votes (stack the votes) to get power, to stay in power, or to get one's way. It is easy in a power-based culture like ours to view politics only as a matter of power or control. Such a perception is understandable when we seem to observe regularly such dysfunctional phenomena as manipulation, methods and maneuvers to get one's way regardless of the damage to truth, love, people or the integrity of an entity or group, ignoring whether confidence in responsible leaders is undermined.

The abuse of politics that produces destruction of people, lives, entities, and reputations includes such other phenomena as "good ol' boy clubs," cliques, "show of right," "straw men tactics," co-dependence (enabling irresponsible behavior), reactivity, secrecy, sabotage, triangulation, and scapegoating. Also included is the brainwashing of congregations for various reasons (on either extreme) to promote a mind-set against District and Synod and its leaders. Such political activity does destroy. It produces hurt and damage. It is always divisive.

### Biblical Examples

POLITICAL (INFLUENCE) ACTIVITIES in the narratives of Holy Scripture are very evident. Let's reflect on just a few of them. In the family and life of Isaac there was scheming, lying and activities in order to gain an advantage—a politics of destruction. Isaac told King Abimelech of the Philistines that his wife Rebekah was his sister. Rebekah conspired with her son Jacob to deceive Isaac in order to get the blessing due the first-born Esau. Laban deceived Jacob and gave him Leah instead of Rachel whom Jacob loved the most and for whom he had to work an additional seven years. Rachel influenced Jacob to have sexual rela-

tions with her maidservant Bilhah. Rachel made a deal with her sister Leah for Jacob to sleep with Leah in return for mandrakes. Jacob sent messengers ahead in order to influence Esau for the sake of his safety. Joseph's brothers schemed together to kill him and then to sell him as a slave.

Another Old Testament incident of "politics" involved Jezebel who influenced her husband, King Ahab, in order to obtain by a "show of right" Naboth's vineyard to which he had no legal right—another example of a politics of destruction (1 Kings 21).

In the Book of Esther we see the politics of destruction as well as construction. Haman conspired to murder the Jews, especially Mordecai. Mordecai influenced Queen Esther, who in turn influenced the king—a politics of construction.

A politics of destruction in the New Testament is seen in the actions of Judas (Matthew 26); Pilate (Matthew 27); the mother of James and John (Matthew 20 and Mark 10) concerning the status of her sons; the disciples and their sinful desire to be the greatest (Luke 22). Their agenda was control, power and personal status/gain.

However, we also see the politics of construction in the church in Acts 6. This was not about power and control but service and that which was helpful and wise in caring for the needs of the widows and in selecting helpers. A wholesome influence was taking place by the apostles in that situation. In a church-at-large convention held in Jerusalem (Acts 15), Paul, Barnabas and Peter were involved in wholesome influence activities. These were followed by more influence activities by Judas and Silas as well as Paul and Barnabas in the church at Antioch.

### Theological Perspectives

IN UNDERSTANDING, appreciating and practicing politics in the church, it would be a most wholesome undertaking if God-pleasing theological perspectives would undergird our politics. I would suggest the following principles for consideration in our beloved Synod.

First and foremost, a politics of construction in the church is to be rooted in being *evangelical*. The gospel of Christ is to be the focus, the root, foundation, purpose, goal, motivation and power.

For a Christian, the ministry of influence is to be an attitude and an act that flows from Christ, our Savior, the humbled and exalted One. Its very nature and function is not derived from the secular realm. The Christian mind-set flows from our intimate relationship with Christ. . . such ministry flows from being saved. Christ and His gifts are the "flow in" or "inflow."<sup>1</sup>

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When St. Paul described his rights and his freedoms, he stated: "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the Gospel . . ." (1 Corinthians 9:22-23). In addressing the Philippians, St. Paul urged that "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27).

Being evangelical is to be the heart and core of Christ-centered political activities. The Gospel is the priority and focal point in justification and sanctification (the Christian life). Saving faith through Christ's redemptive work and its fruit of the Christian life is never to be confused nor reduced to a matter of moralism. Thus, politics in the church is to reflect being evangelical.

Second, Christian political activity is to be grounded in the authority, power, and communication of the Word of God, not the pious word(s) of man nor his/her dark-room wisdom.

A responsible ministry of influence will not seek to be "a party of power" in the church. Instead, it will seek to live under the only power, which is the Word. It is the power of the Word that creates, shapes, molds, moves, instructs and sustains the Church. . . the power in the church, therefore, is not, nor ever shall be, politics, persons, programs, presidents, District or Synodical staff, political groups or cliques. It does not lie in structures, societies, Synodical headquarters or seminaries. The power is not in communication media, communication networks or communication tools. The Word of God is to be the influence in the church and its life. It is the "inflow" in the voters assemblies, in meetings and in conventions.<sup>2</sup>

In C.F.W. Walther's 1848 Presidential Address, he expressed concern for the Synod's church polity. The power exercised in the church was to be simply the power coming from the Scriptures. He states, "We have merely the power to advise one another, that we have only the power of the Word and of convincing."<sup>3</sup>

In an essay presented to the first Iowa District Convention in 1879, he also expressed a concern regarding a pastor's influence in a congregation (the broader context was that of Synod's role being advisory, with Walther using the pastor's role as an example).

According to Holy Scripture then, no pastor has the right to order a congregation to do anything. All he can do is to repeat our Lord's commandments and say, "That is what my Lord Christ says, therefore you must obey or you are lost." But if the pastor tries to order the congregation to do something he personally wants, then every member

of the congregation has the right to tell him, "Pastor, you don't have the right to boss us around, for you are not our pope. Don't you know that we are Christians? We will have nothing to do with anyone who tries to give us orders and commands . . ." So, if such a smarty-pants pastor says, "I must admit that I cannot prove that from the Bible, but you must respect my Office," then you tell him, "You don't seem to know what your Office is . . ."

In this essay, he also concluded,

Just as little as a pastor can issue orders to and establish laws for the congregations, just so little can a whole group of pastors and laypeople combined do that. For not even the church has any power whatsoever to establish rules or regulations that would be binding on individual Christians or on whole congregations and their consciences.<sup>4</sup>

Since the activity of advising, convincing and influencing can be such a wholesome activity in the church, it is so important to communicate in truth the Word of God, using it neither as a club nor a "pass-word" for one's own agenda and advantage, nor as an excuse for spending all one's time and money exclusively on politics. Even an involvement "in the Word" that is not genuine can become a politics of destruction.

Instead of letting the Word of God establish a balanced agenda for the life and mission of our church (local or national), politics in itself can become one's life and ministry style. Such politics can consume one and one another. Thousands of dollars and extreme amounts of energy and time can be expended at the expense of the very Word of God, the mission of the church, the Gospel, evangelistic outreach, the conversion of souls, and even parish pastoral work including the administration of Word and Sacraments to all.

This writer also has observed that a pastor or congregation can regard the mission that Christ has given His Church as one that is to "Save our Synod (sos)," or save our Synod for pure doctrine, orthodoxy or "orthopraxy."

It also has been observed that deep-seated concerns for being influential can be expressed at the expense of a much-needed and necessary confessional stance based on the truth of God's Word.

Politics in itself and the activities of influencing delegates, voters, the election of officers, and conventions can become an obsessive preoccupation. As Walther stated,

Our primary goal must be the promotion of God's glory, the salvation of souls. The moment we consider our District (Synod) more important than





God doesn't count the numbers.

the invisible Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of grace and salvation, we begin to be a sect. For the true characteristic of sectarianism is that you consider your own little community more important than anything else, even if the kingdom of God must suffer as a result.<sup>5</sup>

The Word of God is our authority and power. God gives His Church the wholesome tension of a balanced agenda and one that stays within the boundaries that God has established and described in His Word. Politics in the church is to serve the Word; the Word is not to serve politics.

A third key theological principle of a politics of construction in the church is the doctrine of the priesthood of believers. All believers are spiritual priests (1 Peter 2:9). They function not only in a vertical relationship with God but also in horizontal relationships. Chemnitz states:

It is true that all Christians have a general call to proclaim the Gospel of God, Romans 10:9; to speak the Word of God among themselves, Ephesians 5:19; to admonish each other from the Word of God, Colossians 3:16; to reprove, Ephesians 5:11, Matthew 19:15; and to comfort, 1 Thessalonians 4:18. And family heads are enjoined to do this, Ephesians 6:4.<sup>6</sup>

Christ involves us all in the service of admonishment, forgiveness, teaching, edification, nourishment, encouragement, and comfort. Certainly, the priests (believers) are also to be involved in communication, deliberation, convincing and influencing, all wholesome political activities. As priests of God, all believers should be encouraged to consult with and advise one another and voice his/her conscience.

It is quite clear that the principle of the Priesthood of all Believers shaped Luther's attitudes about church government. Church polity in the formation of the LCMS involved constructive political activity through discussion, consultation, advice, and deliberation. The people of God framed the church orders, church polity, constitutions, and called pastors and teachers. A commitment by our Church to the supremacy of the congregation is based upon the theology of the Priesthood of Believers.<sup>7</sup>

Our church polity and political activities in the church are not to be based on the nature of man, society, or on the democratic form of government of the United States. Nor is it to be based on secular political theory. Politics in the church is set apart from politics in our secular world. It is a politics of construction based on the theological principles of being evangelical, grounded in the authority and power of the Word of God, and based on the Priesthood of

Believers. These make politics wholesome in the life of the church (local or national).

There are four other Scriptural and theological principles that deserve our attention in the practice of a politics of construction: love, truth, the servant attitude, and edification.

*Love!* The world so often influences the life of the church. In the name of love, we abort, have same sex marriage, lie, deceive, slander, blaspheme and commit other sins against God's commandments. However, as we practice the art of influencing in a Christian way, this "art" reflects the heart and love of the Good Shepherd, who had compassion on us and who gave His life for us. There is no greater love.

The Ministry of influence in its purest sense will demonstrate a hatred of evil as it demonstrates a devotion to one another in brotherly love. On the platform of honoring one another above oneself, responsible influence will bless and not curse and will seek to live in harmony. Such love in the ministry of influence will be careful to do what is right, wise, and helpful, will not use evil means to achieve its end and will not repay evil for evil but will attempt to live at peace. (cf. Romans 12:9-21)<sup>8</sup>

Colossians 3:14 states "And over all these virtues put on love which binds them all together in perfect unity." The Lutheran Confessions commented on this passage by stating:

Love is a bond and unbroken chain linking the many members of the church with one another . . . it is not possible to preserve tranquillity unless men cover and forgive certain mistakes in their midst. In the same way Paul commands that there be love in the church to preserve harmony . . .<sup>9</sup>

Paul in Ephesians spoke of "Bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2) and "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). So love, as described and prescribed by our Lord, circumscribes our influencing activities in the Body of Christ.

*Truth!* In Ephesians 4, Paul emphasized "speaking the truth in love." As another fruit of faith, we strive in Christ to possess and communicate the truth. In the name of pure doctrine, or orthodoxy or confessionalism, truth can so easily be butchered. In the name of being progressive in mission, having "real ministry in the real world," being relevant to our ever changing culture with its people forever in transition, or in the name of "church growth," again the truth can become secondary. I am speaking of every context of truth—Scriptural, confessional, the position of a church body, the facts, the situation, the actual communication, and personal positions.

For example, one can as a planned strategy give a speech (influencing activity) on the finances or financial accounting/reporting of the Synod, a speech on the mission-mindedness of the Synod, or an address on being a confessional church, and in so doing also undermine confidence in the existing leadership of the Synod. By doing so, sins of the Fourth Commandment as well as the Eighth Commandment are committed. Christ who is the Truth also produces truth as a fruit of faith.

*The Servant-Mind-Set!* If there is to be a wholesome politics in congregations or in our Synod, we also need this fruit of faith. The Scriptures teach:

"Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm" (2 Corinthians 1:24); "For you have only one Master and you are all brothers" (Matthew 23:8); "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; . . . But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. . . . But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:24-27); and "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interest of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:3-5).

These passages describe the servant attitude. The essence is neither one of control, power, elections, legislation nor being conservative or liberal, but having the same servant-thinking as Jesus Christ (Philippians 2). All of our servant activities flow from the Humble Servant, who was obedient even unto the death of the cross for our eternal salvation. Anything other than having the servant mind-set of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2) will result in a politics of destruction. When politics serves the Word instead of the Word serving politics, the servant mind-set will exist.

*Edification!* Let's encourage the politics of construction, that is, activities that build up each other (Ephesians 4:12,16). As Paul wrote, "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification" (Romans 14:19). Politics in the church is to build up one another as every member of the human body exists for the other member. This means that we even welcome constructive criticism as we put the best construction on everything. The opposite is a politics of destruction which tears down, slanders, divides, destroys, and dishonors.

Politics in itself is not an evil or a tool of the devil. It depends upon what we do with it or how, under Christ, we handle it. The politics of the world does not work on the basis of the Scriptures and theological principles, but under

Christ, the Church does. This makes the difference which marks politics in the church as a politics of construction. It is this kind of politics that will make a difference in The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod!



## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>"The Ministry of Influence in the Church," Council of Presidents, 1988, and LCMS Wichita Convention, 1989. This document is available from any District President or the Office of the Secretary of the Synod, St. Louis.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>C.F.W. Walther's presidential address of the 1848 Missouri Synod Convention. *Moving Frontiers*, ed. by Carl S. Meyer, Concordia Publishing House, 1964, page 170.

<sup>4</sup>"Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod," an essay by Walther at the first Iowa District Convention, 1879. Translated by Everette Meier. *Essays for the Church*, Concordia Publishing House, 1992, Vol. II, pp. 25ff.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>"Ministry, Word and Sacraments—An Enchiridion" by Martin Chemnitz, translated by Luther Poellet. Concordia Publishing House, 1981, page 29.

<sup>7</sup>*Government in the Missouri Synod* by Carl S. Mundinger. Concordia Publishing House, 1947. (A valuable resource on this subject)

<sup>8</sup>"Ministry of Influence" (See #1 above.)

<sup>9</sup>"Apology of the Augsburg Confession," Article IV, *The Book of Concord*. Translated and edited by Theodore Tappert. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959, p. 232.



# Politics in the Church: A Sociological View

W. Theophil Janzow



Any analysis of politics in the church must begin with definitions. *The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* defines politics as "the art and science of the government of a state . . . public affairs or public life as they relate to this . . . schemes and maneuvering within a group."<sup>1</sup>

"All politics is about power," says Chris Matthews, television news commentator.<sup>2</sup>

One organizational scientist defines politics as any behavior humans engage in to influence the decisions of an organization toward the outcome they desire. "Politics is the use of power to get things accomplished, good as well as bad."<sup>3</sup>

These definitions all contain the implicit suggestion that in human organizations political activity is normal, and perhaps inevitable. The church, though it has its divine side, is also a human organization. As such it has goals and objectives, its members

have desired outcomes, and the resultant interaction can be seen as involving some level of political activity, depending on one's interpretation.

Nevertheless, for some the expression "politics in the church" is in and of itself an oxymoron. The church, of all institutions, must be non-political. To the extent that it is not, it loses its churchly character. The proponents of this position would say:

- X The church is divine, but politics is a human endeavor.
- X The church works ministerially, but politics is magisterial.
- X The church operates by faith, but politics operates by reason.
- X The church follows God's lead, but people direct politics.
- X The church must operate ethically, but politics thrives on insinuation, innuendo, secrecy, half-truths, and stereotypes.

Ascribing this point of view to the early leaders of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS), a 19th century historian wrote: "What kind of weapons did Missouri's founders bring to the battlefield? The Word of God and nothing else. . . Seriously certain that the Word would gain for them the victory, they refused to rely on human ordinances and authorities."<sup>4</sup> One is left to feel that these founding fathers wanted to distance themselves from the practice of politicizing the affairs of the church.

Finally, there are those who take a middle ground. Agreed, politics may be inevitable, even in the church. But in the church it should be muted, controlled, reduced to levels which give it a ministerial rather than magisterial role. In other words, when practiced in the church, political activities should be sanctified, not secularized. In the writer's remembrance, this was the position taken by John W. Behnken, president of the LCMS from 1935-1962. Toward the beginning of national conventions he was prone to speak a word of caution, saying in effect: "We know that brethren will be expressing their views as they talk among themselves about issues and elections, but please do not engage in systematic electioneering. Instead, let each delegate cast his ballots according to the Spirit's guidance."

Admittedly, a primary meaning of the word politics is the way in which the state organizes itself to administer the affairs of government. But, when the average person uses

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the word, he usually is thinking of what the dictionary calls "schemes and maneuvering within a group." That will be the focus of this article.

## Is Church Politics Inevitable?

HISTORIANS AND SOCIAL SCIENTISTS have been studying church conflict and concomitant political intrigue for many generations. Latourette, in his *A History of Christianity*, told the story of acrimonious struggles in the early and medieval church over issues including Monophysitism, Nestorianism, Gnosticism, celibacy, the sacraments, and, of course, the question of authority in the church.<sup>5</sup>

Sweet, in telling the story of religion in America, reported vigorous internal political activity in many churches during the period of the American Civil War. He wrote about how "the great popular churches divide over slavery. . . acrimonious conflicts are waged within the Lutheran, Episcopalian, and German Reformed churches, and even among newly formed liberals, the Unitarians, finding it impossible to agree among themselves."<sup>6</sup>

More recently, social scientists have studied and reported on classic intra-church political struggles of the 20th century. Ammerman wrote about what she called "Baptist Battles."<sup>7</sup> Harrison analyzed power struggles in the Free Church tradition.<sup>8</sup> Meyer and Seidler detailed the political struggles that accompanied and followed the controversial decisions of Vatican II.<sup>9</sup>

Related studies have dealt with the secularization process in the mainline churches in America. Glock and Stark, and a few years later Hadden, examined trends in the Congregational, Methodist, Episcopalian, Disciples of Christ, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, and Catholic churches as well as some sects. In Hadden's words, "The Protestant churches are in the midst of a web of crises. These crises are seen as emerging out of serious doubt about the most basic theological doctrines of Christianity, and from a growing struggle over the meaning and purpose of the church."<sup>10</sup> Janzow tested these findings in a study focused on the LCMS in the 1960s and found some evidence of growing value dissonance.<sup>11</sup>

Already in the 1950s the religion sociologist Yinger developed a theory which he called "the dilemma of the churches." He posited that as churches grow from small sect to large denomination they become more open to interaction with other churches and with the world in general. A cross-culturalization process takes place which gradually modifies the church's earlier tenets and practices. The changes inevitably cause stress, and sometimes even cause splits, as proponents of change insist on "progress" while conservatives resist the modification of earlier standards.<sup>12</sup>





We've never done it that way before.

The research studies just named were conducted in the mid-decades of this century. All found secularization trends at work, in greater or lesser degrees, across the ecclesiastical spectrum, but particularly in the larger mainline denominations. All of these struggles, not surprisingly, have been accompanied by varying types and degrees of political maneuvering and intrigue designed to either facilitate or retard the change processes that were at work within the denominations.

One analyst has dealt with the question of the inevitability of such political behavior in a book titled *Can Two Walk Together Unless They Be Agreed?* He noted that the potentials for church conflict, political maneuverings, and possible schism are related to "a disjuncture between norms and values."<sup>13</sup> There is a common-sense aspect to this claim, which, however, does not lessen its value as a hypothesis to be tested analytically and systematically. The study presented data from three mainline denominations, the Southern Presbyterian, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and the Episcopal Church. The researcher came to the conclusion that internal church conflict, political activity, and the schisms that sometimes result, have their origins "in a dispute over norms and allegations that the main group has departed from those implicated in the values of the original movement."<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, the implication of these studies is that the political activity which seeks to influence policies, leadership, and direction which accompanies all ecclesiastical disputes involves values and norms. This observation raises the question, "Is political activity, as here defined, inevitable in the church?" In addition, does this mean that norm dissonance is the only cause of political intrigue?

Politics in the church sometimes stems purely and simply from the inner drives of the human ego. Social psychologist W. I. Thomas posited that all people are inherently driven by "Four Wishes": security, response, recognition, and new experience. It is the "recognition" drive, involving ego satisfaction, that often becomes a motivator in church politics. As one writer explains, this drive "is not a wish to be like others. . . but, rather, to be above them."<sup>15</sup>

Like medieval generals who started wars to make a name for themselves, religious leaders are not immune from stirring up political strife to help achieve ecclesiastical ambitions. But where the social psychologist speaks of "ego needs," the theologian is likely to use the term "sinful pride." From a theologian's perspective, much of the political maneuvering that accompanies church conflict stems from what the great church father, St. Augustine, called "original sin." And that offers a plausible explanation for much of what we call politics in the church, but it does not scientifically substantiate its inevitability.

### Is Church Politics Increasing?

THERE IS A GROWING SENSE that political activity in the church is on the increase. Those who hold to this view would perhaps name, among others, three American denominations as examples: the Roman Catholics, the Lutherans, and the Southern Baptists. These three provide interesting case studies, since, to begin with, they remind us of the 16th century when present-day denominationalism was born, involving a great deal of political maneuvering, both to prevent it from happening, and also, to some extent, to facilitate it.

But more apropos, these three denominations have in recent decades manifested a level of internal political agitation that has brought them into the headlines of the national and international media.

In the Roman Catholic Church, groups have sprung up to place political pressure on the hierarchy on issues such as women's ordination and authority. One of the pressure groups, "Call to Action," has called on the Vatican to consider ordination of women, the use of married priests, and involvement of lay members in decision-making. The controversy intensified in April, 1996, when a Lincoln, Nebraska, bishop, Fabian Bruskewitz, called on members of that organization to resign or face excommunication. This action, which received national attention in the media, was followed by a similar statement by Omaha archbishop, Elden Curtiss. But the Lincoln chairperson of "Call to Action," John Krejci, has challenged the ruling and stated that he will continue to commune in protest of the decision.<sup>16</sup>

The internal conflict that split The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in the 1970s also was widely reported in the media. Did the situation involve internal political maneuvering? Both sides of the conflict saw their opponents as engaging in inappropriate political behavior. *Affirm* and *Christian News*, both unofficial publications that supported a strong conservative position, criticized the moderate group, called ELIM, for alleged unethical political practices. The moderate group replied in kind. Dr. John H. Tietjen, the president of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, who became the focal point of the conservatives' criticism, and who later led the famous/infamous "walk out" by the majority of the Seminary's faculty, recorded his recollection of events in a book titled *Memoirs in Exile*. He summarized the interaction between the combatants as "the gloom and doom of church politics."<sup>17</sup>

Whether the political pressures exerted by these and other groups have effected any permanent change in the Missouri Synod continues to be studied. Laurence L. White claims that, in fact, significant changes have taken place. He posits that "all the rhetoric of orthodoxy notwithstanding. . . the

character of our church is undergoing a radical transformation." Doctrine, he holds, is no longer paramount. Instead, "a host of factions and interest groups each vigorously pursues its own theological agenda." He calls the Missouri Synod "a tattered patchwork coat of many colors" and suggests that, not only the political power groups of the 1960s and 1970s but additional new ones are alive and well in this church today.<sup>18</sup>

Political struggles also have been at work in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). In 1995 massive political pressure forced the leadership of the church to withdraw a statement on sexuality that many considered too liberal, even offensive.<sup>19</sup>

Another example of the ecclesiastical politicization of the decision-making process took place in the Southern Baptist Church in the 1980s and 1990s. The process, as described by Nancy Ammerman in her book, *Baptist Battles*, was a distinct departure from the previous way in which decisions were made and officers elected. Formerly, she reports, there was little if any pre-convention politicking, leaders were chosen "by chance," decisions were made by consensus, and party organization did not exist. Whatever pressure dynamics existed were informal and subliminal because "the people of the Convention had no experience in being asked to support candidates for any reason other than their reputation as preachers or denominational statesmen."<sup>20</sup>

However, in the 1980s the fundamentalists made a strategic decision. They would no longer depend on the unstructured, informal process to keep their church in the conservative theological mode. They would organize. The political steps which they took included the following:

- ✗ Capture the formal positions of power.
- ✗ Identify "party" leaders who would guide their political efforts.
- ✗ Establish a clear agenda.
- ✗ Develop an efficient communication system.
- ✗ Find ways of financing the cost.
- ✗ Line up voters who would support their candidates.<sup>21</sup>

What does all this say about the increase of politics in the church? It is important not to overgeneralize or overstate the case. Many churches have experienced both periods of calm, when political activity was at a minimum, and periods of strife, when the political atmosphere heated up considerably. Among the factors that stimulate increased political activity in any church in any period of time are:

- ✗ Disagreement about norms and values
- ✗ Individual ambition
- ✗ Democratization
- ✗ Secularization
- ✗ Growth and outreach factors that create a dilemma for the churches

### The Secularization Thesis

EARLIER WE IDENTIFIED SECULARIZATION as one of the possible factors in the practice of politics in the church. Let us explore that thesis further, beginning with a hypothetical situation.

Consider the following scenario. John asks Jim to vote for him for president of his regional church organization. Jim approaches other people and asks them to vote for John. John, Jim, and Jerry get a list of the delegates to the convention where the elections will be held and write to them, asking them to vote for John. John, Jim, Jerry, Jan, and Judith organize "The J Group," whose purpose is to promote their choices for elective offices in their church organization, as well as to influence the voting on issues of doctrine and practice in their church body.

"The J Group" moves to a higher level of political sophistication. It prints literature. It sends out posters promoting its candidates. It arranges exposure for them by scheduling appearances and speeches. It starts a regular monthly or weekly publication to present its view on a variety of issues before the church.

~~"Zeal for political victory is allowed to override zeal for factual truth."~~

Before long "The J Group" finds itself tempted to use political procedures which have become common-place in the secular world. Instead of only promoting its own candidates, it begins to demean the other choice or choices. It plants seeds of doubt, suggesting malicious design or behavior on the part of those it wishes to defeat. People are rated, not on scales of preference, but on categories of good or evil. Issues are oversimplified. Stereotypes and demagoguery enter the picture. Editors of the unofficial publications put their own spin on quotes, doings, and events. Zeal for political victory is allowed to override zeal for factual truth. The principle of putting the best construction on everything is made secondary to the accomplishment of a pre-determined agenda.

This is typical politics in the secular world. But is it churchly behavior? Is it good, right, just, fair, loving, edifying, God-pleasing? Or is it another example of where the church has allowed itself to lower its behavioral standards to the level of the secular society in which it lives? Admittedly, the simpler, unorganized, more casual steps in the above scenario are usually benign. But can the same be said about the more systematic, organized, and sophisticated levels of political activity in the church?





Quality, not quantity.

President Behnken, as mentioned earlier, regularly admonished delegates to the conventions of the Synod to avoid aggressive politicking for candidates for office. He acknowledged that some informal conversation was perhaps inevitable. But at every convention attended since 1950, the writer heard Behnken make a little speech urging delegates to avoid outright, organized, systematic efforts to influence the balloting. "Don't interfere with the Holy Spirit" was the message that came through.

Somewhere along the way Synodical leadership began to adopt a different stance. Dr. J.A.O. Preus, LCMS president from 1969 to 1981, grew up in a political family, and his father had campaigned for and won the Minnesota governorship. Almost inevitably, the political activity which seemed normal and ethical in the secular world would not suddenly become heinous when applied to the achievement of church goals.

The governor's other son, Robert, having become an influential Missouri Synod theologian, would be among the first to claim publicly the legitimacy for the use of political tactics in church affairs. As a member of the editorial board of *Affirm*, a publication of Balance, Inc., he would allow the distribution of a special issue at the 1973 LCMS convention in New Orleans in which politics was defended as an appropriate and necessary tool to gain godly ends. Specifically, an editorial in that issue stated:

*Affirm* is not against politicking in the church. . . the vast majority of the delegates will not equate 'politicking' with evil, but will recognize the right—and even the obligation—of groups to voice and promote their opinions on the positions and persons which will be voted upon.<sup>22</sup>

The unofficial publication *Christian News* has gained the reputation of bringing the most strident voice to the political struggles that have rocked Lutheranism in recent decades. And, in the view of many, the publication has exacerbated that debate beyond the levels of ecclesiastical propriety. Ironically, there are those who believe that this publication's high decibel political rhetoric has in fact helped to shape the outcome of LCMS elections in significant ways for more than two decades, a level of influence that has been both highly acclaimed and roundly denounced, depending upon how one feels about the use of such secularly-oriented political tactics in the church.

Having come out publicly in the 1970s in favor of organized politicking in the church, *Affirm* has continued, up to and including the 1995 convention, to engage in electioneering to influence the outcome of LCMS elections. The writer has had correspondence with the former editor-in-chief, Dr. John W. Klotz, now sainted, expressing his view that such politicking is not edifying to the church. The

editor replied, "I hear what you are saying about politics in the church, but I believe there is a place for them."<sup>23</sup>

Another Missouri Synod group that organized itself in the 1970s called itself ELIM and issued a publication that politically promoted the so-called "moderate" side of the controverted matters. It also offered lists of names of people it felt should be considered for the church's leadership positions.

In 1995 a new group emerged, "Lutherans Alive," which publishes a periodical titled *Forward*. This group states that its goal is to "encourage the Biblical, confessional, evangelical, pastoral, and missional dynamic" of the Synod. It states further that it is determined to avoid "the politics of control and character assassination that has embittered the lives of many" in the church. At the same time, it did put forth a list of nominees for Synod offices that it hoped the delegates to the 1995 convention would vote for, nominees who "share our vision for the church."<sup>24</sup>

Two other groups that are currently active in the LCMS on the strongly conservative side are the Association of Confessional Lutherans and the Lutheran Concerns Association. One group's spokesman summarized its position on organized politicking by saying, "There is nothing wrong with church politics when the political activity flows directly from a commitment to sound Lutheran theology."<sup>25</sup>

In addition, a variety of regional publications has sprung up in LCMS circles in recent decades having overt goals of influencing policy concerns and personnel choices.

Clearly, political activity in the LCMS has increased and become more structured in recent years. The progression has been by stages.

*Stage 1.* Casual conversation about church matters, directions, and personnel choices is common-place across the church, but is conducted at low-key levels and without resort to systematic organization.

*Stage 2.* Church leaders detect some seminal efforts to organize political action groups, but strongly discourage it.

*Stage 3.* A few clergy ignore these warnings and begin to send out politically-oriented materials.

*Stage 4.* A number of unofficial publications become increasingly strident in their personal attacks against and open denunciation of selected individuals, officials, and groups within the Synod.

*Stage 5.* Groups organize at both national and regional levels but operate behind the scenes in a clandestine fashion to promote their particular agendas.

*Stage 6.* Top administrative and theological leaders change

the previous stance of the church, making statements designed to lift the taboo against political activity in the internal affairs of the church.

*Stage 7.* Publications and groups operate openly and publicly to influence a wide spectrum of church affairs and use secular-type political strategies and tactics to determine outcomes of elections.

One of the dark sides of this process was demonstrated to the writer while attending the LCMS Synodical Convention in Indianapolis in 1986. Dr. Ralph Bohlmann had just been reelected as president. In a private conversation that evening one of the lay delegates seemed inordinately depressed. When asked why, he said, "I'm in a state of shock. They told us they had Bohlmann's defeat in the bag." The "they" obviously referred to the group that had been working behind the scenes to line up votes to keep Bohlmann from being reelected.

The question posed by the social scientist is how much of this trend in church politics involves what is referred to in the literature as "the secularization of society." One of the classics in this debate is a book titled *The Secular City*, by Harvard Professor Harvey Cox. Admittedly, his use of the term "secularization" refers to a broad and culturally pervasive desacralization of an entire society, as it puts less and less dependence on divine resources and increasingly looks to science, technology, and practical solutions ("what works") for coping with the problems of the day. He says succinctly, "Secularization signifies the removal of religious and metaphysical supports and puts man on his own."<sup>26</sup>

Implicit in Cox's thesis is that the church itself gets involved in this secularization process when it lessens its dependence on transcendent forces, for example, in the selection of its human leaders, and begins more and more to use man-made strategies and tactics (the political process) to shape its policies, select its people, and influence its destiny. And, even though God-words are used while doing this, it is Cox's contention that "We speak of God in a secular fashion when we recognize man as his partner, as the one charged with the task of bestowing meaning and order in human history."<sup>27</sup>

To the extent that this thesis has validity,<sup>28</sup> those who are politicizing the decision-making process in the church should be asking themselves whether they really want to be involved in the secularization of the kingdom of God.<sup>29</sup>

### Can Church Politics Be Benign?

BENIGNITY HAS A NUMBER of important qualities. It is behavior based on truth. It operates in a spirit of compassion and gentleness. It strives to keep from hurting people. It seeks to build, not destroy.

In secular politics the behavior of those who disagree with one another is seldom benign. The principles of church behavior would seem to suggest that the only political behavior that should be acceptable is that which remains benign, for the antonym of "benign" is "malignant."

Ammerman, in the Southern Baptist study, holds that encouraging people to vote for a given point of view while not, however, making an organized effort to get out the vote for specific individuals, is considered to be "normal activity" and "not political."<sup>30</sup>

In Lutheranism's past, leaders like Behnken allowed that casual conversation with political undertones has always been a part of the informal discourse in church decision-making and can take place without deleterious effects.

The point is that at this low-key level the efforts of individuals to influence one another toward certain outcomes can be accomplished without breaching the Biblical injunctions to "be kind to one another" and to speak "only what is helpful for building others up" (Ephesians 4).

This is what we referred to as Stage 1 and Stage 2 political dialog in the church. At this stage political discourse tends to be benign.

However, considerable evidence suggests that when the discourse moves to Stages 3 through 7, the efforts to continue the process at benign levels break down. Instead, the ways in which worldly people conduct politics takes over, including a diminution of charity, distortion of facts, character assassination, and a failure to "put the best construction on everything." (Luther's phrase in his explanation of the 8th Commandment)

When the Council of Presidents of the LCMS studied this question in 1988, it concluded that politics, as the art of influencing others, can be "a wholesome responsibility to offer solutions for problems and to seek the support of and for others." But it also held that this "ministry of influence" must be "carried out in a God-pleasing way and according to agreed upon processes and structures." Any effort to achieve political goals "through destroying, controlling, hating, promoting one at the expense of the other or appealing to base human nature" would be contrary to the Christian ethic.<sup>31</sup>

Given the premises of this statement, church politics, in theory, can be benign. The question is whether the human tendency for power processes to corrupt can be realistically defanged in the actualities of organized political maneuverings.

One example of how politics corrupts, even in the church, is the emergence of secrecy as a political device. At the time when he was a college administrator, the writer had a conversation with a young professor who admitted to being





The Party—right or wrong.

part of a secret organization in the LCMS. The members, he said, communicated only by telephone. They operated through a network of contacts in which each member knew by name some of the other members, but no one knew the names of all the members. When I asked whether I could get additional information from one of his contact people, he said, "If I ever revealed his name outside the network, I would immediately be expelled from the network."

Another example is the use of beepers at Synodical conventions. When a first-time delegate returned home from a national convention, he reported that he had observed people being beeped when important voting times approached. The delegate decided to follow the beeped fellow-delegate out to the lobby where he heard him and others being advised how to vote. The delegate said, "I was shocked."

At another level, some have felt that convention orientation sessions, i.e., calling delegates together to prepare them for Synodical conventions, whether on the Synod, District, or circuit level, have on occasion been used to promote political agendas.

A fourth example is the use of computer technology to conduct clandestine conversations in cyberspace networks such as "Wittenberg Door" where comments can be shared under veiled identities.

A fifth example is the development of a "church within the church" mentality (*ecclesiola in ecclesia*). This occurs when the people who form a "church party" begin to feel alienated from the official leaders and publications of the church and turn to their own unofficial group leaders and printings for guidance, direction, and support. There is some evidence of this developing in some special interest groups in the LCMS.

A sixth example is the logic that says in order to build someone up you have to tear someone else down. This, of course, is the widespread perversity of the worldly politician. Unfortunately, some have also been using it as a tool for seizing power in the church.

Clearly, once politics in the church becomes organized and identified with special interest groups, the temptations for abuse are enormous, perhaps inescapable. Keeping it benign turns out to be as difficult as keeping money out of secular politics or greed out of a materialistic social system.

### Quo Vadis Politics

ONE OF THE MOST NOTORIOUS INCIDENTS in United States history involved a series of behind the scenes political manipulations that were so draconian that their tolerance at the highest levels of leadership was called "a cancer on the presidency."

Few would judge the inner political power maneuverings in contemporary mainline churches to have reached criminal levels. Yet there is a growing feeling that politics in the church during past decades has given the church a black eye, since it opens the door for people to say that the church, in its power struggles, has been sinking to the level of the sinful, secular world. The extent to which LCMS membership, including its leadership, thinks of politics as something necessary to the achievement of goals, even if labeled a necessary evil, continues to be a matter of concern.

The February, 1996, issue of the *Lutheran Forum* contained articles by a former LCMS president and a well-known LCMS writer, both suggesting that odious political maneuverings continue to exert significant influence on the decision-making processes within the church. "Few would deny," one wrote, "that mean-spirited and raw ward politics have become the stock-in-trade of a political network that seeks nothing less than the control of the Synod and its structure."<sup>32</sup> This political activity, one article noted, has been characterized by such "sub-Christian non-virtues as suspicion, distrust, character defamation, propagandizing, and politicization."<sup>33</sup>

The writer himself has encouraged the top leadership of his church to take a high profile position against organized politics in the church. In a letter written shortly after the current president's election, he wrote:

I believe sincerely that the legitimization of the comingling of the historic Spirit-guided decision-making process with a new politics-driven decision-making process has changed the face of our Synod, has led people to organize (often surreptitiously) what approximates a political party and has brought us to this sad situation where we have "voting blocs" and "militant divisions" (terms used by 1995 convention delegates).<sup>34</sup>

The writer also expressed the hope and prayer that the current president:

will use your "bully pulpit" to restore to us a church which seeks to achieve ecclesiastical goals, not by the use of strident, political techniques, but by engaging in consecrated, mutually respectful, fraternal conversation, while listening for "the still small voice of God" and then trusting that not we, but our gracious God, will bring it to pass.<sup>35</sup>

There are a variety of positive things that could be done to mute the harsher, unedifying manifestations of power politics in the church. The following list is not exhaustive.

- ✗ The church body and its subdivisions can pass policy statements pointing out the deleterious nature of politics in the church.

- ✗ Task forces can be established to provide guidelines to help the constituency distinguish between edifying and non-edifying efforts to influence the decision-making process.
- ✗ Church body leaders can set the tone by making regular public pronouncements cautioning against unchurchly political behavior.
- ✗ Official church publications can issue reminders regarding the improprieties of organized political behavior in the church.
- ✗ The church can publish an annual listing of all unofficial organized groups in its midst, distinguishing between those that are inspirational/educational or mission-motivated and those that have a political agenda.
- ✗ The church, as always, should maximize the gift of prayer, beseeching our gracious God, for Jesus' sake, to preserve us all from the fallacy of dependence on human resources to accomplish divine purposes, to cultivate in all of us the kind of Apostolic ecclesiology in which faith remains the chief organizational principle of the church, and to restore to us ever more unconditionally the spirit of the Psalmist, saying, "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, and for thy truth's sake" (Psalm 115:1).

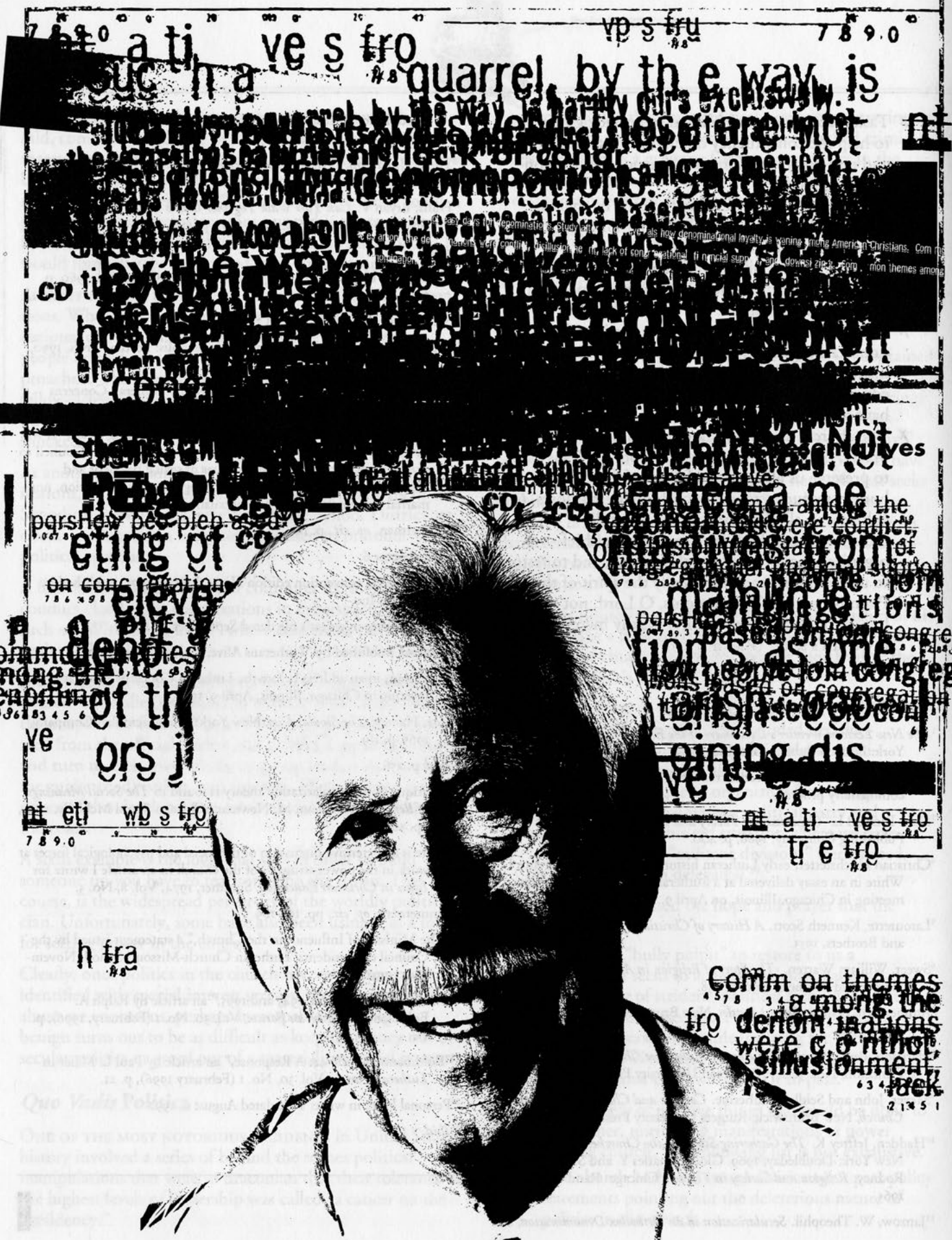
### End Notes

- <sup>1</sup>The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language, New York: Lexicon Publications, Inc., 1989.
- <sup>2</sup>In a TV commercial that advertises the Chris Matthews political commentary program.
- <sup>3</sup>Daft, Richard L. *Organization Theory and Design*, St. Paul: West Publishing Company, 1986, p. 400.
- <sup>4</sup>Christian Hochstetter, early Lutheran historian, quoted by Laurence L. White in an essay delivered at a Lutheran Concerns Association meeting in Chicago, Illinois, on April 9, 1996.
- <sup>5</sup>Latourette, Kenneth Scott. *A History of Christianity*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953.
- <sup>6</sup>Sweet, William Warren. *The Story of Religion in America*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950, p. 258.
- <sup>7</sup>Ammerman, Nancy. *Baptist Battles*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990.
- <sup>8</sup>Harrison, Paul. *Power and Authority in the Free Church Tradition*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1959.
- <sup>9</sup>Meyer, John and Seidler, Katherine. *Conflict and Change in the Catholic Church*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989.
- <sup>10</sup>Hadden, Jeffrey K. *The Gathering Storm in the Churches*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969. Glock, Charles Y. and Stark, Rodney. *Religion and Society in Tension*, Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965.
- <sup>11</sup>Janzow, W. Theophil. *Secularization in an Orthodox Denomination*, an

unpublished doctoral dissertation in the Library of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1970.

- <sup>12</sup>Yinger, J. Milton. *Religion in the Struggle for Power*, Durham, North Carolina: Russel and Russel, 1961.
- <sup>13</sup>Hillis, Bryan V. *Can Two Walk Together Unless They Be Agreed?*, Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1991, p. 128.
- <sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup>Curtis, Jack H. *Social Psychology*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960, p. 233.
- <sup>16</sup>See *Lincoln Journal Star*, April 27, 1996, p. C-1.
- <sup>17</sup>Tietjen, John H. *Memoirs in Exile*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990, p. 159.
- <sup>18</sup>Laurence L. White, keynote address before the Lutheran Concerns Association in Chicago, Illinois, April 9, 1996.
- <sup>19</sup>The statement was called "Human Sexuality: A Working Draft." It was developed by a task force appointed by the ELCA Church Council to give guidance on contemporary issues of sexual behavior and lifestyles. It offered innovative norms regarding masturbation, non-marital cohabitation, and homosexuality.
- <sup>20</sup>Ammerman, *op. cit.*, p. 165.
- <sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, chapter 6.
- <sup>22</sup>*Affirm*, special convention edition No. 4, July 10, 1973, published by Balance, Inc.
- <sup>23</sup>Personal letter in writer's file dated September 14, 1995.
- <sup>24</sup>*Forward*, published by "Lutherans Alive," July 15, 1995, pp. 1-3.
- <sup>25</sup>Rolf Preus, in an address before the Lutheran Concerns Association meeting in Chicago, Illinois, April 9, 1996.
- <sup>26</sup>Cox, Harvey. *The Secular City*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965, p. 119.
- <sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 256.
- <sup>28</sup>A critique of the secularization theory is found in *The Social Meanings of Religion* by William M. Newman, Chicago: Rand McNally, 1974, pp. 307-318.
- <sup>29</sup>There is an extensive discussion of the social and psychological forces at work in the power struggles of the church in an article I wrote for *Issues in Christian Education*, Summer, 1974, Vol. 8, No. 3.
- <sup>30</sup>Ammerman, *op. cit.*, pp. 168-169.
- <sup>31</sup>"The Ministry of Influence in the Church," a statement issued by the Council of Presidents, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, November 17, 1988.
- <sup>32</sup>"Missouri Lutheranism, 1945 and 1995," an article by Ralph A. Bohlmann in *Lutheran Forum*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (February, 1996), p. 17.
- <sup>33</sup>Bohlmann and the 44: A Response," an article by Paul L. Maier in *Lutheran Forum*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (February 1996), p. 21.
- <sup>34</sup>Personal letter in writer's file dated August 6, 1992.
- <sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*





# Toward a Healthier Political Climate in the Church

Dean Nadasy

## A Confessional Church with Significant Unity

ROBERT FROST ONCE SAID that he had a lover's quarrel with the world. For many of us who live and work as Missouri Synod Lutherans, no matter what political, ecclesiastical label we wear along the way, we may have a lover's quarrel with our church. We love the Synod deeply, especially perhaps at a time when we consider its 150 years of extraordinary service in the kingdom. For many of us the LCMS has been "Mother Church" to our parents and grandparents. So when we see her losing touch with the doctrines we cherish or wavering from her inheritance as a great mission church or changing in ways we had never anticipated, then we have a lover's quarrel with our church.

Such a lover's quarrel, by the way, is hardly ours exclusively. These are not easy days for denominations. Study after study reveals how denominational loyalty is waning among American Christians, how people join congregations based on congregational style rather than substance and denominational teaching. Not long ago, I attended a meeting of representatives from eleven mainline denominations as one of the parish pastors joining district and Synodical leaders on our LCMS team. Common themes among the denominations were conflict, disillusionment, lack of congregational financial support, and downsizing. Many of the leaders appeared neither at peace nor fulfilled in their work. As the conference proceeded, however, other themes surfaced, offering hope for denominations. We talked about the need to be responsive to the needs of congregations, to let go of hierarchical forms of governance,

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God calls us to be faithful, not successful.

and to define clearly the often unique contribution a denomination has to make to the work of Christ on earth.

Another interesting thing happened at that conference. Repeatedly attendees commented on the LCMS as a denomination blessed with a strong theological center. A recurring comment can be summarized as follows: "At least you Missouri Synod Lutherans know what you believe. We're floundering in our theology. We're not sure what we stand for any more. At least you have stayed the course theologically." For all of our theological conflict or perhaps because of all of our theological conflict, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, so say others outside our fellowship, is clearly a confessional church, doing what confessional churches do—confessing Biblical truth.

At the outset, then, let me say that we may be a politicized church, but not to the exclusion of being confessional and still strongly carrying the banners of a Reformation church at a time when such banners have either been dropped in battle or furled and stored away in historical societies. When people in the greater church, our brothers and sisters in the *una sancta*, hear LCMS, many of them think of a church that stands uncompromisingly for the following:

- ✕ the Holy Scriptures as God's inspired Word, infallible, and the only source and norm for all teaching in the church;
- ✕ seeing all of life and human experience through the prism of Law and Gospel, God's judgment and God's grace;
- ✕ the steadfast preaching and teaching of the core of the Scriptures, justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, which is the linkage point for every aspect of our life together as a church.

Among us as well is an amazing unity in such affirmations as these: the sanctity of unborn life; the sacred institution of marriage as a life-long union between one man and one woman instituted by God; the vocation of every Christian as a royal priest; the mandate to be in ministry with the poor, the hungry, the homeless; and the commission to preach Christ to the lost who will, unless they believe, be lost to hell forever. These are affirmations implemented in the life and work of thousands of pastors, DCE's, teachers, church workers, and lay people across our Synod. They shape the agendas of our boards and commissions at district and Synodical levels. Most important, congregations stand for these truths and implement them.

So while we have this lover's quarrel going, from whatever perspectives on other issues, we do well to celebrate what God has done in and through our church. These are no minor affirmations which we confess as one church. In a time of easy compromise and a desire to sell out to what sells, the Missouri Synod confesses what Luther confessed almost 500 years ago and what she herself has confessed for

150 years. What is more significant is that we are a church which is seen by others who recognize our theological integrity and confession.

For several years I have sat on a panel of Christian clergy invited into our local high school to field questions from high school seniors concerning our tradition within Christianity. More often than not I have been the only one or one of two on a panel of six who still maintains the exclusive claim of Christ as the only way of salvation (John 14:6). Such a stance is not stubborn, cold-hearted elitism even though it sounds like it to an 18 year old who may want to believe that in the end everyone "gets in," no matter what they believe. It is what the Scriptures teach—Christ, the only way of salvation. As other LCMS professional church workers, I have been educated, and I pledge myself not only to believe what the Scriptures teach, but also to confess what they teach to others. Confessing what the Scriptures teach happens over and over again. This is a hallmark of both our church's heritage and its significant unity, both gifts of divine grace. It is what we in the LCMS do best.

If there is anything I have learned from twenty-two years of parish ministry, it is this: healthy congregations (and denominations) celebrate God's grace. So let's do it. Let's celebrate the unity brought to our church by the Spirit of God—a unity of significant substance and auspicious breadth.

"How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1)

### A Politicized Church: To What Extent?

GIVEN AN AMAZING LEVEL of theological unity in a time when other churches struggle for a common core, I probably do not need to tell you that some in the wider church and some outside the church see us from another perspective as well. We in the LCMS have a reputation for being scrappy, conflict-ridden, and strongly politicized. It is no secret that many of us see ourselves this way as well. As the Bridegroom comes to get His bride, the church, He may see ready to come down the aisle a gorgeous gal dressed in white, but who is bruised, limping, and slowed by conflict. At least the LCMS looks that way at times. In fact, some who are reading this article right now are pleased to read the previous sentences because they were convinced that the first part of this essay was written by someone whose head is either in the clouds or in the sand, with neither vista allowing for clear vision.

The politicization of the church is to be expected. In fact, from one perspective, being politicized is a healthy thing. After all, a denomination is a human organization in need of articles of incorporation, by-laws, policies, and proce-

dures. We have elections, and if elections are not political, what is? We have conventions at which we vote, and usually this entails one side winning and another losing. Churches must be governed and administered. That makes them political institutions from a human perspective with all the human foibles and conflicts of a political organization.

Few argue with this realistic view of the church. The Lutheran Church, after all, was forged in part by the politics of Renaissance Europe. Today's LCMS congregation is as political as an election or as a stormy debate on the floor of a Voter's Meeting, every pastor's favorite venue for ministry.

Still, when we hear about a politicized LCMS, it is often because other factors have come into play. To get at this, a little help from C. S. Lewis might be in order. Once in writing a Catholic friend, he said this about the divisions in the church he saw in his birthplace in Ireland:

Tomorrow I am crossing over (if God so have pleased) to Ireland: my birthplace and dearest refuge so far as charm of landscape goes, and temperate climate, although most dreadful because of the strife, hatred, and often civil war between dissenting faiths.

There indeed both yours and ours (Catholic and Protestant) "know not by what Spirit they are led." They take lack of charity for zeal and mutual ignorance for orthodoxy.

I think almost all the crimes which Christians have perpetrated against each other arise from this, that religion is confused with politics. For, above all other spheres of human life, the Devil claims politics as his own, as almost the citadel of his power. Let us, however, with mutual prayers pray with all our power for that charity which "overcomes a multitude of sins."<sup>1</sup>

We can agree or disagree when Lewis finds politics to be the citadel of the devil. "The left hand of God" rings much more hopeful. Yet when the church plays politics we do at times dance with the devil as sinners. There is a multitude of sins to be overcome. What follows is just a brief catalogue of ways by which we lose charity in the politics of our church. It is applicable to life and ministry in the congregation, circuit, district, or Synod. Here is the downside of a politicized church.

- ✕ We treat people as problems to be dealt with rather than as brothers and sisters in Christ, with whom we form a family. (By the way, siblings have this proclivity for seeing the other as a problem to be solved. Cain and Abel, Joseph and his brothers, provide just two examples.)<sup>2</sup>

- ✕ We appeal to human rules and laws or to human office and authority to make decisions or to settle disputes.
- ✕ We attempt to build the church on a foundation of plans and structures which hold appeal and "work" for the greatest number of people. These criteria become the plumbline by which the church is evaluated, and people's spiritual needs, divine truth, or genuine fellowship decrease in importance. This is nothing more or less than the old political utilitarianism of a John Stuart Mill. Do Christians really want to say that the right is that which brings the greatest good to the greatest number of people? Who besides God determines the good? And since when is the church good at counting noses?
- ✕ We allow our zeal for a cause or truth to override our charity for another. In a politicized church, family members become enemies. We expect the worst of others. We are quick to judge and slow to forgive, cultivating ever so deliberately a root of bitterness. Robert Burns in his poem, *Tam O'Shanter*, describes a woman waiting for her husband to come home from the inn as "nursing her wrath to keep it warm." Such a practice belongs to those who in the place of charity choose to be resentful or rude.
- ✕ We break into factions, particularly factions focused and led by charismatic personalities, not unlike the divisions addressed by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 3. Such factions by their nature become more and more isolated, insulated churches within a church.
- ✕ We rationalize the sins of our politicized churchmanship by saying that we have left the spiritual realm and entered the administrative. Therefore, the argument states that charity can be replaced by the sword, as if we somehow relinquish our ethics and the Ten Commandments and our call to be like Christ when we move in the realm of church politics.
- ✕ We caricature or make a "straw man" of the beliefs or arguments of the other side. We may speak in ignorance of their real position or hyperbolize it because we have not listened.
- ✕ We attempt to create unity and fellowship through a vision that lacks divine sanction or through spiritual language that tickles the ears and heart but may be far from God's will. Put more negatively, we abrogate the true basis of Christian unity being the work of God in Christ, not our own. Who has said it better than Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together*?

Not what a man is in himself as a Christian, his spirituality and piety, constitute the basis of our community. What determines our brotherhood is what that man is by reason of Christ. Our community with one another





That will have to go in next year's budget.

consists solely in what Christ has done for both of us.<sup>3</sup> Real fellowship turns out to be a matter of grace, not of human or political achievement.

- ✗ We lend our time, zeal, and energy to the politics of a human institution to such an extent that little is left for the greater work of the Great Commission. Churches in conflict are often also churches stalled in mission.
- ✗ A final sign of a highly politicized church comes when one has a difficult time distinguishing between a carnal, fallen culture and what one experiences among the people of God. One layperson put it this way following a nasty interchange at a convention, "I can't believe two Christians can talk to each other that way!" In a politicized church, the line between a culture and the salt meant to season it blurs or disappears. The separateness of God's people is sacrificed for expedient personal or party victory. Something can happen to people in a politicized church, not unlike what happened to two Little League coaches I witnessed recently. They simply lost it and began shouting at each other and calling each other names—in front of the kids, their parents, and everyone else. They forgot that Little League is not about them, their egos or their need to win. It is about kids and sport and team. Their losing it—and our losing it ("it" being our holiness as a people set apart) is due to plain, Eden-variety sin, its deepest cut coming with human pride.

Having identified some of the disturbing characteristics of a politicized church, two more comments need to be made. First, when one analyzes the source of overtures to a Synodical convention, it is interesting to note that in 1989 only 183 congregations, or 3.1 percent of the congregations of Synod, submitted 352 overtures. In 1992, 174 congregations, or 2.92 percent of the congregations of Synod, submitted 370 overtures. In 1992, 200 overtures came from sources other than congregations—Synodical boards and commissions, District boards of directors and conventions, circuit forums and circuits, faculties, boards of regents, and pastoral conferences.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, at least with regard to issues facing the Synod, only 3 percent of our congregations participate in the political process of convention overtures. Such participation levels suggest that one may lack data to label the LCMS a politicized church. We are a church body in which very few congregations intentionally participate in the shaping of our convention business. This may suggest any one of the following observations: most congregations do not care; most defer to leaders; most are preoccupied with what they perceive to be more important. Further analysis of those who send overtures to district or Synodical conventions reveals a marked absence or minority of larger

congregations. These congregations may be pivotal in the financial support of the church body and in the provision of leadership, but, for one reason or another, they opt out of taking stances and seeking action relative to the church's business. These data lead me to conclude that we may not be as politicized a church as we imagine ourselves to be.

A second thought surfaces as well to buffer the notion of the LCMS being a highly politicized church. This concerns our tendency to be afraid of or to run from conflict. The very fact that so many in our Synod bemoan the politics of the church may evidence how, for all of our conflict, we neither like it nor desire it. Most of the pastors I know are not comfortable with conflict. Most of us would not have flourished as prophets in the style of Amos or Jeremiah. We value approval, consensus, and calm. The idea of a healthy dialectic, with good coming from tension, sounds Marxian to most of us and, therefore, more than highly suspect. Given the options of fight or flight in a so-called politicized church, most of us choose flight. We retreat into our peaceful families or congregations and defer to those who seem to thrive when the battle is joined. My point here is that most pastors (and other church professionals for that matter) are hardly political as far as Synodical politics is concerned. We can get political at the congregational level when necessary, but we would rather do what we know good spiritual leaders do—listen, trust, put the best construction on what we hear, and gently, yet strongly witness to the truth.

We are, most of us, circumspect when it comes to entering the foray of ecclesiastical politics. Writing this article is a case in point. I can think of a dozen things I would rather be doing now. I would rather be playing tennis or working up a sermon. The truth is I would rather have my molars pulled. You see the point. Most of us find little that is appealing about the political processes of the church, and that may tell us that we are simply not as political a church body as we make ourselves out to be. It may further suggest that C. S. Lewis' relegating of politics to something akin to a necessary evil is the way most of us see it in the Synod.

Yet could it be that, for all of our distrust of church politics, through conflict God will bring a stronger church, a better church? No matter how we are labeled, some among us think that the battle is worth being joined. Luther did not run from conflict, some of us tell ourselves, and that made no small difference. So why should we?

There is an amazing, saving grace to politics in the LCMS no matter how deeply we may object to it or even detest the enterprise. I have yet to meet a LCMS politico whose motivation is tainted by a desire to harm the Synod, take it astray, or damage its people and its mission. This grace, God's work again, still marks us as a church of theological and institutional integrity, however politicized we may be.

## Toward a Healthier Climate

WHAT CAN BE DONE to create a healthier climate for politics in the church? The list of woes attendant to a politicized church begs for a more healthy atmosphere. Here are some suggestions:

- ✗ All participants in the enterprise must agree that church politics is not to be carried on in an ethical wilderness or moral jungle. The Ten Commandments and Christian charity with its attendant spiritual virtues belong in the realm of church politics. We must not "put off Christ" when we put on our political hats.
- ✗ The LCMS must never stop talking about and celebrating what we confess as one. Our strength is in our common confession. People outside of us see it. Why can't we? Who we are can be taken for granted, and we forget how much we confess with one voice.
- ✗ Already in place are several helpful encouragements from our Synod's handbook.<sup>5</sup> Let me mention just two:
  - ✓ Members of the Synod have a right to expect congregational compliance with Synod's resolutions when these resolutions are clearly in accord with God's Word and applicable to a congregation's present condition. (By-Law 2.39b.) Willy-nilly refusal to live by Synod's resolutions breaks a fiduciary relationship, a covenant, with the rest of the Synod. Synod's advisory relationship with congregations, affirmed clearly in Article VII of Synod's constitution, is not a license for going one's own way theologically or in practice.
  - ✓ Dissent on the basis of God's Word must be offered and received in an atmosphere of collegiality. Those dissenting from Synod's doctrinal resolutions are encouraged in By-Law 2.39c to express that dissent first among peers, then with the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, and then in the form of a convention overture.

I have no doubt that this By-Law holds a clue for the formation of a healthier atmosphere in our Synod. It encourages a church where there is enough trust and humility to listen to the dissenting voice and, at the same time, to respect the voice of the Synod as a whole. Few sentences in our By-laws hold more prescriptive power for a healthier church than these words of Bylaw 2:39c: "While the conscience of the dissenter shall be respected, the consciences of others, as well as the collective will of the Synod, shall also be respected."<sup>6</sup>

The mutual respect that allows for open discussions of theological issues at circuit and district pastoral

conferences, for example, marks a healthy church. Where this is lacking, the Synod has failed to live by its handbook, and it has certainly failed to look like the church of Luther. Those dissenting from Synod's doctrinal resolutions have a right and even a duty to do so openly. Their dissent, however, will turn to isolated frustration and home-grown theology if neither respect nor trust are present in the Synod's various forums for theological discussion.

- ✗ Synod's members must take care always that we do not bind the consciences of our pastors or congregations beyond what is taught in the Scriptures. We must hold loosely those tenets and practices more human than divine. In 1866, C.F.W. Walther formulated several theses for the doctrinal discussions at the convention in Fort Wayne.<sup>7</sup> For the next several years district conferences discussed the theses. Among them is this thesis:

The Evangelical Lutheran Church distinguishes sharply between what God's Word commands and what it leaves free. . . . The distinction between matters commanded in the Word of God and things left to our Christian liberty is an important characteristic of our Lutheran Church. This is a matter of great practical importance and also affects church polity. . . . Our Synod owes its flourishing condition to its understanding and recognition of this truth. Therefore it is organized not as a legislative body but as an advisory body. Our congregations know that we do not demand obedience except the obedience to the Word of God.<sup>8</sup>

- ✗ Some very practical steps have been taken in recent years to diffuse the politicization of the Synod, especially in convention. Noteworthy among these is the seating of lay and pastoral delegates on a random, assigned basis, allowing for free and independent voting, and electronic voting which prevents "hallway politics" between votes or ballots that characterized conventions for so many years.

Suggestions for further depoliticizing Synod abound. These certainly deserve further discussion:

- ✓ Limiting the source of overtures by requiring that overtures from congregations be approved and forwarded by circuit forums, eliminating exclusive concerns at an early stage;
- ✓ Requiring the sources of voting lists to identify themselves and those whose names appear on such lists to have granted their permission to be so listed;
- ✓ Maintaining the balance between clergy and laity representation as first intended by the founders of the Synod, allowing true representation of the laity with





No quality without quantity.

the number of lay (or non-clergy church professional) votes being determined by size of congregation;

- ✓ Developing sharper policies, codes of ethics, and processes to be followed by all candidates for office and members of the Synod at the time of elections;
- ✓ Ensuring that district and Synodical conventions provide as much inspiration as they do information and perspiration (the Lutheran Women's Missionary League is a valued resource).

Two final issues surface at the center of building a healthier atmosphere for church politics in the LCMS. First, we must decide (insofar as it can be decided) whether the Synod is a united, single entity with legislative and theological control over its entire membership, or if we are simply a loose association or federation of congregations and districts. Increasingly one easily notices the diversity of practices, discipline, and latitude ranging from district to district. Some districts, as some larger congregations, become mini-denominations to themselves and to their mission field. We can all benefit from fraternal discussions concerning what it means to "walk together." At the root of much of our unsettledness is a lack of consensus on this issue. Some might call it a healthy dilemma. Others want a clear definition. The 21st century may or may not allow for every congregation and district to fall into line on the same path. Just how close and how much in step do we expect one another to be?

Secondly, a healthier climate for politics in the church will mean a coming together of what one hears repeatedly are the two churches within the LCMS. The one, we hear, is the church of faithfulness to the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions; the other is the church where missions and reaching the lost are what matter most. So, as is our custom, we Missourians forever see the next convention as apocalyptic in nature, taking us to a crossroads. Will we compromise confessionalism for growth? Or will we say, "Here I stand," and do just that—stand—with little progress, if any, in reaching the lost?

We strike a dichotomy and fall in line on one side or the other; but it does not have to be this way. Bridging our desire to be faithful and to be in mission are the Law and Gospel of God. I believe the secret to a healthier atmosphere in Missouri will be found where we have always found our unity—in the Word, in our theology. The hard work of theology must be done by all of us: pastors and other church professionals in their studies and conferences; the Commission on Theology and Church Relations; our seminary and university/college faculties; and our lay people. It must not be an either/or. We must do theology, preserving the purity of the Word, but we must do theology for the sake of mission as well. Confessionalism, after all, entails confessing Christ! The two are really never that far apart.

Theology must be done as Luther so often did, with a heart for the common person that edifies the church. No denomination is better poised than The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod to present the pure Law and Gospel of God to the world in mission. So we must do theology. It is what by God's grace and Spirit we do best. We do it not only for ourselves but also for the rest of Christ's church on earth and surely for those who still do not know Him. When at last we leave behind the faithfulness/mission dichotomy, a weak one at best, and project our faithfulness to the Word in our mission to others, we may be as close as we will get to what God has in mind for us. The best of Missouri is both.

So we come full circle. I began this essay with the celebration of how much theological unity we actually have in the Missouri Synod. As T. S. Elliot once wrote,

"We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time."<sup>9</sup>

We started as a Synod with a tremendous heart for theology. Theology is our strength. Theology will take us to a healthier climate for being and doing church together. Then we will have arrived where we started, knowing the place, perhaps in our generation, "for the first time." For this, given our lover's quarrel with the church, we would all do well to pray.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Lewis, C.S. *Letters: C.S. Lewis/Don Giovanni Calabria*. Tr., ed., Martin Moynihan. Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1988.

<sup>2</sup>I owe this insight to Eugene Peterson, whose commentary on Psalm 133 has been very helpful for this essay. See Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980.

<sup>3</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. New York, Harper and Brothers, 1954, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup>These data have been provided by the office of the Secretary, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

<sup>5</sup>All references to the Constitution and By-Laws of Synod are taken from *1995 Handbook—The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod*. St. Louis: The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1996.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>7</sup>These theses and the church's discussion of them are summarized in an intriguing article, "The Evangelical Lutheran Church the True Visible Church of God," by P. F. Koeneke in *The Abiding Word*, Volume I (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1946).

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 318-319.

<sup>9</sup>T. S. Elliot, "Little Gidding," *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*, 1963, p. 208.



## book reviews

**TOTAL MINISTRY: RECLAIMING THE MINISTRY OF ALL GOD'S PEOPLE** by Stewart C. Zabriskie. The Alban Institute, 1995.

By coincidence, on a recent trip across Nevada I read *Total Ministry*, written by Zabriskie, the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Nevada. Driving through this arid, sparsely populated land with an economy based on the rough industries of mining and gambling, I could appreciate the author's concern for reclaiming and marshaling the ministry of all Christians. Zabriskie and fellow Episcopalians in Nevada are developing ways to sustain and extend Word and Sacraments in communities where it is impractical to support full-time church workers. Coincident to that aim are several issues and disputes in the church—Episcopal, Lutheran and others—that relate to the political and community well-being of all God's people. Zabriskie addresses many of those concerns in seven chapters of 107 readable pages with a special concern for mission to both church and world which he recognizes as a "vocation extended by God to a servant church, which in God's mercy is guided and coordinated by the Holy Spirit."

Chapter 1, "Total Ministry and Model-Based Ministry," is a brief discussion of the diocese effort at total ministry, "the shared ministry of all baptized people," "the ministry of the ordained [and] the laity in the mutual work of ministry." (p. x) This endorsement of the priesthood of all believ-

ers is tempered by cautions about creating systems, models, and buzzwords as though mere vocabulary and an organizational chart would amount to ministry. Chapter 2, "Who's the Highest?" recognizes the importance of licensing those in public servanthood while trying to avoid the non-biblical hierarchies that often accompany clericalism. Part of this work has included ordaining local priests and deacons who work with full-time regional vicars of the bishop not in "shared" ministry (which for Zabriskie has an air of control about it—"it is mine to share") but in Christ's ministry that is being "extended" together. Chapter 3, "The Bishop in the Total-Ministry Context," continues the discussion of how to extend the ministry through training and preparation with respect for both the tasks and sensitivity to the local community of believers and the bishop who serves more as a spiritual director than as a magistrate. Chapter 4, "Maintenance and Mission," provides some success and failure case studies of local parishes and the interaction of the locally trained church deacons and priests, seminary trained priests, regional vicars, and the bishop's staff. Chapter 5, "New Twists on 'Downsizing' and 'Upsizing'" includes several more example situations within a garden metaphor of growing and pruning rather than the hierarchy image that has been with us since Constantine. Chapter 6, "Development, Difficulties, and Possibilities," regards every Christian as a theologian and, so, emphasizes the importance of hearing the preached word and of some formal biblical education for all adult Christians. Chapter 7, "Looking Ahead," addresses several issues of church practice which bear on avoiding "us-them" divisions among all Christ's servants: ordination, rites, prayer, size, and success. Among his closing thoughts is the observation that the real test of their ministry "is not how well we function as an institution but how much we touch others in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ."

In many ways Zabriskie is not far from C.F.W. Walther's mediating view of the ministry. Those engaged in office-of-ministry discussions and other matters such as licensing lay ministers, authority in the church, servant leadership, church growth, and the small congregation will find *Total Ministry* an interesting read.

Russ Moulds  
Assistant Professor of Education  
Concordia-Seward

**SCRIPTURE AND DISCERNMENT: DECISION MAKING IN THE CHURCH** by Luke Timothy Johnson. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

Church politics may seem humorous to one and distasteful to another, while they drive a third clean out of the ministry. But if the body of Christ is to act as one, it must discuss, argue, and agree. Presented with choices, it must make decisions, and those decisions should be wise, God-pleasing, and in accord with the nature of the Church: a community of both holiness and ministry, separate and yet serving. The church does not belong to us, but to God, and it is his work, not ours, which we do. We seek his will and his way in his Word, the only authority for holy living. But the small band of martyrs resembles little the bloated apathy of contemporary uncommitted Christianity, and dragging a solution across 21 flinty centuries can leave you with little to hold. How to submit our anecdotes and arguments to the Scripture's authority is the burden of this book.

Instruction on the nature of the Christian Church must be drawn from the teachings of Christ and the writings of Paul, while analysis of how the first century Church reached decisions is necessarily culled from the only book to give detailed record of the process—the Book of Acts. Luke Timothy Johnson is up to the task, having written a very helpful commentary on Acts as well as a wonderful refutation of the Jesus Seminar and its related nonsense entitled *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Gospels*. Johnson is a good Roman Catholic who toes the party line on the authority of the church and tradition, and does show some of the eccentricities one would expect in a former monk and priest who has taught in Protestant seminaries (Yale and Emory) for the past twenty years. The reader who is aware of Johnson's background will not be troubled by his perspective. His greatest weakness is the mistaken opinion that God may use the discernment of present Christians to vitiate doctrines unambiguously presented in God's eternal Word. With that flaw noted, I recommend this text as a fascinating and engaging study.

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*continued on page 28*



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CONGREGATIONAL MEGATRENDS by C. Jeff Woods. Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 1996.

When politics is defined as the art of governing and influencing policy, all involved in politics in the church are invited to consider seven megatrends defined by the author as major transitions in today's church. Four transitions relate to the fundamental purposes of the church: 1) a shift from mass evangelism to relational evangelism; 2) a shift from tribal education to immigrant education; 3) a shift from surrogate missions to hands-on missions; 4) a shift from reasonable spirituality to mysterious spirituality. Three transitions relate to methods in the church: 1) a shift from official leadership to gifted leadership; 2) a shift from segmented programming to holographic programming; 3) a shift from secondary planning to primary.

In discussing each transition, the strategy of the author is to provide a brief review of where we have been, an analysis of the nature, direction, and

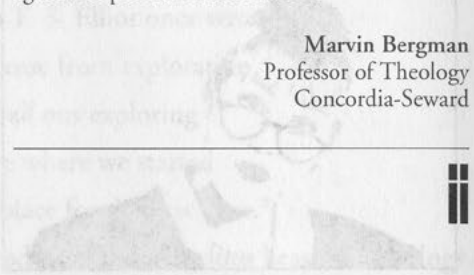
implications of the trend, and statistical, theoretical, anecdotal, and theological support for the shift that is occurring. Questions for discussion and possible applications of trends are offered.

In discussing the shift, for example, from tribal education to immigrant education, the author points out what pastors and teachers experience daily, that one no longer can assume that a person involved in a Christian education experience has any kind of faith foundation or vocabulary. Instead of working with individuals with a tribal (family) background who were taught many of the basics of the faith by the family and faith community, church seekers and members must be educated as if they are immigrants who need a comprehensive education in the basics of the faith that includes hymns and liturgy, the heritage and mission of the church, the background, history, and content of the books of the Bible, doctrinal foundations, and discipleship. This shift in the backgrounds and experiences of the learner calls for changes in teaching and learning strategies. Three strategies that are named are establishing mentoring relationships between seekers and members with

more experiences, assimilating new members through forums and small groups, and providing educational opportunities for church members to learn at every stage of their faith journeys. Instead of relying on tribal education strategies which seek to induct new members into an existing group, congregations which value immigrant education will focus on the faith maturity of each person throughout the lifespan.

Though the discussion is marred at times by sweeping generalizations, non sequiturs, the lack of a recognition of Scripture as source and norm, and an absence of a Law-Gospel dynamic as the power that transforms, this study is more than sociological "babble." Megatrends that impact the life of the church surely deserve a place on the agenda of politics in the church.

Marvin Bergman  
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book reviews  
Total Ministry Reclaims the  
Ministry of the Congregation

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