



REPORT FROM PRESIDENT TERRY CRIPE

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the *One Message* we have been called to speak in *Many Contexts*!

I am stunned at the rapid pace with which three years have passed. As one fellow veteran District President told me, “By the end of the first year you will realize how much you don't know.” I am still making that discovery! What follows is my written report to you, the congregations and professional church workers of our Ohio District.

I noted in my acceptance remarks at our last convention that we in the Ohio District are faced with many challenges not of our making. Certainly the last three years have not shown dramatic improvement in those areas of shrinking and aging populations and economy. Pockets of prosperity and growth do exist, and we thank God for His gracious hand of blessing in those areas. For the most part, the states that comprise the Ohio District continue to age and the majority of our congregations mirror that change. Being “in the heart of it all” has also placed Ohio squarely in the middle of the national economic downturn that began in the final quarter of 2008.

As I hope you have read elsewhere in the workbook, the Board of Directors has established three ends policies which I will summarize as “healthy congregations, healthy professional church workers, and healthy relationship between our congregations, District, and Synod.”

Healthy Congregations

We have seen some good progress as more congregations are stepping outside their four walls and bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to their unchurched surroundings. I pray that the Holy Spirit would move other congregations to see themselves for what they are – the living Body of Christ – and no longer behave as though they were exclusive country clubs. If someone were to visit your church and ask, “Would I learn to be a more faithful pray-er here?”, “Would I have opportunity to exercise myself in the faith that works through love here through community outreach projects?”, “Will my faith grow more strong here through solid Bible studies and sermons?”, or “In this congregation would I learn how to give an answer about the hope that lies within me?”, what would your congregation answer?

Numerous congregations face the challenges created by aging members. As God blessed those congregations in the 1950s with stead growth, now all of those people are at the opposite end of the age spectrum. We are also hampered by significant numbers of pastors who have found themselves ill-equipped to bring the Gospel to a post-Christian world. A few have ventured out and God has blessed their courageous efforts; other pastors are overwhelmed and may choose to tread water until retirement. Far better to partner with a pastor who could help train and challenge that brother pastor for a new page of ministry. Where that has happened, some pastors have become excited about ministry once more.

The worship life of our congregations mirrors that of Synod in general – a wide-ranging variety done with wide-ranging proficiency. A good measuring stick to evaluate them is found in our Lutheran Confessions: “Ceremonies should be observed both so that people may learn the Scriptures and so that, admonished by the Word, they might experience faith and fear and finally even pray. For these are the purposes of the ceremonies” (*Apology*, XXIV). If your congregation's worship forms are not accomplishing those things for your people, you need to re-think what is happening on Sunday morning.

During this triennium I have formed and led a task force on theological unity, which has begun with the topic of administering the Lord's Supper. The group has held honest conversation, read numerous theological documents, and even investigated the practice of neighboring Roman Catholic parishes, where we learned that their priests struggle with the same issues that close(d) communion raises for us.

I would be less than honest if I did not address one more concern. As Lutherans, we believe that the spiritual and numerical health of our congregations is tied to the Word. New church starts as well as revitalized ones will happen only as the Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed faithfully. The Law shows us where we need to repent; the Gospel brings forgiveness to the repentant and power to amend both sinful congregational and personal behaviors. As a result of my time in the pew these three years, I have concluded that our pastors really must work hard to avoid two pitfalls: 1) resorting to moralizing, law-based motivation that leads people to think that they (or the congregation) can *be* better if they just *do* better, and 2) preaching the Gospel, but with such predictable phrases that people's ears are calloused and numbed to its realities. While both are serious, perhaps the second is more dangerous because the touchstone phrases like “forgiveness of sins,” etc. are spoken each week, leading the pastor to believe he's done his job. Let's banish this generic Gospel preaching! Let the Good News flow forth as it is shaped by each week's specific texts.

Between 60 and 90 of our congregations are “at risk” congregations. That means that if they continue as they have in the past, they will close their doors or significantly change the way they operate in the next five to ten years. While it is easy to live in a state of denial, I would plead with such congregations not to wait until their numbers have dwindled to below 50 in Sunday worship before addressing the problem.

Healthy Professional Church Workers

During this past triennium, Rev. Robert Myers announced his retirement from serving as our district Professional Church Worker Counselor. Counseling services to our professional church workers is now available through three capable pastors: Rev. Gilbert Duchow, Rev. Steve Niermann, and Rev. Alan Trapp, located regionally. The transition continues to take place under Pastor Myers' direction. In addition, a Ministerial Health Commission is soon to be formed to provide further input and direction for the counselors.

I have been pleased with the caliber of incoming candidates from both seminaries during the past triennium. They have shown themselves to be dedicated to our Lutheran Confessions and evangelical in practice. While Synod's demand for new pastors has not met previous forecasts because many pastors are not retiring at age 65, the numbers of candidates needed will not diminish. As costs continue to rise, I do suspect that an increasing number will need to be bi-vocational, however.

Hard economic times have hit both our parishes and our schools. Please do all in your power to show these professional church workers how much you value them. Because several congregations have fallen into budgetary problems and have had to reduce their staffs, I am looking carefully at all requests for new pastors. Congregations cannot hope to call a pastor by saving money during their vacancy and then using that to supplement their below-average weekly giving once the new pastor is on site. Ethically and morally that is not fair to the worker when that money runs out. Calls for those church workers who have been let go are not forthcoming immediately. Some are still without a call after three years.

Healthy Relationships

At the last convention delegates gave their blessing to the adoption of policy-based governance. The Board of Directors and staff continue to grow in understanding and competency in a system that separates those who envision (Board of Directors) from those who devise plans to carry out that vision (staff). The Board has struggled to devise meaningful ways to measure progress toward achieving the ends policies they have set. Personally, I have been greatly relieved not to wear the hat of chairman of the Board of Directors. Having the annual budget prepared and presented to the Board by the staff makes a lot of sense and has certainly improved the morale of the Board on the day they are presented with the budget and vote to accept it. Having various fiscal policies in place from the Board has made staff adjustments to the budget more manageable in these challenging economic times.

The Board has prepared a visual report to our congregations that its members have begun to take to congregations that would like to have such a report. This is part of their goal to improve their relationship with our congregations. If your congregation would like to see such a presentation, please contact the chairman or your regional board members.

During the past three years your District has made rapid movement into the digital age. Our website has undergone dramatic change, thanks in no small part to Mr. Glenn Richter. He has been a constant encourager to your District staff use this Web resource as the basis for communication to you and we have responded. Furthermore, utilizing this electronic medium has been a blessing since economic realities have forced us to continue to down-size our support staff. Placing materials on the website has proven to be more economical and timely than having to arrange large mailings. We will continue to make further use of this communications tool, just as many of our congregations are doing. Visit us at www.oh.lcms.org for news, views, and ministry resources.

This convention will devote a lot of time to reviewing the proposed structure changes recommended by the Blue Ribbon Taskforce on Synodical Structure and Governance. Changes in the manner of presentation have been made so that delegates will have their questionnaire forms with them at all times during the discussion. But I urge delegates to do their part by reading through the proposals prior to coming to the convention. The presentation can be found at <http://www.lcms.org/pages/internal.asp?NavID=13867>

The Future

Challenges for our future together in the Ohio District are significant. After a one-year uptick in giving, we have fallen back, no doubt an unhappy effect of the national economic downturn. I pray that our District participation in Fan into Flame will provide us with enough resources to launch our ambitious goal of planting 60 new mission outposts, 20 of which are slotted for West Virginia. Besides the financial component needed - \$4 million – we need congregations willing to step up and step outside themselves to see where new congregations could be planted in their area. We can no longer drop numerous mission planters in District-designated spots and expect things to happen.

Finally, I wish to thank the talented and dedicated co-workers who have served our congregations and professional church workers with me: our regional Mission and Ministry facilitators Rev. Vern Bok, Mr. Jonathan Reitz, Rev. Jim Herndon and Rev. Kevin Wilson have proven that the deployed staff concept can benefit our congregations. Cleveland-based executive staff: Ms. Karen Dutton, Mrs. Bonnie Mann, Rev. Jeff Stephens, and Mr. Gordon Stuckert continue to make the Ohio District a blessing to our Synod. I am also indebted to my secretary, Mrs. Vivian Smeraldi, and Mrs. Deborah Klusak, who cheerfully steps in to help when Vivian is swamped with call list requests and other clerical deadlines. A tip of the hat also goes to Mr. David Bowers, the executive director of the Ohio District Lutheran Church Extension Fund, and to Mr. Peter Hessler, whose legal counsel has proven invaluable.

It has also been a privilege and honor to work with three very fine regional vice-presidents: Revs. John Davidson, Peter Marcis and David Zachrich. They serve your regions well and have lifted my spirits on many occasions.

Your servant in Christ,

Rev. Terry Cripe, President
Ohio District, LC-MS