

Ecclesiastical Supervision According to the 2019 LCMS Handbook

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If there is ever an irony in the LCMS you are listening to it today. Every member of the Council of Presidents can testify to the fact I am the last one on the COP to make mention of or use the LCMS Handbook. I am not saying it is not a useful publication, I am simply saying the least qualified district president to make this presentation is standing before you today. I have always tried to carry out the responsibilities of district president as a pastor leaning on the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions as my formation. When confronted with an issue or situation I think of my office as a Pastor and use that in my vocation as an ecclesiastical supervisor. For that reason it is has been a beneficial and fruitful exercise preparing for this presentation. As is the intended case, those who have gone before me have left their wisdom in print to assist us who follow them in service to the Church. In the presentation I will walk you through the 2019 LCMS Handbook on ecclesiastical supervision along with internal comments as to what this means and how it is exercised. Most of what I will say today is going to be in response to questions and comments you wish to make. I encourage that and will do my best to share openly my experience of being an ecclesiastical supervisor. So as you listen also prepare your questions. We will leave plenty of time for that at the end of my paper.

Definition of Terms: Ecclesiastical Supervision

From By Law 1.2.1 j- “Ecclesiastical supervision is the responsibility, primarily of the President of the Synod and district presidents, to supervise on behalf of the Synod the doctrine, life, and administration of its members, officers, and agencies. Such supervision, subject to the provisions of the Synod’s Constitution, Bylaws, and resolutions, includes visitation, evangelical encouragement and support, care, protection, counsel, advice, admonition, and when necessary, appropriate disciplinary measures to assure that the Constitution, Bylaws, and resolution of the Synod are followed and implemented. Thus, ecclesiastical supervision is also the presenting, interpreting, and applying of the collective will of the Synod’s congregations. Ecclesiastical supervision does not include the responsibility to observe, monitor, control, or direct the day-to-day activities of individual members of the Synod, whether in the conduct of their work or in their private lives. Further, those of constitutional articles and bylaws pertaining to ecclesiastical supervision shall determine the full definition of ecclesiastical supervision.”

In case you were wondering about the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions, they are included in the Constitution.

Article XI of the Synod’s Constitution

From Article XI B- Duties of the President. 1. The President has the supervision regarding the doctrine and the administration of (I wonder why “life” was left out of this phrase?)

- a. All officers of the Synod; (Vice-presidents, in line of succession, as prescribed by the Bylaws. A Secretary. A Board of Directors. Other officers as specified in the Bylaws)

- b. All such as are employed by the Synod; (i.e. Regional Directors and all who serve their regions deployed, all rostered employees at the international center and nationally deployed, The RSO members of Synod as well as our institutions of education)
- c. The individual districts of the Synod; (since districts are nothing more than Synod in that place)
- d. All district presidents (33 geographic and 2 non-geographic)

2. It is the President's duty to see to it that all the aforementioned act in accordance with the Synod's Constitution, to admonish all who in any way depart from it, and, if such admonition is not heeded, to report such cases to the Synod. (again; Word of God and Lutheran Confessions are spoken of in the adherence to the Constitution)

3. The President *has and always shall have* (italics mine) the power to advise, admonish, and reprove. He shall conscientiously use all means at his command to promote and maintain unity of doctrine and practice in all the districts of the Synod.

What does it mean to have the power to advise, admonish, and reprove? Too often the power to advise has been reduced to some sage saying that can either be adhered to or ignored. This has erroneously been applied to situations which are in clear violation of Holy Scripture and their correct exhibition, the Lutheran Confessions. To advise is not merely a conversation about which car to buy based on one's past experience, take it or leave it. There are two tiers to the advising power of the president. The first tier refers to matters that are neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. Such an example is the governance nature of the congregation. The autonomy of each congregation is in relation to their governance and not to their own desires as to what Scripture says. Congregations purchase their own property, maintain their own facilities, Call workers in addition to the Pastor such as they see need in their setting. This they do with the president acting in an advisory role, first tier. The second tier is not so flexible. The second tier of the president's advisory power is to render counsel and opinion on doctrinal matters of Scripture. It implies the making of recommendations as to a course of action by someone with actual or supposed knowledge and experience. In the second tier the president is governed by Scripture and applies Scripture to any given situation calling for it. In the second tier, should the advice be ignored, the president then has the power of admonition. To admonish suggests earnest, gently reproofing advice concerning a fault or error, given by someone fitted to do so. Should admonition fail to resolve the issue the president has the power to reprove? To reprove means to speak to in disapproval; rebuke and express disapproval. This final authority is the realization of the failure to heed the advice and admonition of one's error against Scripture and its correct exhibition, the Lutheran Confessions. The purpose of this authority is to promote and maintain unity of doctrine and practice in all the districts of the Synod.

Article XII Districts of the Synod and Their Regulation

7. The district presidents shall, moreover, especially exercise supervision over the doctrine, life, and administration of office of the ordained and commissioned ministers of their district and acquaint themselves with the religious condition of the congregations of their district. To this end they shall visit and, according as they deem it necessary, hold investigations in the congregations. Their assistants in this work are the circuit visitors, who therefore shall regularly make their reports to the district presidents.

8. District presidents are empowered to suspend from membership ordained and commissioned ministers for persistently adhering to false doctrine or for having given offense by an ungodly life, in accordance with such procedure as shall be set forth in the Bylaws of the Synod.

9 c. Perform, either in person or by proxy, the ecclesiastical ordination of the candidates for the ministry assigned to their district, the commissioning of the candidates for the auxiliary offices assigned to their districts, and the installation of all ministers, ordained or commissioned, called to serve within their districts.

In 1855 the Synod officially divided into four districts creating a new office known as the district president. The DP was essentially the SP in that geographic location. All that the SP was given to do would be allocated to the DP in that area while all along the SP retained his authority and responsibility. That is why districts are known as “synod in that place.” Districts do not exist in and of themselves for their own sake. Therefore DP’s don’t exist except for the purpose of assisting the SP to do what he is not able due to distance and lack of time. The DP has the same responsibility as the SP; to maintain unity of doctrine and practice with the rostered members of Synod in his district. He does this by overseeing the doctrine, life and administration of his districts roster.

According to the 1854 revised constitution the DP has 7 main responsibilities. They are:

1. To conduct district conventions in an orderly way
2. To sign all examination and ordination certificates
3. Visit each of the congregations in his district at least once every three years
4. To deliver a sermon at the visit
5. Oversee the doctrine, life, and practice of the rostered members
6. Should impenitence be a sad result of an investigation and subsequent efforts deem unfruitful, he is empowered temporarily to suspend the membership of such pastor’s until the next District convention
7. Conduct investigations into allegations concerning rostered members

The DP does this with the same authority to advise, admonish, and reprove as does the SP. It is the goal and effort of each DP to correct erring brothers or sisters and congregations with catechesis. This may take multiple visits and extended periods of time depending on the receptivity of those being taught. Some matters require investigations which are carried out while the church worker is placed on restricted status. While on restricted status the worker continues to serve the church but cannot be placed on Call lists or receive Calls during that time. Should the advice, admonition, and reproof not be successful in bringing about repentance the DP has the authority to suspend a church worker or congregation from the roster of Synod. The suspended entity has the right to a hearing panel if requested and also an appeal panel if they think the decision was unjust. Should the suspension be upheld the church worker or congregation is expelled from Synod and no longer has any rights or privileges of the Synod. Bylaw 2.14.1 a&b says: “The only remedy available to the Synod in response to improper activities in the life of such a member of Synod is, as is true with respect to violations of other conditions of membership or is otherwise appropriate under the Constitution of these Bylaws, and following the procedures set forth in these Bylaws, to take such action as may lead to termination of that membership and the attendant rights and privileges. The action to commence expulsion of a congregation or individual from membership in the Synod is the responsibility of the district president who has the responsibility for ecclesiastical supervision of such member, under the supervision of the President of the Synod.

Membership

In an attempt to avoid the need to use disciplinary measures the DP carries out visitations with roster members so as to strengthen and guide such members to maintain unity in doctrine and practice. Bylaw 2.1.1 says: “Included in the objectives of the Synod as stated in its Constitution are, under Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, to provide evangelical supervision, counsel, and care for pastor, teachers, and other professional church workers in the performance of their official duties and to provide protection for congregations, pastors, teachers, and other church workers in the performance of their official duties and the maintenance of their rights. In view of this, it is clear that membership in The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, whether individual or congregational, is viewed as a valuable asset to be carefully monitored and managed. In order for this to occur, it is necessary for standards to be developed and maintained for the benefit of all members so that its value is not diminished or destroyed. Consequently, it is important for the Synod to establish the standards and qualifications it believes necessary for acquiring and maintaining the status of membership as well as procedures for protecting those who attain it.”

Visitations are crucial and vital for maintaining this goal. Since the SP can't possibly make visits to all the roster members this is delegated to the DP of each district. In a typical visit the DP will keep in mind that he is there to “provide evangelical supervision.” This would include such things as:

1. Review each congregation's constitution and bylaws to make sure they are in conformity with Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, and LCMS constitution.
2. Give evangelical encouragement. Every congregation and church worker is under attack from Satan. The Devil uses the tools of the fallen world as well as our own sinful flesh to draw us away from Christ and interfere with ministry. Devotions and prayer with our church workers bestow the strength of the Gospel and encouragement to endure any suffering with gladness.
3. Care for and protection of church workers and or congregations. Mistreatment and malicious behavior toward one another is not unheard of in the Church. This includes broken relationships between pastors and congregations, teachers and school boards, etc. When treatment is unfair and unjust the DP visit can quell such behavior and address a proper appreciation toward each other. Congregations can err in accusations of the church worker. Church workers can err in their accusations against congregations. The DP is there to protect against injustice.
4. Counsel and advise- we have already covered these two aspects of supervision. During a visit the DP often offers evangelical counsel. If and when that is not followed he may and will bring advice to the situation with warning of consequences for ignoring his advice. When counsel and advice is followed he makes efforts to assist with reconciliation between the disputants.
5. Should all efforts be ignored the DP is then left to admonition and discipline when necessary.
6. A visit includes a review of the worship life of the congregation. Counsel is given so that the basic elements of Divine Service are present and that the liturgy bespeaks the giving of the Heavenly gifts. There is also a review of Communion attendance as well as discussion about Closed Communion.
7. When time permits the DP will visit with the Sunday School Director to review education materials as well as the evangelism board to discuss outreach efforts by the congregation.
8. The topic of stewardship will involve bible class attendance, offerings, missions, and church worker compensation

9. As is the purpose of the SP and the DP the visit will discuss the importance of maintaining purity of doctrine by using doctrinally pure hymnbooks and catechisms.
10. Sometimes the Circuit Visitor will attend the meeting with the intention of strengthening relationships between neighboring sister congregations.
11. The Synod intends to be a resource and assist the church workers so God's people can grow in faith, hope and love.
12. When a vacancy occurs the DP will assist in preparing the congregation for the vacancy by procuring a vacancy pastor. He will also assemble a Call list comprised of names offered by the congregation mixed with names the DP will add to the list. He or the CV will attend the Call meetings. When a Call is accepted the DP or his representative will install the new pastor. If the Call is for a commissioned worker the pastor of the congregation usually installs them.

A Closer Look at the Supervision Involving Discipline

Article II of the Synods Constitution says membership requires an adherence by confession.

1. "The Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice." To reject this or to call it into question will result in discipline that unless recanted will result in expulsion.
2. "All the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God..." To reject the doctrinal content of any of the ten documents in the Book of Concord will result in discipline that unless recanted will result in expulsion.

Article VI speaks of the condition of membership, of utmost focus is:

1. Renunciation of unionism and syncretism. This includes issues which direct us not to serve congregations professing and practicing false doctrine. It also includes not taking part in services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations and church bodies.
2. The blameless life of the rostered church worker. Obviously this does not mean a sinless life but it refers to actions in a church workers life that make them lose the confidence and credibility that the Office requires (no longer above reproach). Such examples of misbehavior are listed in the Pastoral Epistles as well as in Jesus Words from the Gospels. Offensive conduct is that which brings shame to the Gospel that the church worker is to preach and teach. It also includes the loss of moral authority by outsiders who see or hear such things as:
 - a. Adultery
 - b. Drunkenness
 - c. Foul language
 - d. Violent temper
 - e. Divorce depending on who is at fault and the filer
 - f. Etc.
3. As said above, membership requires exclusive use of doctrinally pure agendas, hymnbooks, and catechisms.

Should violation of any of these result in suspension from the roster there are provisions for reinstatement. Bylaw 2.18.1 says: “Any person who at any time has held membership in the Synod but has resigned that membership, or whose membership in the Synod has been terminated, is eligible to seek reinstatement into membership. However, there is no inherent right to membership in the Synod, and the decisions as to whether to accept or deny a request for reinstatement shall be at the sole discretion of the Council of Presidents.”

Reinstatement is also an act of ecclesiastical supervision. It begins with the DP of the district from which the church worker last held membership and concludes with the Council of Presidents of Synod.

1. Repentance- Confession and Absolution are sought from and for the worker whose reason for being off the roster is for sinful reasons. Pastoral care is a necessity for those who have been off the roster. When professional help is called for the DP makes efforts to provide for or make arrangements for such help. It is always a question as to whether the person is good for the office. It should also be a consideration as to whether the office is good for the worker. Sometimes the pressures and challenges of the office take their toll on a worker who fails to deal with it in a healthy way. In such cases the office just is not good for the person.
2. Application- should all of number 1 be carried out to satisfaction then the worker may apply for reinstatement. They do this with the DP of the district where membership was last held. The application has many requirements one of which is publication of the application in the Lutheran Witness so that anyone who has a comment to make about the reinstatement can do so, positive or negative.
3. When all the paper work is completed correctly the applicant schedules a meeting where they are interviewed by three DP's (in the case of ordained). In the case of a commissioned worker this can and is done on the district level with the DP and a committee if the DP appoints one. In the case of the ordained the application, post interview, is brought before the entire Council of Presidents. To be reinstated requires a 75% approval of the votes cast.
4. Should the applicant receive 75% approval from the COP the worker is then restored to the roster as a candidate and is eligible to receive a Call to serve the Church.

Conclusion

As you can see from the 2019 LCMS Handbook there is not only logistical reasons for ecclesiastical supervision. Far and away the reason for this is pastoral care to the Church so as to maintain unity in doctrine and practice. Doctrine drives practice such that a common doctrine should result in a common practice within the bounds of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. Jesus said “Thy Word is Truth” and “The Truth shall set you free.” For that reason we maintain an orthodox confession of the Faith. Only Truth converts the unbeliever, only Truth brings comfort to the hurting heart, only Truth carries us over the threshold of eternal life. It is Paul's desire, therefore it is our desire, when he records: “This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” It is for the purpose of seeking and saving the lost while feeding the found that we strive to maintain unity in doctrine and practice.

It has been rather painful for me to write and present a paper while spending so little time in the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. At the same time it has been fruitful for me to comb through the Handbook of our Synod. I still approach my service as an ecclesiastical supervisor with the mind of a pastor holding the Scriptures and the Confessions before my face. I never want to lose that perspective.

I also appreciate the time and effort it takes to put a handbook together and the purpose for which it exists. I personally have never restricted or suspended a church worker. I am blessed beyond all measure to have such faithful servants of the Church as well as congregations where God's Holy Gifts are given. I have also had the heartache of serving on many hearing panels where suspensions were rightly administered and upheld. In each and every case I see very easily how these could have and should have been avoided. I pray the Lord who is Prince of Peace may shower His wisdom upon the Church and she hear what He has to say and receive what He has to give. Where ecclesiastical supervision helps to do this, praise be to God on High.