

The Service of Women  
in  
Congregational and  
Synodical Offices

A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations  
of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

September 1994



With  
Guidelines for Congregations

Prepared by President's Task Force

January 2005

## Abbreviations

AC = Augsburg Confession

Ap = Apology of the Augsburg Confession

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In 1968 the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) completed work on “a detailed and exhaustive study of the entire question of woman suffrage” and of “the matter of full membership of women on synodical boards, commissions, and committees.” This study included a thorough examination of foundational passages of Scripture that determine the church’s practice with respect to the service of women: Gal. 3:26–29, 1 Cor. 11:2–16, 1 Cor. 14:33b–38, and 1 Tim. 2:11–15.

On the basis of this study titled *Woman Suffrage in the Church*, the 1969 synodical convention adopted Resolution 2–17 “To Grant Woman Suffrage and Board Membership.” This resolution states:

Those statements of Scripture which direct women to keep silent in the church and which prohibit them to teach and to exercise authority over men, we understand to mean that women ought not to hold the pastoral office or serve in any other capacity involving the distinctive functions of this office.

The resolution then concludes with these words:

We therefore conclude that the Synod itself and the congregations of the Synod are at liberty to alter their policies and practices in regard to women’s involvement in the work of the church according to these declarations, provided the polity developed conforms to the general Scriptural principles that women neither hold the pastoral office nor “exercise authority over men.”

Following the 1969 synodical convention, the President of the Synod asked the Commission on Constitutional Matters (CCM) to “give guidance to those congregations which desire to incorporate” these conclusions in their constitutions. In response to this request the CCM issued an opinion, subsequently reaffirmed by the Synod in convention, in which it suggested that revised congregational constitutions include provisions that women should not serve as pastor, as members of “the board of elders or corresponding board directly involved in the functions of the pastoral office,” and as chairman or vice-chairman of the congregation. The CCM concluded its response to the President’s request for guidance with these words:

In offering the suggestion below to the congregations the Commission on Constitutional Matters is restricting itself to the position which the Synod has taken in this matter (*de iure humano* rather than *de iure divino*, by human right rather than divine right) at this point. It is therefore assumed that the Synod may further define its position in the future, thereby making it necessary perhaps to refine the suggestions being offered herewith. (1971 *Convention Workbook*, 244)

Nineteen years following the issuing of the CCM's opinion, the Synod in its 1989 convention adopted Res. 3-13A "To Study and Clarify Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices." In this resolution the Synod asked that the "CTCR, in consultation with the Council of Presidents, prepare a study on the eligibility of women for service in all offices of the congregation, including that of chairman, vice-chairman, and elder and District and synodical boards and commissions where their official function would in effect involve public accountability for the function(ing) of the pastoral office."

The CTCR's response to this assignment was *The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices*, originally published in the December 1994 issue of the *Reporter*.<sup>\*</sup> The members of the Synod were urged by the 1995 synodical convention to study this report and to present their responses to the Commission. The 2004 synodical convention adopted a resolution affirming the conclusions of the 1994 CTCR report (see **Appendix A**). Immediately following this convention, the CTCR authorized this publication of *The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices* as a separate document.

The Commission has also included in this publication, upon the request of the President of the Synod, a document titled "Guidelines for the Service of Women in Congregational Offices." These guidelines were prepared by a Special Task Force appointed by the President to assist congregations in making changes in their constitutions in conformity with the conclusions of *The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices*.

Included as appendices in this booklet are two additional documents. The first is the Commission's 2004 response to a request from the Minnesota South District for an opinion regarding women serving in the "congregational offices of Executive Director/President or Assistant Director/Vice President." This opinion is included as **Appendix B**.

Samuel H. Nafzger, Executive Director  
Commission on Theology and Church Relations  
December 2004

<sup>\*</sup> *The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices*, adopted by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations in November 1994, was also printed in the 1995 *Convention Workbook*, together with a "Dissenting Opinion" and with a "Response to the Dissenting Opinion." See pages 310-317. These are also included online at [www.lcms.org/ctcr](http://www.lcms.org/ctcr).

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# THE SERVICE OF WOMEN IN CONGREGATIONAL AND SYNODICAL OFFICES

## I. The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices: The CTCR's Assignment

### A. The Service of Women

The Scriptures without qualification affirm that all believing Christians, both men and women, are priests of God (1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 1:6). Through Baptism God has made them all, equally and without distinctions of importance or value, members of the one body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12–13; Gal. 3:27–28; Rom. 12:5). No one is baptized to be either man or woman. To the members of the “royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9) of believers belong all of the rights, privileges and responsibilities which Christ has given to His church on earth (1 Cor. 3:21,22; Matt. 16:13–19; 18:17–20; John 20:22,23; Matt. 28:18–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–25; Treatise 24). By the mercies of God, His priests are exhorted to present themselves “as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is [their] spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1).

In their various callings, Christian men and women alike have received from their Lord the high privilege and responsibility of serving each other and their neighbor, as He has served them (Mark 10:45; John 13:15). In their relationship to one another as followers of Jesus and members of His family, all questions of rank or authority and the insistence on individual “rights” must be set aside (Mark 10:35–45; John 13:16–17). Rather, in their common life together, they are to give themselves to each other in humble and loving service (Phil. 2:1–4), seeking ways in which they might encourage each other to good works (Heb. 10:24).

When we speak, therefore, of the service of women in the church we are referring in the first instance to nothing else than the common work that belongs to all Christians which they faithfully and joyfully accomplish until the Lord comes (Phil. 4:4–7).

## B. The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices

The Synod has asked the Commission on Theology and Church Relations to prepare a study of the service of Christian women in assigned areas of responsibility in the church.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically, the Synod has requested “that the CTCR, in consultation with the Council of Presidents, prepare a study on the eligibility of women for service in all offices of the congregation, including that of chairman, vice chairman, and elder and district and synodical boards and commissions where their official function would in effect involve public accountability for the function(ing) of the pastoral office.”<sup>2</sup> Simply stated, this assignment has arisen because the Synod has previously taken the position that the Scriptures themselves qualify or limit the eligibility of women for service in the church. The Scriptures do so in those passages which require that only men are permitted to serve in the office of pastor and carry out the functions which God has assigned to it (1 Corinthians 14; 1 Timothy 2). The question before the Commission, therefore, is this: In applying what the Scriptures teach concerning the pastoral office and its functions, what additional limitations, if any, should Christians place upon the service of women in the church, specifically with reference to offices established in and by the church?

In our judgment a scripturally informed response must seek to hold in tension two equally valid themes. On the one hand, we must take care not to diminish in any way what the Bible teaches us about the full possession by men and women, equally, of the rights and privileges of the priesthood of believers. At the same time, we must remain faithful to biblical teaching regarding the uniqueness of God’s gift of the pastoral office, and the divinely given requirements which circumscribe it.

<sup>1</sup>See Appendix.

<sup>2</sup>1989 Res. 3–13A “To Study and Clarify Services of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices,” *Convention Proceedings*, 118.

## II. Offices within the Christian Congregation

### A. The Pastoral Office

#### 1. A Divine Institution (*iure divino*)

According to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, our Lord has mandated and instituted the office of the public ministry—the only divinely established office in the church (Matt. 28:18–20; John 20:22–23; Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 12:28–29; Eph. 4:11; 1 Peter 5:1; Titus 1:5; AC V; AC XIV; Ap XIII; Treatise 67–72). This office is distinct from the universal priesthood of believers and has its origin in the divine institution (*iure divino*) of the office. The Scriptures speak of the office uniquely as one to which God appoints men with the responsibility of oversight and care for His flock (Acts 20:28). To this office belongs the “shepherding” (serving as “pastor”) of that portion of God’s flock assigned to him (1 Peter 5:2–3). This charge to serve as pastor of God’s flock is conferred by God through the call of the church, which places a man under a special obligation for which he is accountable to God and to those who have called him (1 Cor. 4:1–15; Heb. 13:17; 1 Tim. 3:1–7, 14–15; Titus 1:5–9).

#### 2. Divinely Given Functions (*iure divino*)

The pastoral office requires the performance of specific functions that carry out the mission of God in His church as it carries out its work in the world. Some of these functions are “distinctive,” for they entail the public exercise of the ministry of Word and sacrament that has been assigned by God to this office for the nurture, care and equipping of His people. In summary form, the Augsburg Confession asserts “that according to the Gospel the power of the keys or the power of bishops [pastors] is a power and command of God to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer and distribute the sacraments” (AC XXVIII, 5; cf. 8–9, 21 etc.). We recognize that neither the Scriptures nor the Lutheran Confessions provide a detailed list of the activities required of pastors as they carry out these responsibilities in the Christian congregation which they are called to serve. However, intrinsic to this office of overseeing and shepherding of the flock are the following functions: 1) preaching in the services of the congregation; 2) leading the formal public services of worship; 3) the public administration of the sacraments; and 4) the public administration of the office of the keys.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Report of the CTCR on *Women in the Church: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice*, 1985, 42.



### 3. Eligibility for Service

In addition to the moral and vocational qualifications required of those divinely placed into this high office in the church (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 3:5–9), the Scriptures teach that the incumbent of the pastoral office must be a man. On the basis of Old Testament Scripture, St. Paul taught that “the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says” (1 Cor. 14:34). Understood within its context, this passage means that women ought not lead the public worship service, specifically carry out the teaching-preaching aspects of the service.<sup>4</sup> In 1 Tim. 2:12 St. Paul instructs the church, “Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or have authority over man; she is to keep silent.” Again on the basis of scriptural arguments, the apostle holds in this text that women are not to take the position of one to whom is assigned responsibility for the formal, public proclamation of the Christian faith.<sup>5</sup>

In summary, Scripture teaches that women not hold the formal position of the authoritative public teaching office in the church, that is, the office of pastor.<sup>6</sup>

## B. Other Offices Established by the Church

### 1. Established by Human Right (*iure humano*)

Throughout its history the church in Christian freedom has established other offices distinct from the one divinely instituted office of pastor in order to meet various needs in different times and places. Since the church is under no divine command to create such offices, they and their functions exist only “by human right” (*iure humano*). Already in apostolic times, and under apostolic direction, the church selected individuals to assist the apostles in carrying out their work (cf. Acts 6:1–7; 1 Tim. 3:8–13). Similarly, the contemporary church has continued to establish offices which have their origin not in a divine command but in the decision of the Christian congregation and groups of congregations (e.g., Synod) to facilitate the mission given to them by God.

### 2. Functions Assigned by the Church (*iure humano*)

When a congregation or group of congregations (the Synod) assigns “official functions” to a particular office established by the congregation or the Synod, this too is done not by divine mandate (*iure divino*), but by human arrangement. That is to say, the assignment of duties to all offices

<sup>4</sup> See *Women in the Church*, 32–33, for more detailed discussion.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 34–37.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the creational pattern of male headship in the church, see *Women in the Church*, 27–37.

in the church belongs in the sphere of Christian freedom exercised in love. Congregations are free to assign functions to various offices in their midst as they deem appropriate and necessary, for the edification of the church and in keeping with the principle of good order (1 Cor. 14:40). This principle also holds true for all synodical and District offices.

### 3. Eligibility for Service.

In determining the eligibility of women for service in these humanly established offices, it will be helpful to bear in mind that many of these offices are created for the purpose of assisting pastors, to a lesser or greater extent, in carrying out the duties of their office. There is a long tradition in the church of proceeding in this way and such a practice, which engages the service of both men and women, ought to be encouraged, especially in circumstances where burdens of time and increased organizational commitments severely limit pastors' ability adequately to care for those in their charge.

At the same time, such assisting in pastoral work should be distinguished in practice as in theory, from the public exercise of those functions that belong to the pastor's supervision of the flock through the public proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. In keeping with what the Scriptures teach about the service of women with respect to the pastoral office, women may not assume responsibility for or carry out in behalf of the congregation (that is "*publicly*"), and in the stead of Christ, those functions in the local congregation that would involve them in the exercise of authority inherent in this authoritative public teaching office in the church.<sup>7</sup> This remains the only stricture.

These considerations imply, and even require, that in determining the eligibility of women for services in all congregational, District and synodical offices, attention be given to the functions attached to a given office. As the Commission stated in the 1985 report on *Women in the Church*, "For other offices [other than the office of public ministry of Word and sacraments] we have no express 'thus saith the Lord,' and everything depends on the functions assigned to these offices."<sup>8</sup>

## CASE ONE: The Office of Elder

From the early years of the history of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to the present, congregations have established an office called "elder" (*Vorsteher*) to assist the pastor in carrying out the functions of the

<sup>7</sup> See the Commission's discussion of 1 Tim. 2:12, with special reference to the Greek term *authentain*, in *Women in the Church*, 35–36. At its September 1992 meeting the Commission received a request from the Atlantic District to clarify concerns relative to women's service in the church, including the meaning of the term *authentain*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

office of the public ministry (*Predigtamt*).<sup>9</sup> The duties of this office in synodical congregations generally indicate that elders work closely with the pastor in his divinely assigned responsibility to feed the whole congregation with the Word of God and to watch over it for the sake of its spiritual welfare. Elders serve primarily to assist the pastor in shepherding and overseeing the entire flock of God at their place. They frequently assist in certain aspects of the conduct of the public worship service, such as in the distribution of Holy Communion. In certain emergency situations elders may be asked by the congregation to perform, on a temporary basis, certain distinctive functions of the pastoral office (e.g., lead public worship, deliver a sermon).

In evaluating whether women may serve in the office of elder (established *iure humano*) in congregations, the principal consideration is whether the office requires that those who hold it are eligible to perform those functions that are distinctive to the public exercise of the ministry of Word and sacrament. If such a situation pertains, women may not serve in

<sup>9</sup> The term “elder” is derived from the Old Testament and the Jewish Synagogue. In the Old Testament the “elders” were the chief representatives of the tribes and together represented the nation (see Ex. 3:16ff.). The New Testament often refers to the Jewish elders who were the rulers of the synagogues and were apparently responsible for the discipline of the people in the practice of the Law (see Luke 7:3). The New Testament’s own use of “elder” is in continuity with its Jewish antecedents. When used as a designation for an office, the New Testament uses the title “elder” as a synonym for “pastor” or for “overseer” (“bishop”), thus designating those who on behalf of the people are responsible for teaching and the maintenance of Christian discipline. The “elders” of Ephesus are “bishops” placed by the Holy Spirit “to shepherd the church of God” (Acts 20:17–29). The “elders” “shepherd the flock of God in their midst” and are to perform this task as “types of the Shepherd” (1 Peter 5:1–4). Elders “preside” in the church and labor “in the word and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17). Scriptural evidence, therefore, indicates that “elder” signifies those who represent the church and on its behalf have oversight in doctrine and life. Even in the early church when a distinction between bishop and the elders existed, elders were closely associated with the duties of the bishop and were usually ordained to Word and sacrament ministry.

C.F.W. Walther stated in 1864, “A congregation shall also establish (*aufzurichten*) the office of such elders or overseers as do not labor in the Word and doctrine (1 Tim. 5:17: ‘Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching’) but who assist the incumbent of the office of the divine Word in ruling, disciplining, and keeping order in the congregation . . . . The qualifications of the candidates for this office are to be determined from Acts 6:3 . . . 1 Tim. 3:8–12 . . . .” (*The Proper Form of an Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation Independent of the State*, in *Walther on the Church*, John Drickamer, tr. [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981], 141). See E. Eckhardt, “*Vorsteher*,” in *Homiletisches Reallexikon* (v–z) (St. Louis: Success Printing Company, 1917), 219–22; Theodore Graebner, *Handbook for Congregational Offices* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1939), 1–44.

It has been consistently maintained by Missouri Synod theologians that the office of elder is not divinely mandated, but an office created by the church following apostolic precedent. Eckhardt’s *Reallexikon* states that to have elders in the congregation is not forbidden, nor is it a sin to abolish them (Vol. v–z, 219). Theodore Graebner writes, “The Lutheran contention is that the office of eldership, the diaconship (diaconate is the better English word), was not divinely appointed, not instituted by God’s command, as is the office of the ministry” (*Handbook*, 9).

this office. An additional consideration has to do with the use of the term “elder” for those offices which do not in fact require such responsibilities. In view of the use of the term “elder” in the Scriptures (see note 9), in the history of the church, and in our own synodical history, we recommend that this term be reserved for that office which has as its assigned duty assisting the pastor in the public exercise of the distinctive functions of his office.

To avoid confusion regarding the pastoral office, consideration should perhaps be given to the use of a different term (e.g., deacon, deaconess) for those who assist the pastor in the care of the flock, but who are not engaged in the distinctive functions of the pastoral ministry. Women have long participated actively in a caring, spiritual ministry in our Synod’s congregations and in light of presently changing needs will likely be increasingly asked to do so. Such work is not only necessary, but ought to be encouraged, for the responsibility for the mutual care and nurture of Christ’s body, the church, lies with all and may indeed be enhanced through the creation of offices for this task.

## **CASE TWO: The Offices of Chairman, Vice Chairman**

If the duties prescribed for the offices of chairman and vice chairman in the congregation do not allow for the assumption of the distinctive functions of the pastoral office, women are free to hold this office without any scriptural restriction—a principle that applies to the chairmanship of all other congregational committees as well. Since the responsibilities of these offices usually do not involve the exercise of the functions of pastoral oversight through the ministry of Word and sacrament in congregations today, women gifted for such areas of responsibility should be encouraged toward such service.

## **CASE THREE: Members of a Synodical Dispute Resolution Panel**

The following questions have been addressed to the CTCR regarding the service of women on a synodical Dispute Resolution Panel: 1) Whether, or in what cases, the majority of persons on a dispute resolution panel may be women, and 2) if the majority serving on a Dispute Resolution Panel are women, would the decision be valid in that specific case?<sup>10</sup> Given the limitations noted above regarding other positions created by the church but

<sup>10</sup> This request was forwarded to the Commission by the Task Force on Conflict Resolution in February 1993.

not divinely established, women are free to serve as reconcilers and members of such panels. The question as to whether women may constitute a majority on such a panel is in itself irrelevant. To be sure, if women having a majority on such a panel were to seek to assert their power as women over men as men, such conduct would be a violation of Christian love, just as it would be for a majority of men to exercise power as men over women in such a situation.

## CONCLUSION: A Word of Encouragement

St. Paul concludes his epistle to the Romans by greeting and commending by name a number of men and women in the congregation. Included among those mentioned are a number of women, most of whom are held up for the church to see as models of devoted labor in support of the ministry of the Gospel. "If women kept silence in the public worship of the church (1 Cor. 14:34), they certainly did not remain inactive in the work of the church."<sup>11</sup> The apostle's friendship and the warmth of his affection must have been a source of great encouragement to these men and women who had toiled hard with him in the service of Christ and His church.

The biblical restraints regarding the service of women in the church and the authority of the pastoral office need not become the only, or even predominant, word we speak to one another. To speak of the "eligibility" of the service of women in congregational and synodical offices might give the impression to some that our primary concern in the contemporary church is to discourage women from exercising the privileges and responsibilities they hold as members of the priesthood of believers. Men and women alike, however, need to help one another, first of all, to see that God's Word itself provides standards of "eligibility" for service in offices of the church, and it does so without any diminution of the value of persons. But just as important, God's people must be instruments of daily encouragement to one another and help each other to discover and appreciate the joys of Christian service. All of us would do well to emulate the apostle Paul's example in giving words of support and commendation to fellow workers in the church of God.

It is the prayer of the Commission that this brief report will assist the members of the Synod in understanding and faithfully applying what the Scriptures teach about the service of women in various positions of assigned responsibility. May our beloved Lord continue to guide and bless our deliberations and decisions in this area, to the end that we remain faithful to His will regarding the ministry of Word and sacraments and our life of Christian service.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Franzmann, *Romans* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 274.

## APPENDIX

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, after a number of years of careful study and deliberation, decided at its 1969 convention “to grant women suffrage and board membership.”<sup>12</sup> In that decision the Synod stated that it understood those statements of Scripture which pertain to the service of women in the church (specifically, 1 Corinthians 11, 14; 1 Timothy 2) to mean that “women ought not to hold the pastoral office or serve in any other capacity involving the distinctive functions of this office.” Regarding offices and board membership the Synod went on to state its belief that women are prohibited from holding any other kind of office or membership on boards or committees in the institutional structures of a congregation, only if such a way of proceeding involves women in a violation of this principle. Accordingly, the Synod held, the pertinent scriptural texts do not prohibit full membership of women on synodical boards, commissions, and committees, nor is the manner of filling an office or establishing membership on a board or commission in congregations or in the Synod under any scriptural prohibition. With respect to woman suffrage, which congregations without scriptural prohibition are free to adopt, and the matter of congregational offices and board membership, the Synod concluded that congregations are free to alter their policies and practice, provided the polity developed conforms to the scriptural principles informing the Synod’s position regarding the pastoral office. The Synod recognized the sensitivity of this issue and therefore urged “cautious and deliberate action in the spirit of Christian love” if changes are implemented.

Following this action by the Synod in 1969, the President of the Synod and a number of congregations asked that guidance be given by the Commission on Constitutional Matters (CCM) to congregations desiring to incorporate into their constitutions and bylaws the provisions adopted in Resolution 2–17. In 1970 the CCM issued “Suggestions for Congregational Constitutions or Bylaws Regarding the Privileges of Women (Voting and Holding Office).”<sup>13</sup> Restricting itself to the position taken by the Synod (“*de iure humano* rather than *de iure divino*, by human right rather than divine right”), and assuming that the Synod “may further define its position in the future, thereby making it necessary perhaps to refine the suggestions being offered herewith,” the CCM offered a sample constitutional paragraph under the title “Privileges of Women.” This paragraph allows, in addition to franchise, that women may “serve as officers and as members of boards and committees as long as these positions are not directly

<sup>12</sup> 1969 Resolution 2–17 “To Grant Woman Suffrage and Board Membership,” *Convention Proceedings*, 88–89.

<sup>13</sup> See 1971 *Convention Workbook*, 244.

involved in the specific functions of the pastoral office (preaching, the public administration of the sacraments, church discipline) and as long as this service does not violate the order of creation (usurping authority over men).” The paragraph then concludes (footnotes bracketed): “Accordingly, they shall not serve as pastor, as a member of [Here shall be listed the board of elders or corresponding board directly involved in the functions of the pastoral office.], as chairman or vice-chairman of the congregation, or as chairman of [Here the congregation may list at its discretion those major policy and decision-making boards or standing committees, if any, whose chairmanship the congregation may wish to restrict to men.].” The Synod affirmed this position as stated in the CCM opinion in 1981<sup>14</sup> and again in 1986.<sup>15</sup>

In response to inquiries regarding the eligibility of women for service in congregational offices, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations addressed itself briefly to this matter in its 1985 report on *Women in the Church: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice*. The Commission replied to the question “May women hold office in a congregation, serve on committees of the congregation, chair committees of the congregation?” by stating the following:

Women may hold any office and serve on any committee of the congregation which enhances the work of the priesthood of all believers. Women also have the privilege to chair congregational committees, since a “chair” does not “have authority over men” any more than the committee *per se* would have such authority in the New Testament sense. The only stricture would have to do with anyone whose official functions would involve public accountability for the function of the pastoral office (e.g., elders, and possibly the chairman of the congregation). The tasks of the elders in a congregation are often directly associated with the pastoral office and the public administration of the office of the keys. As stated in the introductory paragraph to this section, everything depends on the nature of functions assigned to various offices established by the church.

The same general position outlined above applies to various district or synodical committees and commissions. Affairs of the church have never been assigned only to those holding the office of the public ministry. Women offer valuable contributions to the work of such committees, boards, and commissions.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> 1981 Resolution 3–11 “To Urge Completion of Study on Women’s Role in the Church,” *Convention Proceedings*, 158.

<sup>15</sup> 1986 Resolution 3–09 “To Reaffirm Position of LCMS on Service of Women in the Church,” *Convention Proceedings*, 144.

<sup>16</sup> *Women in the Church*, 46.

Taking into account its previously stated positions, the CTCR's counsel, and questions and concerns raised about the eligibility of women for service in congregational offices, the Synod at its 1989 convention adopted Resolution 3-13A "To Study and Clarify Services of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices." The Synod specifically asked "that the CTCR, in consultation with the Council of Presidents, prepare a study on the eligibility of women for service in all offices of the congregation, including that of chairman, vice-chairman, and elder and district and synodical boards and commissions where their official function would in effect involve public accountability for the function(ing) of the pastoral office."<sup>17</sup>

Adopted by the CTCR on November 16, 1994

<sup>17</sup> 1989 *Convention Proceedings*, 188.



# GUIDELINES FOR THE SERVICE OF WOMEN IN CONGREGATIONAL OFFICES

## Background

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, at its 62nd Regular Convention (July 10–15, 2004) adopted a resolution which affirms its understanding that the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions permit women to hold all humanly established congregational and synodical offices, so long as these offices do not call upon the holders of these offices to “perform those functions that are distinctive to the public exercise of the ministry of Word and Sacraments” or to carry out “official functions [that] would involve public accountability for the function of the pastoral office.”<sup>1</sup> This decision was based on a report issued by the Synod’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) in 1994 and which the Synod had commended for study throughout the Synod at its 1995 convention.<sup>2</sup>

Following the 2004 convention, President Gerald Kieschnick appointed a task force made up of two representatives from the CTCR, two representatives from the Commission on Constitutional Matters, and one District President to prepare “guidelines for congregations and District constitutional committees to follow in revising congregational constitutions and bylaws to permit women to hold all congregational offices so long as their assigned responsibilities do not include distinctive functions of the pastoral office.”

In response to this assignment the task force offers the following guidelines and recommendations which summarize the actions and statements previously adopted by the Synod which present its understanding of what the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions teach about the service of women in the church.

<sup>1</sup> 2004 Resolution 3–08A “To Affirm the Conclusions of the 1994 CTCR Report *The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices*,” *Convention Proceedings*, 132–33.

<sup>2</sup> 1995 Resolution 3–06A “To Continue to Study *The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices* in Light of ‘Dissenting Report’ and Other Ongoing Studies by the CTCR on the Role of Women in the Church,” *Convention Proceedings*, 120.

## Scriptural and Confessional Basis

The conclusions of the CTCR's report *The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices*, affirmed by the Synod, are based on the following principles presented in the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions:

1. The Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions teach that the office of the public ministry (pastoral office) is the only divinely established office in the church (Matt. 28:18–20; John 20:22–23; Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 12:28–29; Eph. 4:11; 1 Peter 5:1; Titus 1:5; AC XIV; Ap XIII; Treatise 67–72;<sup>3</sup> see also 1969 Res. 2–17).
2. The Holy Scriptures teach that women are not to hold the office of the public ministry (pastoral office) or to perform those functions (see 4 below) that are distinctive to the public exercise of the ministry of Word and Sacraments, nor are they to carry out official functions [that] would involve public accountability for the functions of the pastoral office (1 Corinthians 14; 1 Timothy 2).<sup>4</sup>
3. The Augsburg Confession states that “according to the Gospel the power of the keys or the power of bishops [pastors] is a power and command of God to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer and distribute the sacraments” (AC XXVIII, 5; cf. 8–9, 21 etc.).<sup>5</sup>
4. Neither the Scriptures nor the Lutheran Confessions provide a detailed list of the activities required of pastors in the congregations they “are called to serve.” Intrinsic to this office, however, are the following functions: “1) preaching in the services of the congregation; 2) leading the formal public services of worship; 3) the public administration of the sacraments; and 4) the public administration of the office of the keys.”<sup>6</sup>
5. The Synod, based on its understanding of what the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions teach, has adopted resolutions which permit women to vote in congregational assemblies (without any limitations on the matters on which they may vote) and to read the Scriptures in public worship services, thereby indicating that these activities are not distinctive functions of the pastoral office nor do they constitute “official functions [that] would involve public accountability for the function of the pastoral office.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *The Service of Women*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> See 1969 Resolution 2-17 “To Grant Woman Suffrage and Board Membership” (*Convention Proceedings*, 88–89) and 1989 Resolution 3-14 “To Address Appropriate Roles for Women and Men in Worship,” (*Convention Proceedings*, 118).

## Sample Paragraph for Congregational Constitutions

In light of the above understanding of what the Scriptures teach about the service of women, the task force has prepared the following sample paragraph for inclusion in the constitutions of LCMS congregations *that wish to permit* women to hold all congregational offices that are not directly involved in carrying out specific functions of the pastoral office or in public accountability for the functioning of this office:

*Women who have reached the age of \_\_\_(1)\_\_\_ may serve as officers and as members of all boards and committees of this congregation which do not call upon them to carry out the specific functions of the pastoral office (preaching in or serving as the leader of the public worship service, the public administration of the sacraments, the public exercise of church discipline.) Accordingly, a woman shall not serve as pastor of this congregation or as \_\_\_\_\_(2)\_\_\_\_\_.*

(1) The age given shall be at the least the required age established by state law of not-for-profit organizations.

(2) Here shall be listed those positions or offices which call for their holders to carry out the specific functions of the pastoral office as listed in this sample paragraph.

## Recommendations

The task force encourages congregations to take into account the following recommendations made by the Synod itself in its officially adopted resolutions and by the CTCR in its opinions as they consider changes to their constitutions:

1. That the term “elder,” in view of the use of this term in the Scriptures, in the history of the church, and in the Synod’s history, be reserved for that humanly instituted office in the congregation which has as its assigned duty the assisting of the pastor in the public exercise of the distinctive functions of this office.<sup>8</sup>
2. That lay assistance in the distribution of the elements in the celebration of Holy Communion, in order “to avoid confusion regarding the office of the public ministry and to avoid giving offense to the church,” be limited to lay men.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *The Service of Women*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> 1989 Resolution 3–10 “To Address Practice of Women Serving Holy Communion,” *Convention Proceedings*, 116.

3. That, while situations exist in which the service of women in leadership positions in the congregation is desirable or even necessary, men be encouraged to continue to exercise leadership in their congregations even as they are encouraged to exercise their God-given leadership in a God-pleasing manner in their homes.<sup>10</sup>

## A Concluding Word

When the Synod in 1969 concluded that nothing in the Scriptures prohibits women from exercising the franchise in the congregation, it also recognized the need to promote and facilitate “cautious and deliberate action in the spirit of Christian love”<sup>11</sup> (Res. 2–17). Similarly, 2004 Resolution 3–08A includes a final resolve which states:

That the members of the Synod considering changes regarding the service of women in congregational offices consult with neighboring congregations, recognizing that in matters of Christian liberty, Christians are called, above all, to do what edifies the church, respecting the consciences of others.<sup>12</sup>

“The consciences of others” must be a primary concern when congregations consider changes that may impact the life of fellow Christians in neighboring congregations. The service of women in leadership positions is one such change. Particularly on the circuit level, members of congregations may be aware of what is happening in neighboring congregations, and officers of congregations may have occasion to meet and work together.

At the same time, it should be pointed out that 1977 Res. 3–06 “To Commend Task Force on Women and Continue to Study Role of Women in the Church” recommends

That the whole church be encouraged to sensitize itself to the needs and concerns of women, to recognize the gifts that women are and can be in the mission of the church, and to utilize fully *all* the people of God as the church carries out its witness and ministry in the world.<sup>13</sup>

To utilize fully all the people of God remains the interest of the Synod, also in the adoption of 2004 Res. 3–08A. But this desire exists side by side with the Synod’s interest in heeding the clear teachings of the Scriptures regarding the office of the public ministry, as well as its expectations regarding the respective roles of men and women.

<sup>10</sup> See CTCR opinion on “The Service of Women in Congregational Offices of Executive Director/President or Assistant Director/Vice President” in response to a request from the Minnesota South District, 29.

<sup>11</sup> 1969 Resolution 2-17.

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix A, 25.

<sup>13</sup> 1997 *Convention Proceedings*, 129.

As congregations consider changes to their constitutions, therefore, care must be taken that the teachings of the Scriptures are not obscured by how a congregation understands “official functions” and “public accountability” in its corresponding practice. To address these and other issues, 2004 Res. 3–08A encourages the members of the Synod who are contemplating change, and those who will be affected by such changes, to consult with neighboring congregations (congregations in their own circuit, in neighboring circuits, etc.), lest unnecessary offense be given. Likewise, when congregations choose to change their constitutions in conformity with this resolution of the Synod, these decisions should be respected and honored by those congregations which decide not to implement the conclusions of the CTCR Report.

We conclude these guidelines with the “Word of Encouragement” with which the CTCR concludes its report *The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices*:

The biblical restraints regarding the service of women in the church and the authority of the pastoral office need not become the only, or even predominant, word we speak to one another. To speak of the “eligibility” of the service of women in congregational and synodical offices might give the impression to some that our primary concern in the contemporary church is to discourage women from exercising the privileges and responsibilities they hold as members of the priesthood of believers. Men and women alike, however, need to help one another, first of all, to see that God’s Word itself provides standards of “eligibility” for service in offices of the church, and it does so without any diminution of the value of persons. But just as important, God’s people must be instruments of daily encouragement to one another and help each other to discover and appreciate the joys of Christian service. All of us would do well to emulate the apostle Paul’s example in giving words of support and commendation to fellow workers in the church of God.<sup>14</sup>

### **Members of the Task Force**

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**Loren T. Kramer**, Chairman, Commission on Theology and Church Relations

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<sup>14</sup> *The Service of Women*, 14.

# APPENDIX A

## To Affirm the Conclusions of the 1994 CTCR Report: *The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices* \*

### RESOLUTION 3-08A

Overtures 3-88, 3-98-100 (CW, pp. 191, 194-195)

WHEREAS, The Synod at its 1969 convention declared, “those statements of Scripture which direct women to keep silent in the church and which prohibit them to teach and to exercise authority over men, we understand to mean that women ought not to hold the pastoral office or serve in any other capacity involving the distinctive functions of this office” (1969 Res. 2-17); and

WHEREAS, The Commission on Constitutional Matters (CCM) in 1970 issued an opinion (“by human right rather than divine right”) which has been reaffirmed by the Synod at subsequent conventions that a woman “shall not serve . . ., as chairman or vice-chairman of the congregation”; and

WHEREAS, The CCM, in this opinion, indicated that the Synod “may further define its position in the future”; and

WHEREAS, The Synod at its 1989 convention requested “that the CTCR, in consultation with the Council of Presidents, prepare a study on the eligibility of women for service in all offices of the congregation, including that of chairman, vice-chairman, and elder and District and synodical boards and commissions where their official function would in effect involve public accountability for the function(ing) of the pastoral office” (Res. 3-13A, *Proceedings*, p. 118); and

WHEREAS, The Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) completed its 1994 report on *The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices*, in which the Commission concluded on the basis of the Scriptures that women may not “assume responsibility for or carry out in behalf of the congregation (that is, ‘publicly’), and in the stead of Christ, those functions in the local congregation that would involve them in the exercise of authority inherent in this authoritative public teaching office in the church [pastoral office]”; and

WHEREAS, This 1994 report also stated that “these considerations imply and even require, that in determining the eligibility of women for

\* 2004 *Convention Proceedings*, 132-33.

services in all congregational, District, and synodical offices, attention be given to the functions attached to a given office. As the Commission stated in the 1985 report on *Women in the Church*, 'For other offices [other than the office of public ministry of Word and sacraments] we have no express "thus saith the Lord" and everything depends on the functions assigned to these offices"; and

WHEREAS, The Commission on Theology and Church Relations has stated in a recent (April 2004) opinion requested by the Minnesota South District that "the Scriptures clearly teach that God has given the pastoral office and the exercise of pastoral authority to men and not to women" and that "Scripture does not prohibit women who possess the requisite gifts from holding these humanly-established offices, assuming that the occupants of these offices do not 'perform those functions that are distinctive to the public exercise of the ministry of Word and sacraments,' or carry out 'official functions [that] would involve public accountability for the function of the pastoral office"; and

WHEREAS, The Commission in this same opinion counseled that congregations, in filling these offices, keep in mind the family structure and encourage "men not to neglect their leadership responsibilities in their congregations. Since the church encourages husbands to exercise their God-given headship in a God-pleasing way at home"; therefore be it

*Resolved*, That the CTCR be commended for its work in this area; and be it further

*Resolved*, That the Synod affirm that women on the basis of the clear teaching of Scripture may not serve in the office of pastor nor exercise any of its distinctive functions, and that women may serve in humanly established offices in the church as long as the functions of these offices do not make them eligible to carry out "official functions [that] would involve public accountability for the function of the pastoral office"; and be it further

*Resolved*, That the Synod urge the members of the Synod, in making decisions regarding which offices women may hold, to bear in mind the CTCR's counsel that congregations organize "themselves in ways that complement and reinforce the family, for the church is the 'household of God' (1 Tim. 3:15)"; and be it further

*Resolved*, That the Synod encourage men not to neglect their leadership responsibilities in their congregations; and be it finally

*Resolved*, That the members of the Synod considering changes regarding the service of women in congregational offices consult with neighboring LCMS congregations, recognizing that in matters of Christian liberty, Christians are called, above all, to do what edifies the church, respecting the consciences of others.

**Action:** Adopted (10)

(As discussion began, a substitute resolution, the text of Overture 3–97 (CW, p. 194) was introduced but failed to be accepted for consideration. During extended discussion, an amendment was offered to strike all words in the second resolve after the word *church* and replace with *except congregation elders, congregation presidents, and communion assistants*. After the chair ruled that this amendment constituted a substitute motion, the motion failed [Yes: 472; No: 605]. After debate was ended but prior to the vote on the main motion, a request that the following response from the Executive Director of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations be recorded in the minutes was granted: “According to these guidelines, this resolution does not give permission to women to preach in our Synod’s congregations.” The resolution was adopted as presented [Yes: 576; No: 520]. A following motion to allow delegates to record their negative votes also carried [Yes: 639; No: 348].)



**APPENDIX B**

**THE SERVICE OF WOMEN  
IN CONGREGATIONAL OFFICES  
OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR/PRESIDENT  
OR ASSISTANT DIRECTOR/VICE PRESIDENT<sup>1</sup>**

**Introduction**

In response to a request from the Synod in 1989 (Res. 3–13A “To Study and Clarify Services of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices”), the CTCR in 1994 adopted a report titled *The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices*. A dissenting opinion to this 1994 report was issued and signed by five members of the CTCR, and the CTCR Executive Committee then issued a response to the dissenting opinion.

The Commission has been requested by the Minnesota South District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to make a recommendation to the Synod regarding “the appropriateness of women serving as Executive Director or President or Assistant Director or Vice President of congregations.” Our intent is not to rehearse the contents of the reports and documents referred to above. They are available in the 1995 *Convention Workbook*. Rather, our intent is to offer the congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod some further reflections for consideration as they make their decisions regarding the service of women in congregational offices.

We reaffirm the two key emphases made in the 1994 report *The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices*. First, the Scriptures clearly teach that both men and women have been baptized into the one Christ and into His one body, the church (Gal. 3:18). Christ did not create a separate men’s church or a separate women’s church. All the rights, privileges and responsibilities given by Christ to His church on earth belong to the members of His church, both Jew and Greek, both slave and free, and both

<sup>1</sup> This opinion, adopted by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations on April 21, 2004, will be included in the Commission’s report to the 2007 convention and, together with a minority opinion, is available online at [www.lcms.org/ctcr](http://www.lcms.org/ctcr).

male and female. This means that all members, both male and female, should fully participate in the everyday life of their congregation, Christ's church in that place.

Second, "we must remain faithful to biblical teaching regarding the uniqueness of God's gift of the pastoral office, and the divinely given requirements which circumscribe it."<sup>2</sup> The Scriptures clearly teach that God has given the pastoral office and the exercise of pastoral authority to men and not to women. For over nineteen centuries Christendom has recognized this truth. Only during the twentieth century in the West have some Protestant church bodies contradicted this truth and ordained women. While the scriptural restriction may contradict the prevailing winds of the egalitarian *Zeitgeist* [spirit of the time], the church belongs to Jesus Christ and not to the world. Therefore, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod by the strength of God intends to remain faithful to God's holy Word even when it contradicts public opinion.

## Edifying Decisions in Matters of Adiaphora

Congregational polity is an *adiaphoron*, neither commanded nor forbidden in Holy Scripture. The New Testament is not an encyclopedia that answers all possible questions. One cannot expect these ancient documents to address the polity questions that arise 2000 years later. In fact, the New Testament does not give any mandates regarding the polity of a congregation or Synod. How a congregation sets up its daily working arrangements and organizational structure is left to the discretion of human reason and sanctified common sense. How many committees it has and how each committee operates are matters that belong to the area of Christian freedom.

But to say that polity is an *adiaphoron* is only the beginning of the discussion. For then the church has the difficult task of determining what would be wise and edifying for the church. In matters of *adiaphora*—things neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture—the church's arrangements should support and reinforce the scriptural teaching. Even regarding matters of polity, which are *adiaphora*, there should be a concern to support and reinforce the church's God-given doctrine and practice. For example, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod requires an equitable distribution between lay delegates and pastoral delegates at synodical conventions. Why? In order to support and reinforce the church's doctrine regarding both the priesthood of all believers and the pastoral office.

Therefore, a key question is this: What type of polity and organizational structure will support and reinforce doctrine and practice as taught by the Scriptures?

<sup>2</sup> *The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices*, 8.

## Supporting the God-Given Family Structure

In addressing the above question one consideration deserves attention. The congregation's polity should uphold the God-given family structure. It should not in effect subvert it, whether intentionally or unintentionally, by setting up a completely egalitarian arrangement that makes no distinction between husbands and wives. Instead it should reflect and reinforce the family structure.

The New Testament frequently encourages the church to strengthen the God-given family structure (See e.g., 1 Corinthians 7; 11; 14; Ephesians 5; Colossians 3; 1 Timothy 2; 1 Peter 3). In the first century there were various winds blowing in the *Zeitgeist*, such as asceticism, licentiousness, proto-gnosticism, over-realized eschatology, and others. The upshot of it all was the temptation to devalue the institutions of marriage and the family. To these temptations the apostles spoke. They reminded their Christian readers that the Gospel of Christ gives them freedom from sin so that they may serve within the Creator's design for His human creatures. The Gospel does not deliver people from the Creator's intent but for a joyful life within it. The Creator designed and established marriage and the family. These institutions are good gifts from God, to be received with thanksgiving (1 Timothy 4).

There is great significance in the creation of Adam and Eve recorded in Genesis 2 and in the other scriptural texts dealing with creation (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:8–12). The Creator expressed His intent and design for all future "Adams and Eves" precisely by the way in which He created the first Adam and Eve. Unlike the animals, Eve was created to be a helper fit for and corresponding to Adam. Therefore the wife is not inferior to her husband but co-equal. The two become one flesh. Moreover, God created Adam first and then Eve, and He created Eve from Adam and for Adam. Thereby the Creator revealed His design for the marriage relationship. The husband serves as the head and the wife submits herself to her husband.

As Ephesians 5 shows, the Gospel does not destroy this created design but rather purifies it of sinful distortion. Therefore, the Christian husband exercises his headship in self-sacrificial love for his wife as Christ did for the church, and the Christian wife willingly and gladly submits herself to her husband as the church does to Christ.

We live in a society where the traditional view of marriage is increasingly under attack. Large segments of our culture dismiss and even ridicule notions such as these: (1) the Creator created Adam and Eve as Genesis 2 records; (2) thereby the Creator revealed His design for marriage and for all future husbands and wives; and (3) the Creator's intended design is that a husband be the head of his wife and that his wife willingly subordinate her own will under her husband. Especially in our cultural context a congregation should be concerned about what its polity says and in what way its polity supports the church's teaching.

## Congregational Offices of Director/President and Assistant Director/Vice President

There is no “Thus saith the Lord” regarding positions such as executive director/president and assistant director/vice president. These are offices established by the church in Christian freedom. Scripture does not prohibit women who possess the requisite gifts from holding these humanly-established offices, assuming that the occupants of these offices do not “perform those functions that are distinctive to the public exercise of the ministry of Word and sacrament,”<sup>3</sup> or carry out “official functions [that] would involve public accountability for the function of the pastoral office.”<sup>4</sup> In filling these offices the congregation should take into account, among other things, the aforementioned family structure. Further, the Commission encourages men not to neglect their leadership responsibilities in their congregations. Since the church encourages husbands to exercise their God-given headship in a God-pleasing way at home, the church should correspondingly encourage men to exercise leadership in their congregation. Congregations are encouraged to organize themselves in ways that complement and reinforce the family, for the church is “the household of God” (1 Tim. 3:15).

## The Service of All

The Commission further recommends that congregations encourage all their members (male and female, single or married) to exercise their God-given responsibilities of service and leadership in their congregations.

## Conclusion

It is the prayer of the Commission that these brief reflections will serve the congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as they deliberate on issues of polity. May all of our decisions, even in matters of *adiaphora*, serve God’s will and the work of His church.

Adopted by the CTCR on April 21, 2004

<sup>3</sup> *The Service of Women*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Report of the CTCR on *Women in the Church: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice*, 46.



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