

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Self-Governing, Not Autonomous



LIFELINES

by Rev. Dr. Gerhard Michael Jr.
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This month I have chosen the title "Self-Governing, Not Autonomous" for my column because I want to highlight a significant challenge for us in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. It's the challenge of how we can help the congregations of our church body work together for our common mission. It's a concern that fits in nicely with the portion of the church year in which we find ourselves.

Discipleship is about letting Jesus be the Lord of our lives. Our role is to follow, not to control God or make him our servant.



Leaving the Epiphany season, we enter Lent, that time when we especially focus on what it means to let Jesus be our leader. Self-denial is to characterize our lives. After all, our leader headed to the cross, the ultimate in self-giving, fully obedient to the Father's will. He went there that we might be freed from our insatiable drive to be in control, to be independent, to have matters our own way. He went to the cross, so that we might be freed to live for others, to go God's way and do his thing. Where does autonomy fit into such a scheme?

Interestingly, our Synodical constitution in effect rules out autonomy when it writes in Article II, "The Synod, and every member of the Synod, accepts without reservation: 1. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice." (emphasis added) With such a starting point, neither we nor our congregations are free to do whatever we wish. Our decisions must be in-

Interestingly, Article VII of Synod's Constitution has this to say about the "Relation of the Synod to Its Members: 1. In its relation to its members the Synod is not an ecclesiastical government exercising legislative or coercive powers, and with respect to the individual congregation's right of self-government it is but an advisory

congregations are not meant to be "islands" set apart and separated from other congregations, with each one doing its own thing. The very nature of the church, characterized by faith in the one Lord Jesus Christ, drives us to look for other Christians, to be concerned for their well-being, and to team up with them for our common

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body. Accordingly, no resolution of the Synod imposing anything upon the individual congregation is of binding force if it is not in accordance with the Word of God or if it appears to be inexpedient as far as the condition of a congregation is concerned."

Behind that article lies a lot of wisdom, in my opinion. Although I do not consider myself a constitutional expert by any stretch of the imagination, I sense that our Synodical fathers recognized that a healthy evangelical Lutheran congregation does not want to be independent, autonomous, because it desires to follow its Lord and Savior in its teaching and practice.

At the same time it does not want an organization dictating to it how to organize or carry out its mission. Contexts can influence how a church should carry out its ministry. Submission to Jesus' lordship asks for freedom to exercise one's faith in the most appropriate way in one's setting.

Let me give you an obvious example. The national church body may decide to conduct its business in English. Your congregation is Hispanic. Should the national body's use of English dictate to you that your congregation has to conduct its business in English when Spanish is your native tongue? That would just not make sense! Following the lordship of Jesus, wishing to be faithful to him, suggests that freedom for responsible decision-making should be granted to the local congregation.



Having the "right of self-governance," however, does not translate into each congregation doing its own thing. In view of our varying contexts, we will likely end up with some varying practices from time to time. One congregation may utilize very traditional worship forms; another may develop quite contemporary forms. A small rural congregation may make its decisions informally like a family; a large urban congregation may utilize a highly streamlined corporate model. Such diversity is not precluded by our common membership in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. In fact, letting Jesus' lordship guide us may lead us to differing practices!

What would be forbidden in our worship, whether traditional or contemporary, however, would be teaching that is not in keeping with our Scriptural Lutheran teaching. Freedom exists, but it is freedom circumscribed by the Scripture.

Further, our common faith in Jesus Christ suggests that we should work together for the common good. Our

work of reaching the lost for Jesus Christ.

The tremendous missionary opportunities before us in our District — whether reaching out to the growing elderly or youth populations, responding to the variety of ethnic groups in our region, or equipping our people for their individual witnessing — call for us to work together that the challenges before us do not intimidate us, but rather stimulate us to respond!

Of course, creating a sense of partnership does not happen automatically, especially in a denomination which has prided itself on its congregational polity. One writer has suggested that rather than the image of a train with its cars coupled together, all going down the same track with a single engineer driving the train, a denomination like ours is more like a group of wagons crossing the prairie. Each individual driver and his family needs to be convinced of the wisdom of traveling together in the same direction. It's decision-making by cultivating relationships, using gentle persuasion, recognizing differences, and developing consensus rather than by one individual unilaterally dictating what should be done! When such cooperation is gained, though, the commitment to travel together is often deeper and stronger!

During 2005, we have a great opportunity to develop our sense of "Synod" (walking together) in the Florida-Georgia District. This is the year of the Circuit Convocation. Each of our circuits is being encouraged to plan events for the congregations of their circuits — to come together for fellowship, education, mission planning, and inspiration. It is the hope that these gatherings will help us counter the independence we come by naturally due to our sinful condition and foster instead the joy of working together to build up one another and extend the Lord's gracious reign in our midst.

As we become aware of the various Circuit Convocations, we are posting them on the District website. I encourage you to go to <http://www.flga.lcms.org> to learn where the meetings will be held in your area.

Discover what TEAM means: Together Everyone Achieves More (an emphasis of Synod's Mission Department), or what the Scriptural picture suggests: "a three fold cord is not quickly broken" (See Ecclesiastes 4:9-12.). In the cable of the Christian church with each of us wound around the Lord Jesus and bound to each other is real strength for ministry!

-gcm

Discipleship is not about autonomy. Discipleship is about letting Jesus be the Lord of our lives. Our role is to follow, not to control God or make Him our servant.

We have just concluded the Epiphany season. In this season the Voice from heaven clearly identified Jesus at his baptism as "the Son of God." (Matt. 3:17) At his transfiguration, the same heavenly Voice expressed the very same words, but added the clear exhortation, "Listen to him." (Matt. 17:5)

Another key incident in the unfolding Gospel of that season had the beloved Son announcing that the "the kingdom of God was at hand," and then issued the unequivocal instruction, "Follow me." (Matt. 4:17,19)

Make no mistake about it, discipleship is not about autonomy.

formed and determined by the wisdom of God's Word. By our subscription to the Word, we are saying forthrightly, "We want God's way to prevail among us. We do not want to be independent!"

The New Testament makes quite clear, in my opinion, that the Lord's way is incorporation into the church. Jesus calls us into fellowship with himself. We are baptized not only into him but into his body. The Lord's Supper is a corporate meal. We take altar fellowship seriously! The wisdom of the Scripture counters individualism and self-centeredness.

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