



## 104th Michigan District Convention 2025 President's Address | Rev. David A. Davis People of Hope: What Sort of Christians Are We?

People of Hope: We celebrate Jesus: incarnate, crucified, risen, reigning, returning. We share Jesus: incarnate, crucified, risen, reigning, returning. We fix our eyes on Jesus: incarnate, crucified, risen, reigning, returning.

Can I say, this has been a cool opportunity to serve you as District President? That is not to say it has always been fun and certainly not easy. I appreciate the opportunity to serve Jesus and his people, you, in this way ... of course it is up to you to determine how long I might do that.

Thank you for your kindness, support, patience, prayers, suggestions, and where necessary (staff- VPs) your good-sported-ness.

In this time together, I want to address what I believe to be a pressing issue in our circles generally and, since this is us, in our District specifically. I will assume that you have read my report to the District printed in [Workbook II](#), even if you did not also mark, learn, and inwardly digest it. So, in these few moments together here I will not turn our attention to the topics contained there.

**The heart of this address is not specifically about Concordia** and issues surrounding it. Although there is tangential connection. I will say we certainly grieve and are disappointed about what happened and how. We grieve not only about what has happened, but about the future that now cannot happen. Many people's concerns about and discouragement with our life together as Synod have adhered to this issue. Over the next couple of days, delegates will have opportunity to speak into the situation forthrightly and in love through a number of resolutions that address the situation. At the same time, in our final Michigan District Convention here at Concordia, we intend to celebrate the good things that have taken place on this campus, we will do so with great thankfulness. Through it all, we are Christians. We believe our God is almighty and works all things together for good for those who love him. In spite of what is loss, we are already moving ahead to expand campus ministry in other sites across the state and have taken initial steps to develop a vocational ministry that you will hear about later in the convention. But Concordia is not the main issue I want to address.

**The issue is not theology** either, at least not directly. In my attendance at lots of Winkel meetings, dozens of worship services, and countless conversations with pastors, I am encouraged about the theological unity that we enjoy across the board. I continue to find solid Biblical, Confessional teaching throughout my travels.

**The issue is not worship**, although there are issues there we could talk about. We continue to struggle with the right way to worship, with which rites, and how many rites. New. Old. Traditional. Today. This preference. That preference.

**The issue is not bureaucracy**, although that is an issue that needs addressing. Every organization needs a structure. A body without a skeleton is a blob. But as is said, if your skeleton is showing, you're not well. Through the accretion of time and accumulation of convention actions our Synodical structure and its intricacies can only be fully grasped by a few and is barely grasped by most. That's an issue.

All that being said, **the issue I do want to address is our character, our ethic.** This is not about who we are. We are Christians washed by the blood of the Lamb, saved by grace through faith. This is not about whose we are. We are children of the most high God. Our identity is in Christ. The issue I want to consider is “how” we are, what sorts of Christians are we, our character, the ancients termed this ethos, ethic. What sort are we—or need to be—or need to be more so? We will consider three points, which if all is going well should sound somewhat familiar, along this theme: what sort of Christians are we going to be?

### **We are the sort of Christians who read our Bible.**

We read it daily. We read it thoroughly. We read all of it, from beginning to end, even if not in that order. We believe, teach, and confess that the Bible is the sole source and norm for our teaching and believing, and living. It is the norma normans, the norm that norms everything else we think, say and do.

We read our Bible because in it we meet Jesus. John 14: *“If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”* John 8: *“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, you will know the truth and the truth will set us free.”* John 5 *“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life and it is they that testify about me.”* Colossians 3: *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.”* Words are the building blocks of every relationship. Reading the Bible, being in the Word, in a sense is more about relationship with Jesus than it is doctrinal formulations.

We read our Bible because through it we have power, the power of God. When God speaks, things happen. He, His Word, spoke the universe into existence. That same power is unleashed when we are reading His word. Isaiah records, *“My word will not return to me void.”* The book of Hebrews explains, *“The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword.”*

We read our Bible and are humbled. We see the greatness of God and His grace and His Kingdom. We learn to own the mystery, revealed but never fully comprehended, that is the Triune God. We are humbled by the Creator’s love for his creatures. From Romans, *“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?”* Or like Paul says in I Corinthians, *“Now we see through a glass darkly.”*

We read our Bible and are motivated to tell. We learn the ways of the King and His kingdom. The magnificence. The grace. The wisdom. The hope. The promises. And in so doing, become like Peter and John, *“We cannot but speak about what we have seen and heard.”*

We read our Bible and are “reminded.” One of the key themes of our Convention is “remember.” When we remember, we are literally re-mind-ed. We get a new or refreshed mind. This is actually at the heart of repentance—in Greek—metanoia—it is changed mind. We think like Jesus.

We grow in Christ through the Word preached from the pulpit and studied in groups. And yet at the center of Lutheran heritage is personal Bible reading. As they say, *“I can’t read your Bible for you.”* Thanks, Dr. Luther. Thanks, Mr. Gutenberg. What sort of Christians are we? We are the sort who read our Bibles and there meet Jesus.

### **Second, we are also the sort of Christians who love one another.**

A big part of this Convention is to be renewed in that. To be here together, spending time with each other, learning from and about one another. We are here together to love one another.

Of course, this is central to a Christian ethos. I John *“God is love. We love because he first loved us. If God so loved us, we ought to love one another.”* John 13 Jesus said, *“All men will know you are my disciples if your love one another.”*

What do you think about this definition of love, the agape kind? Love is to be fiercely committed to the well-being of another no matter what the cost. Isn't that how God loved us, so much so that He poured out the precious blood of His Son Jesus to purchase us back from the power of the Devil? We are His pearl of great price—He spared no expense or effort.

This is the sort of love we are to have toward one another: to be fiercely committed to the well-being of one another, no matter what the cost. In the family. In the congregation. At work. With actual neighbors. With strangers. In the District. In the Synod.

Now, of course, just because such love is definable and a good thing, it doesn't mean it comes easily. While all the people we see are people for whom Christ died, are loved by God, and are to be loved by us, they are still people. Like us. Sinners. Messy. People with faults and foibles. People with different perspectives and opinions. People who do not always think just like we think, or like the same things we like. It can be hard to love one another. But let's be the sort of people who do.

From a District-wide and Synod-wide standpoint, there are three things that can help us.

For love to flourish we should respect our creaturely nature, that is, that we are all unique. Let's expect and celebrate some variation. Let's expect that not everything will be the same and not everyone will be doing all of the same things across our congregations. *We need to find unity in less, not more.* We are united in Scripture—norma normans. We are united in the Confessions—norma normata. More than that becomes increasingly problematic and finally untenable. We have to come to terms with the reality that not everyone has the same tastes, preferences. People have different tastes in food. People have different tastes in art. People have different tastes in music. Some prefer more traditional things. Good. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Some have more appreciation for the new. That's good too. God is making all things new. Expecting variation in others helps the cause of love.

As signaled at the beginning of this address, for love to flourish in our circles we need to address the complexity of our “official” relationships with one another through the Synod's constitution and bylaws. The structure is too complex and inadvertently makes for a focus on rule-keeping and rule-breaking. Did you know that the Constitution and Bylaws are almost 250 pages? There are over 900 pages in the Council of Presidents Manual. A shorter, but still lengthy Circuit Visitors Manual exists. Certainly, we want things done decently and in order, but our relationship as Synod is to buttress ministry in our congregations and their settings, not to stifle the work of the Spirit or bind consciences of people. By having a system that only a few fully understand and from which all can find some transgression, the system breeds cynicism, suspicion, apathy, and sadly, lovelessness. For the sake of loving one another within our fellowship we need a simpler system that enfolds the key operating system: love.

And for love to flourish we need to be together. Or like is said, to be together you have to get together. That actually is a strength our Synod has. Our congregations provide a chance to get together every Sunday and other times during the week: face to face. Our pastors gather every month for their Winkel Conferences: face to face. This past year, nearly all of our Circuits met for area-wide Convocations, gatherings of brothers and sisters from nearby congregations: face to face. Because of your financial support of the District, we held more than 40 conferences last year. People face-to-face. And of course, that is just what we are doing here. We aren't texting

each other. We aren't Facebooking each other. We aren't Zooming. Here we are: face to face. Like John wrote, *"Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete."* We are going to worship together. We are going to eat together. We are going to think together. We are going to ... be together. Love flourishes through proximity.

What sort of Christians are we? We are the sort who love one another.

**And finally, we are the sort of Christians who work hard for the King and His Kingdom.**

Or as the Detroit Lions might say, we work with grit.

We are saved by grace, freely given to us through faith, but God worked hard to provide it for us. Think about the whole story, plan, tenaciousness of God's salvation for us in Christ. Talk about grit. The fall. The flood. The patriarchs. The Exodus. The Judges. The Kings. The Captivity. But God remained steadfast and, at just the right time, sent His Son. Who, like Father like Son, remained steadfast in His work, service, ministry even to the point of death, death on the cross.

Now, He sends us out as His ambassadors with His Spirit, which is a tenacious Spirit. Like our Father, don't we too want all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth? Well, like He worked hard to save us, we need to work hard to extend that same grace to others.

Trust me, I know full well how difficult it is to "be the Church," to live as a congregation, to engage a community. It's hard work. But that's the sort of people we are. Filled with the Spirit, buoyed by our hope in Christ, and together as we love one another, we work to be used of God to extend His reign in the hearts of others.

Think about the hard work of others that has brought us here. Someone started the 340+ congregations we represent. Someone worked hard, probably a few, to guide you in the way you should go, the way of Jesus. Someone worked hard to recruit and train our pastors, teachers, and other commissioned workers. Someone worked hard to gain the foothold for the Gospel from which we work. Someone worked hard to establish and maintain Concordia.

While each generation faces different challenges, we follow in their train. Our being together in Convention is to build up such a resolve. We want to find courage not only in the presence of God but also in the strength of numbers. That's what God did for Elijah. *"Last one left? Hardly."* Look around. Right now. Look around. See brothers and sisters who are engaged in it all. Being together is to prepare us to return with vigor. Spurred on by one another to love and good works, by the end of the day tomorrow it will be time to return and re-engage in the work of our congregation and the Lord's Church.

Yes, it is hard. Yes, statisticians of the church breed discouragement. Yes, we have buildings we love and want to maintain but have grown tired. Yes, there are congregations that have declined, and people are tired. Yes, the people in the neighborhood might not think just the same as us. Yes, busyness and the secular nature of life work against us.

But this is us. We are people of the most high God, strengthened by His Word, fed by His meal, filled by His Spirit, united in love and purpose. We are the sort of Christians who work with grit to serve the Savior. We work while it is day until the night comes and we lay the work aside.

There are indeed many issues that face the Church, that face your congregation. We can talk about them. We can pray about them. I suppose we can, and do, complain about them. But we might not be able to directly change them or address them.

**This issue, the issue of character, what sort of Christians are we, can be both addressed and acted upon here and now.**

This issue, of course with God's help, is under our control. And this is why we have come together: to become an increasingly different sort of people. It is Christian character that shines through in witness during times of stress: closing of a school we love, facing an apparent decline in the church, troubles in a country, troubles at home, squabbles within a congregation or church body, and as Jesus teaches, wars, rumors of wars, famines, and earthquakes. The work is hard. Our God is greater. The challenge is pressing. Our Savior is present. The difficulties cause stress. The Spirit refreshes.

Exactly what challenges and opportunities we will face in the coming triennium, we cannot predict. But we can prepare for them by God's grace and power as we commend ourselves to God to shape our character, our ethos, individually and corporately ...

- As we read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the word of God—constantly getting new minds—re-minded
- As we are renewed by the Spirit and in fellowship with one another, fiercely committed to the well-being of each other no matter what the cost
- And as we soon return home to our own field of service where we serve diligently, working hard, even with grit, to live out Kingdom life in a needy world.

This is the character of People of Hope.