

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 8, 2009 at 9:54am

Lutheran leaders declare worship wars 'sinful'

by Adelle M. Banks by Religion News Service

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has warned congregations that disagreements over worship styles that developed into full-fledged worship wars are "sinful."

The eight-page "Theses on Worship" was adopted unanimously in September by the denomination's Council of Presidents, which includes its top officials and leaders of its 35 regional districts.

"The polarization that is affecting the church concerning the issue of forms, rites and ceremonies is sinful and hinders the proclamation of the gospel," it says.

The document, the result of two years of work, describes worship as a command of God but says the Scriptures and doctrinal statements permit "considerable freedom" in choosing the rites and ceremonies used for worship.

The document will be distributed to pastors and churches with a memo from the Missouri Synod President Gerald B. Kieschnick that acknowledges the range of worship practices among the denomination's congregations that has sometimes led to "disharmony and even polarization."

Kieschnick said the council hopes pastors, musicians and other church leaders will have "prayerful conversations" about the new theses, which are based on Scripture and the Book of Concord, a collection of Lutheran theological statements.

"We recognize that different affinities in music and worship expressions exist among us," he wrote. "Yet we believe that our future with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ must be firmly grounded in the light of Christ's forgiveness, grace, and mercy."

So-called "worship wars" -- especially whether to use contemporary or traditional worship music -- have

been a source of conflict in many congregations. But some changes in worship, including an embrace of more contemporary styles, have led to increased worship attendance, according to a recent Faith Communities Today survey.

"Congregations that changed their style of worship had greater levels of conflict than those that did not, but especially in those congregations in which the conflict never became serious, they also had higher levels of vitality," wrote Hartford Seminary scholar David A. Roozen in "Faith Communities Today 2008: A First Look."

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