

The Divine Service in the LCMS:
Is Unity or Diversity our Strength?
Strategic Analysis from an Army Chaplain's Perspective
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Introduction:

I served in the United States Army as a chaplain from 2009 to 2023. During these 14 years I provided religious support for my unit, and I advised my commanders. Advising a commander took two forms, internal and external. Internal advisement provided the commander with insights on the unit, specifically how might religion and the faith of individual soldiers and family members positively or negatively impact mission completion? External advisement provided the commander with insights on how the religion and faith practices of those within the operational environment¹ (OE) might positively or negatively impact mission completion.

The formal process for advising a commander within the Army system typically follows the Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP). During this process, soldiers with various specialties and disciplines analyze a particular mission, given to the unit from a higher headquarters. The goal is to analyze data from a systems perspective and develop the best plan for completing the mission objectives. As the process develops, staff members brief the commander with insights from their analysis. Staff members advise the commander concerning potential risks and provide recommendations on ways to mitigate that risk. As a chaplain, I briefed my commanders with insights gleaned by analyzing the mission from a religious perspective.²

Later in my career, I attended the Army War College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas for my Intermediate-Level Education (ILE). During this schooling, I received extensive training in strategic analysis. The goal of strategic analysis from a military perspective is to provide local commanders with the ability to change the OE in ways that favor the strategic guidance given by the current Commander in Chief of the United States and refined by each Combatant Commander. Often this strategic investigation includes Center of Gravity³ (CoG) analysis. CoG analysis visualizes the OE as a complex web of operational variables. The basic question is this: which variable, if changed, has the greatest potential to alter the entire system? This variable is the CoG and once identified, military planners develop plans designed to influence it and reshape the entire OE.

¹ The operational environment includes the conditions, environment, and circumstances that may impact military operations. Normally it encompasses a geographical region.

² While serving in Iraq with an aviation unit, I took part in the MDMP process. As a staff, we analyzed our mission to retrograde personnel and equipment to a central location in preparation to leave Iraq. The plan included flying multiple rotary wing aircraft at a low elevation (around 500 feet) over the same location during a two-month timeframe. As I analyzed the data from a religious perspective, I discovered that our flight path went over a village that would be celebrating a religious holiday within the timeframe of our mission. The people in this village celebrated their holiday by fasting, praying, and shooting AK-47s in the air. I briefed the commander concerning this data and recommended using a different flight path during the religious celebration.

³ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Pub. 5-0 *Joint Operation Planning*, P. xxi, 11 August 2011, hereinafter Joint Pub. 5-0. Joint Pub. 5-0 defines the Center of Gravity as "The source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act."

Thesis:

The goal of this paper is to provide strategic analysis of the Divine Service from an Army Chaplain's unique perspective. While this paper references Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, it is primarily a practical and strategic argument for the need for greater unity in form of worship within the LCMS Divine Service. This paper provides strategic analysis of the LCMS Divine Service by examining the "new recruit," identifying the CoG of the Divine Service, and finally presenting a way toward greater unity utilizing a portion of the Maneuver Center of Excellence's 2018 ethical decision-making model.

The New Recruit:

My experience within the Army training environment includes my initial training as an enlisted soldier and later as an officer, my service as a chaplain for an Infantry Training battalion, and as an instructor for the Chaplain Basic Officer Leadership Course (CHBOLC). Regardless of the specific context, transforming civilians into soldiers requires a systematic process of indoctrination, training, and certification. At the completion of this process a new soldier may be placed into any unit in any location and function at a basic level of military competency. For this to occur, the soldier must embrace the Army ethic (indoctrination), successfully complete all required training, and receive certification in several areas through thorough testing.

When a soldier shows up at their unit of assignment, leaders expect them to perform at a squad level and with minimal training, participate in a platoon live-fire exercise. This means they follow the lawful orders of their leaders, they know squad and platoon movement techniques, they can physically perform their duties, and they are qualified with their individual weapon. No Army leader would ever assume the risk of allowing a civilian to participate in a live-fire exercise. It would be too dangerous for the civilian and too dangerous for the soldiers. A civilian might observe the training, but a commander would never allow any civilian to participate in the exercise.

Another factor contributing to the ability of the Army to place a new soldier into any unit at any location is the uniformity of Army units. Army units need uniformity because, unfortunately, the soldier is expendable. The Army's lethality depends on the ability to quickly replace individual soldiers, teams, or even larger units. Uniformity of practice also allows for combined arms maneuvers. This means that different units and even different types of units can move and fight together because they speak the same language, know the same tactics and techniques, and no one deviates from the agreed upon standards and norms. Any conventional fighting unit that modifies these standards and norms places themselves and all other units at great risk.

Strategic Analysis of the New Recruit:

Within the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), we have a systematic process for transforming a heathen into a Communicant member of a local congregation. This catechetical process includes indoctrination, training, and certification. After completing this process, the

confirmed Lutheran may be placed in any LCMS congregation in any location and function with a basic level of competency.⁴

When a confirmed Lutheran visits another LCMS congregation, the local leadership (pastor and/or elders) usually asks a few questions to determine whether the visitor will be invited to participate in the “live-fire exercise,” normally called the Service of the Sacrament. Once the leadership determines that the individual is a confirmed member of an LCMS congregation and that they are in good standing with their local church, the leadership usually invites the visitor to receive Christ’s Body and Blood. If the leadership determines that the individual is not a confirmed LCMS member, the determination is made that the risk is too high to allow the individual to receive the Sacrament. This practice of Closed Communion is supported by Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.⁵

While congregations within the LCMS are not military units preparing to fight battles with expendable soldiers, a certain amount of uniformity of practice is advantageous from a strategic perspective. From a strategic perspective a confirmed LCMS lay person should be able to attend any LCMS service at any location and experience a similar Divine Service. Further an LCMS pastor should be able to replace any LCMS pastor of any congregation within the LCMS and with minimal preparation lead the service. I contend this is not a present reality within the LCMS based on my experience and observations.

Strategic Analysis of the New Recruit (Experiential Data):

Serving in the Army provided me with opportunities to attend and observe Divine Services in 20 different LCMS congregations in 8 different districts. I observed that most congregations followed a Divine Service from the Lutheran Service Book and sang hymns from the same source. I also encountered congregations that created their own liturgy and sang praise songs. These congregations often employed praise bands and projected words, images, and videos on screens. Often the pastor did not wear robes, and preaching was done among the people and not from the pulpit. Other congregations relied heavily on chanting portions of the liturgy and utilized processions with crucifixes, burned incense, and read the Gospel reading among the people. The pastors in those congregations wore robes and preached from the pulpit.

While some would argue that either extreme of the liturgical spectrum lies outside the boundaries of what is appropriate for an LCMS Divine Service, our Lutheran Confessions do not rigidly bind our consciences. The Epitome, Article X states, “We believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every place and at every time has the authority to alter such ceremonies according to its own situation, as may be most useful and edifying for the community of God.”⁶ The Solid Declaration of the same article further clarifies, “For this reason churches are not to condemn one another because of differences in ceremonies when in Christian freedom one has fewer or more than the other, as long as these churches are otherwise united in teaching and in all the articles of faith as well as in the proper use of the holy sacraments.”⁷

⁴ For lack of a better phrase, I label this the Principle of Reciprocity. Perhaps an even greater argument could be made for the Principle of Reciprocity applied to LCMS clergy. If we are truly Confessional Lutherans and part of the Missouri Synod, should we not be able to “plug and play” any LCMS rostered clergy into any LCMS congregation?

⁵ Scriptural references include Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, and 1 Corinthians 11.

Confessional references include, but are not limited to Ap Articles XII, XXIV, LC Fifth Part, and SD Article VII.

⁶ Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 515.

⁷ Kolb and Wengert, 640.

Aside from the abrupt discord one may experience while attending LCMS Divine Services at either end of the liturgical spectrum, we are bound by our confessional unity not to condemn one another because of differences in ceremonies. But many LCMS pastors and theologians contend that doctrine and practice are intimately connected and cannot be separated.⁸ What one believes drives how one practices and how one practices betrays what one believes. What I found while attending various LCMS Divine Services was a common and interesting trend. The farther a congregation and pastor shifted toward the less structured end of the liturgical spectrum, the closer that congregation and pastor moved toward an open communion practice. The farther a congregation and pastor shifted toward the more structured end of the liturgical spectrum, the closer that congregation and pastor moved toward a closed communion practice. The following examples support this observation.⁹

At one LCMS church I was greeted by a very welcoming woman. She asked me my name, invited me to Bible class, and informed me that their congregation was not like most LCMS churches. She said, “As long as you believe in Jesus, you’re welcome to commune with us today.” After Bible class I sat down in a pew and was greeted by the family sitting behind me. They introduced themselves and asked me if I was a Christian. When I indicated that I was, they eagerly invited me to participate in the communion service. They said, “Our pastor is very loving. He communes all believers.”

As the service began, a praise band took center stage and played various contemporary songs. The female leader of the band opened the service with an energetic welcome and prayer. She reiterated what I had already been told, “Everyone here who is a Christian is welcome to join as we commune today.” After the praise band played another few songs, a man in a suit and tie appeared at the edge of the free-standing altar area. He started clapping vigorously and then started pumping his fist in the air. Someone from the back of the church ran down the aisle with a large flowing banner. The person with the banner worked their way around the praise band as the man pumped his fist more enthusiastically. With a final wave the banner was placed near the altar. Then the praise band reduced their volume but continued to play as the man in the suit stepped into the aisle, read a short Scripture passage, and began preaching. After the sermon, everyone was welcome to come forward to receive communion. Since the congregation was large, the Lord’s Supper was distributed from several stations. The pastor and another individual were at one station, while other members, including one female, posted themselves at the other stations. Those participating walked through the station, quickly consuming the Body and Blood of Christ.

At another LCMS church, as I came in for service, I was greeted by a husband-and-wife team. They immediately directed me to the guest book and encouraged me to put my name and home congregation. They asked me if I was Lutheran and then clarified, “Are you an active member of an LCMS congregation?” When I said yes, they let me know that their congregation was celebrating the Lord’s Supper and that I would need to talk with the pastor prior to participating in the sacrament. When I spoke with the pastor, he asked me when and where I was confirmed, where I held current membership, and the name of my pastor. Satisfied with my

⁸ Klemet I. Preus, *The Fire and the Staff: Lutheran Theology in Practice* (St. Louis: CPH, 2004), 107–35. Preus devotes an entire chapter to arguing that doctrine and practice are intimately linked together. He notes that the fifth century theologian, Prosper of Aquitaine, is credited with coining the phrase “*Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*.” According to Preus, this phrase means that “practice teaches doctrine.” (132)

⁹ The following illustrations are an amalgamation of what I observed at several LCMS Divine Services.

answers, he welcomed me to commune and let me know that he would send my home congregation a note that I had communed at their church.

As the service began, an out of sight organist played the first hymn which ended with a trinitarian stanza. The pastor and all the congregation stood in unison. Then the pastor, wearing a robe and stole, led the service for the congregation from the Lutheran Service Book, Divine Service setting three. Sometimes he stood facing the congregation and sometimes he stood with his back toward the congregation. He made the sign of the cross at various points and bowed before approaching the altar. After reading several Scripture passages the congregation confessed the Nicene Creed, sang a hymn, and the pastor preached a message from the pulpit.

The pastor prepared the Lord's Supper by reading the words of institution from the book on the altar. A man in a robe with no stole joined the pastor as the preparations continued. Several ushers worked their way down the pews, inviting participants to begin moving forward to the communion rail. When they came to me, the usher quietly asked me if I had talked with the pastor about the Lord's Supper and if the pastor had invited me to commune. After I answered twice to the affirmative, he invited me to come forward. At the communion rail, everyone was welcomed and most kneeled to receive Christ's Body and Blood. The pastor led, distributing the Body, while the elder followed with the Blood.

Strategic Analysis of the New Recruit Concluding Thoughts:

Diversity of practice within the Divine Service of LCMS congregations is putting our "new recruits" and "seasoned soldiers" at great risk. Because we are a Synod and because we all confess the same doctrine and articles of faith, our radically divergent practices potentially reveal a significant problem. Is it possible that our divergent practices reveal that some LCMS congregations and pastors are drifting away from confessional unity? From a strategic analysis perspective the answer is, "Let's dig a little deeper before giving the commander any recommendations."

Center of Gravity Analysis of the Divine Service:

As stated above, CoG analysis is systems analysis. Analysts take the OE and separate it into specific categories labeled operational variables. These variables may include categories such as Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information, and Infrastructure (PMESII). The analyst compiles the data into categories and compares the data across a spectrum of variables. The goal of this process is to identify the CoG; the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act. In analyzing the CoG for the LCMS Divine Service, several categories of "operational variables" require scrutiny. These categories include: the LCMS formal and material principles, the confessional unity of the LCMS, and the elements of the Divine Service.

According to *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*,

We believe, teach and confess that the Gospel of the gracious justification of the sinner through faith in Jesus Christ is not only the chief doctrine of the Holy Scripture and a basic presupposition for the interpretation of Scripture, but is the heart and center of our Christian faith and theology (material principle). We also teach, believe, and confess that only "the Word of God shall establish articles of faith" (SA, II, ii, 15), and that "the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New

Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged” (FC, EP, Rule and Norm, 1).¹⁰

The Formal Principle protects the LCMS from false teachings and false teachers. It appears in the Constitutions of LCMS churches and confession of it takes place in Confirmation and Ordination vows. The Material Principle keeps us focused on the central teaching of the Bible. Klemet Preus in *The Fire and the Staff* declares, “Doctrine is important because of the central doctrine of the Bible—the doctrine of Christ. Christian doctrine teaches Jesus.”¹¹

One might argue that either the formal or material principle of the LCMS is the CoG for the Divine service. If one changes either principle in the slightest way, it will destroy the entire system. Even if one simply swaps the definitions, the system is destroyed. But this is a theological argument and perspective from one inside the system. Please allow for further analysis as I attempt to provide a slightly more nuanced CoG possibility.

The confessional unity of the LCMS means that individuals are a member of a system called a local congregation. This local congregation is part of several other systems, including, the circuit, the district, synod, and the catholic church. The individual member has confessed before members of their local congregation that they agree with the formal and material principles of the LCMS and further they agree with the articles of faith as they are summarized in the Small Catechism. One might argue that this confessional unity in the LCMS is the CoG for the Divine service. While a possibility, the strategist must ask more questions and analyze further data before identifying the CoG.

One significant question to ask is what about an individual who is outside of the LCMS system? The strategist must consider the “associated sub-variable”¹² of those who have not publicly confessed their faith and have not been received into membership in an LCMS congregation. For the sake of simplicity, the label of non-Lutheran is applied. To conduct this “crosswalk”¹³ the Divine Service is simply divided into two operational variables: the Service of the Word, and the Service of the Sacrament.

Inserting the associated sub-variable of the non-Lutheran into the Service of the Word does nothing harmful to the system. Even if the non-Lutheran is an unbeliever, the system remains strong. The pastor and the members are held together by confessional unity and the presence of the associated sub-variable cannot impact the system. The associated sub-variable cannot speak against the formal or material principles and their participation is limited to speaking and singing God’s Word as it is presented in the Divine Service. They hear the sermon and the prayers and what they believe and confess is irrelevant.

Inserting the associated sub-variable of the non-Lutheran into the Service of the Sacrament does something extremely damaging to the system. The theologian often assesses the potential damage to the associated sub-variable, but this is not the primary concern from a

¹⁰ LCMS, *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles* (1973), <https://www.lcms.org/about/beliefs/doctrine/statement-of-scriptural-and-confessional-principles>

¹¹ Preus, *The Fire and the Staff*, 55.

¹² A good military strategist doing systems analysis will look at operational variables and then insert an associated sub-variable into the system. The strategist then asks how this sub-variable might influence the operational variables. If the influence is significant, then the analyst asks how this sub-variable might influence the entire system. If it has the potential to completely disrupt, or radically strengthen the system, it may be the CoG.

¹³ A “crosswalk” is simply the process of asking how a sub-variable might impact each variable within a system. In this case the question is how does a non-Lutheran visitor impact the LCMS Divine Service?

systems analysis perspective. The primary concern is the system: the members of the local congregation, the circuit, the district, the synod, and the catholic church.

The analysis takes into consideration the reality that all LCMS members have publicly confessed unity with all other LCMS members. All LCMS pastors believe, teach, and confess the formal and material principles of the LCMS and additionally bind themselves to the Book of Concord. This creates a sealed system which says that unity of faith and doctrine is essential for receiving the Body and Blood of Christ in the Service of the Sacrament. When a congregation of the LCMS allows the associated sub-variable of the non-Lutheran to participate in the Service of the Sacrament, they allow the associated sub-variable the opportunity to publicly confess his or her own confession. The associated sub-variable can only speak what is spoken in the Divine Service during the Service of the Word, but in the Service of the Sacrament the associated sub-variable speaks what he or she truly confesses. If this confession is not the same as the LCMS confession, the LCMS confession just became the confession of the associated sub-variable. For this reason, this strategic analyst contends that Closed Communion is the CoG of the LCMS Divine Service.

Toward Greater Unity in the Divine Service:

A good staff officer never briefs a problem without recommending a potential solution. Sometimes the solution is touted as a complete fix to a problem and other times the solution simply moves toward a more favorable OE. The following recommendation falls squarely into the latter category.

While stationed as a chaplain at Fort Benning,¹⁴ I participated in a character development program titled “Transformational Moral Leadership.”¹⁵ I utilized portions of the program model to develop additional training modules for the Drill Sergeants in my unit.¹⁶ The most useful portion of the program for this discussion is the model for making ethical decisions. Based on this model one must first consider “Who am I?”, “Who are We?”, and “Who Benefits from Us?” before we make moral decisions. The model further explains the moral decision-making process as having the following steps: Identify the Problem, Evaluate the Options, Commit to a Decision, and Take Moral Action.¹⁷

I recommend the use of this model within congregations and circuits, particularly for determining what practices occur in the Divine Service, especially with respect to the Service of the Sacrament. A pastor with his elders, or a circuit visitor with the circuit pastors could examine their current or proposed practices with the model. For the sake of simplicity, the following example demonstrates the potential use of the model at the circuit level.

Situation: A member of Congregation A visited Congregation B. Both congregations are in the same circuit. The member was taught in Congregation A that only male elders could assist with distributing Christ’s Body and Blood during the Service of the Sacrament. While attending

¹⁴ The name Fort Benning was changed to Fort Moore in May 2023.

¹⁵ “Transformational Moral Leadership elevates, expands, refines, and forges people of excellence through moral courage, moral reasoning, and moral empathy.” Taken from CH (LTC) Anthony Randall’s PowerPoint presentation on Moral Leadership, October 2018.

¹⁶ If you are really bored you can find my entire project at: Matthew C. Christensen, “God’s Plan for Life: Training Drill Sergeants to Better Serve Their Neighbor by Developing Moral Character Utilizing the ‘Transformational Moral Leadership’ Model,” D.Min. MAP, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 2022.

¹⁷ Randall, Anthony P. *MCOE Character Development Training Slides*. Fort Benning, GA: U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence, 2018.

Congregation B, Christ's Body and Blood were distributed by the pastor and a female assistant. The member of Congregation A had talked with Congregation B's pastor prior to the service, and he welcomed the member to commune at Congregation B. When the member saw the female assisting with the Service of the Sacrament, the member refused to commune and went back to Congregation A and spoke with Congregation A's pastor.

Response: The pastor of Congregation A called the pastor of Congregation B to verify the practice described above and to discuss the situation. He quoted Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions in his appeal to change the practice in Congregation B, but Congregation B's pastor refused to concede. Congregation A's pastor called the Circuit Visitor and explained the situation. At the next circuit meeting the Circuit Visitor led the group through the ethical decision-making model. Each pastor answered the first question, "Who am I?" Responses varied from "A child of God" to "A called pastor in the LCMS." Then each pastor answered the second question, "Who are we?" Responses varied from, "We are Lutherans" to "We are all members of Synod." Finally, each pastor answered the third question, "Who benefits from us?" The responses to this question grew rapidly, "our members," "the community," "our circuit/district/synod," and even "the greater Christian community."

The first set of questions suggests the reality that we are all individuals, but we are part of a system, which is part of a larger system, which is part of an even larger system. What one individual pastor does, especially when leading the Divine Service, has a ripple effect into the entire system. The first set of questions prepares the pastors within the circuit to ask a simple, yet profound question: Is this a tension to manage, or a problem to solve? If it is a tension to manage, each Congregation and pastor simply continues their different practices. If they determine it is a problem to solve, they see that, for the sake of unity, they must clarify the problem and determine an appropriate action to take. This group decides they have a problem to solve.

The next step is to determine what is the problem?¹⁸ Much discussion takes place to determine the problem. Eventually the group reaches consensus: The problem is a lack of unity within the practices associated with the Service of the Sacrament causing a member of Congregation A to refuse to commune at Congregation B. Once the problem is identified, the next step is to evaluate the options using Scripture, the Confessions, Constitutions and Bylaws, and potential consequences for congregational members/circuit/district/synod, etc.¹⁹ The group of circuit pastors discuss three options, "Everyone in the circuit adopt the practice of using women for distributing Christ's Blood during the Service of the Sacrament," "Everyone in the circuit abide by the normed practice of using only male elders for distributing Christ's Blood during the Service of the Sacrament," and "Allow Congregation B to adopt the practice of communing only members of their congregation so that no outside LCMS members could be offended by their practice of allowing women to distribute during the Service of the Sacrament."

After much debate, discussion, and deliberation the group of circuit pastors commits to a decision. They decide that everyone in the circuit will abide by the normed practice of using only

¹⁸ In this example, I am intentionally ignoring the theological arguments for the sake of presenting the model. Theologically I would argue from God's Orders of Creation that it is an abhorrent practice to give any woman the responsibility of distributing any element of Holy Communion. God created Adam to function as the protector and provider, the one who was to give. God created Eve to function as the helper and nurturer, the one who was to receive. The church preserves this order by using only males to give Christ's Body and Blood to His Bride, the Church.

¹⁹ The original Transformational Moral Leadership model used "virtues, rules, and consequences" as lenses for evaluating possible options. I modified the model to fit our context within the LCMS.

male elders for distributing Christ's Blood during the Service of the Sacrament. They further agree to support their brother pastor to continue his current practice until the Circuit Visitor and the pastor meet with Congregation B's Board of Elders to develop a plan for honoring the women who are currently serving with new positions in the church.²⁰ Finally they all agree to a date, three months in the future, when it will no longer be tolerable within the circuit to have women distributing Christ's Blood during the Service of the Sacrament.

Conclusion:

In this paper I set out to present strategic analysis of the Divine Service from an Army Chaplain's perspective. I developed a practical and strategic argument that LCMS congregations and pastors need to move away from diversity and toward greater unity in form of worship within the LCMS Divine Service. I further provided strategic analysis of the LCMS Divine Service by examining the "new recruit," identifying the CoG of the Divine Service as closed communion, and by presenting a way toward greater unity utilizing an ethical decision-making model.

²⁰ I fully acknowledge the simplicity of the proposed solution to the problem. For the sake of time and space I chose not to develop contingency plans for the elders not wanting to comply and for resistance from the women assisting with Holy Communion.

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