

Conservative surge upends Missouri Synod president: Matthew C. Harrison takes the helm

by [Tim Townsend](#) in the [August 10, 2010](#) issue

The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod has elected the denomination’s director of disaster response as president, a candidate backed by its more conservative members. Matthew Harrison received 54 percent of the vote for the three-year term, defeating three-term incumbent Gerald Kieschnick, who received 45 percent.

Harrison’s first-ballot victory July 13 at the LCMS convention in Houston represents a large ideological change for the 2.5-million-member denomination, which is split between conservative and relatively moderate camps. Harrison was the candidate of theological and doctrinal conservatives who call themselves “confessional Lutherans” and stress a strict adherence to the central doctrines of Lutheranism.

In his nine years as president, Kieschnick, 67, was criticized by traditionalists who bemoaned what they called his postmodern approach to the church. Kieschnick, they said, had favored a nondenominational, evangelical megachurch model and in the process diluted Martin Luther’s theology.

Delegates had already voted on proposals, which were championed by Kieschnick, to radically restructure the denomination. Supporters said restructuring would decrease costs, while critics felt the move would give too much power and authority to the president’s office.

“The change we really need is not structural,” Harrison wrote in the *Reporter*, a synod newspaper, before the convention. “Part of me might like the massive increase in power proposed for the synod president. That’s why it’s not a good idea.”

On July 12, the third day of an eight-day convention, delegates voted by a narrow margin to dismantle the church’s seven program boards and fold the boards’ functions into two “superboards.”

“It’s ironic that the guy who had no desire to see an increase in the power of the presidency of the synod is now in that position,” said Harrison, referring to himself in an interview after the election. “The way forward is going to be deliberate and slow and involve the counsel of lots of folks.”

As the executive director of the church’s World Relief and Human Care office since 2001, Harrison, 48, managed the denomination’s national responses to the January earthquake in Haiti, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Harrison’s victory was not a complete surprise. When the nominations for president were tallied in April, Kieschnick had received only 755 nominations, the lowest ever for a sitting president, and Harrison got 1,332.

“I think Pastor Harrison will focus on leadership in scripture,” said Timothy Rossow, pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church in Naperville, Illinois, and a leader of the conservative movement to elect Harrison. “He really believes unity of the synod is very important.” Rossow said he believed that concerns about change that permeated the convention hall during the debates on restructuring carried Harrison over the top.

Mark Hanson, presiding bishop of the larger and more liberal Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, congratulated Harrison on his election and issued a short statement wishing “God’s blessings” on his tenure.

Harrison was born in Sioux City, Iowa, and was ordained in 1991. He served two parishes in Iowa and Indiana over the next ten years before assuming the disaster response job in 2001. When Harrison took the stage after the election, he and Kieschnick hugged as the delegates gave both men a standing ovation. *-Tim Townsend, Religion News Service, via the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.*