

Lutherans find common ground with Catholics on Obama mandate

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February 23, 2012

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ST. LOUIS (RNS) Lutherans and Catholics are not historically known for their theological sympathy, but earlier this month the president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod told the U.S. House that he will "stand with our friends in the Catholic Church" in opposition to a recent government ruling on contraception.

History aside, the Rev. Matthew Harrison made it clear that the Missouri Synod now has "large consensus with the Roman Catholic Church on moral issues."

"The Christian church is a billion times beyond the Missouri Synod," Harrison said. "Without the Roman Catholic Church in this country, our way would be infinitely more difficult."

So when Harrison, who was elected president of the LCMS in 2010, received an invitation to testify before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, he reluctantly agreed. He sat on a panel with other religious leaders and scholars, including Roman Catholic Bishop William Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., and Rabbi Meir Soloveichik of Yeshiva University in New York.

Harrison delivered a fiery indictment on Feb. 16 before lawmakers, venturing past the issue of contraception and deep into broad issues of intolerance and righteousness.

President Obama's administration triggered the battle over the contraception mandate last month when it ruled that religiously affiliated institutions, like universities and hospitals, must include free birth control coverage in their employee health coverage.

Houses of worship and their organizing authorities were exempted from the requirement, but Catholic bishops nevertheless coordinated a firestorm of protest, arguing that the ruling would force Catholics to violate their consciences and was therefore an infringement on their First Amendment right to free religious expression. They were joined by some Orthodox rabbis, evangelical Christian leaders and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

The White House and women's groups argued that the mandate had nothing to do with the First Amendment. It was, they said, about improving women's health. The surge of protest was large enough, however, that earlier this month the administration modified the ruling so that the organizations' insurance companies -- not the religious organizations themselves -- would pay for birth control costs.

The roots of the Catholic Church's opposition to contraception can be traced to the second century. In the modern age, that opposition was most famously reaffirmed by Pope Paul VI in his 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, or "Of Human Life." The Catholic Church teaches that because artificial contraception suppresses the possibility of procreation, and therefore violates the natural law, it is always wrong.

Most other Christian churches -- including the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod -- accept artificial contraception as a responsible method of family planning. But, like the Catholic Church, the Missouri Synod does oppose so-called abortifacients, chemical substances that interfere with the ability of a newly fertilized egg to implant in the mother's womb.

While the administration has said drugs that cause abortion are not covered under the plan, there is some disagreement among church leaders and administration officials on the definition of an abortifacient.

Harrison told lawmakers that the synod's opposition to "abortion-causing drugs" was one reason the denomination maintains its own health plan. A provision in the government's new ruling would "grandfather" the Missouri Synod's plan, meaning its 50,000 members would not have to participate in the new mandate.

But the "grandfather" clause doesn't mollify Harrison. He's still aching from a recent legal clash with the Obama administration -- a unanimous U.S. Supreme Court victory last month for the church involving a school owned and operated by a Missouri Synod member congregation. The ruling, known as *Hosanna-Tabor*, said religious employees of a church cannot sue for employment discrimination. But the

battle -- with the Obama administration arguing the other side -- exposed for Harrison a White House that he now believes is hostile to religious institutions, and it left him bitter because of it.

Hosanna-Tabor "gives us no comfort that this administration will be concerned to guard our free-exercise rights," Harrison told Congress.

Missouri Synod Lutherans and Roman Catholics agree on other issues. Both, for instance, are opposed to a new Illinois law that grants same-sex couples the right to seek civil unions and disrupted the work of Catholic agencies working in foster care and adoption.

During his five-minute testimony, Harrison was visibly angry. His goal, he said, was to tell Congress to "get the federal government out of matters of conscience for religious people, particularly in life issues where there's long-standing moral and ethical church precedent."

But he also wanted to drive home the intense feeling of alienation that, he said, conservative people of faith feel under the Obama administration. He said he would rather go to jail than comply with even the modified mandate, and that he would "give up my sons to fight" for the First Amendment.

Later, he explained those comments: "We've laid down our blood to have a free exercise of religion in this country and will continue to do so."