

Missouri Synod president apologizes for 'debacle'

by [Caleb K. Bell](#)

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The president of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod has apologized for his role in the “debacle” that led him to publicly reprimand a pastor in Newtown, Connecticut, for praying at an interfaith service following the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

In the initial incident, the denomination’s president, Matthew C. Harrison, requested an apology from Pastor Rob Morris of Newtown’s Christ the King Lutheran Church for participating in an interfaith prayer vigil that followed the December 14 shootings. Morris’s role in the vigil broke denominational rules against joint worship with other religions.

Morris complied and apologized—not for his participation in the vigil (which he saw as an “act of community chaplaincy” rather than an act of joint fellowship), but for offending members of the St. Louis–based denomination.

But Harrison’s request sparked a blaze of criticism from within the denomination and outside it. Critics charged that he was intolerant and insensitive to the town’s grieving residents.

“In retrospect, I look back and see that I could’ve done things differently,” Harrison said in a video posted on the denomination’s blog February 10. “My deepest desire was to bring unity, or at least to avoid greater division in the Synod over this issue.”

In a letter posted on the denomination’s website February 9, Harrison apologized for the “embarrassment due to the media coverage” that came with the controversy. “As president of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, I take responsibility for this debacle,” he said. “I handled it poorly, multiplying the challenges. I increased the pain of a hurting community.”

In the video and a letter on the blog, Harrison said his exchanges with Morris have been cordial and understanding. “To members of the Missouri Synod, I plead for your forgiveness and patience as we try to work toward resolution, faithful to Christ and His Gospel, in times that challenge us all,” Harrison wrote.

Harrison admitted that the denomination is divided over the issue of participation in interfaith events. Some see it as an endorsement of other religions, while others see it as an opportunity to share their faith with the community.

Morris, who was installed as Christ the King’s pastor last August, issued a statement February 8 to the people of Newtown assuring them of his congregation’s commitment to the community. —RNS

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