

Anti-incumbent mood in the Missouri Synod: "Tea Party feel to these numbers"

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When the nominations for president of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod were tallied and released in April, a collective gasp went up from Lutherans who pay attention to things like presidential nominations.

It wasn't just that nine-year incumbent Gerald Kieschnick, 67, received only 755 votes, but that Matthew Harrison, 48, received nearly double that amount: 1,332.

Harrison, executive director of the church's World Relief and Human Care office, has the support of a group called the Brothers of John the Steadfast whose mission is, in part, to "defend and promote the orthodox Christian faith which is taught in the Lutheran Confessions."

The group's Web site (steadfast-lutherans.org) is one of the voices in the conservative wing of the synod that's unhappy with Kieschnick. According to the group's analysis, Kieschnick's vote totals were the lowest number ever received by a sitting president.

"The nomination numbers were encouraging," said Timothy Rossow, pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church in Naperville, Illinois, who heads the Brothers of John the Steadfast. Some observers say the movement reflected by Rossow's group comprises as many as one-third of the denomination's 2.4 million members. Others say it's much smaller, though loud and influential.

Theological and doctrinal conservatives within the St. Louis-based Missouri Synod call themselves "confessional Lutherans." They are traditionalists who stress a strict adherence to the Book of Concord, the 16th-century work that defined the central doctrines of Lutheranism.

Confessionalists are critical of what they call Kieschnick's postmodern approach to the church. They say that for the last decade, Kieschnick has taken a nondenominational, evangelical mega church approach, and in the process has diluted Martin Luther's theology.

"My vision for the LCMS is that the gift that God has given us—that we believe, teach and confess on the basis of holy scripture—is a treasure," Kieschnick said. "That treasure is not intended to be hoarded. It's intended to be shared with the world."

Dale Meyer, president of the Missouri Synod's Concordia Seminary, said Harrison "has more conservative supporters, who are active in the blogosphere."

"Harrison is seen as more confessional, adhering to the teachings and practices of the Lutheran confession," Meyer said. "President Kieschnick is a very conservative person, but he is a little bit more influenced by the evangelical stream in the church."

Church delegates will cast their votes at the synod's triennial convention in Houston in July. Missouri Synod presidents have no term limits. If reelected, Kieschnick will serve his fourth three-year term. But in the current American political landscape, *incumbent* is a dirty word.

Rossow said Harrison's large number of nominations—the most ever for a nonincumbent, according to steadfastlutherans.org—reminded him of another grassroots effort seeking change. "There's definitely a sort of Tea Party feel to these numbers," he said. —*Tim Townsend, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, via Religion News Service*