

Fallout Over Newtown Interfaith Prayer Vigil Continues

The president of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod apologized for his role in the “debacle” that led him to publicly reprimand a pastor in Newtown, Conn., 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 the Rev. Rob Morris of Newtown’s Christ the King Lutheran Church for participating in an interfaith **prayer vigil** that followed the Dec. 14 shootings. Morris’ role in the vigil broke denominational rules against joint worship with other religions.

Morris complied and apologized—not for his participation, but for offending members of the St. Louis-based denomination. But the president’s request sparked a blaze of criticism—from within the denomination and outside it. Critics charged 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 Sunday. “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 on Saturday, 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.

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

“Though we will never be perfect in doing so, we will not hesitate to offer our love and care in any way that we can, just as Christ has done for us,” Morris wrote.

The Newtown congregation’s lay president, Rob Cicarelli, said the church is standing by its pastor.

“He did what was needed, for us and for our community,” Cicarelli wrote on Saturday. “In fact, we heard nothing but thanks. In the last two very difficult months, Pastor Morris has been a source of constant affirmation that God is indeed here in Newtown.”

Harrison admitted that the denomination is divided over the issue of interfaith participation. Some see it as an endorsement of other religions, yet others see it as an opportunity to share their faith with the community. He also responded to those criticizing the Missouri Synod for being intolerant.

“We respect others of deep religious conviction and appreciate good citizenship shown by any and all, no matter what religion or lack thereof. And we have and will fight to protect the religious liberty and conscience rights of all,” Harrison

wrote.

In a separate statement on the Synod's blog, Harrison, Morris and the president of the Synod's New England District, the Rev. Timothy Yeadon, expressed a sense of unity. They also called for patience and understanding from members of the Synod.

The controversy is the second high-profile reprimand after a New York pastor was suspended for participating in an interfaith service after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The Rev. Gerald Kieschnick, who was Synod president at the time of the 9/11 controversy, has written a commentary in support of a Lutheran pastor praying under such circumstances.

"My perspective is: Absolutely! Anytime! Anywhere! In the presence of anyone!" he wrote.

Adelle M. Banks contributed to this report.