

Outspoken Pastor Kicked Out of Denomination in 'Modern-Day Heresy Conviction'

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod recently carried out what various members consider the equivalent of a modern-day heresy conviction.

The case pitted two-term denomination President Matthew Harrison—who is known for his bushy mustache and conservative views—against Matthew Becker, an outspoken pastor and professor of theology.

Becker teaches at Valparaiso University, an independent Lutheran institution in Valparaiso, Indiana, about an hour's drive from Chicago.

Becker had raised questions about the denomination's stance against the ordination of women, as well as its teaching of creationism.

Becker's insistence on talking about such issues has led certain members of the church to file charges against him, triggering several investigations.

To the disappointment of some, including Harrison, church panels handling the investigations have consistently cleared Becker, allowing him to remain in the church.

Yet, Becker, 52, was officially ousted last week from the 2.3 million-member denomination in which he was raised; he remains on the faculty at Valparaiso University.

"I happen to be right now the most infamous person in the synod," Becker said recently, while noting the long lineage of family members active in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, including his grandfather.

Becker's ouster has led some to raise questions about the direction of the Missouri Synod, as well as leaders such as Harrison, who is up for re-election next summer.

Although Harrison could not be reached for comment, he has spoken publicly about Becker, including on a widely circulated Facebook post.

"I am saying that if my synod does not change its inability to call such a person to repentance and remove such a teacher where there is no repentance, then we are liars and our confession is meaningless," Harrison wrote in January.

While many agreed with Harrison, others argued that, as a member, Becker had the right to question church teachings on women's ordination.

"It seems now we can't even talk about it," said Robert Hartwell, senior pastor at Village Lutheran Church in Bronxville, New York, referring to women's ordination. "That's what makes this so scary."

More moderate members of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod have clashed with conservatives before. In 1974, conservative Lutherans accused John Tietjen, then president of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis of failing to insist on a literal teaching of the Bible, especially the Old Testament.

The controversy led the majority of Concordia's faculty and students to walk out of the school in protest. Many eventually formed Seminex, a "seminary in exile," at St. Louis University and Eden Theological Seminary. Seminex has since disbanded.

Tietjen helped organize a collection of congregations that opted to leave the Missouri Synod. In 1987, the group merged with the Lutheran Church in America and the American Lutheran Church. That merger created the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the largest Lutheran denomination in the U.S.

Some argue the 1970s schism left the church bereft of more moderate members, setting the stage for leaders such as Harrison.

Harrison's 2010 election represented a conservative ideological shift for the denomination, which has come with its set of challenges.

In 2013, for example, Harrison made headlines when in the wake of the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, he asked a church pastor to apologize for participating in an interfaith vigil.

The church's constitution prohibits members from taking part in worship services that blend the beliefs and practices of Lutherans with those of other faiths and Christian denominations.

More recently, members have questioned Harrison's treatment of Becker. In February, numerous pastors and members signed an open letter, noting that, with regard to Becker, they were "extremely offended" by Harrison's action.

Becker grew up in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in Oregon. He had doubts about remaining in the church but said he hoped that, as a member, he could help reform the synod.

But by the late '90s, he was attracting attention by publicly speaking about the ordination of women.

"There's nothing in Scripture that clearly prohibits women from serving," Becker said. "You don't need a certain body part to share the love of God."

In a blog post, Becker went even further, comparing the exclusion of women leaders from the church to "the institution of slavery and the subordination of people of color to whites."

Becker has endured years-long investigations as a result. Then

in April, the Rev. Terry Forke, a district president in Montana, filed a charge against him for failing to maintain that Genesis represents a historical record.

Soon after, he was asked to resign.

"I feel like many people who are my opponents are making an idol out of the LCMS," Becker said. "It's almost as if the church cannot make mistakes. I've always taken the view that nothing should be off the table."

Others, however, argue that Becker and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod are better off parting ways.

"It really doesn't make sense for him to continue in our synod at this point," said Eric Andersen, a pastor in suburban Chicago and associate editor of the conservative Lutheran blog The Brothers of John the Steadfast. "He doesn't believe what we believe, so it's best not to pretend."