

A large red circle containing a white logo. The logo features a stylized cross with a central vertical bar and a horizontal bar, all enclosed within a circular border with four points extending outwards. Below the logo, the years "1850" and "2025" are written in white. Underneath the years, the words "CHRIST" and "THROUGH US" are written in a bold, white, serif font, separated by a thin white horizontal line.

1850 2025

CHRIST
THROUGH US



**2026 REPORT TO THE
TWELVE DISTRICTS**

Report to the Twelve Districts

May 2026

WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD
Waukesha, Wisconsin

Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
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For more information, visit wels.net/synod-convention.

President's message

In the name of Jesus—the One who was, who is, and who is to come,

As delegates gather for district conventions this summer, they are faced with several important responsibilities. First, they will receive reports about all areas of the synod's work. Leadership groups, boards, commissions, committees, and schools will describe in some detail the work that has been done since the synod convention in the summer of 2025. Their reports will tell of the progress that has been made in their areas, the tasks that have been accomplished, and the decisions made. They will also point with openness and honesty to the times when human effort and decisions did not produce the results that were hoped and prayed for. Yet, no matter whether the news is good or bad, they will see in all things the hand of a gracious God who has kept his promise to make all things work together for the good of those who love him and for the accomplishing of his purpose. Delegates will review that work, evaluate the progress, and take note of the challenges that remain and the opportunities that God is placing before us.

It's important to look back on what has been done because it reminds us of the many ways in which God graciously works through us. In spite of our own human weaknesses and failings, he sees to it that the gospel is preached, the message is proclaimed, and souls are saved. And he reminds us of the amazing privilege that he has given to us to be workers in his harvest field.

The delegates will also have their attention directed forward to the work before us. Guided by the new long-range plan that was adopted at the last convention, they will hear of challenges and opportunities in mission fields at home and abroad. They will review the ways in which our ministerial education schools are continually making adjustments in their programs and curriculum to meet the changing needs of the church. They will be given a glimpse of plans that are being made to strengthen congregations as they carry out their mission in a hostile and changing culture. They will be informed of efforts to equip those now serving as called workers with all that they will need to do their work faithfully. As plans are reviewed, the delegates will have an opportunity to provide input and direction in several important areas for the next synod convention in 2027.

We are living in the last days. And those last days, as Jesus told us, will not always be easy. Satan will be doing all he can to silence the gospel and to oppose God's church. There will be wars and rumors of wars. The love of many will grow cold. At times it will seem that the church is in retreat. But in these last days, we know that we have God's unbreakable promises that he will be with us and that the gates of hell will not be able to withstand the power of God as his church carries out its mission.

In 2 Samuel 7, King David found himself at a time when he was looking back on the blessings God had given him and looking forward to the challenges still before him. After years of battle, the Ark of the Covenant had finally been brought to Jerusalem. The Lord let it be known that a temple would be built for him, but David would not be the one to build it. But God gave to David some amazing promises. God would give the nation of Israel peace and rest from its enemies. God would bless David with an unequalled reputation and with unrivaled power. The Lord would see to it that the temple would be built by Solomon. And most important, the Lord repeated the promise of an eternal King, the Savior, who would come from David's line. God assured him, "I will raise up your offspring to succeed you,

your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom" (2 Samuel 7:12). It was at that point, overcome with humble awe and thanks, that David responded, "Who am I, Sovereign LORD, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?" (2 Samuel 7:18).

That's a question that we can and should be asking when we reflect on God's blessings of the past and his promises for the future. "Who are we, Lord, that you have brought us this far?" We ask that question because we know that we are nothing but poor, miserable sinners. We know that we deserve nothing from God but his anger and eternal punishment. We know that on our own we can do nothing for him or for his glory. Who are we? We know all too well.

But there is another answer to that question. Who are we? We are redeemed children of God. We have been adopted into his family through faith in Jesus. We are people who have been called to belong to a gracious and forgiving God. And more than that, and just as amazing, is that we are people who have been called to be his messengers, his witness, his workers.

As delegates meet for district conventions, they will ask the question that David asked. And, marveling as David did, we will hear God give us the answer to that question. He will answer that question at the foot of the cross and at the door of an open, empty tomb. And when he answers, we will believe. We will trust. And we will commit ourselves to remaining faithful to his Word, to cherishing our great heritage, and to proclaiming all of the things that we have seen and heard.

Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president

Strategic plan summary

In 2025, the convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod adopted a new long-range ministry plan titled “Christ through us” (see Appendix 2 of the Synodical Council’s report on p. 51). That plan was developed to provide clarity, focus, and alignment for our shared work as a synod during a time of rapid demographic, cultural, and ministry change. As WELS continues its work in a shifting environment, “Christ through us” helps identify the most important challenges and opportunities facing our church body and establishes a common direction for addressing them.

At its heart, “Christ through us” reflects a simple conviction drawn from 2 Corinthians 5—Christ has reconciled us to God, and he now carries out the ministry of reconciliation through his people. The long-range plan is therefore not merely organizational. It is meant to help WELS carry out its work with greater unity and intentionality as Christ continues his saving work through his church, providing every member with the encouragement to see his or her role in that mission.

“Christ through us” is an issues-based directional plan. It does not prescribe one uniform set of programs or initiatives for every area of ministry. Instead, it identifies broad priorities and long-term goals that are intended to guide the work of the synod through 2035. Within that framework, each area of ministry is able to pursue objectives and initiatives appropriate to its own responsibilities, while still supporting the same larger direction. As the plan itself explains, the priorities remain fixed, while objectives develop over time as opportunities and challenges emerge.

The 4 priorities and 20 goals

The plan is organized around four major priorities. Each priority includes five goals. Together, these priorities reflect a comprehensive approach to WELS ministry: shaping culture, strengthening congregations, expanding mission efforts, and preparing workers for the harvest.

Culture: Cultivating a gospel-driven culture

This priority emphasizes the shared thought habits, assumptions, and expectations that shape what congregations and leaders actually do. It recognizes that ministry strategies and programs are strengthened or hindered by the underlying culture in which they operate.

1. **Raise up culture-shaping leaders**—Help leaders recognize and steward their influence in shaping a gospel-driven congregational culture.
2. **Foster a zealous gospel mindset**—Encourage congregations to move beyond institutional preservation and toward bold, mission-minded engagement.
3. **Make outreach a personal effort**—Help members view evangelism not merely as a church program but as a personal calling lived out in everyday relationships.
4. **Encourage cross-bearing discipleship**—Form believers who are willing to embrace sacrifice, discomfort, and courage in service to Christ’s mission.
5. **Build deep Christian community**—Strengthen congregations as authentic communities of faith whose life together becomes both a blessing to members and a witness to the world.

Congregations: Strengthening WELS' backbone

This priority focuses on the health, vitality, and reach of WELS congregations in North America. Because congregations are the foundation of the synod's broader ministry efforts, strengthening existing ministries and establishing new ones is strategically essential.

6. **Engage the laity in mission**—Help all believers, men and women, young and old, see and carry out their God-given role in Christ's mission according to their gifts and callings.
7. **Support ministry enhancement efforts**—Assist congregations as they pursue ministry renewal, revitalization, collaboration, consolidation, or other strategic improvements.
8. **Expand WELS' reach through strategic church planting**—Plant congregations in underserved areas where confessional Lutheran ministry is limited or absent.
9. **Elevate the home as the first mission field**—Strengthen Christian homes and equip parents for spiritual leadership and faith formation.
10. **Provide sound Lutheran resources**—Develop resources that are confessionally Lutheran and practically useful for worship, discipleship, outreach, planning, and leadership.

Commission: Bringing Christ to the nations

This priority reflects the outward-facing mission of the church. It emphasizes both the global opportunities before WELS and the importance of strengthening the theological depth, flexibility, and reach of mission efforts.

11. **Forge a borderless support network**—Strengthen international mission partnerships and foster shared support across church bodies in fellowship.
12. **Equip a global missionary force**—Train indigenous leaders and missionaries so that gospel proclamation expands through global partnership rather than one-directional support alone.
13. **Establish confessional Lutheran seminaries**—Build strong theological training centers in strategic global locations.
14. **Expand multi-language mission efforts**—Translate, publish, and distribute confessional Lutheran resources in more languages and formats.
15. **Pioneer missions in high-risk and unreached areas**—Develop flexible mission strategies for places where Christ is little known or where gospel work must be carried out under pressure.

Calling: Producing workers for a growing harvest

This priority addresses the recruitment, preparation, sustainability, and support of those who serve in public ministry. It reflects the reality that future gospel opportunities depend in part on a steady and realistic supply of workers prepared to serve.

16. **Expand pathways into gospel ministry**—Broaden access to ministry preparation while maintaining strong theological oversight and formation.
17. **Innovate recruitment efforts for future called workers**—Develop new ways to identify, encourage, and recruit future pastors, teachers, and staff ministers.

18. **Ensure the long-term stability of ministerial education**—Sustain WELS ministerial education financially and structurally for the long term.
19. **Establish a sustainable strategy for called worker development**—Align ministry growth with realistic called worker supply and sound staffing models.
20. **Support the well-being of called workers**—Provide resources and encouragement that strengthen the spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being of those in ministry.

How to read this plan in *Report to the Twelve Districts*

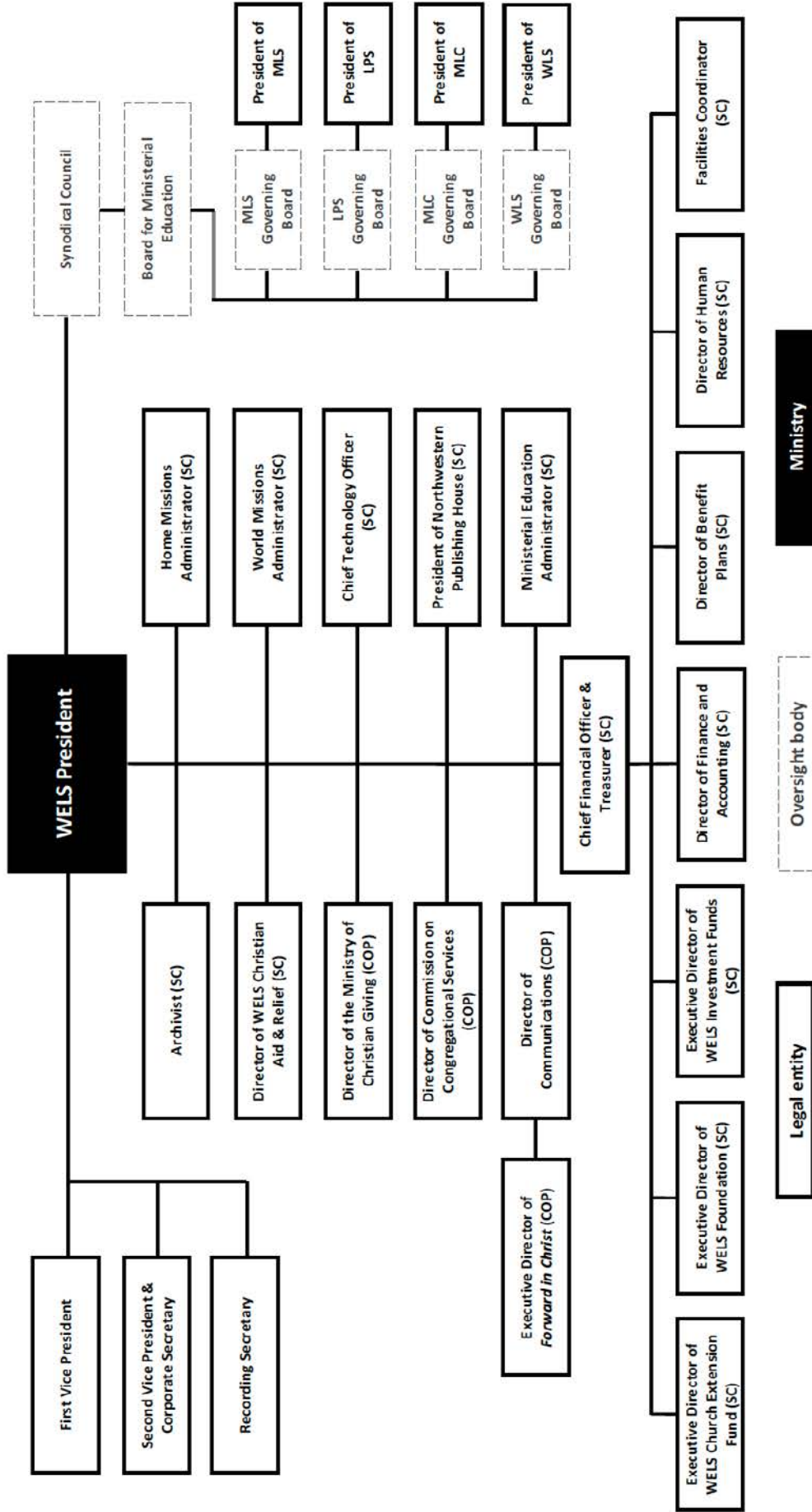
Readers will see the influence of “Christ through us” throughout this book. Readers should watch for ways in which areas of ministry report how initiatives, objectives, and efforts align with one or more of the priorities and goals of the plan.

In some cases, a report may name a specific goal directly. In other cases, the relationship may be evident from the work being described. The purpose of this front-end summary is to help readers recognize those connections. As areas of ministry describe current efforts, future objectives, and emerging opportunities, this report shows how the synod’s work is being carried forward within the shared direction established by “Christ through us.”

In that sense, *Report to the Twelve Districts* does more than report activity. It helps readers see how the synod’s efforts are being aligned around a common set of priorities and goals as WELS seeks to carry out the ministry of reconciliation in the years ahead.

Organizational charts

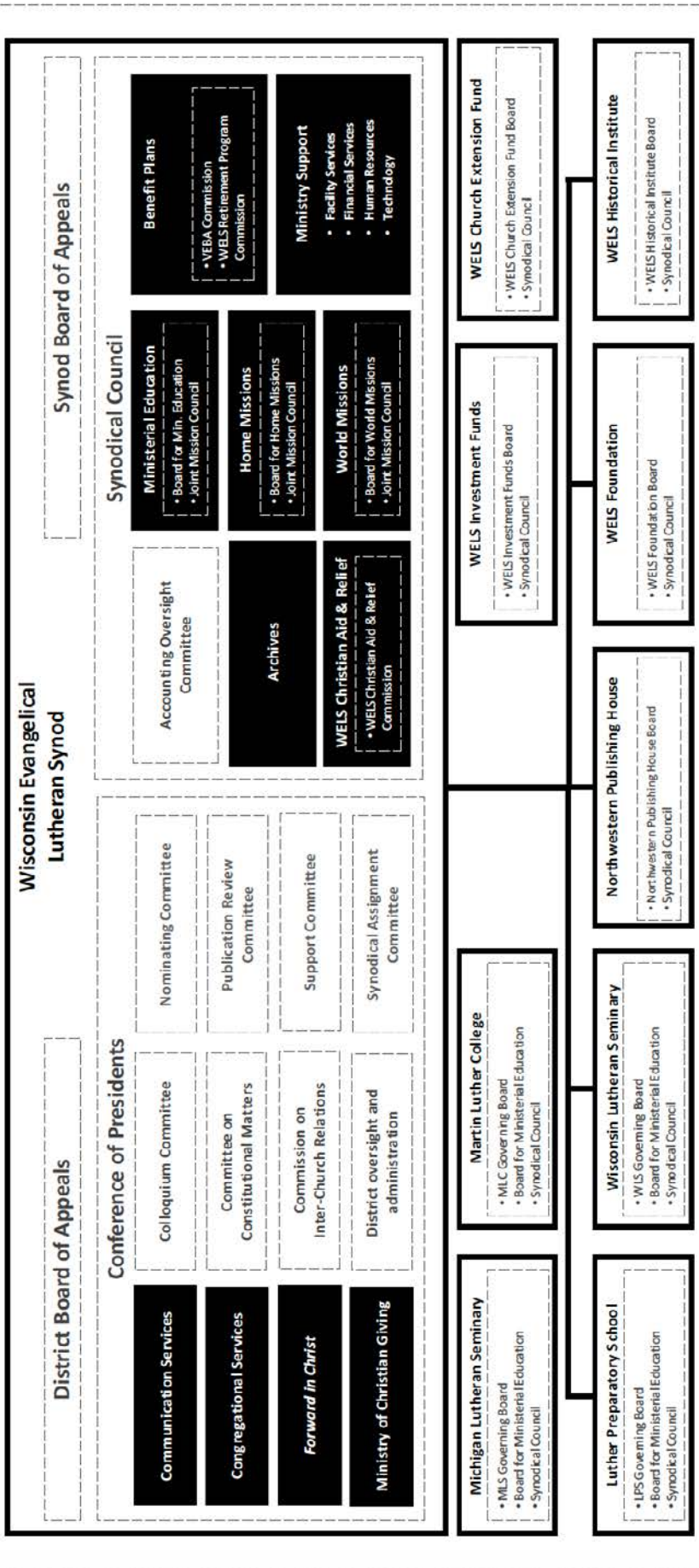
PERSONNEL



COP = Conference of Presidents
 SC = Synodical Council

ENTITIES

Synod in Convention



Ministry

Oversight body

Legal entity

COP = Conference of Presidents
SC = Synodical Council

Congregation and District Ministry

The Congregation and District Ministry portion of WELS' ministry financial plan (budget) includes the Conference of Presidents (COP) and all entities overseen by the COP. These include:

Conference of Presidents

- Regular and special meetings of the Conference of Presidents and the Assignment Committee
- Travel and other expenses related to the district presidents' work
- Pastoral assistants provided to the congregations served by the district presidents
- Partial cost of the vicar program

Support Committee

Grants and assistance provided to needy retired called workers and their spouses

Commission on Inter-Church Relations

- Regular and special meetings of the commission
- Travel expenses related to inter-church relations
- Annual support for the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC)
- Financial support for sister church bodies as appropriate

Ministry of Christian Giving

- Administration and staff salaries and office expenses
- Salaries and travel expenses for current and deferred Christian giving counselors
- Expenses of counselor training and consultation
- Cost of promotions and appeals

Communication Services

- Content production and management of WELS' web presence, including wels.net and social media outlets
- Graphic design, editorial, and video production services to create WELS communication pieces and to assist all areas of ministry, subsidiaries, and one affiliate with their communications
- Coordination of public responses and communications of the synod
- Funding for editorial staff of *Forward in Christ*

Synod Nominating Committee

Selection of nominees for convention elections

Congregational Services

- Commission on Worship
- Commission on Evangelism
- Commission on Special Ministries
- Commission on Lutheran Schools
- Commission on Discipleship
- Commission on Congregational Counseling

Continuing Education for Called Workers Committee

Coordination of efforts to help called workers grow in faith, knowledge, and skill

Conference of Presidents (COP)

The Conference of Presidents (COP) is composed of the 12 district presidents, elected by their respective districts, as well as the synod president and the two synod vice presidents. The synod president serves as the chairman of the COP. The synod recording secretary, elected by the synod in convention, serves as a non-voting advisory member of the COP. The COP meets in person three times annually for regular in-person meetings and as needed via teleconference. The COP also meets twice in May in its role as the Assignment Committee of the synod.

The Conference of Presidents is responsible for the following areas:

- Supervising, maintaining, and strengthening biblical doctrine and practice;
- Overseeing the calling process by providing calling bodies with call lists for pastors, teachers, and staff ministers, as well as counsel and advice pertaining to the divine call;
- Serving as the Assignment Committee to assign graduates of Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to their first calls into the public ministry;
- Working with congregations, often through circuit pastors, to care and provide for the physical and spiritual needs of called workers and their families and to help address issues between congregations and their called workers;
- Encouraging congregations and individuals in their financial support of the synod, primarily through Congregation Mission Offerings;
- Overseeing the work of the Ministry of Christian Giving, Communication Services, and Congregational Services;
- Promoting the synod's mission and ministry in the districts;
- Promoting the general welfare of the synod; and
- Providing counsel to the synod president as he carries out his responsibilities.

The COP is organized into three standing committees: the Doctrine Committee, the Congregations Committee, and the Called Worker Committee. Matters for discussion and action are assigned to one of these three committees, and the committees forward reports and recommendations to the entire COP for action.

The COP spends significant time at each meeting discussing specific questions of doctrine and practice and issues formal statements and guidelines in these areas as needed. The COP also addresses practical issues that affect congregations and called workers. The group functions primarily as a "conference," with district presidents and the synod presidium conferring with each other, both seeking and offering advice for the good of the synod and its people.

Overseeing matters of doctrine and practice

Each district president, along with his district officers and circuit pastors, is entrusted with the responsibility of overseeing doctrine and practice in his district, including carrying out discipline of called workers and congregations when Christian love and faithfulness to God's Word require it. To assure as much consistency as possible from district to district, the COP devotes considerable time in its meetings to discussing practical situations, providing a forum for mutual advice and encouragement.

The COP is fully committed to the biblical principle of Christian freedom in matters of adiaphora (things neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture); at the same time, it continues to encourage called workers and lay leaders to exercise their Christian freedom with wisdom, brotherly love, and extensive consultation with others in our fellowship who may be affected. The COP continues to encourage open and brotherly discussion of such things as worship style, outreach efforts, and congregational organization. The COP believes that such discussion, when done in a spirit of Christian love and based on an ongoing study of the Scriptures, is essential to maintaining our synodical unity, a correct understanding of Christian freedom, and our clear identity as a confessional Lutheran church body.

Doctrinal statements and pastoral briefs

Individually, the district presidents deal with matters of doctrine and practice and matters of discipline in their own districts. Collectively, from time to time the COP offers evangelical and pastoral guidance to called workers and members in the form of pastoral briefs on subjects that need addressing. Depending on the subject, the COP may make use of committees of people who are knowledgeable in the subject to study the issue and provide initial input for the pastoral brief.

Assignment of ministerial candidates

In its role as the Assignment Committee of the synod, the COP continually monitors the number of candidates graduating from Martin Luther College (MLC) and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS). Most assignments are made in May and June, with a smaller number of teacher and staff minister candidates assigned in December in conjunction with the mid-year graduation at MLC.

The Assignment Committee also assigns third-year seminary students to their place of vicarship. These assignments are made by the COP after extensive consultation with Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and the Board for Home Missions. Since the vicar year is actually a part of the seminary's program of education, the seminary provides input into the vicar assignment process to ensure that the candidates are placed in locations where they can receive thorough training in the practical aspects of the pastoral ministry. Candidates who are identified as having gifts for evangelism/outreach are often assigned to supervising pastors with proven gifts for the same so that the vicar's evangelism/outreach gifts may be developed. The Vicar in a Mission Setting program has worked well to provide outreach-ready graduates for assignment.

The Assignment Committee has put in place a procedure by which limited-time assignments can be made permanent prior to the May assignment day. In addition, the Assignment Committee has achieved its earlier stated goal of not assigning MLC graduates as school principals. A program to train currently-serving teachers as principals in a three-year process is currently in place.

Funding for the synod's mission and ministry

While the Synodical Council is responsible for formulating and recommending the synod's ministry program and the budget that supports it, the COP is responsible for funding the ministry program adopted by the Synod in Convention.

The COP operates under the principle that the foundational support for the mission and ministry of the synod is the Congregation Mission Offering (CMO). Other sources of financial support, such as gifts from individuals, bequests, grants from foundations, etc., are great blessings and play an important role in providing the resources necessary to carry out the synod's work. Gifts from these sources can vary widely from year to year; CMO, on the other hand, has been a more consistent and predictable source of financial support.

The COP works to encourage congregations to increase their CMO commitments and to meet or exceed those commitments by the end of the year. Prior to 2020, CMO had been relatively flat for 10 years. We are grateful that in each year since then congregations have exceeded the congregational subscriptions. That upward trend has continued in calendar year 2025. While CMO has continued to rise, the growth has not been keeping pace with inflation. The COP thanks our congregations for their commitment to CMO and for the generous way in which our members have provided gifts beyond expectations.

The COP has also authorized Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to begin a generosity campaign in support of its planned building project. The project will provide classrooms, remodeling of current space for faculty offices, remodeling of portions of the library, and a gathering space attached to the gymnasium.

Luther Preparatory School has also been authorized to begin a generosity campaign for its planned auditorium and music center.

Meetings with the Doctrine Committee of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod

The COP Doctrine Committee meets annually with the Doctrine Committee of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod to discuss doctrinal issues and other subjects of mutual interest.

Development of a new theology curriculum for WELS schools

The development of a new theology curriculum for students in WELS early childhood ministries, elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools is progressing. The COP asked the Commission on Lutheran schools to form a task force to oversee this work. Ms. Melanie Giddings serves in a full-time position to work with the task force and to serve as the coordinator of this project. The project will be carried out in phases, with the first phase being the early childhood level.

Calls issued and accepted

The COP called Pastor Aaron Glaeske to serve as a deferred Christian giving counselor for the Northern Wisconsin District. He has accepted the call.

COP liaison with WELS-affiliated ministries and organizations

Dozens of ministries are carried out by WELS members in organizations referred to as "affiliated ministries." Because WELS-affiliated ministries do their work among our WELS members and congregations, the COP believes that close communication and cooperation between these ministries and the COP is vital. A three-man standing special committee of the COP makes regular contact with the leaders of these ministries to accomplish this goal on an ongoing basis.

Guidance for congregations that are considering merging or closing

Because of demographic changes, a growing number of congregations in the synod are considering whether to merge with one or more neighboring congregations or to close altogether. Other congregations may also begin to consider this as a way of exercising good stewardship of God's resources. The COP has asked Congregational Services to provide counsel and guidance to congregations as they make these decisions.

Liaison committees

To facilitate good communication, the COP has several teams of district presidents who serve as liaisons to various groups and entities. Pastor Daniel Leyrer, president of the Southeastern Wisconsin District, and Pastor Daniel Lange, president of the Pacific Northwest, have been appointed to serve on the Affiliated Ministry Liaison Committee. Pastor Snowden Sims, president of the Michigan District, has been appointed to serve on the Liaison Committee to Martin Luther College.

Review process for those seeking to re-enter the ministry

From time to time, individuals who have left the public ministry desire to re-enter ministerial service. For them to receive a divine call, they must be declared to be a *candidatus reverendi ministerii* (that is, CRM, a candidate for the Holy Ministry, eligible to be called as a pastor, teacher, or staff minister). That declaration comes after the candidate has gone through a process led by the district presidium. For consistency from district to district, the COP has adopted a standardized interview framework and supporting evaluation tools to assist the district presidia in carrying out this process. This is intended to provide a consistent, pastoral, and thorough approach while allowing flexibility for the varied circumstances surrounding resignation (for example, health, vocational transition, for the good of ministry, or for cause).

Election procedures for synod officers

Delegates to the 2025 synod convention approved a change in the procedure for the election of the synod president, vice presidents, and recording secretary. Currently, for the office of president and second vice president, delegates at the convention are asked to nominate one person for the position being filled, with the top five nominees comprising the ballot for the president and top three for the second vice president (first vice president and secretary in alternate conventions). Under the system that had been in place, delegates were asked to vote for one person on the ballot, even though they had little time to be informed of the nominees' biographies. The voting continued until one person received the majority of votes cast. Once a person was elected, he was expected to make a decision to accept or decline the call within 24 hours. This process required a very quick decision and did not provide time for a person to give full consideration to the call or to consult with others about it.

The new procedure will request nominations from delegates well in advance of the convention in late spring or early summer. Along with that request, the delegates will receive a job description for the office. This will give delegates the opportunity to gather information about nominees. Each delegate may nominate one candidate, and the top five nominees will form the ballot for president, and the top three will form the ballot for second vice president in 2027 and first vice president and secretary in 2029. Once the ballot is determined, it will be sent to the delegates in advance of the convention, along with the candidates' biographical and service information. It will also be made available to the synod members. Delegates will then have the opportunity to give due consideration to the candidates who have been nominated. Those whose names are on the ballot will also have the time to consider a possible call to serve and to discuss that possibility with family and other trusted advisors. The actual election will take place at the synod convention.

It's assumed that this method of election of district officers will also take place at the district conventions in 2028.

Vacancies

As of the April meeting of the COP, there were 177 pastoral vacancies in the synod, with 151 of those being parish pastor positions. The 2026 seminary graduating class will provide candidates numbering in the mid-40s, meaning that the pastoral vacancy situation will improve somewhat in the near term. In view of this continuing shortage, the COP asks every WELS congregation and member to encourage young men to consider training for the pastoral ministry.

A similar high vacancy rate is taking place in teacher positions. WELS school enrollments have increased significantly in the last two years—a real blessing—but that has caused a need for more teachers than are currently available. It's estimated that even after teacher candidates are assigned at Martin Luther College in May, there will still be more than 100 vacancies in teaching positions. The Commission on Lutheran Schools has been working with congregations to find ways to fill the vacancies. At the same time, Martin Luther College has been redoubling its efforts to recruit both traditional and non-traditional teacher candidates. It will also be exploring other ideas to provide more teacher candidates. As in the case of pastors, those in the best position to recruit and encourage young people for the teaching ministry are congregational members, called workers, parents, and grandparents.

The shortage of called workers has complicated the task of providing call lists to congregations and has also resulted in called workers receiving frequent calls. The COP continues to discuss ways to alleviate these pressures until more candidates become available in the coming years.

175th anniversary of the synod

The COP authorized a special synodwide thank offering as a part of the synod's 175th anniversary celebration last year. As of this writing, individuals and congregations brought more than \$450,000 in special anniversary gifts. The gifts were designated for North American ministry, international ministry, and worker training.

Graduate assistants for district presidents

When assistants to district presidents are assigned, the COP will assign those men to permanent assignments. The exception will be when graduate assistants are assigned to a district when the location is not yet known at the time of assignments (because a new district president will be chosen in the summer). In that case, when those graduate assistants are assigned, it will be for a one-year renewable call.

Convention fees

Districts will now collect convention delegate fees as a part of their district fees.

Bible translations for the new theology curriculum

The COP determined that the new theology curriculum will offer two translation choices—the New International Version and the Evangelical Heritage Version. These choices were also offered in the most recent catechism and will enable congregations to use the same translation in both the catechism and the theology curriculum.

Thanks for faithful service

Pastors Charles Westra, Joel Zank, Don Patterson, and Doug Free will be completing their service on the COP at their respective district conventions this summer. Their successors will be elected at those district conventions. We thank God and these men for their faithful service and pray for God's continued blessing on their ministry.

Pastor Kurt Lueneburg, director of the Ministry of Christian Giving, will be retiring in July. We thank God for his 21 years of faithful service as a part of the Ministry of Christian Giving.

New COP representatives on the Synodical Council

Pastors Charles Westra, Joel Zank, and Phil Hirsch have completed their service as COP reps on the Synodical Council. We thank them for their service. The COP chose three new representatives on the Synodical Council—Pastors Joel Heckendorf, Dennis Klatt, and Michael Seifert. They will begin their service on the Synodical Council at its November meeting.

Assistance for presidents of the Northern Wisconsin and Western Wisconsin Districts

Several years ago, the Synodical Council recognized the need for assistance to the presidents of the three large Wisconsin Districts. Such assistance was needed because of the amount of time needed for processing the large number of teacher calls. The first step in providing this assistance was taken when the Southeastern Wisconsin District was provided with a full-time assistant. In April, the COP decided to seek approval from the Synodical Council to call a half-time position who would work with the presidents of the Northern and Western Wisconsin District presidents to provide similar help in the calling and vetting process for teachers. The Synodical Council will consider this request at its April 2026 meeting. If that request is granted, the Northern Wisconsin and Western Wisconsin Districts will begin calling for this half-time position in May 2026.

Looking ahead

- The COP will continue in its role of providing supervision of doctrine and practice, as well as assisting congregations in the calling process.
- The COP will work with Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to recruit and train future called workers.
- The COP will be working with Congregational Services and the Commission on Lutheran Schools to develop resources for helping churches and schools implement policies and procedures to help prevent sexual abuse and to provide help to victims of such abuse.
- The last Synod in Convention adopted a new procedure for electing synod officers. The COP will be establishing a process to carry out elections in a way that is helpful for delegates in making informed decisions as they choose these new leaders. The process will include providing expanded job descriptions as well as identifying important skills needed to carry out their duties.
- The COP will address questions relating to congregational policy and organizational structure.
- The COP will encourage congregations to grow in Christian stewardship and in financial support of the synod and its mission.
- The COP will look for ways to assist the synod in maintaining its identity as a confessional Lutheran synod and to communicate our synod's beliefs to the outside world in a clear and loving manner.
- The COP will work with the Commission on Congregational Counseling and other entities of Congregational Services to help congregations grow stronger and healthier through the means of grace.
- The COP will continue to review the calling process and identify ways in which it can be improved.
- Luther Preparatory School has extended an invitation for the synod to hold its 2027 convention on its campus.

The COP invites all members of the synod to join in giving thanks to a gracious God, who has blessed our synod with his pure Word, who has permitted us both to hear and proclaim the saving gospel, and who has united us as one in Christ—in faith, in mission, and in Christian love.

Rev. Mark Schroeder, reporter

Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president and chairman

Rev. Joel Voss, WELS first vice president

Rev. John Bortulin, WELS second vice president

Rev. Doug Free, Dakota-Montana District

Rev. Joel Heckendorf, Arizona-California District

Rev. Philip Hirsch, Nebraska District

Rev. Michael Jensen, Western Wisconsin District

Rev. Dennis Klatt, Minnesota District

Rev. Daniel Lange, Pacific Northwest District

Rev. Daniel Leyrer, Southeastern Wisconsin District

Rev. Don Patterson, South Central District

Rev. Michael Seifert, North Atlantic District

Rev. Snowden Sims, Michigan District

Rev. Charles Westra, South Atlantic District

Rev. Joel Zank, Northern Wisconsin District

Advisory:

Rev. Tyler Peil, WELS recording secretary

Support Committee

Our calling

The elders who lead well should be considered worthy of double honor, especially the ones who work hard in the word and doctrine" (1 Timothy 5:17 EHV). In our Wisconsin Synod, one way we seek to show such honor to those who serve in gospel ministry is through the WELS Support Committee. This committee has the privilege of providing financial assistance to retired called workers and/or surviving spouses who do not have adequate financial resources for everyday living expenses. The following factors guide our committee as we seek to carry out our calling:

- The fund is not an entitlement program.
- The fund is not an extension of the synod's pension plan.
- The financial assistance received is a charitable gift from the synod to those in need.
- The fund is not established to provide temporary assistance for those who resigned from the ministry.
- The fund does not grant financial assistance to those who need assisted living and nursing home care.
- The fund is not intended to be the main source of income. Assets and other means of income are expected to be used first, with Support Committee assistance supplementing those resources.

Our current situation

The Support Committee is composed of five district first vice presidents of WELS. The first vice president in every district is the contact person for the Support Committee. Each year the district first vice presidents reach out to local pastors, circuit pastors, and district officers to request their help in making sure the

Support Committee is made aware of retired called workers and/or their surviving spouses who may need financial help. Once a possible recipient is identified, a simple application form is used to help determine the level of need. The Support Committee then reviews all the applications received and must approve them before assistance begins. The annual amount budgeted for this work is \$315,000. Currently, 21 individuals or couples throughout the synod are receiving support. It also often happens that during the course of the year new requests are made to the Support Committee. What a blessing that our Lord allowed our synod to take care of all those who are seeking assistance.

A look ahead

The Support Committee will continue to provide assistance to retired called workers and/or their surviving spouses as long as synod finances make it possible. Please speak with your pastor, circuit pastor, or district first vice president if you wish to inquire about gifts through the Support Committee.

Subscriptions to *Forward in Christ*, *Meditations*, and *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* are also provided to those recipients who request them. The Support Committee thanks Northwestern Publishing House for covering the costs of these subscriptions.

Rev. Brett Brauer, reporter

Rev. Brett Brauer, chairman
Rev. Michael Enderle
Rev. Nathanael Scharf
Rev. Aaron Steinbrenner
Rev. Jon Zabell

Translation Liaison Committee

Our calling

The Translation Liaison Committee (TLC) consists of four parish pastors and three professors who were appointed by the Conference of Presidents in 2013. The purpose of the TLC is “to evaluate major Bible translations; to communicate with their editors and publishers; to offer, when appropriate, suggestions to improve such translations; and to share its findings with the synod at large” (2013 *WELS Proceedings*, p. 68).

Our current situation

New International Version

In May 2025, the TLC submitted 25 more translation suggestions to the Committee on Bible Translation (CBT)—the 15-person committee that oversees the text of the New International Version (NIV). That brings the total number of suggestions submitted by the TLC in the past 10 years to 144. Once again, the suggestions were received with thanks. Dr. Douglas Moo wrote: “We on CBT appreciate the well-presented proposals to improve the NIV that you send our way. We continue to meet annually to consider changes to the NIV; eventually these changes will appear in a new edition (no timeline for that yet).”

Moo also informed us that he is no longer the chair of the CBT, after serving in that position for 18 years. He remains on the committee, but Dr. Simon Gathercole has taken over as chair.

English Standard Version

In 2025, the English Standard Version (ESV) incorporated a few changes—the first revision of the ESV since 2016. The changes were very minor, in keeping with the desire of the ESV to maintain a stable text. Changes were made in 42 verses involving a total of 68 words. Also some footnotes and punctuation were changed.

The Translation Liaison Committee published a report about these changes in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* (Fall 2025, 304-305), authored by Pastor Kenneth Cherney, a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Crossway Publishers explains the revision and gives a list of the text changes at esv.org/about/2025-updates.

New Living Translation

The Translation Liaison Committee recently learned that a thorough review of the New Living Translation (NLT) is in the works under the direction of the Bible Translation Committee for the NLT. The review involves a large number of evangelical scholars and is expected to take seven years or so.

When we reached out to learn more about the review, Bible Translation Committee chairman Mark Taylor said that the Bible Translation Committee would be happy to receive suggestions from the TLC. So, the Translation Liaison Committee is making a modest effort to share some suggestions. We are looking at catechism proof passages in the NLT, and we expect to write up 10-20 suggestions by the summer of 2026.

We sense that the New Living Translation is not widely known or used in WELS. However, for many years the NLT has been one of the top selling Bibles in the USA. The sales ranking for 2025 by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association lists the sales of translations in this order: 1) NIV, 2) ESV, 3) KJV (King James Version), 4) NLT, 5) NKJV (New King James Version), 6) CSB (Christian Standard Bible). The NLT is the go-to Bible for evangelical Christians who want a Bible that is very easy to read.

WELS Christians may have a negative image of the NLT if they mentally associate it with the Living Bible, which was a paraphrase of the Bible popular in the 1970s. The NLT is very different from the Living Bible, however. The NLT is a serious translation first produced in 1996 and later revised in 2004. As a translation, the NLT does insist on clear, natural English, following a translation philosophy that is more “thought-for-thought” than “word-for-word.”

A look ahead

As reported in the *2025 Book of Reports and Memorials*, the TLC is hoping to do some writing about Bible translation and to update the WELS website about Bible translation. We continue to work on these goals, although they are being delayed some by our current work on the NLT.

Anyone who has a suggestion in regard to Bible translation is invited to share it with a member of the TLC. It is a privilege for the TLC to represent WELS with the major Bible translations prepared outside of our fellowship, as it is a blessing from God for all of us to have so many high-quality Bible translation options.

Prof. Thomas Nass, reporter

Prof. Thomas Nass, chairman
Rev. Brett Brauer
Prof. Kenneth Cherney, Jr.
Prof. Joel Fredrich
Rev. Geoffrey Kieta
Rev. Glenn Schwanke
Rev. Paul Zell

Continuing Education for Called Workers Committee

Our calling

The Continuing Education for Called Workers (CECW) Committee coordinates our synod's efforts to assist called workers to grow in faith, knowledge, and skill to carry out their unique vocations. Growth for our called workers is not about advancing in a career, gaining recognition, or increasing compensation. Growth for our called workers is about growing in the gospel to be clearer presenters of God's mercy wherever God has called, whether that is in the home, church, school, or community.

The committee works to help synodical leaders and calling bodies clearly understand why it is wise for calling bodies to invest in the continued growth of their called workers. To that end, the CECW also seeks to urge lay leaders to understand the importance of investing in assisting current called workers toward growth in letting Christ's love be ever more clearly seen.

The CECW includes representatives from the Board for Ministerial Education, Martin Luther College (MLC), Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS), and Congregational Services. By the synod's constitution, our chairman is the first vice president of the synod, and we report to the Conference of Presidents (COP). Our report is divided into the CECW's work for pastors, for teachers, and for staff ministers.

Pastors

Our current situation

We thank God for the good work being done by so many entities in our church body, encouraging pastors to grow. A considerable part of that work has been entrusted to WLS, which carries it out through Grow in Grace. Grow in Grace seeks to partner with pastors to support their spiritual and professional growth through informal (non-credit) and formal (credit) continuing education. To support informal study by pastors of our fellowship, Grow in Grace provides the following: a monthly digital newsletter called *Grace Notes*, a monthly digital newsletter called *Four Branches*, periodic book reviews called *Shepherd's Study*, study packets, a 3-year mentoring program called Pastor Partners, and Celebrations of Ministry retreats for men who have served in the pastoral ministry for 3, 10, 25, and 35 years. Grow in Grace spends approximately \$2,100/year to make thousands of theological journals available to all WLS alumni through the AtlaSerials Database on the WLS website under "Resources" and then "Library." This is a valuable resource for both informal and formal continuing education.

Grow in Grace offers formal courses in an accredited Master of Sacred Theology (STM) degree program. Many pastors take courses for credit without intending to pursue a degree. The best time for pastors

to commit to earning an STM degree is after a few years of service but before they reach 20 years in public ministry. An STM degree can be earned in one of nine focus areas: Biblical Theology—New Testament, Biblical Theology—Old Testament, Church History, Education, Missiology and Evangelism, Pastoral Care, Pastoral Leadership, Preaching and Worship, and Systematic Theology. Pastors may take STM for-credit courses through on-campus Summer Quarter in even-numbered years. They may take courses for credit or for audit during a week of Winterim in January. In 2027, satellite events in the districts will not be for credit. The goal is to have 80 to 100 pastors on campus for Summer Quarter 2026. Qualifying credits from partner institutions and guided research under the supervision of an advisor may also contribute to an STM degree.

In 2015, the Pastor Partners mentoring program marked 20 years of service to pastors. In those years, more than 220 pastors were mentored by a nearby pastor-mentor. Young pastors have expressed appreciation for the program and for their mentors, who helped them navigate the sometimes-difficult first three years of ministry. Prof. em. John Brenner serves as the coordinator for Pastor Partners, working with a Mentor Leadership Team of seven pastors.

Former WLS Prof. Rich Gurgel prepared three workbooks/study packets to help pastors plan for growth. “Guard What Has Been Entrusted to Your Care” encourages pastors to guard the gifts of time, faith, health, and brothers/sisters. “Reclaiming Our Christ-Centered Lutheran Devotional Heritage” helps pastors strengthen their devotional life. “Fan God’s Gifts into Flame” helps pastors approach planning for growth from a biblical perspective. WLS continues to offer these resources on its website.

About two dozen parish pastors partner with Shepherd’s Study to share two book reviews each month. The editors of *Shepherd’s Study* have also recorded and published more than 20 podcasts—discussions with pastors about the books they reviewed. The Four Branches is a monthly e-newsletter that offers pastors a brief article in each of the four areas of theological study. About 1,100 pastor-recipients open each newsletter with a 37 percent click-through rate.

A look ahead

Under the leadership of WLS Prof. Brad Wordell, Grow in Grace will work with local circuit pastors to seek their input and provide formal continuing education that supports informal continuing education in their circuits. The WLS faculty and valued adjunct instructors will continue to provide quality resources, courses, and events that serve the needs of WELS pastors and congregations.

Teachers

Our current situation

WELS teachers or aspiring WELS teachers who need ministry or professional certification should contact Dr. John Meyer at MLC, meyerjd@mlc-wels.edu, 507-354-3221 ext 398, to determine the next steps in their course of study.

To encourage development in educational leadership, WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools (CLS) provides financial and professional development support to men and women in the Principal Training Program, Director Training Program, Principal Credential Cohort, Director Credential Cohort, and Director Apprentice mentoring programs. For more information, write to lutheralschools@wels.net.

CLS encourages all teachers to have a Ministry Development Plan. CLS also continues to support federations and individual schools desiring training to support the Ministerial Growth and Evaluation Process that was launched in 2020.

MLC strives to offer online and on-location professional development for WELS teachers that is relevant, high-quality, and affordable. MLC does not offer any on-campus learning for teachers in the field.

Below are some highlights:

- **Master's degrees and certificates:** Teachers can earn ministry-focused master's degrees in Education, Educational Administration, Special Education, and Theology, with emphases in areas of instruction, technology, leadership, and special education. Teachers with a bachelor's degree can take individual courses or earn certificates with options to stack them toward degrees.
- **WELS teaching ministry certification:** Teachers who are currently called or who wish to be called can complete online theology training to serve as ministers of the gospel in permanent calls.
- **Early childhood teachers:** Ministry and professional support for early childhood ministries and those whom they employ is available both online and on-location. Support includes free in-services, Child Development Associate (CDA) training, an associate degree, and ministry certification.
- **APPLE:** The Alternative Pathway for Professional Licensure Eligibility (APPLE) is an online competency-based program for non-traditional learners desiring an elementary degree and license.
- **Satellite courses:** Schools and districts regularly schedule face-to-face courses with MLC instructors.
- **OpenLearning@MLC:** This is a free, online, synchronous conference offered two days in June with additional Power Hours during the school year. Topics focus on contemporary issues in WELS schools. On June 16–17, the topics will include Lutheran school culture and teacher burnout.

A look ahead

MLC will be overhauling its online theology courses with a student-centered focus for WELS Teaching Ministry Certification.

The CLS annually hosts a summer school leader orientation seminar for new and interim leaders in WELS schools at the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry. As school leader vacancies approach 20 percent, that seminar will be planned for the foreseeable future.

Staff ministers

Our current situation

Staff minister continuing education begins with the annual staff minister conference and its opportunities for networking and spiritual growth. That conference is held every fall on a three-year cycle: (1) At Martin Luther College, (2) in one of the districts in the Midwest, and (3) in a district outside of the Midwest. The 2025 conference was held in Oxford, Fla.

Martin Luther College's Master of Arts in Theological Studies (MATS) program is recommended for ministry-certified staff ministers and teachers. It is 100 percent online, so it is accessible by men and women regardless of where they live. This program contributes to the spiritual and professional growth of individuals by equipping them to be reflective, competent, and dedicated workers in the kingdom through advanced studies in Scripture, doctrine, church history, and ministry.

A look ahead

As congregations make their ministry plans in view of the ongoing shortages of called workers, they might consider calling local WELS people with an appropriate background to serve provisionally in their home congregations. Options exist for such persons to seek staff ministry certification while already serving. Interested individuals or congregations can contact MLC at ministrycert@mlc-wels.edu for further information.

Prof. John Meyer, reporter

Rev. Joel Voss, chairman, WELS first vice president

Rev. Charles Vannieuwenhoven, secretary, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education

Rev. Jonathan Hein, coordinator of WELS Congregational Services

Prof. John Meyer, director of continuing education and graduate studies, Martin Luther College

Prof. Lawrence Olson, director of staff ministry, Martin Luther College

Teacher James Rademan, director of WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools

Prof. Bradley Wordell, director of continuing education, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Commission on Inter-Church Relations

Our calling

The WELS Bylaws charge the Commission on Inter-Church Relations (CICR) to “serve under the Conference of Presidents by representing the synod in doctrinal discussions with other church bodies who are, or are not, in fellowship with the synod” and to “keep itself informed on the doctrinal trends in other church bodies.” This function is in keeping with the object and purpose of the synod: to “extend the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church” (WELS Constitution, Article IV).

To carry out its calling, the CICR meets twice each year for regular meetings, at which time it receives updates about sister synods throughout the world. It also reviews doctrinal statements and constitutions from groups recommended for fellowship by our World Missions One Teams and responds to questions from them. Some members of the CICR represent WELS at the conventions of sister synods. Others meet regularly with our Board for World Missions One Teams (as detailed further in this report) and travel to foreign countries to assist church bodies that are seeking to take confessional Lutheran stances. Some commission members also travel to attend national conventions and regional gatherings of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC). Finally, commission members stay abreast of happenings in other Lutheran church bodies around the world through periodical reading and personal interaction.

Our current situation

The origins of the Commission on Inter-Church Relations go back to the days leading up to WELS' suspension of fellowship with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod in 1961. In the early years, this commission was occupied mainly in doctrinal discussions with other Lutheran church bodies in the Western world. Gradually work has shifted to discussion partners predominantly in the non-Western parts of the world, where the gospel is bearing much fruit. As a result, the CICR now works closely with the WELS Board for World Missions (BWM) in assisting established and emerging church bodies from

around the globe who are looking for fellowship with WELS and/or for assistance in educating their pastors in confessional Lutheranism. Many of the inquiring groups are either breaking off from established church bodies or seeking fellowship and assistance after leaving other church federations. Some are self-supporting church bodies, while others require mission assistance.

Pastor Larry Schlomer, administrator of WELS World Missions, also serves as part-time CICR administrator. CICR members are assigned to work in tandem with the BWM One Teams. The CICR representatives on the One Teams represent the inter-church perspective on the team. They attend the One Team meetings most appropriate for each team and, through that connection, have a voice in how WELS interacts with the various sister churches in a team's designated area of the world. They provide doctrinal guidance when the members of a One Team respond to inquiries from churches interested in establishing fellowship ties with WELS. To accomplish this work, the CICR has developed a four-stage toolkit containing guidelines for the various visits, interviews, doctrinal discussions, and official communication that take place between WELS representatives and church bodies that are seeking fellowship with WELS. As the discussions with such a church pick up momentum, the CICR representative hopes to make at least one (sometimes more) onsite visit to the church as it moves into stages two through four of the fellowship toolkit. It has resulted in increasing blessings in our communication with the church bodies throughout the world with whom we are now in fellowship or are in the process of establishing fellowship. These are CICR representatives to the various One Teams:

- One Africa Team: Prof. Bradley Wordell, Pastor Jonathan Bilitz
- Asia-Oceania Team: Pastor John Koelpin, Prof. Nicolas Schmoller
- Europe Team: Prof. James Danell
- One Latin America Team: Pastor Daniel Voigt

Here's a brief overview of our work on the various continents.

Africa: The CICR continues to be in contact with our long-time partners on the continent of Africa, church bodies in Malawi, Zambia, Nigeria, and Cameroon, as well as with our more recent partners, the Lutheran Church of Ethiopia, the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ–Kenya, and the Obadiah Lutheran Synod of Uganda. In 2025, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod declared fellowship with The Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of Kenya (ELDK) and is sponsoring it for membership in the CELC at this summer's convention in June.

We are seeing an increasing number of church bodies in Africa that are coming into contact with WELS and want to learn more about confessional Lutheranism. The One Africa Team has begun discussions with the Confessional Lutheran Synod of Uganda (CLSU); the Community of Evangelical Lutheran Churches of Central Africa in the Democratic Republic of Congo (CEELAC); and *La Mission Évangélique Luthérienne Au Congo* (MELC). All three of these church bodies are currently in stages two or three of the CICR's four-stage process that works toward the goal of church fellowship. The One Africa Team and CICR are also working with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Augsburg Confession–Uganda; *L'église Évangélique Luthérienne Du Burkina Faso*; Trinity Lutheran Congregation (Cameroon); and Lamb of God Lutheran Church in Buchanan, Liberia. CICR members Prof. Bradley Wordell and Pastor Jonathan Bilitz are working with our African missionaries to facilitate these discussions.

At this past synod convention, WELS delayed a declaration of fellowship with the African Missions Evangelical Church–Tanzania (AMEC). The CICR and One Africa Team continue to work carefully and prayerfully toward this goal.

Asia-Oceania: WELS is working with sister churches in Japan, Indonesia, India, East Asia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea, in addition to the mission work being done by our Board for World Missions in this vast area. We are also working to establish church fellowship with numerous church bodies in various countries in the Asia-Pacific rim, though safety concerns prevent us from sharing exact locations. For many years, we have been teaching confessional Lutheranism to The Hmong Evangelical Lutheran Church of Vietnam which is now in the third of our four-stage process toward declaring fellowship.

Certain factors make the work of church relations in this part of the world particularly difficult. One is the vast diversity of people groups in Asia and the Pacific Rim. Another is the difficulty in travel and communication, which is often compounded by an inability to gain entrance/residence into numerous countries. The CICR is assisting the Asia-Oceania Team in building relationships with a number of these groups as members are able. A growing number of groups we are coming into contact with are increasingly interested in coming under confessional influence.

The Asia-Oceania Team missionaries divide their work into three areas: explore, support, and train. CICR member Prof. Nicolas Schmoller focuses on the “explore” function, which considers areas of work where we may anticipate groups or churches with whom we can begin the four-stage process. CICR member Pastor John Koelpin focuses on the “support” function, which continues building those relationships with groups with whom we have begun the four-stage process. We pray that the Lord continue to bless our work and will continue to open the door for gospel ministry to be done, for more pastors to be trained, and for the confessional Lutheran presence in Asia to be strengthened.

Europe: In Europe, we enjoy many longstanding relationships with churches and congregations with whom we are in fellowship, including church bodies in Norway, Sweden, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Ukraine, Portugal, Albania, Russia, Bulgaria, and Czechia. The CICR is continuing to nurture a relationship with Manchester Lutheran Church in the northern part of England. Many of these church bodies are small and have limited resources. One of the major challenges they face, as we do in WELS, is continuing to train the next generation of pastors to shepherd their congregations. Our missionary, Pastor Luke Wolfgramm, continues to keep up relations with most of our sister churches in Europe, including doing some theological training and instruction.

Our sister church in Portugal has used its language connections to do mission work in Brazil. This past December, the Lutheran Church of Portugal (ILP), along with our Europe Team representative to Portugal and Brazil, Prof. Ken Cherney, traveled to Brazil to ordain a man named Gilberto into pastoral ministry. The ILP currently has three areas in which it is focusing its mission outreach to this vast country.

This past May, there was a CELC Europe meeting hosted in Nerchau, Germany. Thirty-eight people from ten countries were in attendance and, among other things, considered several essays on anthropology (the area of theology on mankind).

One major item worth noting from our sister church bodies is from the *Evangelisch Lutherische Freikirche* (ELFK) of Germany. This year the ELFK and WELS are celebrating 150 years of fellowship. WELS President Mark Schroeder will preach for the Sunday worship service. Prof. Jim Danell, the Europe Team liaison to the ELFK, will also be in attendance. Throughout this century-and-a-half, our synods have worshiped together, worked and collaborated together, shared exchange students at each other’s worker training schools, and supported one another in many ways. We greatly benefit from the resources and work they are doing in Europe to organize and support many CELC functions in Europe. We are so thankful for this long-standing fellowship that we share with our brothers and sisters in Germany. May the Lord continue to bless and expand this fellowship with the ELFK as well as with our other sister churches in Europe.

Latin America: We continue to interact with and encourage our sister churches in Mexico, Peru, and Chile, as well as *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*, which reaches out to all Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America. This group of churches grew out of the past WELS World Missions work and WELS' *Academia Cristo* online Christian training program. Among the groups recently accepted into the fellowship of *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional* are the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Church in Puerto Rico, as well as a new church plant in both Bolivia and Mexico. The model of church planting developed with *Academia Cristo* presents exciting opportunities as well as unique challenges, such as how congregations are to be formed and pastored. The missionaries of One Latin America and representatives of the CICR have developed a strategy with *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional* to call a *sembrador* ("planter") to serve at a church plant until it calls its own fully trained pastor.

This past fall, the CICR welcomed Pastor Daniel Voigt to be its representative on One Latin America and to these churches in Latin America. He was able to attend the *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional* synod convention in Medellin, Colombia, in October to meet face to face with some of those in our fellowship. In November Pastor Paul Biedenbender and our seminary's Prof. Samuel Degner attended the convention of the *Iglesia Evangelica Luterana Confesional—Mexico* in Monterrey. We pray for the Lord to bless the strategies and labors in *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional* and also Pastor Voigt's service on the CICR and to our sister churches in Latin America. The CICR is thankful to have a man on the commission who is functional in Spanish.

North America: In the United States, WELS has enjoyed fellowship with our sister church body, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), for over a century. The CICR and COP Doctrine Committee interact with the ELS on a regular basis to foster the unity of faith that we treasure with this sister synod. Before completing his final term on the CICR as the ELS liaison, Pastor Thomas Fricke attended the 2025 ELS convention. The focus of the convention was on the anniversaries of the Council of Nicaea (1700th) and the publishing of Martin Luther's *On the Bondage of the Will* (500th), including an essay presented on the latter. New CICR member Pastor David Barkow will be working with the ELS going forward. In October, he attended the 2025 Reformation lectures hosted at Bethany Lutheran College, and plans to attend the 2026 ELS convention this summer. The Doctrine Committee of the WELS Conference of Presidents and the ELS Doctrine Committee held their annual meeting in January, and the biennial ELS/WELS Forum will be held this fall.

In keeping with the directives of previous WELS conventions, synod leaders and CICR representatives continue to hold annual, informal talks with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), with whom we do not share church fellowship. These informal talks are exploratory conversations between representatives of the church bodies to learn about each other's doctrine and determine whether official discussions are appropriate. (Formal talks are officially authorized doctrinal discussions in which appointed delegates speak on behalf of their church bodies to determine whether there is sufficient agreement for church fellowship.)

These informal talks, which have been held annually since 2012, have included representatives of WELS, the ELS, and the LCMS. This past December, President Mark Schroeder, along with WELS representatives Prof. David Bivens, Pastor John Bortulin, Prof. em. John Brenner, Pastor Michael Jensen, Prof. em. Thomas Nass, Pastor Paul Prange, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary President Earle Treptow, and Pastor Joel Voss once again met with representatives of the LCMS and ELS in Jacksonville, Fla. While the meetings allowed for general updates from each church body, the majority of the time was spent discussing the historical events that led to the ELS and WELS suspending fellowship with the LCMS in 1955 and 1961, respectively. A 1961 document entitled "Fellowship in Its Necessary Context of the Doctrine of the Church (Statement of the Overseas Committee)" that was presented by Dr. Henry Hamann Jr. in 1961 and is found in the Proceedings of the *Recessed Forty-Sixth Convention of the Synodical Conference*,

1961, was read in advance and served as a base text for further conversation. The attendees from each synod offered evaluations, reactions, and perspectives to the document. The conversation also allowed for discussion of the events and doctrinal positions, such as joint prayer and each synod's understanding of prayer fellowship, that led to the ELS and WELS suspending fellowship with the LCMS and the eventual dissolution of the Synodical Conference. Plans are in place for a December 2026 meeting. In addition, the CICR intends to send a representative as an official WELS observer to the LCMS convention, which will be held July 18–23, in Phoenix, Ariz.

Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference

The CELC is the worldwide association of churches committed to the teaching of confessional Lutheranism, of which WELS is a member. The twelfth triennial convention of the CELC will be held on May 29–June 1, 2026, in Lusaka, Zambia, hosted by the Lutheran Church of Central Africa–Zambia. This will be the first CELC convention on the continent of Africa. The convention delegates and guests will hear essays on the following topics: an exegesis of 1 Corinthians 14 (David Bivens, WELS), baptism (David Kamwata, Lutheran Church of Central Africa–Zambia), the Formula of Concord V: Law & Gospel (Kalyan Gollapalli, Lutheran Mission of Salvation–India), pietism (Holger Weiß, *Evangelisch Lutherische Freikirche*, Germany), and the strategy and success of *Academia Cristo* (Henry Herrera, *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*, Latin America).

The convention expects to have about 100 participants from more than 30 countries. God-willing, the worship and study of God's Word together will be an experience participants will never forget. Attending the convention as voting delegates for WELS will be President Mark Schroeder and First Vice President Joel Voss. Convention attendance will be greatly aided by the CELC Travel Assistance Fund, which will allow many delegates to attend who otherwise would have found the travel costs prohibitive.

Three church bodies are applying for membership at this 2026 convention. They are the Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of Kenya, the *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional* made up of churches in a variety of Latin American countries, and the Obadiah Lutheran Synod of Uganda. The convention is expected to remove two churches from membership: the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Church of Puerto Rico, which joined *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*, and the Bulgarian Lutheran Church, which no longer exists. Going into the convention, the CELC numbers 34 church bodies; presumably at the end, the CELC will number 35 churches.

The convention is expected to approve an additional article in the CELC *Eternal Word* doctrinal statement—Article IX on the Triune God. Also, a proposal will be considered that the CELC hire a part-time communications manager to give relief to the CELC president as the size and activities of the CELC have increased.

Another important feature of CELC's work is that of the Global Theological Education Commission under the leadership of CICR member Prof. Brad Wordell. This commission exists to facilitate the discussion of Lutheran theological education in and among CELC churches at pre-seminary, seminary, and continuing education levels, and to promote the sharing of curricula, Lutheran materials, and sound pedagogical practices between CELC seminaries worldwide.

See celc.info to review the *Eternal Word* doctrinal statement and other information about the CELC. People interested in regular updates about CELC churches are encouraged to sign up for the CELC news briefs through a link on the CELC website.

A look ahead

This is an exciting time for the CICR. God is blessing WELS with many new fellowship relationships in our increasingly global world. As a result, we are beginning to think about how we need to adapt our structure and function to best serve brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world as we work in close cooperation with our Board for World Missions.

At its spring meeting, the CICR elected Prof. David Bivens to serve as its new chairman. We ask for God's blessing as he begins this important work and thank Prof. Jim Danell for his time serving in this role.

Rev. Joel Naumann, reporter

Prof. James Danell, chairman

Prof. Nicolas Schmoller, vice chairman

Rev. Joel Naumann, secretary

Rev. David Barkow

Rev. Jonathan Bilitz

Prof. David Bivens

Rev. John Koelpin

Prof. Joel Otto

Rev. Daniel Voigt

Prof. Bradley Wordell

Ex officio:

Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president

Advisory:

Rev. Larry M. Schlomer, administrator of WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations
and WELS Board for World Missions

Rev. Earle Treptow, president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Rev. Joel Voss, WELS first vice president

Ministry of Christian Giving

Our calling

WELS Ministry of Christian Giving (MCG) serves on behalf of the Conference of Presidents (COP) to encourage every WELS member to “excel in the grace of giving” through Christ (2 Corinthians 8:7,9). It is our privilege to help God’s people offer gifts to Jesus for his work in their congregations, synod, and WELS-affiliated ministries. These offerings play an important role in the synod’s long-range strategic plan by supporting the plan’s various priorities intended to bring Christ’s ministry of reconciliation to our communities and the world.

Our synod’s funding is provided through Congregation Mission Offerings (CMO) and direct gifts to WELS from individuals, groups, and foundations.

In the area of CMO, our efforts are focused on informing congregations of ministry opportunities, particularly as they prayerfully set their annual commitments. We also send them quarterly reports of their offerings to WELS.

In the area of direct gifts from individuals, we regularly mail and email appeals for support of our gospel work. We provide information to donors about Christian estate planning and planned giving options that allow them to give in a way that is beneficial for them, their families, and the ministries close to their hearts. WELS Christian giving counselors (currently 12.4 full-time equivalents [FTEs], including 1 semi-retired and 12 full-time) are called workers serving all 12 districts of WELS who apply scriptural principles to the gift planning process. Since giving counselor services are funded by our church body, there is no cost to individuals or congregations.

Gifts from foundations result from consultations between the MCG director, other synod leaders, and the foundations regarding their goals for supporting WELS ministry.

Our current situation

Congregation Mission Offerings

The Ministry of Christian Giving coordinates with Communication Services to share CMO updates and ministry impact through WELS media. Each year, the Ministry of Christian Giving oversees the process of collecting congregational offering subscriptions from late summer through the first Friday of February. This involves mailed and emailed communications as well as direct follow-up by our MCG district chairmen. We are happy to report a 99 percent participation rate in the subscription setting process for 2026 (the average participation rate over the past ten years has been 98 percent).

In addition, we collaborate with Communication Services to develop a yearly video and the WELS annual report, “Your Gifts, God’s Blessings,” to inform members of the work being done through congregational offerings. By our Savior’s gracious blessing and empowered by his Spirit, our churches offered 2025 CMO of \$24.05 million for the gospel work we do together. This is the fourth consecutive calendar year in which CMO surpassed \$23 million, and the first calendar year in which CMO surpassed \$24 million. While we give thanks for these blessings, we also acknowledge that the rise in Congregation Mission Offerings has not been keeping pace with inflation. (For a chart showing a comparison of subscriptions to actual CMO, see the “Financial results and ministry financial plan” section, p. 86.)

Christian giving counselors

Through face-to-face, phone, and Zoom visits and presentations, our Christian giving counselors invite faith-prompted support of WELS ministries. Here are the results of this nurturing of individual donors by our WELS Christian giving counselors and director in FY25:

- 1,344 meaningful meetings (in-person, Zoom, phone) with donors
- 4,800 meaningful contacts (phone calls, emails, mailings) with donors
- \$14.4 million in immediate gifts from assigned donors
- \$1.2 million in irrevocable expectancies from assigned donors
- \$30.4 million in new revocable expectancies arranged with assigned and unassigned donors
- \$12 million in revised revocable expectancies arranged with assigned and unassigned donors

From FY08–FY25, our Christian giving counselors have nurtured an annual average (per FTE) of:

- \$605,321 in **immediate gifts** (18-year total of \$141 million; annual average of \$7,858,370).
- \$2,324,668 in new/revised **deferred expectancies** (18-year total of \$545 million; annual average of \$30,284,387).

During the 2025–27 biennium, our church body is annually investing approximately \$1.85 million in our Christian giving counselors.

We thank our Lord for the generous return he’s given.

Recent staffing changes include Pastor Aaron Glaeske accepting the call to serve as the deferred giving counselor for the Northern Wisconsin District. Glaeske will begin his duties on June 15. Mr. Mark Werre retired in March from serving as the current giving counselor for the Western Wisconsin District. The Conference of Presidents is calling to fill that vacancy. In the Ministry of Christian Giving office, Ms. Amy Schultz took over as prospect analyst after Mr. Reuben Schmitz retired in February. May God bless the work of these new team members!

WELS 175th anniversary offering

The Ministry of Christian Giving worked with WELS Communication Services to coordinate a special offering commemorating our synod’s 175th anniversary in 2025. Gifts to the 175th Anniversary Fund support future goals in North American ministry (including Home Missions and Congregational Services), international ministry (World Missions), and worker training (Ministerial Education). The anniversary offering was publicized through a bulletin insert in churches and a mailing to members. Synod members responded by giving more than \$450,000 to thank our Lord for his history of blessing our synod and to support our synod’s ongoing ministry.

100 Missions in 10 Years Home Missions campaign

The Ministry of Christian Giving coordinated with Home Missions through June 2024 on the 100 Missions in 10 Years synodwide campaign that was approved at the 2021 synod convention and launched in September 2022. Since July 2021, the Lord has graciously allowed WELS to receive \$4.44 million to be used toward establishing 100 new home missions and enhancing 75 mission congregations during 2023–2033.

Luther Preparatory School “Magnify” music center campaign

God has blessed our work with Luther Preparatory School on the “Magnify” campaign to encourage offerings to build a new music center. So far, by God’s grace, \$8.5 million has been received in gifts, commitments, and events revenue/discretionary funds toward the \$16 million goal.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary “Compelled” campaign

Our Savior has also blessed our work with Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary on its “Compelled” campaign to encourage offerings for the school’s education wing, remodeled faculty offices, and auditorium gathering space. By God’s grace we’ve received \$8.2 million in gifts and commitments. In addition, WLS has \$3 million in discretionary funds that may be used toward the \$15 million project.

Appeals

The Ministry of Christian Giving works closely with our WELS areas of ministry and ministerial education schools to send about 13 mailed appeals and 6 e-appeals each year. Each of the synod’s four main areas of ministry receives two of the annual mailed appeal slots and some e-appeals, while other initiatives (e.g., Commission on Inter-Church Relations, Christian Aid and Relief, Mission and Ministry, and WELS endowments) receive one mailed appeal slot per year. Another annual appeal coordinated with WELS Foundation encourages members to consider giving through a charitable gift annuity. The appeals coordinate with other WELS media, including *WELS Connection*, *Forward in Christ*, WELS’ websites, and the Together e-newsletter. Over the past 10 fiscal years, God has blessed these appeals with an average net income of \$938,095 each year.

Online giving

The Ministry of Christian Giving refreshed WELS’ online donation site in 2025. The new site includes a donations portal that has some beneficial new features requested by members. In addition to providing a faster donation experience and the ability to update contact information and view giving history, the donations portal lets donors view and manage recurring gifts to WELS and save their preferred payment method. (Note that the donations portal can only manage gifts at **wels.net** and not at ministerial education school donation sites. To modify a recurring gift to one of our schools, please call the school.)

WELS endowment funds

The WELS endowments benefit the Lord’s work in WELS Home and World Missions and at our four ministerial education schools. Out of gratitude for God’s love and a desire to help more people know Jesus as their Savior, WELS members have, through January 2026, faithfully contributed \$48.6 million to these endowments, with another \$86.1 million expected through planned gifts. In July 2025, the annual distribution from the WELS endowments totaled about \$1.4 million. We praise God for these blessings!

Encouragement of planned gifts

Known as the Great Wealth Transfer, an estimated \$124 trillion in assets will shift from the Silent Generation and Baby Boomers to younger generations (Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z) and charities over the next couple of decades, peaking toward 2045. Per James Langley in the February 2026 *Planned Giving Today* newsletter, “Philanthropy-seeking organizations will never see a larger [portion] of philanthropic dollars or a generation as loyal to non-profit organizations. Further, when Baby Boomers pass on, there will be nothing like them to follow, not in terms of assets or inclinations.” With a shrinking and aging WELS membership in the United States and plenty of ministry opportunities across the world, it is a good time to inform members about planned giving options that can support family and the work of the church while saving on taxes. The Ministry of Christian Giving offers a booklet and resources to help congregations easily and regularly encourage planned gifts. Our Christian giving counselors can introduce the resources and assist congregations. Visit **wels.net/plannedgivingprogram** to learn more.

The *Grace of Giving* planned giving newsletter is mailed each spring and fall to WELS members who may be interested in supporting ministry through certain planned giving instruments. The newsletter

includes inspiring stories of faithful brothers and sisters in Christ, ministry updates, and planned giving opportunities. Visit wels.net/graceofgiving to read past newsletters.

In recent years, qualified charitable distributions (QCDs) from IRAs have become a popular way for anyone 70.5 years or older to support ministry. These distributions are free from federal and potentially state income tax when individuals direct them to their church, synod, and other WELS ministries. Donors can also use QCDs to establish charitable gift annuities. The Ministry of Christian Giving and WELS Foundation work together to inform individuals and WELS-affiliated ministries of this opportunity. Visit wels.net/qcd to find more information and resources to help with qualified charitable distributions.

Development counsel to other organizations

The Ministry of Christian Giving annually offers development training to Christian giving counselors, Ministerial Education mission advancement staff, Home and World Missions administrators, and anyone serving a WELS-/ELS-affiliated ministry in development. One goal of such training is to encourage a consistent Christ-centered, donor-sensitive approach to God's people that minimizes potential donor fatigue and the impression that we are competitors or trying to "get" something from our fellow Christians. Twenty-two people participated in our 2026 training.

WELS-affiliated ministries can arrange a part-time collaborative partnership with the Ministry of Christian Giving, where our counselors assist their organizations with major and planned giving donor nurture. Contact WELS Director of Christian Giving Kurt Lueneburg at 414-256-3214 or kurt.lueneburg@wels.net for more information.

A look ahead

Lord willing, WELS Ministry of Christian Giving will move forward with the following specific initiatives this year:

- We will call a new Ministry of Christian Giving director to replace Pastor Kurt Lueneburg, who is retiring July 15. We thank Jesus for Kurt's service as director for 13.5 years and his work as a Christian giving counselor for 7 years before that. May God bless him in his retirement.
- We will continue to praise and thank God for the offerings of his faithful people to his church and encourage strong congregation and individual mission offerings.
- We will add a mid-level donor giving counselor to our team.
- The Ministry of Christian Giving will continue working with Luther Preparatory School and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary on their respective capital campaigns.
- Our next WELS Christian giving training session for WELS/ELS advancement personnel is scheduled to take place Jan. 11–15, 2027. Contact us to register or receive more information (800-827-5482 or mcg@wels.net).

WELS Ministry of Christian Giving is privileged to serve our Savior and you by helping God's people generously fund the ministries that touch their hearts. We are happy that these gifts in response to Christ's love are helping us as a synod to fulfill our calling of proclaiming Jesus' name to more people.

Rev. Kurt Lueneburg, reporter

Communication Services

Our calling

Communication Services exists to assist the Conference of Presidents in clearly and consistently communicating WELS' mission to members of the synod and to those outside our fellowship. The team supports the synod's national office and areas of ministry by providing strategic communication, exploring and implementing innovative media usage, and ensuring that synodical communications are accurate, coordinated, and aligned with our shared mission. Communication Services also reviews and authorizes new communications originating from the synod's national office.

Our current situation

The Communication Services team continues to focus on a coordinated mix of print, digital, video, social media, and event-based communication approaches to support the ongoing mission and ministry of the synod. Key updates are summarized below.

Forward in Christ

Forward in Christ (FIC), the official monthly magazine of WELS, brings Lutherans together through shared stories of faith and articles that address important issues facing Christians today. FIC also provides an in-depth look at important biblical truths while striving to inspire its readers to live lives of Christian service. It shares news from WELS congregations, schools, ministry affiliates, and synodical areas of ministry. Each issue is designed to educate, inform, and inspire. A new feature in 2026 called "Straight talk" offers synod administrators an opportunity to answer difficult questions about current ministry.

Currently *Forward in Christ* has more than 25,000 monthly subscribers. Congregational subscriptions comprise the great majority of that number, with almost 900 congregations subscribing. Issues can be delivered in bulk to the church or sent directly to members' homes—all at a reduced cost from the individual subscription price. A one-page newsletter included with each bulk shipment to congregations details easy ways to share content in a congregation. Visit forwardinchrist.net/promote to find more ways to promote the magazine. Visit nph.net/fic for current subscription information.

Forward in Christ's dedicated website, forwardinchrist.net, provides content from each monthly issue as well as supplemental materials. Readers can sign up at forwardinchrist.net/subscribe to receive a free weekly e-newsletter filled with articles, photos, and sneak peeks. In 2025, forwardinchrist.net had about 200,000 visitors and more than 300,000 pageviews. Through *Forward in Christ's* Facebook and Instagram social media sites, WELS members have multiple ways to access and share the magazine's content.

If you are interested in creating awareness of the magazine in your congregation, Executive Editor James Pope is available to preach and/or conduct Bible classes. Visit forwardinchrist.net/submit to submit your request. There you can also submit photos, articles, and story ideas for possible inclusion in the magazine.

WELS websites

Communication Services oversees and supports a large network of WELS websites that serve a variety of audiences and ministry needs across the synod. These sites provide timely information, devotional resources, ministry updates, and specialized content for members, congregations, and partners.

Top-performing WELS websites during calendar year 2025 include:

- **wels.net**—5.3 million visits
- **forwardinchrist.net**—314,000 visits
- **welscongregationalervices.net**—192,000 visits and 512,000 resource downloads

Together, these sites reflect the breadth of digital engagement across the synod and underscore the importance of maintaining reliable, accessible, and well-supported web platforms.

WELS Connection

WELS Connection, now in its 40th year, continues to highlight the important work made possible through Congregation Mission Offerings. Viewed monthly in more than 750 congregations, the five- to six-minute video shares uplifting stories and key information every WELS member should know.

WELS Connection videos are available exclusively through online streaming and download, eliminating the cost of DVD production and mailing. Visit online.nph.net/wels-connection-subscription.html for subscription and access information.

Together

Together, the monthly e-newsletter, is emailed to more than 8,000 subscribers. It provides synodwide news and updates relevant to all members, often including short video features to supplement written content. Visit wels.net/subscribe to begin receiving this informative e-newsletter.

Annual report

Your gifts, God's blessings: An annual report to our members continues to provide a clear overview of the synod's work and ministry activities. Print copies are mailed annually to congregations and to members who have made direct gifts to WELS, with an online version available at wels.net/annualreport.

Each mailing also includes a two-sided overview flyer describing WELS and its ministries. This resource is especially useful for congregational displays, tract racks, and outreach events. Visit online.nph.net/wels to order free print copies.

Social media

Social media remains a growing and increasingly effective channel for sharing WELS news, resources, and ministry stories. As of March 12, our primary platforms have continued to show strong growth:

- **Facebook followers**—103,868
- **Instagram followers**—9,468
- **YouTube subscribers**—1,470

Recent performance metrics show significant engagement increases compared to the previous quarter.

Facebook (Dec. 12, 2025–March 11, 2026)—Views reached 2.1 million, representing 79.1 percent growth. Link clicks increased to 13,600 (58.2 percent growth), content interactions rose to 59,200 (45.6 percent growth), and the page gained 969 new followers (77.5 percent growth).

Instagram (Dec. 12, 2025–March 11, 2026)—Views totaled 351,000 (30.6 percent growth), reach increased to 29,800, content interactions climbed to 13,400 (70.2 percent growth), and the account gained 511 new followers.

Our strongest-performing content continues to feature real-time imagery and timely visual storytelling. Examples include coverage from *Forward in Christ* initiatives, the WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership, WELS Night events, and seasonal or holiday graphics. These posts resonate especially well by offering authentic, immediate glimpses into life and ministry across the synod.

The WELS YouTube channel has become an important platform for hosting and sharing synod-produced video content. In recent months, Communication Services has expanded both long-form video offerings and YouTube shorts, increasing the visibility and accessibility of WELS content.

The channel currently includes more than 250 videos and has grown to approximately 1,470 subscribers. Content is organized into a variety of playlists, including recordings of weekly chapel services from the Center for Mission and Ministry, past episodes of *WELS Connection*, devotions, and videos highlighting WELS Missions, Women's Ministry, and other synodical efforts.

YouTube remains a growing area of focus as the synod continues to invest in video storytelling and digital outreach.

Events

Synodical events remain a vital way to foster fellowship, learning, and shared purpose among members and called workers. Communication Services supports these events through planning, promotion, and onsite execution, in coordination with area of ministry representatives. A full-time events manager provides focused leadership in this area, helping ensure consistent quality and clear communication.

During the current biennium, Communication Services provided comprehensive communication support for a number of events including the WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership. This support included promotional materials, digital content, onsite support, and post-event resources. Visit lutheranleadership.com for information about the conference and related resources.

The team is also actively supporting preparations for the upcoming WELS youth rally. Communication Services is assisting with branding, promotional materials, website content, and ongoing communication to congregations, parents, and participants. Visit welsyouthrally.net for event details, registration information, and updates.

WELS 175th anniversary

Communication Services supported the ongoing celebration of WELS' 175th anniversary during calendar year 2025 through coordinated promotion of events and resources. The team worked closely with WELS Historical Institute, WELS Archives, and the anniversary planning committee to highlight 175 years of God's grace. Visit welshistoricalinstitute.org/175th for resources and updates. The team also assisted with communication surrounding a synodwide anniversary offering in partnership with the Ministry of Christian Giving.

Long-range strategic plan

With the launch of the synod's new long-range strategic plan, "Christ through us," Communication Services has supported implementation through focused, coordinated communication efforts. A new website, christthroughus.net, was launched to serve as a central hub for plan resources, updates, and storytelling related to the plan's goals and priorities.

In addition, the team devoted four consecutive editions of *WELS Connection* to the "Christ through us" plan, with each episode highlighting one of the plan's four ministry priorities. This approach helped

introduce the plan in a clear, accessible way and reinforced how Congregation Mission Offerings support the work outlined in the plan. Communication Services will continue to use the plan as a guiding framework for future communication efforts and to report on progress as implementation moves forward.

A look ahead

Brand refresh and digital infrastructure

During the current biennium, Communication Services' digital infrastructure efforts have focused less on visual redesign and more on strengthening the systems that support synodwide communication. The team worked closely with WELS Technology Services to assist with the migration of newsletters, devotions, emailed broadcasts, and other key content into the new HubSpot customer relationship management (CRM) platform. This work helps improve content management, distribution, and long-term sustainability of digital communications.

While early planning has occurred, comprehensive content auditing and redesign efforts for **wels.net** have not yet begun. Based on current priorities, that work is expected to begin in earnest toward the end of the current biennium.

Similarly, feedback gathered through recent surveys did not indicate an urgent need for a complete redesign of the WELS brand. As a result, broad brand redevelopment has not been a focus during this biennium. Limited brand refreshing will begin with subsidiaries of WELS, including WELS Foundation, WELS Investment Funds and WELS Church Extension Fund, where specific needs have been identified. Exploration of a potential full WELS brand redesign is expected to take place during the next biennium.

In conclusion

WELS Communication Services plays a multi-faceted role in supporting the synod's mission. The team works to maintain positive synod and congregational reputations, facilitate clear and unified communication within and beyond the synod, oversee brand consistency, and support events and ministry initiatives. It is our privilege to serve the synod by helping communicate the message of Christ through us with clarity, faithfulness, and purpose.

Mr. Dan Nommensen, reporter

Congregational Services

Our calling

One of the priorities of the “Christ through us” long-range plan is to strengthen WELS’ backbone of North American congregations. There are two reasons for that being made a priority.

First, the mission field right in North America is ripe. The rapid de-churching of America over the past 20 years runs in inverse proportion to the increase in depression and anxiety. Across the country, people are lonely and hurting. This provides a great mission opportunity for congregations to help people understand the real problem behind all problems—sin—and introduce them to the only solution—Jesus Christ.

Second, for the synod to carry out its global mission, it needs to have the support of a broad swath of healthy congregations. WELS’ Ministerial Education system, World Missions efforts, and Home Missions work is all predicated upon having a broad base of congregations to support those efforts. The loss of 100,000 members (a 24 percent decline) from WELS’ peak membership impacts those efforts.

WELS Congregational Services’ mission—to encourage and equip congregations for faithful and fruitful gospel ministry—aligns with the priority to strengthen WELS’ backbone. The “Christ through us” plan contains 20 goals—areas of focus for the next decade. An explanation of those goals can be found in Appendix 2 of the Synodical Council’s report on p. 51. They will be referenced throughout the remainder of this report.

Congregational Services’ effort to help congregations assess and plan their ministry occurs in three primary ways:

- **Consultation**—Congregational Services team members work directly with congregations and schools to assess ministry and plan for the future.
- **Resources**—Congregational Services produces confessional Lutheran tools for worship, discipleship, outreach, and leadership.
- **Training and gatherings**—Congregational Services organizes a number of national conferences where called workers and laity alike can discuss best ministry practices and receive encouragement for our shared mission.

Congregational Services serves directly under WELS Conference of Presidents (COP). The COP has two groups that assist their efforts—circuit pastors, who serve as the pastor’s pastor, and Congregational Services, to help congregations assess and carry out their ministry efforts.

Congregational Services operates in two cohorts—church and school—that parallel major ministries within our congregations. Congregational Services’ six commissions are made up of men and women around WELS with passion and expertise for certain ministry efforts.

- **Commission on Congregational Counseling**—The Commission on Congregational Counseling exists to serve congregations in their efforts to evaluate ministry efforts, congregational organization, and staffing needs; develop plans to adjust and expand ministry efforts over time; and equip lay leaders in their vital roles.

- **Commission on Discipleship**—The Commission on Discipleship exists to serve congregations in their efforts to help their members grow in both their knowledge of God’s Word and their sanctified service of Christ and neighbor.
- **Commission on Evangelism**—The Commission on Evangelism exists to serve congregations in their efforts to seize every opportunity the Lord provides to evangelize lost souls, both through congregational outreach efforts and through personal witnessing.
- **Commission on Lutheran Schools**—The Commission on Lutheran Schools exists to serve congregations in their efforts to provide Christian education through Lutheran schools and other early childhood ministries.
- **Commission on Special Ministries**—The Commission on Special Ministries exists to serve congregations in their efforts to bring the gospel to those with needs or circumstances that prevent them from being served through the congregation’s usual ministries.
- **Commission on Worship**—The Commission on Worship exists to serve congregations in their efforts to glorify God and strengthen God’s people through Word and sacrament.



Each commission has a director. Directors not only work with the commissions to plan ministry efforts and resources but also conduct in-field consultations with churches and schools when requested. Additionally, directors train volunteers to assist in operating these in-field programs. Congregational Services is thankful for the dozens of pastors, teachers, and laypeople who provide encouragement and guidance to churches and schools that request such help.

The Congregational Services Coordinating Committee consists of the directors, operations manager, coordinators, and chairmen of each commission (elected by the Synod in Convention). The Congregational Services Coordinating Committee prioritizes the programs and resources proposed by each of the commissions. The Congregational Services Executive Committee consists of the coordinator (a pastor), the associate coordinator (a teacher), and the operations manager (a layman). The Executive Committee is responsible for allocating the human and financial resources necessary to carry out the initiatives approved by the Congregational Services Coordinating Committee.

Congregational Services is also responsible for studying statistical trends within WELS. Congregational Services analyzes the data and produces an annual summary of the relevant information. This data is

used by all areas of ministry, as well as the Conference of Presidents and the Synodical Council, as they plan our shared ministry. (Visit welscongregationalervices.net/stats for 2025 statistical information.)

Our current situation

This *Report to the Twelve Districts* is intended to share a cursory view of the work of Congregational Services. Space prohibits this report from going into detail about all programs and resources.

Consultations

A major effort in Congregational Services is conducting church and school consultations, in fulfillment of “Christ through us” Goal 7: Support ministry enhancement efforts. Every WELS congregation faces a distinct blend of opportunities and challenges, shaped by shifting ministry contexts. Some will seek to enhance or revitalize their current mission efforts, particularly if their ministry context has changed. Others will explore regional collaboration, shared ministry, or consolidation to amplify their gospel reach.

Congregational Services seeks to support WELS congregations in whatever ministry enhancement effort they choose to undertake for Christ’s glory. Congregational Services offers several consultations where members or teammates are onsite at churches and schools. In some cases, Congregational Services works with a large segment of members as they assess ministry efforts and plan for the future. In other cases, the Congregational Services team provides training to church and school leadership. In the past biennium, the position descriptions for Congregational Services’ directors shifted, so that most are spending, on average, about half of their time working with churches and schools.

Some examples of those onsite programs follow.

Mission Together

The Mission Together program brings together multiple congregations in geographic proximity that are considering a partnership or even congregational consolidation. In an exploratory meeting the assigned Congregational Services counselor explains the assorted options for mergers. If the congregations are interested in taking further steps, the assigned counselor helps them work through the necessary analysis, planning, and training to allow for a smooth merge. This program also supports “Christ through us” Goal 2: Foster a zealous gospel mindset and Goal 19: Establishing a sustainable strategy for called worker development. Goal 2 encourages congregations to embrace thoughtful adaptability to ensure the gospel thrives amid the opportunities and trials of this generation. With Goal 19, Mission Together can help address the reality that the ratio of called workers to total members has drastically shrunk.

Everyone Outreach

Everyone Outreach was designed to carry out “Christ through us” Goal 3: Make outreach a personal effort. Everyone Outreach helps congregations build a mission culture so that every member and every ministry is thinking about and participating in outreach. The program kicks off with a two-day onsite workshop where participants discover thought habits that may be keeping them from reaching out with the gospel as well and as often as they would like. Following the workshop, resources are provided that help create new thought habits resulting in new behaviors and, Lord willing, more evangelism. Visit everyoneoutreach.com for more information.

WELS School Accreditation

WELS School Accreditation (WELSSA) is a process in which the school evaluates its current education practices and seeks sound methods to build on its strengths. An onsite validation visit assists in determining new ways to grow and strengthen the educational ministry of the school for the benefit of the students and parents to the glory of God. Yearly progress reporting provides accountability to ministries as they

seek to keep the improvement process moving forward. WELSSA is a sanctioned member of the National Council for Private School Accreditation.

Shadow of the Leader

Every organization has its own culture, including Christian congregations. A congregation's culture has a tremendous impact on its ability to carry out the ministry God has given it. The Shadow of the Leader program helps WELS congregations better understand their congregation's culture and the role of congregational leaders in shaping that culture. The program includes a workshop and a supporting website (shadowofthelider.com). The workshop is currently being offered to pastoral conferences throughout WELS. To date, 11 workshops have been held. The goal is to hold Shadow of the Leader in all 50 pastoral conferences by the end of 2027, in support of "Christ through us" Goal 1: Raise up culture-shaping leaders.

AXIS

AXIS helps congregations produce a long-range plan aimed at ministry revitalization or redevelopment. The assigned congregational counselor helps the congregation define and commit to mission, envision the congregation's desired future, and identify the long-range goals that would help move the congregation in that direction. AXIS is intended to help support "Christ through us" Goal 6: Unleash the laity in mission.

Telling the Next Generation

This one-day seminar serves as the starting point for developing and implementing a clearly defined harvest strategy. WELS schools have an increasing opportunity to connect unchurched and underchurched families in their communities with the gospel. Some ministries pursue this work with strong intentionality and effectiveness. Many congregations would like to improve their efforts. This training seminar is designed for pastors, principals, early childhood directors, teachers, and church and school lay leaders. Participants gather for a day of interactive presentations that assist congregations in developing a harvest strategy—a plan that focuses on intentional ways to connect unchurched families with the gospel. Telling the Next Generation aligns with both "Christ through us" Goal 9: Elevate the home as the first mission field and "Christ through us" Goal 10: Provide sound Lutheran resources.

School consultations

School consulting exists to partner with congregational consulting to help support the overall ministry of a congregation. It also provides onsite support for congregations seeking to start a new children's ministry.

In 2025, Congregational Services teammates worked with approximately 150 congregations in one of these planned programs, approximately 12 percent of congregations in WELS. Congregational Services continues to adjust consultation processes and train other partners to conduct them, with the goal that by the end of this biennium, Congregational Services would have the capacity to serve 20 percent of congregations in a year if requested.

Resources

"Christ through us" Goal 10: Provide sound Lutheran resources. The most impactful ministry moments tend to happen face to face—personal conversations, shepherding, and witnessing—where Christ's reconciling love touches hearts one soul at a time. Yet, called workers and lay leaders, burdened with administrative tasks and content creation, often lose time for that relational gospel work. Thus, Congregational Services produces a variety of resources—for discipleship, worship, outreach, planning, and leadership to help churches in their gospel efforts. Most of these are disseminated at welscongregationalervices.net and are free.

The Foundation: Weekly ministry resources

The Foundation is a suite of resources that attempts to build upon the importance of public worship both on Sunday morning and throughout the week. The Foundation resources for planning and promoting worship are used every week by more than 600 WELS congregations. Since December 2025, those resources include background and usage notes for every hymn and Psalm setting. By the end of 2026, those notes will be collected and available for everyone at christianworship.com along with video instructions for anyone who is new to using the Service Builder software for bulletin preparation.

In addition to these free resources, all the Congregational Services devotions—WELS' online daily devotions, family devotions, school devotions—capture the worship themes for that week. Thus, congregations that use The Foundation have a coherent, focused spiritual message that is repeated throughout the week in the homes of members who utilize those devotions. Thus, The Foundation also attempts to support “Christ through us” Goal 9: Elevate the home as the first mission field.

New theology curriculum

This is a comprehensive, multi-year undertaking to update the theology curriculum for our Lutheran early childhood ministries and elementary, middle, and high schools. A focus by the development team has been to have each unit and lesson designed to emphasize that Christ is for us, Christ is in us, and Christ is through us. In addition, these units and lessons attend to the developmental appropriateness for our children as they move through our schools from infancy through high school, where God's plan of salvation from both the Old and New Testaments are revisited every year. Each of the four levels looks to instill in our learners that they can study God's Word for themselves, know that it is truth and the basis for their worldview, and be prepared to give the answer for the hope that they have. The curriculum is designed to engage both parents and children in age-appropriate practices. The curriculum project fulfills both “Christ through us” Goal 9: Elevate the home as the first mission field and Goal 10: Provide sound Lutheran resources.

Constitution examples

Congregational Services was involved in the production of several new examples of church governance models. They are designed to help churches examine and adjust their church governance (e.g. constitutional bylaws) to be more flexible, allow for more nimble decision making, and better utilize the gifts and insights of members. Some of the governance models update position descriptions to allow women to serve more broadly in ways that faithfully uphold scriptural gender principles. These constitution examples are available from district constitution committees and are an effort to fulfill “Christ through us” Goal 6: Unleash the laity in mission.

Women's Ministry resources

Goal 6: Unleash the laity in mission also aligns with the efforts of WELS Women's Ministry, which is a subcommittee of the Commission on Discipleship. Through online webinars, Bible studies, devotionals, podcasts, and programs like Advent/Lent by Candlelight, Women's Ministry seeks to nurture, encourage, and equip the women of our congregations to faithfully use their gifts for service in God's kingdom.

Speak to My Heart—a marriage enrichment resource

This five-part video series and corresponding discussion guides walks participants through the redemptive love story found in the book of Ruth. It provides opportunities for participating couples to reflect, discuss, and apply lessons to their marriage. The resource is adaptable for use in settings like a small group, marriage workshop, or a weekend retreat.

Welcome Home

This is version 2.0 of a resource published about six years ago that had two goals. First, the congregation holds a Welcome Home celebration that gets every single member to attend one service, letting the congregation see the true size of membership and experience the encouragement of such a gathering. Second, through careful instruction and communication, the congregation grows in their understanding of the role they play in caring for each other in the church “home,” fulfilling “Christ through us” Goal 5: Build deep Christian community. The large suite of Welcome Home resources are easily adaptable for use during any time of the church year that fits the congregation’s schedule.

Beyond the Temple Walls: A Greater Vision for the Future Church

This is the next installment of the Stewardship Legacy series. It reframes the concept of “church” so people better think of it as this—God’s people living out their faith beyond Sunday and beyond the walls. Grounded in the Bible’s rich “temple” theme, this four-week series invites congregations to rethink stewardship in terms of relationships, authentic community, whole life well-being, and engagement with God’s world. It aligns with “Christ through us” Goal 10: Provide sound Lutheran resources.

Conquerors through Christ

“Christ through us” Goal 4: Encourage cross-bearing discipleship. A “cross” is any type of suffering the believer experiences as a result of possessing the gift of faith. So, a cross may take the shape of persecution from non-believers. But it is also proper to call the painful denial of our sinful flesh a cross. The Conquerors through Christ program helps Christians who struggle with the temptations of pornography. The website conquerorsthroughchrist.net has been effective in motivating people to seek help from their pastors or professional counselors. A Bible study, “Bought at a Price”; downloadable parenting resources; and a steady stream of new resources can also be found on that website. The Conquerors through Christ Committee has also started online support groups for those who struggle with these issues.

Care Committee for Called Workers Handbook

Addressing the vacancy problem in WELS is not only a matter of encouraging WELS believers to consider entering public ministry but also includes doing what we can to encourage called workers to remain in ministry when stress or burnout leads them to consider pursuing a different vocation. This is why the “Christ through us” long-range plan includes “Christ through us” Goal 20: Support the well-being of called workers. This handbook helps churches do that, helping them understand how to operate a congregational Care Committee for Called Workers in an effort to ensure that the spiritual, physical, and emotional needs of all their called workers are being met.

Resources for the Visually Impaired

The Mission for the Visually Impaired, a subcommittee of the Commission on Special Ministries, helps people who are unable to read normal-sized print, whether they are blind or have impaired eyesight. The mission produces devotional and other materials in Braille, large print, and online audio files. These materials are distributed free throughout the world to WELS and non-WELS people who are visually or print impaired.

Ministry training

In the effort to fulfill “Christ through us” Goal 6: Unleash the laity in mission, Congregational Services offers ministry training to help individuals (both called workers and laity) carry out their ministry efforts. Some of this is self-directed and asynchronous; other training modules are done in person or virtually. What follows are a few examples. Visit welscongregationalservices.net for a more complete list.

WELS chaplain certification

This continuing education initiative is a joint effort of the Commission on Special Ministries and Martin Luther College (MLC). It requires ongoing education to renew the certification every three years. In an era of increasing security procedures in institutions, it has become difficult for local pastors to minister in prisons, military bases, and large health care facilities. Chaplain certification will be increasingly useful, especially if a pastor or layperson wants to reach out to more than one's own members. Online courses are taught through MLC. Visit wels.net/chaplain-certification-program for more information.

School leader training

Nearly one in five Lutheran elementary schools has a principal vacancy and is operating under an interim leadership plan. Lutheran Schools supports, mentors, and provides training for new and aspiring school leaders in partnership with Martin Luther College through the Principal Training Program, Director Training Program, Early Childhood Credential Cohort, and Principal Credential Cohort. In addition, an annual summer seminar is held for new and interim school leaders. A business certificate program has also been launched, supported by grants from the Milwaukee School of Engineering and the Kern Family Foundation. By providing support for school leaders, helping them to be better equipped for their work, this effort supports "Christ through us" Goal 20: Support the well-being of called workers.

Soul care/Elder training

This video-based program is designed to help equip lay leaders of your congregation to identify and reach out to missing members from your church family. The videos are short yet focused and include accompanying guide sheets to facilitate discussion about how to increase the congregation's shepherding activity. Welcome Home aims to create a culture within your congregation where it is understood that straying members will be pursued lovingly and aggressively, thus it fulfills "Christ through us" Goal 5: Build deep Christian community. Creating that culture requires congregational leaders who themselves are strengthened and encouraged for this endeavor. That is why "before" and "after" devotionals are included with every video chapter.

Military Distinctive Religious Group Leaders

The U.S. Department of Defense officially tracks about 130 major overseas bases. When you add in smaller sites, logistical hubs, large population vehicles (e.g., aircraft carriers, amphibious assault ships, submarines, etc.) there are more than 1,000 places a WELS member serving in the military might be located. It is obviously impossible for us to have a trained pastor serve in all those places. Thus, WELS Military Services, a ministry of the Commission on Special Ministries, established the Distinctive Religious Group Leaders program. This program trains WELS members to gather fellow WELS members in weekly worship and Bible study while in the military. The military's Distinctive Religious Group Leaders status grants these leaders greater access to military locations. Currently, just over a dozen WELS Distinctive Religious Group Leaders are serving around the world.

Training for ministry to those with intellectual and developmental disabilities

The Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Ministry promotes and encourages sharing the gospel with those who have special education needs or developmental disabilities. The ministry urges churches to provide a supportive Christian network for people with special needs in our synod and encourages their active participation in the congregation. The ministry develops resources and provides information to parents, caregivers, children, adults, pastors, teachers, and congregations about education programs, mentoring networks, support groups, and printed and digital materials.

Conferences and gatherings

2026 WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership

On Jan. 19–21, 2026, more than 1,600 called workers and lay members gathered at the Chicago Hilton for encouragement and fellowship, to discuss the big challenges facing our churches, and to examine some best practices for every area of ministry. The four keynotes built on major themes of the “Christ through us” long-range plan—the need for Spirit-wrought courage as we engage in gospel ministry; utilizing character formation as a cultural strategy in ministry; the intersection between curiosity and critical thinking in leadership; and the quiet exodus of young women from WELS and what we might do to address it. Those keynotes are available for viewing at lutheranleadership.com.

One highlight was the participation of young WELS members, ages 16 to 24. One objective of the conference steering committee was to get 10 percent of the attendance from that age demographic. (That objective was exceeded.) The aim was not simply to provide encouragement and training to these young members but to allow older WELS members to hear from them—their views on why their generation has disengaged from church and what we might do to better reach and retain them.

A look ahead

WELS Congregational Services will continue to identify common needs within our congregations and schools and produce the resources or programs that help meet those needs. Here are just a few of the resources, efforts, and events being planned that you can look for in the upcoming biennium. Note that they are aimed at fulfilling various goals of the “Christ through us” long-range plan.

Consultation and program pivots

Consultation evolution

Congregational Service’s consultations are grouped into various programs. Over the next biennium, the vision is that consultations will evolve in several ways. These pivots are intended to support “Christ through us” Goals 1: Raise up culture-shaping leaders; 2: Foster a zealous gospel mindset; 6: Unleash the laity in mission; and 7: Support ministry enhancements.

First, consultations will be more customizable to fit the exact needs of each church and school. This means beginning with a comprehensive diagnostic phase (survey, interviews, data analysis); identifying root issues, not just surface symptoms; and building a tailored scope of work rather than fitting congregations into a predefined track of tasks that may (or may not) fit their situation.

Second, consultations will move toward more comprehensive, not piecemeal, engagement. Many congregations face interconnected challenges (e.g., staffing, school identity, outreach, governance). Addressing one in isolation often leads to limited results. Thus, consultations will increasingly address ministry systemically, not as isolated parts, helping leaders see how decisions in one area affect others.

Third, consultations will focus even more on congregational culture. Particularly, they will help train leaders to see the role they play in forming congregational culture and what they can do, when necessary, to shift culture. Phase 2 of *Shadow of the Leader* will launch in 2027. The same type of training that was provided primarily to pastors in Phase 1 will be available to all congregational leaders.

Fourth, to plan management and leadership capacity training will typically be the final component of any consultation. This helps congregations build the systems needed to follow through on ministry priorities, track progress, and make any needed strategic pivots.

Fifth, schools will engage with the newly revised accreditation standards. The revision emphasizes school safety, learner-centered instruction, collaboration, serving students with diverse needs, flexible organizational and leadership structures, sound financial practices, and a clearly articulated Lutheran identity, while preserving WELSSA's rigor. A unified core set of standards for all age levels supported by clear descriptions and evidence expectations will drive continuous improvement at our infant through 12th-grade educational ministries.

Taken together, these developments reflect a shift from program-based consultation to comprehensive ministry support. Congregational Services will not only help congregations determine what to do but also help them build the culture, leadership, and systems needed to do it faithfully over time.

WELS Military Services

WELS Committee on Military Services is doing a complete analysis on how to best approach this vital ministry in the face of the demographic shift within WELS. It has been thoroughly documented that WELS' back door losses have come predominantly from young adults, the age demographic that was most often served by our military chaplaincy program. This created an operational tension: drastically escalating costs to serve an increasingly small pool of WELS military members. That tension has led to the suspension of the position of full-time European chaplain, with those individuals now being served spiritually through the Distinctive Religious Group Leaders program and various retreats. The future strategic ministry plan for WELS Military Services will be presented to the 2027 synod convention.

Part of that plan, God-willing, will include WELS being able to participate in the United States military chaplaincy program. Previously, the regulations for that program prohibited WELS from participation, due to the doctrinal principles of fellowship. Those regulations have changed greatly, eliminating those doctrinal concerns. Since it was a resolution of the Synod in Convention that opted WELS out of that program, we believe it wise that opting-in be supported by the Synod in Convention. A resolution proposal to that effect will be presented at the district conventions.

Resources under development

New theology curriculum: Next phases

This year the theology curriculum project's working timeline has four writing teams (early childhood, elementary school, middle school, and high school) drafting the units and lessons. Meanwhile, WELS and Northwestern Publishing House are collaborating on the production details and securing personnel for editing, design and layout, and graphics and artwork for both the print resources and digital platform, which will be the focus in 2027. The desire is to run beta pilots in spring and fall of 2028.

"Christ through us" Goals 9: Elevate the home as the first mission field; 10: Provide sound Lutheran resources

Abuse prevention

A comprehensive suite of resources designed to help Lutheran congregations and schools create the safest possible environment for children and youth are being developed. When fully developed and faithfully implemented, these resources will position WELS ministries as leaders in the church community in preventing abuse, protecting the vulnerable, and responding wisely when concerns arise. Rooted in Christ's warning about causing harm to "little ones," these resources equip congregations and schools with practical tools for screening, training, supervision, reporting, and accountability. The project integrates theological convictions, legal best practices, and organizational systems so that child safety is treated as a permanent culture component of ministry. Resources will be rolled out at **welscongregationalservices.net** and elsewhere as they are ready, with a completion target for all components being fall 2027.

“Christ through us” Goals 5: Build a deep Christian community; 9: Elevate the home as the first mission field; 10: Provide sound Lutheran resources

Preaching resources: Sermon feedback

Since good preaching is at the heart of good worship, the Conference of Presidents has asked the Commission on Worship to provide resources for helping congregation members provide appropriate sermon feedback. Pastors want to know what worshipers are hearing them say, especially when it comes to clear law and gospel. Such resources should be available online before the 2027 synod convention.

“Christ through us” Goal 7: Support ministry enhancement efforts

Come and See

Come and See assists congregations in encouraging members to invite unchurched people in their lives to connect to God’s Word and God’s people in their congregation. It includes a congregational survey that can be used to discover aspects of congregational life that encourage or discourage members from inviting the unchurched. The congregation can then address any aspects that discourage invitational evangelism. Removing these barriers will, Lord willing, lead more members to offer invitations to others.

“Christ through us” Goals 3: Make outreach a personal effort; 7: Support ministry enhancement efforts

Witnessing app

The Come and See program aims at helping equip members to invite their unchurched acquaintances to worship. However, for some individuals, visiting church is a significant step. This envisioned witnessing app would provide members with another simple way to engage others with God’s Word in more immediate and personal settings—by pointing these unchurched individuals to the app. (This is a variation on a strategy that has proven highly successful in WELS’ Latin American outreach through the *Academia Cristo* program.) The app would include short, sharable Scripture-based video devotions and responses to common spiritual questions. Users would be led through a systematic course of Bible study, with scheduled calls to action, such as engaging with a local WELS congregation.

“Christ through us” Goal 3: Make outreach a personal effort

Conferences and gatherings

WELS International Youth Rally

The 2026 rally will gather thousands of high school teens at Bowling Green State University on July 14–17 for worship, workshops, and fellowship. Centered on the theme “We are Christ’s ambassadors” (2 Corinthians 5:18–20), young adults and youth leaders will explore what Christ can do through them, building on some key emphases of the “Christ through us” long-range plan.

“Christ through us” Goals 3: Make outreach a personal effort; 4: Encourage cross-bearing discipleship; 5: Build a deep Christian community

WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts

Congregations of any size with musical resources of any type will benefit from sending representatives to the next National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts, to be held June 15–18, 2027, at Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minn. The conference will have a Christmas in June theme and will be providing help for worship planners with the services in December 2027.

“Christ through us” Goals 6: Unleash the laity in mission; 7: Support ministry enhancement efforts; 10: Provide sound Lutheran resources

WELS National Education Conference

Lutheran Schools will expand on the success of the National Education Conference held in June 2025, where over 450 Lutheran teachers gathered to build school culture for meaning, purpose, and belonging. As site locations are being explored for the June 2028 National Education Conference, the Lutheran Schools team is identifying the conference steering committee and laying the groundwork for a conference that impacts the everyday life of our classrooms.

“Christ through us” Goals 7: Support ministry enhancement efforts; 19: Establish a sustainable strategy for called worker development; 20: Support the well-being of called workers

Conclusion

In the beginning of this report, we discussed the work that Home Missions, World Missions, and Ministerial Education does for you: starting new churches across the country, planting new gospel beachheads around the world, and providing called workers. WELS Congregational Services is the ministry group that works with you as you proclaim the gospel in your corner of the world. We are thankful for that privilege.

Rev. Jonathan Hein, reporter

Rev. Donn Dobberstein, director of WELS Commission on Discipleship

Rev. Joel Gaertner, director of WELS Commission on Special Ministries

Teacher Melanie Giddings, coordinator of curriculum development for WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools

Rev. Jonathan Hein, coordinator of WELS Congregational Services and director of WELS Commission on Congregational Counseling

Mr. Dan Nommensen, operations manager for Congregational Services

Teacher Paul Patterson, associate director of WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools

Rev. Paul Prange, director of WELS Commission on Worship

Teacher James Rademan, associate coordinator of WELS Congregational Services and director of WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools

Rev. Eric Roecker, director of WELS Commission on Evangelism

Teacher Jamie Walta, coordinator of WELS Early Childhood Ministries

Appendix: 2025 statistical summary preview

WELS Congregational Services is responsible for collecting and analyzing statistical data within WELS. In years evenly divisible by five, additional demographic detail is requested, including total membership distributed across 11 distinct age cohorts. We now possess this expanded dataset for four benchmark years—2015, 2016, 2020, and 2025. The value of this dataset lies in the fact that it permits substantially more refined demographic analysis than aggregate membership totals can provide. Rather than merely measuring whether the synod is larger or smaller from year to year, these benchmark collections allow us to analyze the age composition of membership, assess the relative strength or weakness of specific generational cohorts, and identify where decline is accelerating, stabilizing, or compounding over time. As a result, the data supports more credible longitudinal comparisons, more careful interpretation of generational continuity and attrition, and more dependable projections regarding the demographic trajectory of WELS.

Here are some notable highlights from 2025.

Signs of gospel vitality continue

Several of WELS' most important ministry-activity indicators moved upward again in 2025. Average weekly in-person worship attendance and adult Bible study attendance rose for the fifth straight year. WELS also recorded the highest number of annual adult confirmations in its history (4,341) along with the largest number of total "new to WELS" gains since 2004—almost 8,300, including about 2,100 pre-confirmation-aged youth. Taken together, these measures point to a church body that, by God's grace, is seeing real strength in congregational engagement and adult-accession outreach.

Membership decline reached a new historic low point

At the same time, 2025 marked the most severe one-year membership decline in WELS history. Total membership fell to 322,000, a 1.8 percent decline in one year. This makes clear that strong ministry activity in some areas is not yet translating into overall demographic stabilization. The result is a statistical report that must be read with nuance—there are meaningful reasons for thanksgiving but also unmistakable reasons for concern.

The youth base of WELS continues to erode

One of the most significant long-term developments in the report is the continued weakening of the youth base within WELS. Pre-confirmation-aged members now make up a smaller share of a church body that is itself shrinking, creating a compounding demographic effect. In 1975, members ages 0–13 represented 25.9 percent of total membership; by 2025, that figure had fallen to 19.9 percent. Because total membership also declined during that same period, the result is not a marginal adjustment but a dramatic contraction in the actual number of children and youth within the synod. This is one of the clearest indicators that WELS' future challenges are not merely short-term but structural.

The source of growth is shifting from births to evangelism

The statistical summary will suggest that WELS is entering a different demographic era. Births to WELS couples fell to their lowest recorded level in 2025, and marriages within WELS were the second lowest on record. At the same time, adult confirmations, professions of faith, and other "new to WELS" gains were unusually strong. This means a growing share of WELS' replenishment is coming not through biological continuation within member families, but through adult-accession evangelism. If current trends continue, WELS may soon add more pre-confirmation-aged members through evangelistic gains

than through births to WELS couples. That would represent a meaningful shift in how the synod grows and where future ministry emphasis must be placed—on member assimilation.

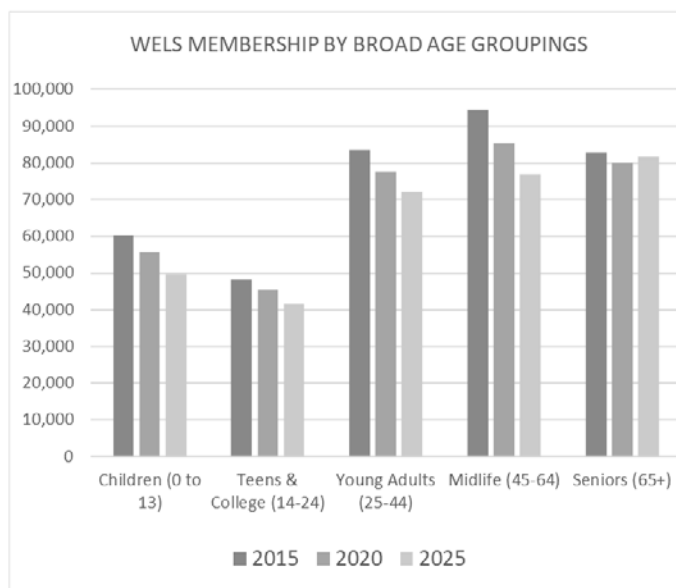
Called worker strength has been sustained by a smaller demographic base

One of the most striking features of the data is that called worker totals have remained strong even as overall membership has declined substantially since 1990. Over that period, total membership fell by 23.6 percent, yet the total number of called workers increased by 30.8 percent. Teacher totals are now at or near record highs, the number of staff ministers has grown dramatically, and the number of active pastors in 2025 still exceeds the 1990 total. This is a testimony to the Lord’s blessing and to deliberate recruitment efforts, but it also means that a shrinking membership base is being asked to sustain a comparatively large ministry footprint. That helps explain why vacancy pressures and called worker pipeline concerns remain so significant.

Financial support remains strong, but support for shared ministry is lagging

The financial data tells a mixed but important story. Total offerings in WELS increased by 6.3 percent in 2025, suggesting strong congregational generosity even amid inflationary pressure. Yet Congregation Mission Offerings, which support the shared ministry of the synod, rose by just 0.1 percent over the prior year. Over the past decade, local ministry support has grown far more quickly than Congregation Mission Offerings, meaning support for synodwide ministry has not kept close to pace with inflation and now represents a declining share of total congregational giving. In other words, financial health at the local level remains encouraging, but the funding model for shared work is under increasing pressure.

Taken together



These statistics show a church body experiencing both genuine encouragement and significant transition. The Lord continues to bless WELS with measurable strengths. At the same time, the data reveals deeper demographic and structural challenges. These realities should neither lead us to pessimism nor allow us to become complacent. Rather, they help us see more clearly the ministry context into which the Lord has placed us, so that we may respond with gratitude, wisdom, and renewed intentionality in carrying out his mission. Many of these opportunities and challenges are reflected in the goals of the “Christ through us” long-range plan, through which WELS is seeking, by God’s grace, to respond strategically to the realities now before us.

More statistical information

God-willing, the full 2025 Statistical Analysis & Summary will be completed by the time of district conventions. It will go into much greater detail about these and other topics. That summary, as well as all the data submitted in 2023, will be available at welscongregationalservices.net.

Ministry Support

The Ministry Support area of the ministry financial plan includes the Synodical Council and all entities overseen by the Synodical Council. These include:

Synodical Council

- Expenses for all regular and special meetings of the Synodical Council
- Expenses for the Accounting Oversight Committee
- Some insurance expenses

President's Office

- Compensation for the synod president
- Stipends to the congregations of the first and second vice presidents
- Office staff serving the president and the Synodical Council
- Travel expenses for the synod presidium
- Colloquy expenses

Facility Services

Expenses related to the maintenance and operation of the Center for Mission and Ministry, including insurance costs

WELS Archives

WELS Historical Institute (see p. 138)

WELS Christian Aid and Relief

Expenditures related to humanitarian aid and relief programs; funding for the programs of Christian Aid and Relief is provided by gifts from individuals, congregations, and other organizations

Technology

- All expenditures related to maintaining the technology infrastructure of the synod
- Maintaining the synod's database for personnel and systems for financial records and transactions
- Meeting the needs of all areas of ministry to communicate using web technologies

Financial Services

- Prepares and provides accounting and financial information and services that support WELS ministries and subsidiaries
- Payroll processing
- Risk management
- Investments, banking, and cash management

Human Resources

- Oversees development and communication of the synod's personnel policies and procedures
- Assures compliance with federal and state employment laws
- Serves as a resource for the Compensation Review Committee
- Serves as a resource for congregations in the matters listed above

Synodical Council

The Synodical Council (SC) is responsible for the implementation of all decisions and resolutions made by the Synod in Convention and for overseeing all activities of WELS in pursuit of its mission (other than those that are the specific responsibility of the Conference of Presidents). In keeping with the WELS Constitution and Bylaws, the Synodical Council has the authority to act on behalf of the synod between conventions when proper and necessary.

As it carries out the broad oversight described above, the Synodical Council is responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and overseeing all programs of ministry carried out by WELS. Part of that oversight is the management of all financial activities of the synod, assuring fiscal soundness, preparing and updating support forecasts, and monitoring expenditures to maintain a balanced financial plan. The Synodical Council also makes adjustments to the ministry financial plan when necessary and prudent between synod conventions. In the years when the synod meets in convention, the Synodical Council is responsible for working with all areas of ministry to develop and propose a balanced biennial ministry financial plan (budget) that supports the work of WELS in keeping with its long-range ministry plan.

The Synodical Council receives regular reports from all areas of WELS mission and ministry and departments, including subsidiary organizations and their operational and investment policies, as it carries out its oversight responsibilities.

Standing committees

The Synodical Council is organized into three standing committees.

The Finance Committee establishes the support forecast and recommends the overall level of spending for budgetary planning. The Finance Committee also monitors the financial performance and works closely with the WELS Chief Financial Officer to oversee risk management, banking, and the general financial situation of WELS.

The Administration Committee develops and implements general policies and procedures; provides oversight of WELS subsidiary organizations; and oversees WELS Human Resources, Communication Services, and Technology. It also provides recommendations for WELS called worker compensation (with the input of the Compensation Review Committee).

The Ministry Committee recommends how the total funding recommended by the Finance Committee is to be allocated among the areas of ministry and the departments of the synod. It oversees and coordinates the plans and activities of all areas of ministry and monitors and evaluates how the various areas of ministry are carrying out their tasks in keeping with the WELS long-range ministry plan.

The Compensation Review Committee is a standing subcommittee that reports to the Administration Committee. The Compensation Review Committee reviews and recommends adjustments to the WELS compensation guidelines for called workers, subject to the approval of the Synodical Council.

Synodical Council members

The following members of the SC have completed their service as of the district conventions:

- Mr. John Fowler (South Atlantic District lay representative, voting member)
- Pastor Phil Hirsch (Conference of Presidents representative, voting member)
- Pastor Charles Westra (Conference of Presidents representative, voting member)
- Pastor Joel Zank (Conference of Presidents representative, voting member)
- Pastor Kurt Lueneburg (director of WELS Ministry of Christian Giving, advisory member)
- Mr. Dennis Maurer (director of WELS Human Resources, advisory member)
- Mr. Daniel Nommensen (director of WELS Communication Services, advisory member)

We thank them all for their faithful service!

The SC has welcomed new members during the past year:

- Pastor Jonathan Bauer (pastor-at-large, voting member)
- Pastor Bart Brauer (pastor-at-large, voting member)
- Pastor Charles Vannieuwenhoven (administrator, Board for Ministerial Education, advisory member)

The SC will welcome four new members at its November meeting:

- Pastor Joel Heckendorf (Conference of Presidents representative, voting member)
- Pastor Michael Seifert (Conference of Presidents representative, voting member)
- Pastor Dennis Klatt (Conference of Presidents representative, voting member)
- Lay representative from the South Atlantic District (voting member, chosen at the 2026 district convention)

We pray for God's blessings on their service.

Long-range plan

The Synodical Council oversaw the development of a new long-range plan that will direct all areas of ministry for the next ten years. The plan was adopted by the 2025 synod convention and is already being implemented. The "Christ through us" long-range plan has four priorities:

- Culture: Cultivating a gospel-driven culture
- Congregations: Strengthening WELS' backbone
- Commission: Bringing Christ to the nations
- Calling: Producing workers for a growing harvest

All areas of ministry are using this plan to guide them over the next ten years as they plan and carry out their ministry. The plan can be found in Appendix 2 of this report on p. 51.

Financial results

The Synodical Council monitors the financial results for the synod and all its subsidiaries. Broadly speaking, the financial results in terms of financial support from congregations and individuals continue to remain positive. There are some cautionary signs, however. While Congregation Mission Offerings (CMO) continue to rise, the increase has not been keeping up with inflation. In view of this, expenses have continued to be diligently managed, including some underspending within several ministry and ministry support areas. Areas of ministry and ministerial education schools continue to report strong levels of reserves, and the Financial Stabilization Fund continues to function as designed.

The details of the financial results for Fiscal Year 2025 and the first six months of Fiscal Year 2026 can be found in the “Financial results and ministry financial plan” report beginning on p. 86.

Our thanks to God for his gracious providence and for the faithful way, motivated by the gospel, in which congregations and their members continued their faithful support for the mission and ministry of our synod.

Annual audit

The independent auditing firm of Baker Tilly US, LLP (Baker Tilly) conducted annual audits of the consolidated financial statements of WELS, its ministerial education schools, and its support service subsidiaries for the fiscal year ended June 30, 2025. Baker Tilly issued an unmodified opinion (the best possible) on the financial statements and did not identify any material weaknesses in internal controls. The Accounting Oversight Committee reviewed the financial statements and the auditor report and recommended approval. The Synodical Council approved these at its November 2025 meeting.

Ministry financial plan

Even though the next ministry financial plan will not be adopted until the 2027 synod convention, work has already begun to develop the plan for FY28–29 that will be recommended by the Synodical Council to the convention. A support forecast is being developed, which estimates the amount of financial resources that may be conservatively expected to be available to support the various WELS ministries. This forecast takes into consideration the funds available from all sources, including, but not limited to, Congregation Mission Offerings; gifts, grants, bequests; investment income; tuition and student fees; special funds/reserves; and the Financial Stabilization Fund. Based on that forecast and in keeping with the Synodical Council policy to maintain the Financial Stabilization Fund within an acceptable range, the SC recommends overall spending levels, as well as the planning assumptions that will be followed (compensation, cost of insurance, retirement benefits, etc.). The support forecast is adjusted periodically, if necessary, to reflect changing financial circumstances.

In developing the ministry financial plan, each area of ministry and synodical department submits its proposed ministry plans and requested operational support, along with planned use of special funds, to the synod president. The president, taking into consideration the established priorities of WELS outlined in the long-range plan and in keeping with the spending levels adopted by the Synodical Council, and with input from areas of ministry and departments and subsidiaries, crafts a draft comprehensive ministry financial plan. The President’s Advisory Council, which includes representatives from all synodical areas of ministry and departments, reviews the plan proposal and makes suggestions for modifications. The president, taking into consideration the input of the President’s Advisory Council, then recommends a complete plan to the Synodical Council. The Finance Committee of the Synodical Council reviews the plan and is tasked with recommending the approval of the level of funding that would be provided in the ministry financial plan. The Ministry Committee of the Synodical Council reviews the plan and is tasked with recommending the allocation amounts for all areas of ministry and departments. After further discussion and input, the Synodical Council adopts the plan (or amends it) and forwards it for discussion and approval.

This planning process has been followed for more than a decade and has served the synod well. All areas of ministry have demonstrated a great deal of brotherly cooperation and a willingness to consider the overall needs of WELS.

Strategic capital planning for ministerial education schools

Over the past few years, the synod has worked to refine the planning process for capital projects at its ministerial education schools while maintaining a responsible approach to funding. This approach provides each ministerial education school with greater flexibility in managing small- to mid-sized capital projects within their ministry financial plans while establishing a structured process and benchmarks for major capital projects.

In April 2023, the Synodical Council established the Synod Capital Projects Fund (balance of \$6 million as of Dec. 31, 2025) to support major capital project development for the ministerial education schools. A portion of the fund is dedicated to early-stage site design and planning costs, while the remainder is preserved for future debt service through strategic use of bridge financing to accelerate project initiation. Rather than waiting to raise the full cost of a project up front, each major project will follow a structured generosity campaign in two phases. The quiet phase, conducted alongside the project's design development through preconstruction, focuses on securing commitments and gifts from major donors. Once a significant portion of necessary funds are raised, committed, or designated, construction begins through bridge financing, with a public generosity campaign focused on broadening donor engagement to facilitate rapid debt repayment.

To strengthen the long-term campus planning, the synod engaged Credo, a consulting firm specializing in strategic and master site planning for higher education institutions. Through Credo, the synod is developing a cohesive master site plan for the entire ministerial education system, ensuring that each campus' facilities align with their strategic objectives. This collaborative approach ensures a long-term vision for each campus, extending beyond the next biennium.

Initial steps have already been taken to advance potential major capital projects at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and Luther Preparatory School, including engaging firms for schematic design drawings. As of Dec. 31, 2025, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary secured enough funding and received approval from the Synodical Council to transition from the quiet phase of its "Compelled" generosity campaign into the public phase and to enter the construction phase for its project, which includes a new education center, library renovations, faculty office renovations, and campus gathering hall. Groundbreaking for these projects is planned for May 2026. The synod remains committed to responsible financial stewardship and strategic campus development to support the mission of ministerial education.

Reports

The Synodical Council has reviewed the reports of all WELS subsidiaries and other entities that are under the supervision of the SC. Those entities that submit reports are WELS Investment Funds, WELS Foundation, WELS Church Extension Fund, Northwestern Publishing House, Communication Services, Human Resources, Technology, WELS Benefit Plans, and WELS Archives. Reports from all these entities are included in *Report to the Twelve Districts*. The SC also reviewed reports from World Missions, Home Missions, Ministerial Education, Congregational Services, and WELS Christian Aid and Relief, which are also included in *Report to the Twelve Districts*.

Martin Luther College strategic and financial sustainability initiative

In spring 2024, WELS engaged a consultant from the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges to help Martin Luther College (MLC) address structural deficits and improve financial health. Driven by declining enrollment and increasing college closures nationwide, this synod-funded initiative involved a financial review; strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats (SWOT) analysis; and feedback from students, faculty, staff, and the MLC Governing Board, along with a review of MLC's strategic priorities. The deliverable was an action plan of objectives and priorities aligned with MLC's

existing strategic plan, focusing on 1) improving fiscal sustainability and operations efficiency; 2) expanding educational opportunities and accessibility; and 3) enhancing brand identity and outreach efforts. The Synodical Council reviewed MLC’s implementation plan and encouraged swift action on these objectives and priorities. MLC continues to develop and implement the plan to improve sustainability and operations efficiency.

Comprehensive inflation analysis

Since inflation began accelerating in 2021, the relationship between inflation and called worker compensation has been a regular topic of discussion for the Synodical Council. During this period, synod leadership has closely monitored economic conditions, completed multiple inflation-related analyses, and conducted a synodwide called worker survey to better understand how calling bodies are applying the WELS Called Worker Compensation Guidelines (commonly referred to as “synod code”) in practice. The survey indicated many congregations would benefit from additional clarity regarding the guidelines and their various components. The Compensation Review Committee is actively working to improve communication and understanding so that calling bodies are better equipped to apply these guidelines faithfully and consistently.

The synod has also conducted a comprehensive analysis of inflation’s impact on local ministry offerings, CMO, and the WELS salary matrix, along with a state-by-state compensation benchmarking study using data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. This benchmarking compared WELS compensation at key experience levels to percentile benchmarks within each state. While this work includes statistical and economic analysis, it is not intended to reduce ministry to numbers alone. Behind every data point stands a called worker, and behind every called worker stands Christ’s love and the church’s responsibility to care faithfully for those who serve in his name. The analysis has been undertaken with a desire to ensure that called workers are supported in a manner that is fair, responsible, and sustainable.

This analysis provided the following high-level takeaways:

- **Local ministry offerings and Congregation Mission Offerings**—Congregational giving at the local level has generally demonstrated resilience over time. While inflation has affected real purchasing power differently across districts, aggregate local offerings have largely kept pace with inflation. In contrast, Congregation Mission Offerings have not maintained the same inflation-adjusted strength, resulting in a measurable reduction of real resources available for synodwide ministry. This reflects a growing difference between local financial capacity and the level of support directed toward synodwide work.
- **Salary matrix and inflation**—The WELS salary matrix (see p. 96 for the current matrix) has remained closely aligned with inflation over the long term when evaluated using CPI-U less shelter (a version of the Consumer Price Index that excludes housing costs, which are addressed as a separate component of total compensation). Since FY10, cumulative increases to the salary matrix have slightly exceeded this benchmark, indicating that adjustments to the salary matrix have generally preserved real purchasing power over time. This is before considering additional components of compensation, such as housing, Self-Employed Contributions Act (SECA), Cost of Living Adjustments (COLA), and additional responsibilities, as well as the flexibility calling bodies have to exceed the guidelines.
- **Compensation benchmarking**—State-by-state benchmarking indicates that the WELS Called Worker Compensation Guidelines compare favorably with labor-market benchmarks. In most states, compensation aligns at or above the median benchmarks, with many progressing into upper-quartile ranges over time.

Viewed together, these findings indicate that the WELS Called Worker Compensation Guidelines provide a fair and reasonable framework when applied as intended. Differences in individual experiences of compensation are often influenced by how the guidelines are applied in specific local settings, along with broader economic conditions that affect all households.

It is also important to recognize that responsibility for called worker compensation is shared between the synod and individual calling bodies, with distinct but complementary roles.

First, the synod establishes the WELS Called Worker Compensation Guidelines to provide a structured and consistent framework for compensation. These guidelines incorporate factors such as position, experience, responsibilities, education, and cost-of-living considerations. The WELS Called Worker Compensation Guidelines, salary matrix, and compensation calculator are designed as tools to assist calling bodies in determining appropriate compensation within recommended ranges. Because these guidelines are intended for use across a wide variety of ministry settings, they are not designed to address every individual circumstance but rather to establish a baseline standard of fair compensation.

Second, each self-supporting calling body is responsible for applying these guidelines within its local context. Calling bodies have the flexibility to exceed the guidelines in order to address individual circumstances, local economic conditions, and other relevant factors, and latitude to go above these base guidelines to address individual circumstances, localized cost-of-living considerations, and other relevant factors. Because the synod cannot account for every individual situation, each calling body is tasked with giving careful and thoughtful consideration to providing total compensation that demonstrates honor to the Lord's servant and appreciation for the labors carried out in Christ.

Third, called worker compensation is best understood in totality. In addition to base salary, compensation includes several important components, including:

- COLA;
- Cash housing allowance or parsonage/teacherage;
- SECA contributions;
- Employer contributions for retirement savings;
- Voluntary Employee Benefits Association (VEBA) health insurance premiums, which should be fully covered by the calling body; and
- Tax benefits associated with the Minister of the Gospel status (parsonage allowance), which can provide significant after-tax financial advantages.

At the same time, it is recognized that rising costs—particularly in areas such as housing, childcare, and everyday expenses—are placing pressure on households. These challenges are not unique to called workers and are being experienced broadly across the country. In some cases, reports have indicated that called workers may qualify for government assistance programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). It is important to understand that eligibility for these programs is influenced by how income is defined, including the tax treatment of the Minister of the Gospel housing allowance, and does not always reflect a complete picture of financial resources. As a result, these indicators should be interpreted with care and do not, by themselves, indicate deficiencies in compensation guidelines.

While synod leadership recognizes these financial pressures faced by congregations, the responsibility for stewarding resources in a way that honors and sustains called workers rests with calling bodies, supported by guidance and encouragement from district leadership.

Ministry financial plan modifications

The SC approved the following ministry financial plan modifications for FY26 and FY27:

- **Michigan Lutheran Seminary**—\$200,000 increase in FY26 expenses for costs related to elevator repairs (no additional synod operating support is required)
- **World Missions**—\$91,000 (2.5 FTE) increase in FY26 special fund expenses related to Central Africa Medical Mission Field Director (0.5 FTE), church planting facilitator for One Latin America Team (0.5 FTE), women’s ministry coordinator for Europe Team (0.5 FTE), and women’s ministry coordinator for Asia-Oceania Team (1.0 FTE) (no additional synod operating support is required)
- **World Missions**—\$500,000 (3 FTE) increase in FY27 special fund expenses related to Asia Lutheran Seminary professor (1.0 FTE) and missionaries to Senegal (2.0 FTE) (no additional synod operating support is required)
- **Communications**—\$110,000 (2.5 FTE) increase in FY26 and \$512,000 (1.0 FTE) increase in FY27 utilizing additional synod operating support related to staffing, including a junior designer, administrative assistant, digital communications strategist, and web designer; and website redesign
- **Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary**—\$1,230,000 increase in FY26 expenses for capital project costs associated with the “Compelled” campaign and additional vicar expenses utilizing higher gifts, bequests, investment returns, and satisfaction of restrictions (no additional synod operating support is required)
- **Martin Luther College**—\$630,000 increase in FY26 expenses for capital project costs and rebranding utilizing higher revenue from improved enrollment, sale of a triplex, higher investment returns, and satisfaction of restrictions (no additional synod operating support is required)

Appointments

The Synodical Council approved the following appointments to various boards, commissions, and committees:

- Mr. Jeff Fischer, Mr. Kevin Rusch, and Mr. David Maccoux reappointed to the Accounting Oversight Committee
- Mr. Mark Hartman reappointed to the Church Extension Fund Board
- Pastor Charles Degner reappointed to the WELS Investment Funds Board
- Pastor Jonathan Kolander and Mr. Michael Krueger reappointed to the WELS Foundation Board
- Pastor Jeremiah Gumm appointed to the Northwestern Publishing House Board

Stipend for district presidents

In view of significant responsibilities of the district presidents, the Synodical Council, upon the recommendation of the Compensation Review Committee, approved an annual stipend of \$2,400 for the district presidents, beginning in FY27. This stipend is in addition to each district president’s existing compensation and will be provided through the district president’s calling body as taxable income.

Appendices to this report

Following this report, Appendix 1 (p. 50) provides the WELS convention compliance listing as a means of reporting how the resolutions of the previous convention have been addressed. Appendix 2 (p. 51) is the “Christ through us” long-range plan.

Looking ahead

Those who serve on the Synodical Council are deeply mindful of the trust that has been placed in them by the members of our synod. They recognize that they can carry out their responsibilities faithfully only with the help and guidance of our gracious God. The members of the Synodical Council look forward to continuing their service to the synod, to doing everything they can to communicate both blessings and challenges, and to making decisions that give glory to God and support the proclamation of his saving gospel.

Rev. Mark Schroeder, reporter

Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president and chairman
Mr. Pete Aisbet, Southeastern Wisconsin District
Rev. Jonathan Bauer, pastor-at-large
Rev. Bart Brauer, pastor-at-large
Rev. Matthew Brown, chairman of the WELS Board for Home Missions
Mr. John Fowler, South Atlantic District
Mr. Seth Hansen, Dakota-Montana District
Rev. Phil Hirsch, Conference of Presidents
Mr. Chris Kestner, Michigan District
Mr. Noel Ledermann, Arizona-California District
Mr. Tim Lehman, Northern Wisconsin District
Mr. Jake Lemke, Western Wisconsin District
Mr. Brent Masters, Pacific-Northwest District
Mr. Brent Nemmers, South Central District
Dr. Ryan Olson, North Atlantic District
Teacher Thomas Plitzuweit, teacher-at-large
Rev. Duane Rodewald, chairman of WELS Board for Ministerial Education
Mr. Kurt Sames, Minnesota District
Rev. Jonathan Schroeder, chairman of WELS Board for World Missions
Rev. Charles Westra, Conference of Presidents
Mr. Chip Woods, Nebraska District
Rev. Joel Zank, Conference of Presidents

Advisory:

Rev. John Bortulin, WELS second vice president, secretary of the Synodical Council
Mr. Kyle Egan, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer
Rev. Mark Gabb, administrator of WELS Board for Home Missions
Rev. Jonathan Hein, coordinator of WELS Congregational Services
Rev. Kurt Lueneburg, director of WELS Ministry of Christian Giving
Mr. Dennis Maurer, director of WELS Human Resources
Mr. Daniel Nommensen, director of WELS Communication Services
Teacher James Rademan, director of Lutheran Schools
Rev. Larry Schlomer, administrator of WELS Board for World Missions
Mr. Martin Spriggs, WELS chief technology officer
Rev. Charles Vannieuwenhoven, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education
Rev. Joel Voss, WELS first vice president

Appendix 1:

2025 WELS convention compliance listing

Resolution	Responsible group/individual	Resolution description	Status
2025 Res. 08-01	Finance with input from areas of ministry and department	Adopted ministry financial plan	<i>2025-27 ministry financial plan implemented</i>
2025 Res. 09-01	Areas of ministry	"Christ through us" long-range plan adopted	<i>Areas of ministry have begun implementing long-range plan</i>
2025 Res. 17-01	President	Bylaw revision changing method of electing synod officers	<i>Bylaw change made; to be implemented in spring 2027</i>
2025 Res. 17-02	President	Bylaw revision for WELS Retirement Commission	<i>Bylaw change made</i>
2025 Res. 17-03	President	Bylaw revision for WELS VEBA Commission	<i>Bylaw change made</i>

Appendix 2: WELS' long-range strategic plan "Christ through us"

If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. ([2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-21](#))

In these verses, St. Paul describes two precious gifts.

The first gift: *God . . . reconciled us to himself through Christ*. Reconciliation. Redemption. Restoration. In Christ, God became man so that he might lay down his perfect life as the atoning sacrifice for sin. This is Christ for us. This "*is the chief article in all Christian doctrine. Without it, the knowledge of Christ is lost*" (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV).

The second: *We are . . . Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us*. Recruitment. Responsibility. Representation. God gives all believers a new and lofty purpose—sharing that message of reconciliation with others as Christ's ambassadors. This is Christ through us.

So, we celebrate these inseparable truths: *Christ for us* and *Christ through us*.

The first truth is *the message*—"the message of reconciliation"—the Holy Spirit works the saving faith through which we receive all of Christ's gifts.

The second truth is *the method*—"through us"—that Christ has chosen to share that life-giving message.

The motivation for us to embrace this "Christ through us" calling is abundantly provided in the good news of "Christ for us." In gratitude for the gracious gift of Christ's righteousness, the believers of WELS joyfully serve as Christ's ambassadors.

- We know that Christ desires that his message of reconciliation go into the whole world.
- We affirm that only that gospel of reconciliation can create and sustain faith.
- We trust that the Spirit will work through the means of grace he has entrusted to us.
- We entrust the spiritual outcomes of our work to Christ, the Lord of the Church.

With hearts full of thanksgiving, we carry out this ministry of reconciliation as individuals and as congregations united in a confessional Lutheran church body. Together, we proclaim the gospel, standing unwaveringly on the full truth of God's Word as expressed by the Lutheran Confessions. We will labor diligently, yet humbly, knowing that our efforts are but instruments in the hands of the Spirit, who alone brings life. Thus, we press forward in this sacred task—steadfast in our doctrine, bold in our witness, and ever reliant on Christ to accomplish his good work through us.

OUR PURPOSE

As we plan our shared ministry efforts and marshal resources as good stewards of God's blessings, we do so with this sense of purpose:

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod exists to glorify God by proclaiming the truth of the Holy Scriptures as articulated in the Lutheran Confessions—supporting congregations as they equip their members to serve as Christ's ambassadors, training called workers to serve in the ministry of reconciliation, and coordinating mission efforts at home and abroad.

OUR PRIORITIES

In 2025, the people of WELS lift their hearts in gratitude to God for the 175 years of grace he has lavished upon our church body. Since 1850, Christ has mightily worked through us, his ambassadors, to share the message of reconciliation with countless souls, drawing them to his cross. Across those seven generations, we see that mankind's greatest affliction—sin—remains unchanged, as does its only remedy: the righteousness of Christ, freely bestowed through faith.

However, we also acknowledge that the world in which we carry out this sacred mission has transformed dramatically. In North America, the cultural landscape has shifted. Secularism and skepticism have surged. Increasingly, Americans dismiss faith as being irrelevant and view the church with suspicion, associating it with judgmentalism or hypocrisy. The vast majority of Christian denominations in America are declining at a pace that strains their ability to sustain ministry. WELS, too, has felt the weight of these challenges.

Yet at the same time, across the world, the Lord is opening doors wide. In regions where Christianity was once unknown or unwelcome, the gospel is taking root and flourishing. Through Word and sacrament, the Holy Spirit is drawing new believers to Christ—often in the face of opposition or persecution—building his church in ways that defy human expectation. These global opportunities remind us that the ministry of reconciliation entrusted to us is not bound by borders or eras, but is a living, Spirit-driven mission that transcends all perceived obstacles.

As WELS steps into its eighth generation, the "Christ through us" long-range strategic plan emerges as our prayerful response to these current realities. With humility before God's grace and bold confidence in his promises, we seek to navigate this shifting landscape by supporting congregations in their effort to faithfully extend the reach of the gospel locally and abroad.

This issues-based strategic plan names four strategic priorities—sweeping areas that face our gravest challenges. Each priority offers a rationale for its urgency, followed by goals—tangible steps showing how, by God’s grace, we will meet these trials. Priorities frame the struggles; goals forge the path. (Note: The order of the priorities and goals reflects no ranking, as they are intrinsically intertwined. The broader work we do as a synod is predicated upon a backbone of congregations being able to support that broader work.)

These priorities and goals must guide our collective efforts through 2035. All our efforts, initiatives, and objectives will align with this thought—Christ through us.

With unwavering reliance on God’s Word, we pray that he would bless all our work, multiply all our efforts, and accomplish his will *through us* for the sake of souls yet to know his reconciling love.

Priority: Culture

CULTIVATING A GOSPEL-DRIVEN CULTURE

Culture is a shared mindset—commonly held values, assumptions, and expectations—that shapes what an organization does. As we mark 175 years of God’s grace, we recognize that the cultural landscape around us has shifted dramatically, with secularism, skepticism, and apathy toward faith challenging the church’s voice. Yet these realities do not diminish the power of the gospel; rather, they compel us to cultivate a gospel-driven culture within our congregations—one where the message of reconciliation, rooted in Christ’s sinless sacrifice, becomes the heartbeat of all we are and do.

A strong, gospel-driven culture determines whether our congregations are outward-reaching or inward-focused, whether members see themselves as Christ’s ambassadors or merely as mission spectators, and whether the good news of salvation permeates our daily lives or fades into a Sunday-only thought. In this priority, we ask the Holy Spirit to work through Word and sacrament, transforming not just our actions but our very identity as a confessional Lutheran church body, so that we might be poised to meet the challenges and opportunities of this generation with boldness and humility.

Imagine a future where congregations assess not just what they are doing in ministry but also ask why, where leaders diligently diagnose unhealthy thought habits within the congregation—pride, complacency, or fear—and prayerfully plan how to nurture new ones rooted in Christ’s love. Imagine a future where our members joyfully lean into their confessional Lutheran identity—not just as a set of doctrines we affirm, but as a Spirit-formed culture that shapes our worship, our witness, and our daily life in Christ. Imagine a future where leaders see their role as not only orchestrating ministry programs but also cultivating a vibrant, gospel-driven culture that empowers those plans to flourish—a culture where every member embraces their role in the ministry of reconciliation and where the gospel’s light shines brightly into a skeptical world.

Here is what we pray Christ might accomplish through us.

GOALS

1. Raise up culture-shaping leaders

A congregation's culture flows first and foremost from the leader—Jesus Christ—who, through his gospel of reconciliation, renews our minds and hearts. Yet in his gracious design, Christ also works through human leaders—called workers and laity alike—to mold the culture of congregations. What leaders emphasize, the priorities they champion, the way they lead—with humility, boldness, compassion, curiosity—profoundly shape the attitudes and habits of the members of their congregations.

Our goal is to help leaders see the weight of their influence—how their words and example can cultivate a gospel-driven culture where the mission is not merely a program but the natural, Spirit-sustained heartbeat of congregational life, flowing from a shared mindset that all believers are Christ's ambassadors.

2. Foster a zealous gospel mindset

The challenges facing our congregations can sometimes lure us into a maintenance-mode mentality, prioritizing institutional preservation—maintaining familiar programs and routines—over the urgent call to bring the message of reconciliation to a world in desperate need of Christ's righteousness. This mindset, while understandable in a time of uncertainty, risks adversely affecting our mission efforts as Christ's ambassadors.

Our goal is to help congregations foster a zealous gospel mindset where the proclamation of Christ drives every decision and action. Rooted in the unchanging truth of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, we will encourage believers to explore fresh ways to reach souls, while holding fast to our doctrine and confidence in Christ's means of grace. This passion transforms us into bold ambassadors, not content with mere survival but eager to carry the ministry of reconciliation to the lost, blending heartfelt zeal with thoughtful adaptability so that our gospel ministry remains faithful and responsive amid the opportunities and trials of this generation.

3. Make outreach a personal effort

In a Western society increasingly drifting from the church, corporate outreach efforts—while still valuable—are becoming increasingly less effective in piercing the cultural haze. The message of reconciliation shines brightest when shared within the context of personal relationships—through believers speaking boldly and lovingly about their Savior in everyday conversations with family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Personal evangelism must become the vibrant heartbeat of WELS culture, where every believer embraces their role as a living witness to Christ's love in daily life.

Our goal is to help congregations cultivate this culture by shifting the perception of outreach from a formal church program to an organic, Spirit-led part of daily discipleship. We will provide resources that help believers share their faith confidently and joyfully, trusting the Holy Spirit to multiply these efforts into a harvest of souls.

4. Encourage cross-bearing discipleship

The call to serve as Christ's ambassadors is a high privilege, but it is not an easy path. Jesus himself warned that following him demands self-denial and cross bearing—sacrifices that challenge our natural inclination to seek comfort and security over the costly demands of the gospel. It is tempting to embrace a discipleship that avoids risk, staying within familiar routines rather than risking discomfort for the gospel. Yet the ministry of reconciliation requires believers who are willing to embrace the challenges and hardships inherent in this calling, reflecting the same love that led Christ to the cross.

Our goal is to help congregations shape a culture of cross-bearing discipleship, where members are moved beyond their comfort zones, not out of obligation but out of a Spirit-fueled passion for Christ's mission. Through encouragement and examples rooted in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, we will help believers to demonstrate courageous love and to bear bold witness to the gospel, even when it invites opposition.

5. Build deep Christian community

The church, united as God's family by Christ's reconciling love, stands in a fragmented society where isolation and division fracture relationships, leaving many yearning for authentic community beyond fleeting connections. In this broken age, the world—especially young people—seeks more than shallow ties. People are looking for a community that helps one another: sharing burdens, constant encouragement. This is exactly what Christ intended his church to be!

Our goal is to help congregations knit members together into something more than friendly acquaintances—the deep Christian community Christ declares us to be: a family of faith. This authentic fellowship not only guards us against the loneliness tearing at our time but also offers a compelling gospel witness, showing a fragmented world the unity and love found in Christ. Trusting the Holy Spirit to work through these bonds, we aim to draw those aching for belonging into the reconciling embrace of the Savior.

Priority: Congregations

STRENGTHENING WELS' BACKBONE

The congregations of WELS form the vital backbone that supports our shared gospel efforts. WELS congregations are beacons of light and truth in their communities, proclaiming the life-giving gospel to a dying world. However, these congregations are not only local gospel outposts but also the foundation of the synod's broader ministry efforts. Through their offerings, they sustain worldwide missions and the planting of new churches. Through their nurture, they identify and encourage the future called workers who will serve the next generation. Through their witness, they embody the love of Christ who reconciled us to God.

Yet we face a sobering reality: the cultural tides of secularism and skepticism threaten to erode this backbone. Strengthening our existing congregations and establishing new ones is not just part of the commission Christ has given; it is strategically essential for the future ministry efforts of WELS.

Imagine a future where our churches pulse with vibrant discipleship, their members deeply engaged in reaching out to their communities with the gospel's hope and working hand-in-hand across the synod to strengthen and expand ministry efforts at home and abroad. Imagine congregations where members see themselves as active participants in Christ's mission—boldly sharing their faith as a natural way of life—rather than passive spectators on the sidelines. Imagine a network of churches, both longstanding and newly planted, radiating the unity and love of Christ, drawing the lost into fellowship and equipping the faithful to stand firm in a fragmented world.

Here is what we pray Christ might accomplish through us.

GOALS

6. Engage the laity in mission

God grants spiritual gifts to all his people to build up his church. However, sometimes congregations function with the mindset that called workers are the ones who do all gospel ministry—evangelism, youth discipleship, etc.—with laity's responsibility being only to support that ministry with prayers and offerings. This mentality can inadvertently obscure or inhibit the joyful exercise of the universal priesthood—leading members to forget the gospel privilege they've been given to serve others in Christ's name.

Our goal is to better engage all members in our congregations, helping them to embrace their God-given role in Christ's mission—viewing their neighbors as their personal mission field and their homes as the heart of youth discipleship. We want all God's people—men and women, young and old—to see that their ideas, insights, and talents are gifts that God has given to his church for use in zealous ministry efforts. We will provide training and resources to help congregations foster an environment where every believer joyfully and confidently serves Christ's mission according to their gifts and callings.

7. Support ministry enhancement efforts

Every WELS congregation faces a distinct blend of opportunities and challenges, shaped by shifting ministry contexts. Some will seek to enhance or revitalize their current mission efforts, particularly if their ministry context has changed. Others will explore regional collaboration, shared ministry, or consolidation to amplify their gospel reach. Still others will prayerfully consider the objectives of their childhood ministries, including Lutheran schools: discipleship, outreach, or both. They will seek to ensure such childhood ministries are sustainable long term.

Our goal is to offer support to WELS congregations in whatever ministry enhancement effort they choose to undertake for Christ's glory. When asked, we will help them assess their strategies, providing the encouragement, advice, and resources that can help them plan and implement efforts that enhance their outreach and discipleship ministries.

8. Expand WELS' reach through strategic church planting

Driven by Christ's reconciling love, we are called to bring the gospel to every corner. Yet America's shifting landscape—marked by growing diversity and population drift—leaves millions beyond the reach of WELS' gospel witness, with only two percent living near our congregations. This gap cries out for action, as souls hunger for the hope of reconciliation in regions where confessional Lutheran ministry is rare. Planting new churches not only meets this need but fortifies our synod's backbone for enduring mission impact.

Our goal is to broaden WELS' reach by planting congregations strategically in underserved areas, pinpointing locations where a faithful Lutheran presence is scarce and equipping them with resources and support grounded in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. We will nurture these new missions to stand as beacons of Christ's love and truth.

9. Elevate the home as the first mission field

The exodus of young members from WELS underscores a critical need: the home must be reclaimed as the first mission field. In a society—and even within our church—where marriage and childbirth are in decline, we face a diminishing appreciation for family as God's blessed design. Strengthening homes is essential to sustain our congregational backbone and ensure the gospel thrives among future generations.

Our goal is to lift up the home within WELS as the first mission field, equipping parents to embrace their role as spiritual leaders in passing down the faith, with congregations standing to support—not supplant—these family efforts. Future discipleship efforts and resources, especially ones aimed at our younger brothers and sisters, will affirm marriage and childbearing as divine blessings. Trusting the Holy Spirit, we aim to fortify our homes as gospel strongholds.

10. Provide sound Lutheran resources

The most impactful ministry moments tend to happen in face-to-face encounters—personal conversations, shepherding, and witnessing—where Christ's reconciling love touches hearts one soul at a time. At a time when biblical literacy wanes and cultural resistance to Christianity is high, congregations must prioritize these moments. Yet called workers and lay leaders, burdened by administrative tasks and content creation, often lose time for the relational gospel work that bolsters our congregational backbone in a faith-starved world. Seeking help and efficiency, they may find that many of the resources readily available fall short of what a confessional Lutheran congregation would desire.

Our goal is to empower WELS congregations with sound Lutheran resources—for discipleship, worship, outreach, planning, leadership—that reflect confessional Lutheran theology, not generic Christian content, saving time and amplifying impact. God willing, these tools will free congregational leaders for frontline, face-to-face ministry.

Priority: Commission

BRINGING CHRIST TO THE NATIONS

God has entrusted us, as his ambassadors, with the message of reconciliation, commissioning us to proclaim the gospel to every nation, tribe, people, and language—a charge that echoes with urgency in our time. While Christianity wanes in much of the Western world, its light blazes anew in regions where the gospel is still a fresh whisper, revealing the Spirit’s boundless power to gather souls. Yet over 6.5 billion people—more than two-thirds of humanity—dwell in places where Christ’s name is barely known, their hearts unreached by the hope we bear.

In 2025, as WELS reflects on 175 years of grace, we stand at a crossroads: The decline of faith in North America contrasts with unprecedented global opportunities, calling us to extend our confessional Lutheran witness beyond familiar borders. This commission is not a mere task but a sacred privilege, strengthening our synod’s resolve to bring the nations to the foot of the cross.

Imagine a future where, through us, the unchanging truth of God’s Word resounds across continents, uniting over a million souls in faith and sparking a global movement anchored in our confessional Lutheran heritage. Picture not just WELS dispatching missionaries worldwide, but new Lutheran church bodies—birthed by our mission efforts—rising as partners in this divine calling. Envision a day when these vibrant churches, from distant hemispheres, send well-trained missionaries to a spiritually dimming North America, rekindling the message of reconciliation with confessional clarity. Imagine a symphony of nations, bound by the gospel, proclaiming Christ together in joyful unity.

Here is what we pray Christ might accomplish through us.

GOALS

11. Forge a borderless support network

Envision a wave of generosity and support—resources, prayers, people—flowing freely across national borders, a vision born of our call to share Christ’s reconciling love with all. The Great Commission is too big for one church body alone. WELS has long leaned almost exclusively on stateside funding and missionaries—a faithful and blessed beginning to our world mission efforts but now poised to grow. By fostering strong international partnerships, we will expand this holy work, bringing the Spirit’s life-giving power to a dying world.

Our goal is to forge a global support network, transcending national boundaries. We will nurture robust mission collaboration with confessional Lutheran church bodies in full doctrinal fellowship with WELS, equipping pastors and congregations worldwide to thrive as Christ’s ambassadors.

12. Equip a global missionary force

Mature church bodies, entrusted with Christ’s reconciling love, do not merely receive missionaries—they send them as ambassadors to the nations. Historically, WELS has dispatched stateside workers

to plant the gospel, but a world ripe with harvest calls for more. Training indigenous leaders—pastors and evangelists from sister churches globally—unlocks a boundless force to proclaim reconciliation where expatriates alone cannot reach. This shift from dependence to partnership magnifies the Spirit's work, gathering the elect across borders. It also strengthens our stateside mission, as these global voices will enrich our cross-cultural outreach with fresh zeal and wisdom. Picture a future where thriving Lutheran churches in distant lands send missionaries to a spiritually dim North America, echoing the gospel back to us.

Our goal is to equip a global missionary force through WELS, training indigenous leaders from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and beyond to carry the gospel into new regions. We will guide expatriate missionaries to focus on empowering these leaders with Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, fostering a borderless network that sends workers to their own lands and new frontiers.

13. Establish confessional Lutheran seminaries

A strong church depends on well-trained shepherds who proclaim Christ's reconciling love. Training called workers has long been a historic strength of WELS, equipping faithful pastors to serve with confessional clarity. As the gospel spreads globally, emerging Lutheran church bodies crave this same depth to sustain their witness. Planting seminaries in strategic regions builds on this foundation, ensuring the Spirit's reconciling work thrives through our Lutheran heritage for years to come.

Our goal is to establish confessional Lutheran seminaries in key global locations through WELS, training pastors and leaders to shepherd with theological depth and Lutheran fidelity. These centers—grounded in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions—will empower a worldwide movement to proclaim reconciliation faithfully in their own contexts.

14. Expand multi-language mission efforts

The rapid rise of mission churches worldwide offers rich opportunities to share Christ's reconciling love, yet poses challenges in grounding believers in Lutheran doctrine amid diverse tongues. Many nations lack Lutheran resources in their native languages, risking theological drift where the gospel's clarity could fade. Expanding multi-language efforts to deliver sound Lutheran materials strengthens these churches, ensuring the Spirit's work of reconciliation takes deep root in every land for faithful witness and growth.

Our goal is to expand WELS' multi-language mission efforts, translating, publishing, and distributing confessional Lutheran materials in print and digital forms to equip churches globally. We will invest in Lutheran media, digital outreach, and theological publications to bolster both evangelism and discipleship efforts. Trusting the Holy Spirit, we aim to empower believers worldwide with tools to grow in faith and proclaim the gospel boldly in their own languages.

15. Pioneer missions in high-risk and unreached areas

WELS has planted mission fields across many lands, yet vast swaths of humanity remain unreached—cut off from Christ's reconciling love—especially where hostility or strict limits shroud the gospel's light. These high-risk regions, home to countless souls who may never hear of their Savior, beckon us as his

ambassadors to step boldly into the breach. Tailored strategies for such places can pierce the darkness, extending the Spirit's reconciling work to the farthest edges of the earth.

Our goal is to pioneer WELS missions in high-risk and unreached areas, identifying and crafting strategies—discreet underground networks, business-as-mission efforts, or digital outreach—fitted to these tough contexts. We will train and support workers to bring the gospel where it's least known.

PRIORITY: CALLING

PRODUCING WORKERS FOR A GROWING HARVEST

Jesus declared the fields ripe for harvest yet lamented the scarcity of workers—a truth that echoes today as WELS, entrusted with the message of reconciliation, expands its gospel reach. Planting new churches, opening mission fields, and growing Lutheran schools amplify the call for pastors, teachers, and staff ministers to serve as Christ's ambassadors. Yet decades of declining birth rates and membership contraction press us to face a sobering reality: our capacity to produce called workers strains under these demands.

At WELS' 175th anniversary, we stand at a pivotal moment. Faithful stewardship of this mission requires us to act with wisdom and urgency. We must intensify efforts to recruit and train workers while aligning plans for ministry growth with projections of a sustainable workforce. This dual task is not merely practical but a sacred charge to equip God's people to proclaim his love to a world in need, now and for generations ahead.

Imagine a future where men and women eagerly heed the call to ministry, their hearts stirred to carry Christ's gospel to the nations and their communities. Picture diverse pathways into service—flexible, faithful training that welcomes more gifts into the harvest—where pastors, teachers, and staff ministers eagerly answer the calling to public ministry. Envision a WELS where planned expansions thrive, unhindered by persistent vacancies, as a steady stream of called workers, grounded in confessional Lutheran truth, sustains vibrant churches, schools, and missions with joy and purpose.

Here is what we pray Christ will accomplish through us.

GOALS

16. Expand pathways into gospel ministry

The Lord of the Church, having entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation, provides workers in diverse ways to gather his harvest. Ministerial education has been a tremendous strength of WELS. By God's grace, we have cultivated servants deeply versed in the theology and artistry of Lutheran ministry. Yet a rapidly shrinking candidate pool urges us to broaden access, ensuring every willing heart is equipped to meet the new challenges of 21st-century ministry. Thus, in recent years, WELS has provided new ways to enter ministry (e.g., enhanced competency-based ministry certification for teachers).

Our goal is to carefully expand pathways into gospel ministry, with all efforts overseen by Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. We will better leverage technology to accommodate remote learning, while simultaneously stressing the blessing of the bonds developed with future ministry colleagues through in-person learning. We pray these pathways will reach a broader and more diverse pool of candidates, ensuring that every willing and qualified individual is equipped to serve.

17. Innovate recruitment efforts for future called workers

The Lord entrusts the church with his ministry of reconciliation, then calls workers to lead in the mission. The need for more called workers is ever urgent as new fields open. To sustain—let alone expand—our gospel reach, we must pursue bold, creative recruitment, stirring hearts both young and seasoned to answer Christ’s calling, publicly proclaiming Christ’s reconciliation in a world aching for hope.

Our goal is to innovate recruitment within WELS, seeking fresh ways to spark zeal in youth and second-career candidates for gospel ministry. Congregations will lead, cultivating spaces where all ages are urged to serve, armed with practical tools and guidance to identify and encourage future workers. We will tirelessly forge a steady stream of servants, trusting the Holy Spirit to multiply our efforts for an abundant harvest.

18. Ensure the long-term stability of ministerial education

For generations, WELS has been richly blessed by a robust ministerial education system, equipping faithful workers to proclaim the gospel with steadfast clarity. The sacred task of training called workers to share Christ’s reconciling love rests on our ministerial education schools. These schools must remain steadfast, adaptable, and financially sound to equip servants amid shrinking numbers and shifting needs. Without a stable foundation, we risk faltering in our mission to raise up workers who proclaim reconciliation for generations in a world yearning for hope.

Our goal is to ensure the long-term stability of WELS’ ministerial education system, sustaining our schools to train new workers for generations to come. We will pursue a strategy, including a comprehensive facilities plan, that keeps these schools financially secure and right-sized for the workers we can realistically expect to prepare, ensuring a steady supply of servants to share Christ’s love.

19. Establish a sustainable strategy for called worker development

Expanding gospel ministry flows from our longing to share Christ’s reconciling love, yet uncoordinated growth strains us when called workers fall far short of mounting needs. WELS must weigh the desire to expand ministry efforts against our capacity to raise up called workers, a stewardship vital for a sustainable future. Without a steady plan, we risk leaving missions understaffed or overburdening our servants. Since Christ works through us, both those risks potentially dim the gospel’s reach.

Our goal is to help WELS leaders—in the synod, congregations, and schools—consider their options

for sustainable staffing models. We will share strategies—pacing growth, pooling resources—to help align called worker demand with supply. Trusting the Holy Spirit to bless these efforts, we will ensure that the growing number of ministry opportunities is matched by a workforce that is prepared, supported, and able to serve effectively for years to come.

20. Support the well-being of called workers

The Lord sends workers to a harvest that demands steadfast endurance. WELS called workers pour out their lives to proclaim this gospel, yet ministry's potentially heavy yoke—intensified by rising demands and fewer hands—can sow weariness and lead to loss. With workers scarce, retaining these faithful servants is as crucial as recruiting them, their strength a lifeline for the mission. Upholding their well-being keeps Christ's light ablaze in a world shrouded by sin's darkness.

Our goal is to bolster the well-being of WELS called workers, equipping them with resources for spiritual renewal, emotional fortitude, and physical vigor. We will empower congregations with practical tools—assessment and care strategies—to gauge and meet workers' needs, fostering resilience and joy in service.

OUR PROCESS

To bring the “Christ through us” long-range strategic plan to life, we entrust its execution to key groups within WELS, uniting their efforts to proclaim the message of reconciliation through 2035.

- The synod president, in counsel with the President's Advisory Council (PAC), will craft a biennial ministry plan for the Synodical Council and the Synod in Convention, weaving continuity in our gospel mission with bold responses to emerging opportunities and challenges.
- WELS ministry groups will align all objectives and efforts with the goals of this plan, detailing their work annually in the *Book of Reports and Memorials* and *Report to the Twelve Districts*, ensuring our work focuses on our priorities.
- The Conference of Presidents (COP) will coordinate the work of circuit pastors, WELS Communication Services, and the Ministry of Christian Giving (MCG) to encourage both Congregation Mission Offerings and special gifts from individuals and groups for the general work of WELS, as well as for special efforts that fall under the “Christ through us” goals.
- The Synodical Council (SC) will steward Congregation Mission Offerings, prior gifts in the Financial Stabilization Fund, and new contributions, allocating them wisely in each biennial plan while monitoring progress to keep our mission thriving.

These groups will unite in purpose, steadfast in God's Word, assessing progress regularly to refine our course and faithfully serve Christ's harvest with unwavering resolve.

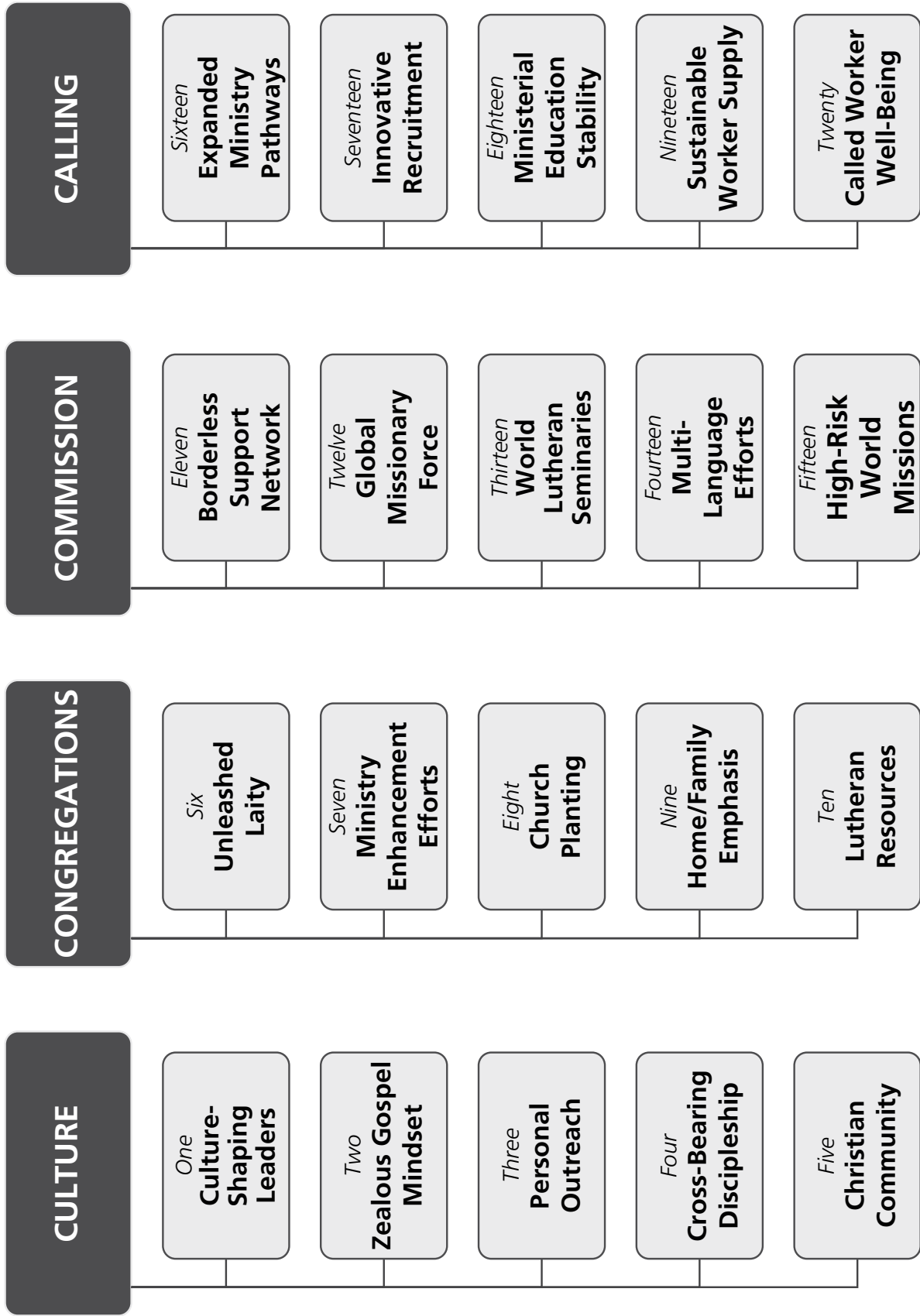
OUR PRAYER

Under the banner “Christ through us,” we rejoice in all that Christ has wrought across seven generations, taking our synod from just three humble congregations in the greater Milwaukee area to what is now a worldwide church body, boldly proclaiming Christ’s reconciling love in every hemisphere. We thank our gracious God that he, in his boundless mercy, chose us—flawed, frail, and sinful though we are—to bear this gospel to countless souls. Looking back, we lift our praise for every blessing, every soul drawn to faith through his mighty Spirit. We thank Christ for choosing to do this through us.

The “Christ through us” long-range strategic plan now turns our gaze forward, to a horizon brimming with both challenge and promise. This vision summons every heart in WELS to embrace the role Christ gives to each, understanding we all have a role to play in this collective effort. We commit our plans to the Lord, trusting in the power of his Word. Our prayer is that, with the faith and strength that Christ himself provides, as each of us labors with the message of reconciliation, then by 2035:

- We will not merely plant a few new home mission congregations but see every WELS church operating with the evangelistic zeal of a mission church.
- We will not limit thoughts of new mission fields to distant continents but see them in every neighbor across the street, every soul near our doors yearning for hope.
- We will not settle for a few hundred new called workers but awaken hundreds of thousands of Lutherans to live as the ambassadors Christ has made us to be.

The work of the church is *Christ’s* alone, yet he deigns to work *through us*. As WELS steps into its eighth generation, may his Spirit, through the Word, empower us for his purpose, multiply our humble efforts, and gather a harvest of souls into his eternal embrace.



WELS Long-Range Planning Task Force

Rev. Mark Gabb

Rev. Jonathan Hein

Rev. James Huebner

Mr. Kurt Nitz

Mr. Dan Nommensen

Rev. Paul Prange

Rev. Larry M. Schlomer

Mr. Martin Spriggs

“Christ through us”: Addendum A

Strategic plan components

PRIORITIES AND GOALS

The “Christ through us” strategic plan contains four priorities—broad ministry directions we have identified as crucial in the coming years. Priorities answer the question, “What must we focus on right now?” These are few in number and long-term in focus, providing clarity and alignment across the synod.

Each priority has corresponding goals—key long-term outcomes we pray the Lord of the Church allows us to achieve. Goals answer the question, “What are we aiming to accomplish?” Goals bridge the high-level direction (priorities) and the day-to-day action (objectives).

OBJECTIVES

Objectives are the specific actions, efforts, or programs we carry out to accomplish each goal. Objectives answer the question, “How are we going to get there?” Priorities and goals are broad and long term. Objectives are SMART:

Specific: answering “who, what, when”

Measurable: there are criteria for tracking progress

Achievable: realistic and attainable, considering available resources and constraints

Relevant: clearly supports one of the “Christ through us” goals

Time-bound: a deadline/timeframe is established

Areas of ministry will pull their biannual objectives into a framework that includes:

Objective: a concise description of the action, effort, or program

Goal: the goal(s) of the “Christ through us” strategic plan that objective supports

Who: the entity(s) that is responsible for the objective

When: the due date for the objective (some are ongoing)

Funding: A) operational funds, B) divisional funds, C) additional funding needed

KPIs/Conditions: how progress of the objective is measured or assessed

MANAGEMENT

The priorities and goals remain fixed, providing focus as we begin the eighth generation of WELS ministry and attempt to navigate the challenges before us. The objectives are expanded over time, as opportunities or challenges present themselves, yet always align with the goals of “Christ through us.”

An ongoing list of objectives for all areas of ministry, including the components of that framework, will be reported in future issues of *Report to the Twelve Districts* and *Book of Reports and Memorials*. That list will also allow the Synodical Council to look at funded and unfunded efforts in its efforts to steward Congregation Mission Offerings and other funding sources.

In all these efforts, we place our confidence not in our planning, but in Christ, who works through us.

“Christ through us”: Addendum B

The importance of culture

Every organization has a culture—commonly held values, assumptions, and expectations—that shapes what that organization does. Congregations are no different. You can picture congregational health as a pyramid. The foundation is Word and sacrament. St. Paul says, “You are . . . fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:19,20). Without that foundation, the church does not exist.

The top of the pyramid is our strategies and tactics—the ways we use Word and sacrament in our mission to disciple believers and evangelize the lost.

In between is congregational culture—the thought habits of the members. If a congregation is going to choose sound strategies and execute them well, members must have the right thoughts, attitudes, and expectations comprising their culture. Healthy culture supports sound ministry efforts.

Every WELS congregation has aspects of healthy culture. For example, by God’s grace, WELS congregations have maintained a rock-solid trust in the efficacy of God’s Word. *Sola Scriptura*. We know that God chooses to create and sustain faith through Scripture alone. Thus, all our ministry strategies have the ultimate aim of leading people into the gospel. However, congregations often have unhealthy elements as part of their congregational culture. This inevitably acts to the detriment of those congregations’ gospel ministry. Shaping a healthy, gospel-driven culture is a major focus of the “Christ through us” plan.

The list below contains some examples of unhealthy cultural aspects that WELS congregations have observed when doing honest self-assessment. For each example there is an explanation of how we pray that Christ, through us, might shift culture: FROM the unhealthy mindset TO a mindset that is more supportive of our gospel efforts.

This list is shared to illustrate the importance of congregational culture. It may also serve as a diagnostic tool for individuals congregations. With more than a thousand congregations in WELS, there is a broad range in congregational culture. Just as each congregation is unique, the path taken from using this diagnostic will be unique. (Note: The *Shadow of the Leader* program, developed to support “Christ through us—Goal 1: Raise up culture-shaping leaders,” helps congregational leaders with this effort.)



FROM Institutional preservation as the *de facto* focus

TO Zealous gospel proclamation as the explicit, overriding focus

Some WELS congregations operate with a maintenance-mode mentality. Zealous gospel proclamation means shifting from “How do we sustain our congregation?” to “How do we bring Christ to more souls with urgency and joy?”

FROM Outreach occurs primarily through congregational programs and committees

TO Outreach occurs primarily through members interacting with the unchurched

WELS congregations often rely on structured outreach programs, expecting those to draw people in. Yet many of the unchurched in our communities have a negative view of organized religion. However, they are still willing to discuss spiritual matters with their Christian neighbor. This culture shift means members joyfully embrace their individual role as Christ’s ambassador, sharing the message of reconciliation with which we have been entrusted.

FROM Ministry is accomplished through our called workers, with support of the members

TO Ministry is accomplished by our members as equipped by our called workers

Sometimes congregations default to a “pastor does the ministry” model. The expectation is for members to support and cheer on the church’s efforts. For example, in many congregations, schools disciple kids with minimal parental input and corporate outreach is stressed over personal evangelism. This shift sees pastors not as the doers of all gospel ministry but as ones who equip members as they embrace their callings as Christ’s ambassador: growing in faith and sharing it, spiritually leading their family, etc.

FROM Comfortable Christians

TO Cross-bearing Christians

Sometimes in our Christian lives we prefer to keep our faith low profile and safe, staying within familiar routines rather than risking discomfort for the gospel. The shift is to a culture of cross-bearing Christians, where service in Christ’s kingdom pushes us beyond our comfort zones—embracing the challenges and sacrifices of sharing the message of reconciliation.

FROM *Status quo* mindset; reluctance to depart from tactics

TO Thoughtfully exploring new ideas with curiosity

Ministry tactics must be examined to see if they are serving the gospel well. Some congregations resist change even when better ministry models could strengthen the church and reach more people. The shift would mean maintaining fidelity to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions while embracing curiosity about methodology.

FROM Resigned to decline

TO Committed to renewed efforts

Membership drops and aging demographics can foster a fatalistic slump: “There’s nothing we can do.” The shift is to a culture of hope—that through his means of grace the Lord of the Church can spark ministry revitalization. We give Christ our most zealous mission efforts while always leaving the results of those efforts completely in his loving hands.

FROM Not fully utilizing women’s insights or gifts

TO Women using their gifts in every biblically appropriate way

In some WELS congregations, at times, the ideas and insights of women are unheard and their gifts and skills not fully tapped. This can lead to sisters in Christ feeling discouraged, and it harms the congregation’s efforts. The shift is to a culture where women are appropriately involved in congregational ministry, not altering or bypassing biblical principles but upholding them in a way that reflects the complementary design God established at creation.

Culture is a major focus of the “Christ through us” long-range strategic plan, serving as one of the priorities. You will note culture shifts embedded throughout the goals of that plan.

Accounting Oversight Committee

Our calling

The Accounting Oversight Committee serves WELS and its ministerial education schools, subsidiaries, and affiliates that are under the oversight of the Synodical Council. The committee serves the Synodical Council by assisting management with ensuring appropriate accounting policies and internal controls are established and financial systems are efficient and effective; retaining external auditors; assisting in ensuring that financial personnel have the requisite skills; and assisting in ensuring that financial reports are prepared timely, accurately, and in compliance with accounting principles generally accepted in the United States of America (U.S. GAAP).

The Accounting Oversight Committee keeps the Synodical Council informed of its action through the Synodical Council's appointed member of the committee. The synod's ministerial education schools and its subsidiary and affiliate boards, commissions, and committees are informed through WELS' chief financial officer and treasurer.

Our current situation

The Accounting Oversight Committee engaged the independent audit firm of Baker Tilly US, LLP (Baker Tilly), to conduct the annual audits of the consolidated financial statements of WELS, its ministerial education schools, and its support service subsidiaries for the fiscal year ended June 30, 2025. All of the audits were completed within four months of the fiscal year-end (consistent with historical precedent), with all entities receiving an unmodified opinion—the best you can get—on the financial statements' compliance with U.S. GAAP. The auditors did not identify any material weaknesses in internal controls. They did, however, provide a management suggestions letter that included recommendations to further strengthen certain governance practices, including refreshing conflict of interest policies and enhancing related disclosure and training processes. These suggestions are being considered as part of ongoing efforts to maintain strong internal controls and transparency.

In addition to the annual WELS financial statement audits, the Accounting Oversight Committee also engaged Baker Tilly to audit the WELS VEBA Group Health Plan and WELS Pension Plan for calendar year 2025. These financial statements received unmodified opinions for 2024, and the auditors did not identify any material weaknesses in internal controls. The 2025 calendar year audits for these two entities won't be available until summer 2026 and are expected to be similar to prior years' results.

A look ahead

With no new accounting standards anticipated to be adopted in the near future, the Accounting Oversight Committee will continue to focus on its core responsibilities. This includes ensuring strong financial oversight, maintaining effective internal controls, and supporting the financial personnel across WELS and its affiliated entities. The committee remains committed to upholding best practices in financial management and transparency to support the mission of WELS.

Mr. William Schultz, reporter

Mr. William Schultz, chairman

Mr. Jeffrey Fischer

Mr. Ryan Grunewald

Mr. Seth Hansen, Synodical Council liaison

Mr. David Maccoux
Mr. Daniel Riebe
Mr. Kevin Rusch

Advisory:

Mr. Kyle Egan, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer

WELS Archives

Our calling

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives is the official repository of the permanent records of WELS and its congregations, called workers, and affiliated ministries. These permanent records are those of significant historical value for the synod and its congregations, and they document all aspects of WELS administration, mission, and ministry. The mission of the archives is to preserve and protect these records and make them available for researchers as well as provide information services to the synod and its called workers and congregations.

Our current situation

The year 2025 marked a significant milestone as the synod celebrated 175 years of blessings. Throughout the year, the archives had numerous opportunities to commemorate and promote synod history at various events. May 2025 included two major anniversary celebrations. The archives hosted an event at the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry, offering employees the chance to view a selection of artifacts such as the synod's original constitution and early photographs. The following week, WELS Historical Institute held an anniversary dinner at Salem Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, where similar artifacts were presented for attendees. At the end of June, the WELS Educators Conference provided another forum for outreach. In July, the archives showcased two tables at the synod convention in New Ulm, Minn., displaying a diverse range of archival materials for delegates. Several presentations at the convention further enabled delegates to engage with the synod's history.

Later in the year, the archivist was invited to speak to various groups about the work of the archives. In October, the Church Librarians Organization requested a presentation at its annual gathering at Star of Bethlehem, New Berlin, Wis. November 2025 saw another display at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, giving students the opportunity to view key artifacts. This occasion also allowed the archivist to advise the senior class on best practices for preserving ministry-related materials. In January 2026, the women's group at Pilgrim Lutheran Church in Menomonee Falls, Wis., invited the archivist for a presentation. Additionally, in January 2025, the archivist served as a breakout presenter at the WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership in Chicago, Ill.

The anniversary year also brought 30 tours to the Center for Mission and Ministry. These tours included time in the archives and visitor's center.

The archives managed an unprecedented volume of research inquiries in 2025, handling 200 requests and hosting 22 in-person research appointments. Simultaneously, ongoing efforts continued in processing collections and managing material donations. Notably, 18 boxes of materials were received

from the Michigan District, along with various other collections from congregations and schools that have closed, including those from former preparatory schools. Archive volunteers played a vital role in facilitating processing work. With their assistance, initial processing was completed for several collections: the Martin Westerhaus Collection, the Theodore Saur Collections, the Trinity West Mequon Collection, the Venus Winters Collection, and new additions to the Arizona-California District Collection.

In 2025, WELS Historical Institute's website underwent substantial updates, which were overseen by WELS Technology and the archivist. Enhancements included the introduction of a digital interactive timeline of WELS history and an array of additional historical resources, such as a Bible study based on the *Christ Through Us* pictorial book. Efforts to highlight congregational histories resulted in the creation of a webpage that enables visitors to access digital copies of submitted congregational histories, which are also linked to the online yearbook. Congregations are encouraged to submit recent histories in digital form for inclusion on this platform.

Additionally, the archivist began a collaboration with the curator of the WELS Museum to develop a complete inventory and catalog of the museum's holdings. This project employs ArchivesSpace, aligning the museum's cataloging system with that of the archives and replacing the outdated internal platform. This transition will enable more flexible access across devices and facilitate improved technical support from WELS Technology.

A look ahead

Archival operations will proceed as usual throughout the upcoming year, with ongoing processing and cataloging of collections. As new materials are acquired, priorities will adjust accordingly. Cataloging collections within ArchivesSpace will remain a primary objective. Addressing research requests will also be a central responsibility of the archivist. Additionally, continued collaboration with WELS Historical Institute to fully integrate its collections into ArchivesSpace will be an important focus.

A range of outreach initiatives is planned for 2026, including participation in the Southeast Wisconsin District Convention in Milwaukee, Wis.; and the Lutheran Women's Missionary Society Convention in Madison, Wis., both scheduled for June. The archivist will serve as a presenter at the OWLS Convention in Brookfield, Wis., in October and attend the biennial Lutheran Historical Conference in St. Paul, Minn. It is hoped that these events will continue to enhance interest in synod history.

Mrs. Susan Willems, reporter

WELS Christian Aid and Relief

Our calling

WELS Christian Aid and Relief is one of our synod's compassion ministries (also known as "mercy ministry"). Our mission is to reflect Christ's love and compassion to people suffering as the result of disasters and other hardships. The theme passage that guides our ministry is found in Galatians 6:10: "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." We carry out our mission through three main activities:

- **Disaster relief:** When a disaster—tornado, hurricane, fire, flood, etc.—strikes a community where we have a WELS congregation or home or world mission, we work together with that congregation or mission to bring relief to those impacted. We do this by providing funding, leadership, logistics, and trained volunteer labor to help the congregation and community restore and rebuild. Disasters not only damage and destroy buildings and infrastructure, but they also often traumatize people. For this reason, we strive to give careful attention to the people impacted by a disaster. As God gives the opportunity, we listen to their stories, pray with them, and share with them the comfort of a Savior who loves them.
- **Humanitarian aid:** Working together with our partners in WELS Home and World Missions, we provide basic needs to people in our mission fields here in America and all over the world. Basic needs provided through our humanitarian aid program include food for the hungry, clean water for the thirsty, medicine and medical care for the sick and dying, mosquito netting for those who live in areas where malaria is a problem, and school supplies for underprivileged kids. One wonderful result of sharing such care and compassion is that it builds trust between our missionaries and the people in their mission field. This in turn leads to many opportunities to proclaim the good news of the One in whose name we show such compassion.
- **Personal relief grants:** Sometimes a member or prospective member of one of our congregations faces a crisis, usually financial or medical in nature, that is too big for the congregation to provide all the help that is needed. In such cases, when invited, we work together with the congregation to make sure that the need is met. In this way, we help congregations to help those in need, “especially those who belong to the family of believers.”

Our current situation

Financial matters

From Jan. 1 through Dec. 31, 2025, WELS Christian Aid and Relief utilized \$592,899 of the gifts entrusted to us for foreign and domestic disaster relief. Humanitarian aid projects in WELS mission fields at home and abroad were supported with \$387,221. Personal relief grants amounting to \$429,373 were given to assist WELS members and prospects experiencing severe financial or medical crises.

Disaster relief

WELS Christian Aid and Relief provides disaster relief in a variety of situations and in a variety of ways. When a major disaster causes extensive damage and disruption in a community where we have a congregation, we often mobilize and deploy volunteers for onsite disaster relief operations. We go in and help the church and community to clean up after the disaster. When a disaster strikes in an area where there is no WELS ministry close by, and when appropriate, we use Direct Relief to provide grants to assist the survivors of the disaster. Direct Relief specializes in providing medical assistance in the form of equipment, medications, and other medical supplies.

The past two years have been somewhat quiet on the disaster relief front. In fact, 2025 marked the first time in a decade that no hurricanes made landfall in the United States. We thank the Lord for this reprieve from the damage and loss that these storms cause.

We responded to several disasters in the United States during the past biennium. We provided relief for fires in Los Angeles, Calif., and on the San Carlos reservation in Arizona; hurricane relief in Florida, Tennessee, and North Carolina in the aftermath of Hurricanes Helene and Milton; and tornado relief for Camp Shiloh in Pittsburg, Texas. We also responded to the August 2025 flooding in Milwaukee

County, Wis., by providing more than \$150,000 in aid to WELS members who lost washers, dryers, furnaces, and water heaters, and had other flood damage.

In the past two years, we worked with WELS World Missions and other WELS-affiliated partners to provide disaster relief around the globe. This included flood relief in India, Vietnam, Thailand, Kenya, and Pakistan. We helped to rebuild several churches destroyed by windstorms in Malawi. In addition, we assisted victims of the terrible apartment fire in Hong Kong, people impacted by a cholera outbreak and a hurricane in Haiti, and those affected by riots in Bangladesh.

Volunteers are important to our disaster relief work. In fact, we couldn't provide the service that we do without their compassion, dedication, and hard work. WELS members are encouraged to register at welsdisasterrelief.org as disaster relief volunteers.

During the past biennium, we have been active in training volunteers for disaster relief. On February 4–5, 2025, several WELS laypeople attended training at the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry in Waukesha, Wis. The goal of the training was to prepare them to serve as leaders on our Incident Management Assistance Teams (IMAT). These teams will help lead safe and effective disaster relief deployments. On Oct. 4, 2025, a chainsaw training event was held in Albany, Wis. Four new sawyers received training in the basic techniques and safety measures needed for our disaster relief deployments. Plans are being made to offer additional training opportunities.

We have launched a disaster relief resource center at wels.net/relief, which includes a suite of resources, links, and informational articles for congregations and disaster relief volunteers. The purpose of these resources is to help congregations and individuals be better prepared for disasters before they happen and better prepared to assist those in need after they happen.

Humanitarian aid

WELS Christian Aid and Relief is privileged to partner with WELS Home and World Missions to provide basic needs to people who lack them in our mission fields through our Humanitarian Aid program. For fiscal year 2025–26, more than \$430,000 was approved for this effort. These grants fund projects such as food distribution for the poor, access to clean drinking water, free health clinics, lunch packs for breastfeeding mothers, vocational training and technology classes, scholarships, warm clothes for widows and orphans, backpacks and school supplies for underprivileged children, and support for legal immigrants. This work is happening all over the world in places like Malawi, Zambia, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Indonesia, Albania, Mexico, Canada, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and in the United States.

In addition to helping people who are struggling, these projects provide missionaries an opportunity to connect in a meaningful way with the people in our mission fields by showing them the love and compassion of Christ. This, in turn, leads to many opportunities to share the reason for the hope that we have in our Savior.

Community Care and Compassion Matching Grants Program

This program provides matching grants of up to \$4,000 annually for self-supporting WELS congregations that submit an approved plan for a compassion ministry project in their community. (WELS mission congregations are not eligible but may take advantage of our humanitarian aid program.) The goal of this program is to encourage WELS congregations to reach out to those in their community who are hurting, help them with their needs, build relationships with them, and share with them the good news of the One who cares for our every need. Visit wels.net/ccapp for more information about this program and an application form.

Personal relief grants

WELS Christian Aid and Relief assists WELS congregations as they support their members and prospects who are dealing with serious financial or medical crises. We are here to help! Please note that WELS members in need should not contact us directly. Instead, they are encouraged to make their pastors aware of their situation. Pastors can then contact the director of WELS Christian Aid and Relief if the need goes beyond what the local congregation can handle.

A look ahead

Goals for next biennium include offering additional training opportunities for volunteers, including chainsaw training; producing a disaster trailer manual to provide our trailer coordinators with a clear, concise, and consistent system for managing our disaster relief trailers; and continuing our work with the WELS chaplaincy program to finalize an elective curriculum that will prepare chaplains to serve those affected by disaster.

WELS Christian Aid and Relief is always looking for ways to improve communication to WELS members. Through printed updates, videos, social media posts, and visits to congregations, schools, and groups we strive to educate people about our work and to let those who support this ministry see firsthand how their gifts are being used. More information can be found on wels.net/relief or on our Facebook page. In addition, wels.net/cargift provides a convenient way to make an online donation toward Christian Aid and Relief projects. Commission members also make presentations to various church and school groups to “tell our stories” and inform WELS members about the needs and opportunities to help people through Christian Aid and Relief. Contact us to learn more.

Thank you

We are grateful to our compassionate Lord for moving the hearts of WELS members to show how much they care for those who are hurting by offering both prayers and generous financial gifts. We are also grateful for our disaster relief volunteers who give their time, effort, and energy to help those in need. To God alone be all the glory!

Rev. Daniel Sims, reporter

Rev. Thomas Spiegelberg II, chairman

Rev. Curt Backhaus

Rev. Paul Biedenbender

Mr. Dennis Palmberg

Teacher Steve Vasold

Advisory:

Mrs. Grace Hennig, administrative assistant

Rev. Daniel Sims, director of WELS Christian Aid and Relief

Support Services

Support Services encompasses Technology, Financial Services, Human Resources, and Facility Services. These areas support the ministry of the synod and its four ministerial education schools.

Technology

Our calling

WELS Technology supports the synod’s mission by providing a robust technical infrastructure, developing modern applications, facilitating digital communications, and assisting congregations and called workers in harnessing technology to spread the gospel. Our dedicated team of professionals embraces the challenge of leveraging the tools of the 21st century to further God’s kingdom. Time and resources are set aside to help make technologies available to those who want to share the good news by “any means possible.” Our calling is to find those intersections between technology and ministry.

Our current situation

This past year has been one of significant growth and transformation for WELS Technology. Across our three teams—Information Services, Web Services, and Software Services—we have advanced the synod’s digital capabilities, strengthened our security posture, and laid the groundwork for a more unified and effective technology ecosystem.

Artificial intelligence

The WELS AI Task Force, launched in August 2025, continues to meet monthly to address the purpose and place of artificial intelligence within the synod, our congregations, and our schools. Grounded in a “human-first” approach and confessional Lutheran theology, the task force completed a synodwide survey that yielded more than 1,200 responses from called workers, educators, and lay leaders. The results showed that, while some skepticism exists regarding AI in core ministry tasks like sermon writing and student assessment, the majority of respondents are open to responsible use that does not undermine ministry or human connection. An ethical framework and ministry risk matrix have been produced and are available at welstech.wels.org/ai. AI has also proven helpful in our policy repository project, where it is being used to identify policy conflicts and gaps across the synod. When finished, this repository will make it easy to find, manage, and apply the right policy at the right time. Internally, Microsoft Copilot AI has been implemented for staff use, allowing our teams to explore practical applications of AI in daily administrative work.

Digital communications and HubSpot

The rollout of HubSpot as our customer relationship management, content management, and communications platform is having a significant impact on how we communicate across the synod. Web Services led the migration of more than 40 WordPress-based newsletters—representing 27,000 unique subscribers—into HubSpot, including the 12,000-subscriber Daily Devotions list. New subscription forms, templates, and automated workflows have been created, and ministry teams have received training and onboarding support. HubSpot-led development of ministry journeys

for Evangelism, Congregational Counseling, and Outreach is helping each area of ministry build a more effective and data-informed communications strategy. The platform also now supports Zoom integration for webinar registration and follow-up, and more than 70 informational e-mail broadcasts were sent to called workers throughout 2025.

Web Services

WELS web properties received more than 8.4 million total visits in 2025. The Web Services team developed the **christthroughus.net** website on the HubSpot platform in partnership with Communication Services, supporting the synod's long-range strategic plan with video customization and digital engagement strategies.

Major web projects included new event websites and registration forms for the WELS Youth Rally and the WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership. The team also continued consolidating the WELS web portfolio, decommissioning outdated properties and drafting a digital project process and policy framework to improve governance and coordination.

Software Services

The Software Services team completed several key projects that strengthen ministry operations and data quality. A new military ministry application was designed and implemented for Congregational Services, centralizing military contact data and automating referral processes to replace long-standing spreadsheet-based workflows. The WELSource and HubSpot customer relationship management integration was completed, connecting synod ministry data with communication and outreach tools. Backend systems were migrated to updated cloud infrastructure for improved reliability and security. New analytical reporting initiatives, including a congregational health report, are helping identify ministry needs and support data-informed decision-making. The team also updated systems to support a Synodical Council decision raising the mandatory pension distribution threshold to \$7,000 and delivered enhancements to the synod convention administrative platform.

Information Services and Security

Information Services welcomed the addition of Ben Biersack as IT systems support specialist and the transition of Rob Benson to security analyst. We also honored the retirement of help desk specialist Larry Henrichsen after his years of faithful service. Several key infrastructure upgrades were completed, including the installation of a Cloud Azure Fortinet firewall to complement the physical firewall, cloud server upgrades, and the migration of our password vault and help desk ticketing system to cloud-based platforms.

In July, a third-party security auditor conducted a three-day cybersecurity risk assessment of the Center for Mission and Ministry. Our overall score was "Good" across all six core functions of the NIST Cybersecurity Framework. Since implementing vulnerability management tools, we have reduced critical and high vulnerabilities on CMM systems from more than 100 to fewer than 10. Phishing simulations showed a 3.1 percent failure rate, well below the 4.5 percent industry average for nonprofits. To support WELS schools and Northwestern Publishing House (NPH), a new standardized auditing tool (WELS-CSAT) was developed, and the first WELS Joint Security Group meeting was held. Security audits have begun at Martin Luther College, with all four schools and NPH to be audited over the next three years.

Education and outreach

A new presentation called "Screens and Souls" was produced and delivered at the WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership in January 2026. It addresses the effects of personal and corporate

screen time on our members and provides guidance on the effective use of technology for growth and outreach. Artificial intelligence is also addressed in the presentation. In addition, our Enhancing Ministry with Technology workshops on “Personal Knowledge Management,” “Project Management,” and “Personal Productivity,” along with Working Genius assessments, continue to be available. If you are interested in any of these presentations for your church, school, or conference, please contact our office.

A look ahead

As we look to the coming year, WELS Technology is focused on unifying our digital ecosystem, advancing security, and equipping ministry teams with modern tools.

Web and digital platform unification

Web Services will work closely with Communication Services to refresh website branding, clarify messaging, and better focus content for specific audiences. Approximately 50 WordPress websites, including **wels.net**, will begin a gradual transition to the HubSpot platform to create a more unified and manageable web presence. This transition includes migrating blog content so that publications like *Forward in Christ* and the WELSTech podcast connect directly with e-mail subscriptions and communications. A new resource center and Congregational Services website will be developed, supported by digital asset management tools integrated with HubSpot. Online forms will be migrated to newer tools, and the “Contact us” request system will be rebuilt using HubSpot’s ticketing system for improved tracking and follow-up.

Software and data initiatives

The Software Services team will focus on upgrading home mission statistics collection and reporting, delivering an enhanced WELSource-to-HubSpot integration architecture, and building a new congregational statistics reporting platform available to WELS congregations online. Other priorities include creating capabilities for online WELSSA application processing and continuing to improve My WELS Cloud login functionality and authentication reliability.

Security and infrastructure

A major focus in the coming year will be implementing recommendations from the cybersecurity risk assessment. This includes deploying Microsoft Purview for data protection and compliance, migrating endpoint and server protection from Sophos to Microsoft Defender, adding a Security Information and Event Management (SIEM) system, and conducting tabletop exercises for critical business systems. Security audits at Luther Preparatory School and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary are scheduled. We will also improve the detection, auditing, and approval process for third-party applications used by departments and areas of ministry and require security awareness training for third-party vendors before granting system access.

Artificial intelligence

The AI Task Force will continue to develop and refine its deliverables, including guidance for schools on the legal and responsible use of AI in education, a communication and training strategy to keep the synod informed on progress, and a catalog of practical use cases. Recognizing the rapid pace of AI development, the task force is committed to regular review and adaptation, ensuring that all technology is leveraged faithfully in service to the gospel.

Conclusion

The WELS Technology team is deeply grateful for the opportunity to serve the synod and its mission. We remain committed to providing innovative solutions, solid security, and faithful support to all who proclaim the gospel message. As technology continues to shape our world, we stand ready to embrace its possibilities and use them to spread the love of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth.

Mr. Martin Spriggs, reporter

Financial Services

Our calling

Financial Services prepares and provides accounting and financial information and services that support and serve WELS ministries. This is done by providing timely, accurate, and complete financial statements, reports, and analyses. These reports facilitate ministry by providing God-pleasing, efficient, and effective financial services and operations in accordance with policies, procedures, and regulations. Financial Services also designs, implements, and maintains internal control systems to safeguard the assets God has provided.

Financial Services is led by the WELS chief financial officer (CFO) and generally provides the following services to WELS, WELS Church Extension Fund (CEF), WELS Foundation, WELS Investment Funds (WIF), WELS Historical Institute, WELS Retirement Program Commission, and WELS Voluntary Employee Benefits Association (VEBA) Commission:

- Financial planning and forecasting;
- Accounting and auditing services, including financial statement preparation;
- Transaction processing including gifts, accounts payable, and accounts receivable;
- Special funds accounting;
- Financial analysis and reporting;
- Payroll processing;
- Insurance and risk management;
- Short-term investments, banking, and cash management;
- Trust and other gift administration;
- Coordination of corporate-wide programs including the credit card, foreign travel, and vehicle rental programs;
- Non-profit state and federal compliance reporting;
- Tax research, contract review, and third-party legal services coordination;
- Unclaimed property management; and
- Records retention.

Financial Services also provides many of these services through consultation to Northwestern Publishing House (NPH) and WELS' four ministerial education schools. Outside of Financial Services, the CFO also oversees the Human Resources and Facility Services departments. The CFO is the WELS treasurer and an advisor to the Synodical Council, as well as an advisor to the Board for Ministerial Education, the Accounting Oversight Committee, and the Compensation Review Committee of the Synodical Council. In addition, the CFO serves as an ex-officio member of the board of directors of NPH, CEF, WELS Foundation, WIF, WELS Historical Institute, WELS Retirement Program Commission, and WELS VEBA Commission.

Our current situation

Financial Services is blessed with a dedicated, talented staff with complementary education, training, and work experiences. The following is a summary of significant events or projects the Financial Services team worked on in the past year:

- Completed all audits within four months of fiscal year end (consistent with historical precedent), with all entities receiving an unmodified opinion (the best possible) on the financial statements;
- Assisted the ministerial education schools with the development of major capital projects through the Synod Capital Projects Fund, meant to support site design and planning costs for the ministerial education schools as well as possible debt service costs if funds are borrowed for a synod capital project;
- Continued implementation of a new banking platform to better support the cash needs of the 12 districts while ensuring compliance with key legal, tax, accounting, and governance requirements;
- Explored a more robust and flexible solution to accept payments from congregations and affiliated organizations electronically;
- Partnered with payroll provider to implement and monitor compliance with the Minnesota Paid Family and Medical Leave regulations, ensuring accurate employee coverage and reporting;
- Monitored the support forecast and ministry financial plan for fiscal 2026; and
- Developed planning assumptions, support forecast, and synod support allocations for the fiscal year 2028 and fiscal year 2029 biennium ministry financial plan.

A look ahead

In addition to maintaining daily operations, Financial Services will continue to identify, investigate, and implement strategies that improve efficiency and effectiveness, reduce costs, and/or strengthen internal controls within the department and across WELS. Our upcoming plans include

- Exploring how artificial intelligence can enhance process efficiency and improve financial operations.
- Implementing new reporting tools to provide greater visibility and enhance data analytics for better decision-making.
- Evaluating ways to improve the ministry financial plan planning process, including how plan modifications and capital project requests are managed.
- Onboarding a new insurance broker to address prior service gaps, elevate client support, and improve coverage management.
- Continuing to evaluate and optimize gift processing workflows by increasing adoption of electronic payment methods and utilizing a more cost-effective method of check processing.
- Cross training employees to ensure service continuity during vacations, vacancies, and extended absences.

The Financial Services team is honored to serve and is prepared to use the available resources and its God-given skills and abilities to support the ministries of WELS.

Mr. Kyle Egan, reporter

Human Resources

Our calling

The synod's Human Resources department oversees the personnel functions for synod personnel, including development, communication, and implementation of personnel policies, recruitment, compensation, benefits, performance management, and managing employee relations. Human Resources provides guidance to supervisors on matters such as federal and state legal requirements to ensure compliance with labor laws.

Human Resources also serves as a resource to WELS congregations and to affiliated groups and entities on the matters mentioned above as well as for risk management and federal and state legal requirements related to personnel matters. Further, in addition to legally mandated reporting to authorities, any charge, report, or allegation of sexual misconduct or physical abuse that has been made of an incident involving pastors, teachers, vicars, full- or part-time employees, and volunteers in any capacity must be reported to the synod president, director of Lutheran Schools, or director of Human Resources.

Our current situation

Current WELS Human Resources staff consists of two employees: a full-time human resources director and a human resources generalist who splits time between human resources (50 percent) and the WELS Benefit Plans Office (50 percent). With the current Human Resources director planning to retire in early summer 2026 after 11 years in the position, the most critical area of focus at present is the search for his successor and implementation of a development plan enabling a smooth transition for the new director.

Beyond day-to-day human resource management activities, a few key initiatives include:

- Staffing key lay worker positions over the last year: digital communications project manager, Communications; copyeditor and content writer, Communications; Creative Services manager and senior designer, Communications; HubSpot specialist, Technology; social media coordinator, Communications; WELS prospect analyst, Ministry of Christian Giving; administrative assistant, Christian Aid & Relief; assistant director, Home Missions Operations; financial specialist, Joint Missions; IT systems support specialist, Technology; digital communications coordinator, Communications; marketing coordinator, WELS Investment Funds (WIF), WELS Foundation, and WELS Church Extension Fund (CEF); investor and donor services specialist, WELS Investment Funds; administrative specialist, Commission on Lutheran Schools; assistant director of Missions Operations, Joint Missions;
- Called worker compensation: Education and training of congregational leadership in application of WELS Called Worker Compensation Guidelines and the use of electronic Called Worker Compensation Calculator (CWCC) continues. Popularity and increased use of the CWCC is evident through majority of positive feedback provided. Adjustments/improvements continue to be made to CWCC including through feedback received from congregation leadership;
- WELS Benefit Plans Office assistance: the HR generalist in her shared resource role assists in the management of the external VEBA enrollment and billing to ensure accurate benefits administration, quality customer service, and timely issue resolution. Serves participants and sponsoring organizations by providing benefits, eligibility, and enrollment information;

- Human Resources continues to collaborate with congregations and WELS District Presidents related to risk and personnel matters, as well as general compensation, benefit, and policy issues.
- Synod Board/Committee Nominee Vetting: human resources assists in the process of filling board/committee openings for Synodical Council appointed positions for WELS VEBA, WELS Retirement Commission, WELS Foundation, WIF, Accounting Oversight Committee (AOC) and CEF, mainly with vetting of nominees to establish willingness to serve, procuring resume and/or bio forms, and creation of a central database to maintain all nominee data and vacancy records.
- Affordable Care Act (ACA) Reporting & Compliance: Per ACA compliance requirements, large employers must file annual reports and monitor measurement periods to comply with the ACA's employer mandate. Human Resources oversees this annual reporting process for the CMM and WELS' four ministerial education schools.

A look ahead

Priorities for the Human Resources team going forward will be to evaluate current operations and to identify where efficiencies could be implemented while maintaining effectiveness. Over the next year HR will, with God's guidance and blessings:

- Update and maintain the **wels.net** site (**welsrc.net/human-resources**) and WELS HR Cloud site (**cloud.wels.net/hr**) to ensure information and details provided assist members from both an information as well as practical aspect;
- Improve utilization of the Paycom HRIS software modules and support for CMM and the subsidiary schools;
- Work with the Synodical Council's designated committee(s) in reviewing and evaluating Human Resource policies and procedures, and compensation programs at our synod-operated organizations;
- Work with our areas of ministry and synodical schools in coordinating timely information and support for our workers;
- Facilitate learning and development programs for the management and staff of the synod entities;
- Provide continued training with synod leaders to continue to reinforce and develop the supervisory skills required; and
- Continue providing support to WELS organizations in areas related to our synod human resources.

Questions can be directed to hro@wels.net or by calling 414-256-3268.

Mr. Dennis Maurer, reporter

Facility Services

Our calling

Facility Services provides support services to the ministries conducted at or through the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry (CMM). This objective is accomplished by providing a God-pleasing physical workspace conducive to mission and ministry operations and by creating a welcoming environment to passersby, visitors, guests, and employees.

Our current situation

The WELS CMM is located in Waukesha, Wis., along I-94 on Stone Ridge Drive and consists of approximately 49,000 square feet on three floors. WELS and all areas of ministry operate out of the CMM, along with WELS support service subsidiaries including WELS Church Extension Fund, WELS Foundation, WELS Investment Funds, and Northwestern Publishing House, and WELS' affiliate, WELS Benefit Plans. In addition, the CMM includes the WELS Visitors Center, a chapel, and archival space designed to preserve and organize historical WELS documents, books, and artifacts. Many routine services, such as cleaning, landscaping, snow removal, window washing, and HVAC controls and maintenance are being outsourced.

Building on this approach and following the retirement of facilities coordinator Tim Luetzow at the end of calendar year 2025, WELS has transitioned to an outsourced model for day-to-day facility management and maintenance. We give thanks for Tim's faithful service in maintaining and improving the facilities at the WELS CMM. His efforts contributed meaningfully to providing a safe, functional, and welcoming environment for ministry work.

Rather than hiring a new part-time facilities coordinator, WELS has engaged Colliers, a well-established property management firm with extensive experience managing nearly 13 million square feet of commercial space across Wisconsin. Colliers is providing a tailored and flexible service model that includes part-time on-site maintenance support, coordination and oversight of key vendors, implementation of preventative maintenance programs, and construction management for future projects or renovations. This approach is intended to strengthen ongoing facility care, reduce unexpected maintenance issues, and help preserve the long-term value of the property, while continuing to support the ministry work carried out at the WELS CMM.

The Synodical Council created the WELS Building Fund to ensure that an adequate funding source exists for maintenance and improvement of the WELS CMM. The policy directs a portion of rents paid by the WELS subsidiaries and affiliate to the Building Fund. As of Dec. 31, 2025, the balance of the WELS Building Fund was approximately \$200,000.

Significant projects completed during the past 12 months include the replacement of the aging Trane Summit Tracer HVAC building automation system. This legacy system controlled all rooftop HVAC units and variable air volume (VAV) systems but had not been supported by the manufacturer for several years. As a result, parts and programming were no longer available, contributing to inconsistent heating and cooling throughout the building. The system has since been replaced with a new Carrier i-Vu® building automation system.

A look ahead

Facility Services is focused on key infrastructure improvements to enhance efficiency and maintain facilities long term. Preventative maintenance on all equipment is performed on a scheduled basis. Due to high HVAC equipment replacement costs, repairs are completed as needed and replacements will be completed in phases. The parking lot is being seal coated every other year to maintain its condition and extend the lifespan. Overall, the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry building, grounds, and fixed equipment are in good to excellent condition.

Mr. Kyle Egan, reporter

Financial results and ministry financial plan

Overview

The Lord has blessed WELS with gifts from congregations, members, and others, and we pray he will continue to do so. These gifts are used to reach the lost at home and abroad, train and nurture called workers, and provide services that facilitate and support ministry excellence in congregations and their schools and for administration.

WELS manages and reports the financial position of the synod based on a fiscal year (FY) that runs from July 1 to June 30. WELS areas of ministry, ministerial education schools, and support service subsidiaries are fully incorporated into the ministry financial plan (budget) to ensure all sources and uses of funds entrusted to WELS are reported and considered by the Synod in Convention.

Synod operating support is the amount of unrestricted support allocated for total ministry plan expenses for WELS areas of ministry (excluding the ministerial education schools and support service subsidiaries) covered by unrestricted support sources. Approximately 70 percent annually comes from Congregation Mission Offerings (CMO), and approximately 30 percent annually comes from other unrestricted support consisting primarily of gifts, grants, bequests, and investment income. The Financial Stabilization Fund (FSF) was created to manage all unrestricted support (other than CMO) to ensure that ministry plans did not need to be adjusted in the middle of a year if these difficult-to-predict unrestricted funding sources turned out to be less than planned. The synod does not hold onto funds within the FSF for long-term spending purposes. Rather, funds are used on a continual basis to support the overall operating expense of the synod. Separately, gifts provided by donors to WELS for a specific ministry are maintained within WELS special funds for general use by that area of ministry. Planning for and use of these gifts is initiated by areas of ministry with guidance from Financial Services and approval from the Synodical Council.

Fiscal Year 2024–25 (FY25)

WELS

WELS is financially strong. WELS areas of ministry (excluding the ministerial education schools and support service subsidiaries) received total unrestricted support in FY25 of \$52.3 million consisting of CMO of \$24.0 million, unrestricted special fund support of \$18.7 million, and other general unrestricted support of \$9.6 million. Synod operating and special fund expenses totaled \$50.7 million, leading to an overall increase in reserves without donor restrictions of \$1.7 million (an increase in unrestricted special fund reserves of \$2.7 million and a decrease in the FSF balance of \$1.0 million).

- **Congregation Mission Offerings**—Reported CMO for FY25 was \$24.0 million, an increase of \$434,000 (or 1.8 percent) over the prior year and \$899,000 (or 3.9 percent) better than the original plan. The Lord continues to bless WELS through faithful and consistent offerings of its congregations, which provides an important foundation for developing the ministry financial plan. However, while reported CMO has grown year-over-year, inflation-adjusted CMO has not kept pace with rising costs, indicating an erosion in the synod's purchasing power over time

(meaning each dollar supports less ministry over time). In most districts, CMO growth has lagged both inflation and broader local giving trends, resulting in a declining share of local offerings being directed toward synodwide ministry.

- **Unrestricted special fund support**—Unrestricted special fund support for FY25 was \$18.7 million, an increase of \$2.9 million (or 18.2 percent) over the prior year and \$3.3 million (or 21.5 percent) better than the original plan, driven by increased satisfactions of restrictions due to increased gifts and bequests in all areas of ministry.
- **Other unrestricted support**—Other unrestricted support consisting primarily of unrestricted gifts, grants, bequests, and investment income for FY25 was \$9.6 million, a decrease of \$2.8 million (or 22.8 percent) from the prior year but an increase of \$1.3 million (or 16.2 percent) from the original plan. The reduction from the prior year was primarily a result of higher than average gifts and bequests received in FY24. The improvement over the original plan was related to higher investment income.
- **Synod operating and special fund expenses**—Synod operating and special fund expenses for FY25 were \$50.7 million, an increase in expenses of \$1.2 million (or 2.4 percent) over the prior year and \$5.0 million (or 9.0 percent) below the original plan. The increase in expenses over the prior year was driven by Home Missions from increased Mission Program Support Agreement (MPSA) costs for missions already receiving subsidy and for new missions under the 100 Missions in 10 years initiative and Congregation & District Ministries related to the national worship conference and women’s ministry conference. Expenses were below the original plan related to position vacancies in several areas of ministry and lower spending in World Missions.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary is financially strong. FY25 reserves without donor restrictions increased \$2.2 million (or 16.0 percent) to \$15.8 million. Total support without donor restrictions of \$10.1 million was \$980,000 (or 10.7 percent) higher than the prior year driven by increased bequests and investment returns. Total expenses without donor restrictions of \$7.9 million were \$1.0 million (or 15.1 percent) higher than the prior year driven by increased vicar related costs due to a larger vicar class as compared to the prior year and increased facility related costs.

Martin Luther College

Martin Luther College is financially stable. FY25 reserves without donor restrictions decreased \$1.1 million (or 6.6 percent) to \$15.0 million. Total support without donor restrictions of \$25.9 million was \$1.7 million (or 6.8 percent) higher than the prior year driven by increased satisfactions of restrictions related to special gifts received for marketing and communications consulting and facility improvements. Total expenses without donor restrictions of \$26.9 million were \$2.3 million (or 9.1 percent) higher than the prior year driven mainly by increased expenses related to renovations of the chapel basement, Centennial and Summit Hall restrooms, and the library.

Luther Preparatory School

Luther Preparatory School is financially stable. FY25 reserves without donor restrictions increased \$281,000 (or 4.6 percent) to \$6.5 million. Total support without donor restrictions of \$10.3 million was \$382,000 (or 3.6 percent) below the prior year due to fewer unrestricted gifts and bequests received in FY25 compared to FY24. Total expenses without donor restrictions of \$10.0 million were \$648,000 (or 6.9 percent) higher than the prior year driven by higher wage and benefit costs and expenses related to design and construction documents for the music center.

Michigan Lutheran Seminary

Michigan Lutheran Seminary is financially stable. FY25 reserves without donor restrictions increased \$23,000 (or 1.2 percent) to \$2.0 million. Total support without donor restrictions of \$4.8 million was \$322,000 (or 6.3 percent) below the prior year due to lower gifts and grants received during the current year partially offset by increased tuition and satisfaction of restrictions related to gifts received for facility improvements. Total expenses without donor restrictions of \$4.8 million were \$339,000 (or 7.7 percent) higher than the prior year driven by higher wages and benefit costs and facility improvements.

WELS Church Extension Fund

WELS Church Extension Fund is financially strong. FY25 reserves without donor restrictions increased \$1.4 million (or 1.4 percent) to \$96.9 million. Total support without donor restrictions of \$12.3 million was \$1.3 million (or 11.6 percent) better than the prior year driven by higher investment income. Total expenses without donor restrictions of \$10.9 million were \$4.9 million (or 81.9 percent) higher than the prior year due to increased grant expenses, increased interest paid to investors, and adjustments to the allowance for credit losses.

WELS Foundation

WELS Foundation is financially strong. FY25 reserves without donor restrictions increased \$2.4 million (or 17.9 percent) to \$16.0 million. Total support without donor restrictions of \$10.1 million was \$2.8 million (or 38.4 percent) better than the prior year driven by increased gifts received and increased satisfactions due to deferred gift distributions to ministry. Total expenses without donor restrictions of \$7.7 million were \$1.3 million (or 19.6 percent) higher than the prior year driven by increased distributions to ministry.

WELS Investment Funds

WELS Investment Funds continues to be financially blessed. WIF does not have reserves because it invests and administers funds for others. Assets under management in FY25 increased by \$34.8 million (or 10.7 percent) to \$359.7 million driven by realized and unrealized market gains.

Northwestern Publishing House

Northwestern Publishing House is financially stable. FY25 reserves without donor restrictions increased \$1.2 million (or 8.2 percent) to \$16.3 million. Total revenue without donor restrictions of \$6.3 million was \$190,000 (or 3.1 percent) higher than the prior year due to increased sales and favorable investment returns. Total expenses without donor restrictions of \$5.1 million were \$295,000 (or 6.1 percent) higher than the prior year due to increased product costs related to increased sales.

Fiscal Year 2025–26 (FY26)

WELS

Support and expense projections point to continued financial strength for WELS in FY26.

- **Congregation Mission Offerings**—Through December 2025 (six months), CMO was \$12.9 million, flat to the prior year. CMO is projected to be \$24.0 million in FY26, slightly above planned levels and flat to the prior year receipts.
- **Unrestricted special fund support**—Through December 2025 (six months), unrestricted special fund support was \$10.6 million and is trending better than the planned pace for the fiscal year.

- **Other unrestricted support**—Through December 2025 (six months), other unrestricted support was \$5.8 million and is trending better than the planned pace for the fiscal year. This increase is being driven by higher than planned bequests received and investment income.
- **Synod operating and special fund expenses**—Through December 2025 (six months), total synod operating and special fund expenses were \$26.3 million and are trending slightly higher than the prior fiscal year but below the planned pace for this fiscal year.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary remains financially strong. Through December 2025 (six months), reserves without donor restrictions increased \$1.5 million on support of \$5.9 million and expenses of \$4.4 million. Support without donor restrictions has been trending higher than planned levels due to increased gifts and investment income, while expenses without donor restrictions have been trending slightly above planned levels related to faculty home renovations and building costs related to the “Compelled” capital campaign.

Martin Luther College

Martin Luther College remains financially stable. Through December 2025 (six months), reserves without donor restrictions increased \$1.0 million on support of \$14.4 million and expenses of \$13.4 million. Support without donor restrictions has been trending in line with planned levels, while expenses without donor restrictions have been trending lower than planned levels due to lower wage and benefit costs related to open positions.

Luther Preparatory School

Luther Preparatory School remains financially stable. Through December 2025 (six months), reserves without donor restrictions increased \$466,000 on support of \$5.7 million and expenses of \$5.2 million. Support without donor restrictions has been trending higher than planned levels due to increased gifts, investment income, and satisfactions of restrictions related to gifts and expenses for the music center while expenses without donor restrictions have been trending in line with planned levels.

Michigan Lutheran Seminary

Michigan Lutheran Seminary remains financially stable. Through December 2025 (six months), reserves without donor restrictions increased \$136,000 on support of \$2.6 million and expenses of \$2.5 million. Support without donor restrictions has been trending higher than planned levels due to increased gifts and investment income, while expenses without donor restrictions have been trending ahead of plan due to increased food service expenses and facility related costs.

WELS Church Extension Fund

WELS Church Extension Fund remains financially strong. Through December 2025 (six months), reserves without donor restrictions increased \$2.7 million on support of \$6.7 million and expenses of \$4.0 million. Support without donor restriction has been trending higher than planned levels due to higher interest income from its loan portfolio and a gain on a property sale, while expenses without donor restrictions have been trending lower than planned levels due to lower grant expenses for new mission loans.

WELS Foundation

WELS Foundation remains financially strong. Through December 2025 (six months), reserves without donor restrictions increased \$1.3 million on support of \$6.1 million and expenses of \$4.8 million. Support without donor restrictions has been trending higher than planned levels due to favorable investment returns while expenses are trending in line with planned levels.

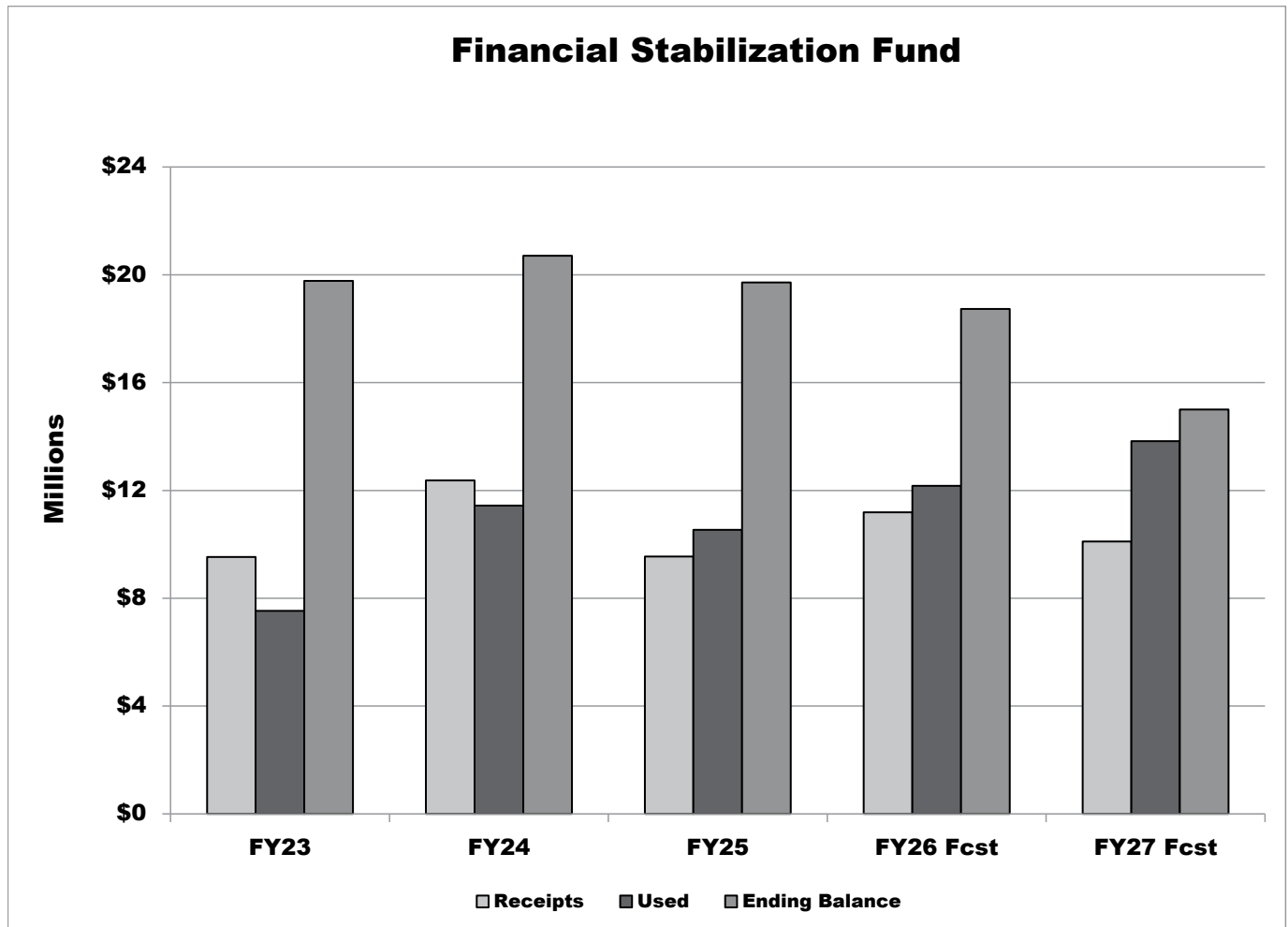
WELS Investment Funds

WELS Investment Funds continues to be financially blessed. Through December 2025 (six months), assets under management have increased \$30.2 million (or 8.4 percent) to \$390.0 million due to favorable investment returns.

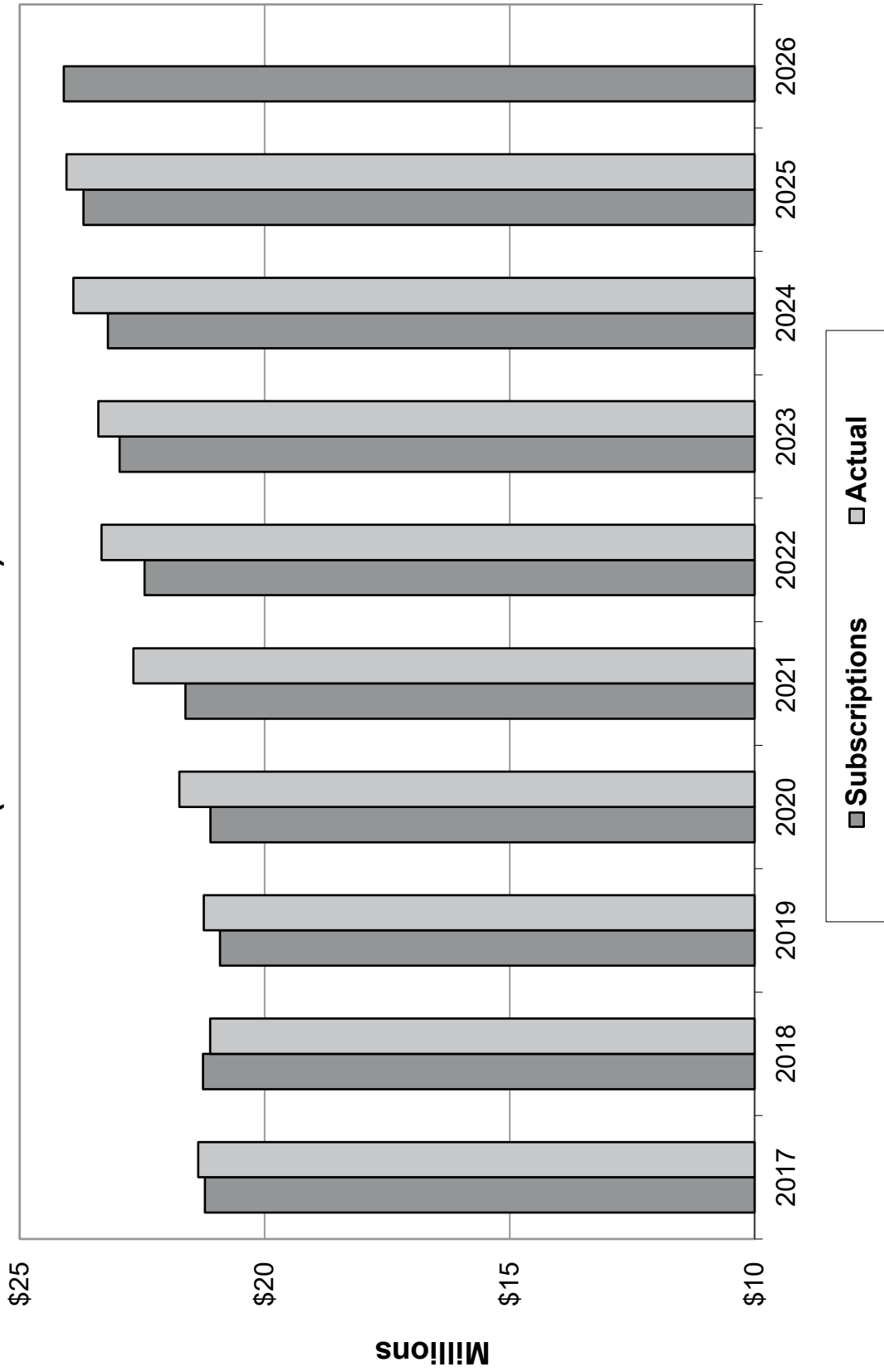
Northwestern Publishing House

Northwestern Publishing House remains financially stable. Through December 2025 (six months), reserves without donor restrictions increased \$1.0 million on revenue of \$2.9 million, other income of \$700,000, and expenses of \$2.6 million. Sales are trending higher than planned levels as is other income due to higher investment income, while expenses are trending in line with planned levels as higher costs of sales due to increased sales volumes are offset by lower operating expenses due to tight cost controls.

Mr. Kyle Egan, reporter



Congregation Mission Offerings (Calendar Year)



WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD

Consolidating Statement of Financial Position
As of June 30, 2025

ASSETS

	WELS	MLC	WLS	MLS	LPS	WELS CEF	WELS Foundation	WIF	WHI	NPH	Eliminations	Consolidated
ASSETS												
Cash and cash equivalents	\$ 58,594,164	\$ 6,701,144	\$ 2,468,112	\$ 2,352,233	\$ 15,277,927	\$ 11,647,393	\$ 2,393,378	\$ -	\$ 12,752	\$ 1,934,278	\$ (1,794,321)	\$ 99,587,060
Restricted cash	1,007,990	-	-	-	-	-	1,131,097	-	-	-	-	2,139,087
Investments	12,262,482	11,172,919	6,025,006	725,893	-	37,052,777	220,059,778	359,500,428	-	11,807,026	(284,343,224)	374,263,085
Accounts receivable, net	467,895	51,363	41,654	63,303	3,791	-	8,190	-	-	573,062	(65,592)	1,153,666
Gifts and bequests receivable, net	1,540,066	69,371	258,351	30,288	513,948	-	106,384	-	-	-	-	2,518,408
Accrued interest receivable	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Inventories, net	-	205,942	172,691	44,253	28,480	738,132	-	-	-	-	-	738,132
Loans to students, net	-	255,675	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2,080,504	-	2,531,870
Property and real estate held for sale	692,556	-	-	-	-	180,375	2,566,000	-	-	-	-	255,675
Loans receivable from congregations, net	-	-	-	-	-	203,276,521	-	-	-	-	-	3,438,931
Cash surrender value of life insurance policies	-	72,502	11,105	1,458	-	-	1,604,029	-	-	-	-	203,276,521
Assets held in trust outside WELS	-	433,675	-	169,391	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1,689,094
Other assets	488,447	223,018	65,642	3	50,996	31,303	1,740	-	-	66,742	-	603,066
Interest in net assets of WELS Foundation	26,954,801	4,970,738	2,949,181	2,627,712	680,509	511,848	-	-	-	-	(38,694,789)	937,891
Beneficial interest in net assets of WELS Foundation	22,323,922	4,168,151	3,204,798	307,305	623,850	-	-	-	-	-	(30,628,026)	-
Property, plant, and equipment, net	3,762,908	30,192,353	5,251,747	4,879,413	8,797,073	-	-	-	-	277,235	-	53,160,729
Interest in assets of WELS Foundation	31,221,622	27,024,513	30,046,433	2,312,371	3,905,466	-	-	-	-	-	(94,510,405)	-
Due (to)/from related party	1,834,317	4,904,323	1,710,930	-	1,697,548	-	-	395,893	(2,522)	624,721	(11,165,210)	-
TOTAL ASSETS	\$ 161,161,170	\$ 90,445,687	\$ 52,205,650	\$ 13,513,623	\$ 31,579,588	\$ 253,438,349	\$ 227,870,596	\$ 359,896,321	\$ 10,230	\$ 17,363,568	\$ (461,191,567)	\$ 746,293,215

WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD

Consolidating Statement of Financial Position (continued)
As of June 30, 2025

LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS

	WELS	MLC	WLS	MLS	LPS	WELS CEF	WELS Foundation	WIF	WHI	NPH	Eliminations	Consolidated
LIABILITIES												
Accounts payable	\$ 1,536,291	\$ 1,656,684	\$ 223,939	\$ 15,749	\$ 108,128	\$ -	\$ 57,043	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 69,038	\$ (60)	\$ 3,666,812
Liability for credit losses on unfunded commitments	-	-	-	-	-	80,330	-	-	-	-	-	80,330
Accrued expenses and other liabilities	3,822,791	383,361	112,374	50,286	98,931	4,807,012	-	175,305	-	167,478	(287,482)	9,310,036
Deferred revenue	92,045	569,287	294,083	14,562	63,154	-	-	-	-	631,266	-	1,664,397
Retiree health benefits payable	501,517	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	501,517
Certificates payable	-	-	-	-	-	113,929,442	-	-	-	-	(18,837,738)	95,091,704
Deposits held in custody	1,006,460	475,605	14,916	4,960	20,702	-	-	-	-	-	-	1,522,643
Liabilities to other beneficiaries	-	1,589,029	-	-	-	-	23,875,488	-	-	-	-	25,464,517
Liabilities to outside agencies and organizations	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	92,663,660	92,663,660
Gift annuities payable, at fair value	-	-	-	-	-	-	9,252,825	-	-	-	-	9,252,825
Trusts payable	-	-	-	-	-	-	13,453,423	-	-	-	-	13,453,423
U.S. government grants refundable	-	117,062	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	117,062
Due to WELS and Schools	-	-	-	-	-	-	94,530,699	-	-	-	(94,530,699)	-
Due to/from related party	-	-	-	1,060,328	9,958,610	136,479	-	-	-	-	(11,155,417)	-
Total Liabilities	6,959,104	4,771,028	645,312	1,145,865	10,249,525	118,953,263	141,169,478	175,305	-	867,782	(32,147,736)	252,788,926
NET ASSETS												
Without donor restrictions	62,773,583	15,023,711	15,763,788	2,005,976	6,454,423	96,920,472	15,954,602	359,721,016	10,230	16,325,043	(313,602,290)	277,350,554
With donor restrictions	91,428,483	70,650,948	35,796,550	10,361,782	14,875,640	37,564,614	70,746,516	-	-	170,743	(115,441,541)	216,153,735
Total Net Assets	154,202,066	85,674,659	51,560,338	12,367,758	21,330,063	134,485,086	86,701,118	359,721,016	10,230	16,495,786	(429,043,831)	493,504,289
TOTAL LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS	\$ 161,161,170	\$ 90,445,687	\$ 52,205,650	\$ 13,513,623	\$ 31,579,588	\$ 253,438,349	\$ 227,870,596	\$ 359,696,321	\$ 10,230	\$ 17,363,568	\$ (461,191,567)	\$ 746,293,215

WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD

Consolidating Statement of Activities
As of and For the Year Ended June 30, 2025

	WITHOUT DONOR RESTRICTIONS											Consolidated
	WELS	MLC	WLS	MLS	LPS	WELS CEF	Foundation	WIF	WHI	NPH	Eliminations	
MEMBER SUPPORT, REVENUE AND RECLASSIFICATIONS												
Member Support:												
Offerings from congregations	\$ 24,026,352	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 24,026,352
Gifts and grants	2,986,886	1,114,036	1,055,094	135,107	181,900	66,130	2,833,989	-	3,857	-	(785,722)	7,591,277
Bequests	1,559,643	125,360	390,633	83,443	83,443	59,086	351,661	-	-	-	-	2,569,826
Total Member Support	28,572,881	1,239,396	1,445,727	135,107	265,343	125,216	3,185,650	-	3,857	-	(785,722)	34,187,455
Revenues:												
Tuition and student fees, net	-	11,197,182	586,152	1,849,548	5,144,677	-	-	-	-	-	-	18,777,559
Activity fees and retail sales	2,738,891	1,188,948	123,730	181,118	166,676	-	-	15,770,764	11,525	5,293,307	(16,268,735)	9,206,224
Investment returns, net	3,179,416	1,180,856	1,668,881	98,976	265,739	10,304,993	1,411,437	39,517,247	4	1,027,536	(39,789,549)	18,865,476
Net loss on sale of property and real estate held for sale	-	662	-	-	-	-	(32,086)	-	-	-	-	(32,086)
Change in value of trust agreements	417,518	223,991	35,039	18,145	79,985	11,938	796,726	-	-	3,012	21,873	22,463
Other	855,592	4,408,527	2,922,358	1,456,998	2,987,951	-	-	-	90	-	(12,631,516)	1,492,747
Transfer from other funds	7,191,417	18,200,166	5,336,160	3,604,713	8,645,028	10,316,871	2,176,077	55,288,011	11,619	6,323,855	(68,761,534)	48,332,383
Total Revenues	16,564,426	6,433,728	3,339,097	10,446,673	1,379,462	1,873,165	4,753,695	-	3,599	22,165	(5,982,391)	29,431,619
Net assets released from restrictions	16,564,426	6,433,728	3,339,097	10,446,673	1,379,462	1,873,165	4,753,695	-	3,599	22,165	(5,982,391)	29,431,619
Total Reclassifications	52,328,724	25,873,290	10,120,984	4,784,493	10,289,833	12,315,252	10,115,422	55,288,011	19,075	6,346,020	(75,529,647)	111,951,457
and Reclassifications												
EXPENSES												
Program Services:												
Ministerial education	10,048,812	22,570,945	6,717,771	3,909,684	8,684,800	-	-	-	-	-	(14,931,348)	37,000,664
World missions	11,775,493	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	(262,898)	11,512,595
Home missions	12,962,305	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	(360,273)	12,602,032
Congregational and district ministry	8,879,817	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	(270,330)	8,709,487
Northwestern Publishing House	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3,714,775	(69,185)	3,645,590
Total Program Services	43,766,427	22,570,945	6,717,771	3,909,684	8,684,800	-	-	-	-	3,714,775	(15,894,034)	73,470,368
Support Services:												
Ministry support subsidiaries	-	-	-	-	-	10,536,922	2,584,291	-	15,784	-	(2,202,451)	10,934,546
General and administrative	4,349,185	3,586,594	811,959	828,660	1,115,843	401,530	374,921	537,892	7,699	1,395,377	(34,270)	13,375,390
Mission advancement	2,541,301	777,536	417,548	22,828	208,152	-	-	-	-	-	67,257	4,034,622
Transfer to other funds	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total Support Services	6,890,486	4,364,130	1,229,507	851,488	1,323,995	10,938,452	7,687,518	19,986,565	23,483	1,395,377	(24,714,871)	28,344,568
Total Expenses	50,656,913	26,935,075	7,947,278	4,761,172	10,008,795	10,938,452	7,687,518	20,524,457	23,483	5,110,152	(42,778,369)	101,814,926
CHANGE IN NET ASSETS												
NET ASSETS - Beginning of Year	61,101,772	16,085,496	2,173,706	23,321	281,038	1,376,800	2,427,904	34,763,554	(4,408)	1,235,868	(32,751,278)	10,136,531
NET ASSETS - END OF YEAR	\$ 62,773,583	\$ 15,023,711	\$ 15,763,788	\$ 2,005,976	\$ 6,454,423	\$ 96,920,472	\$ 15,954,602	\$ 359,721,016	\$ 10,230	\$ 16,325,043	\$ (313,602,280)	\$ 277,350,554

WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD

Consolidating Statement of Activities (Continued)
As of and For the Year Ended June 30, 2025

	WELS	MLC	WLS	MLS	LPS	WELS CEF	WELS Foundation	WIF	WHI	NPH	Eliminations	Consolidated
MEMBER SUPPORT, REVENUE AND RECLASSIFICATIONS												
Member Support:												
Gifts and grants	\$ 11,244,154	\$ 4,662,008	\$ 1,920,203	\$ 696,537	\$ 2,117,093	\$ -	\$ 3,013,396	\$ -	\$ 3,599	\$ 45,124	\$ (49,000)	\$ 23,653,114
Bequests	3,308,455	437,614	534,902	-	-	400,000	1,165,829	-	-	-	(982)	5,845,818
Total Member Support	14,552,609	5,099,622	2,455,105	696,537	2,117,093	400,000	4,179,225	-	3,599	45,124	(49,982)	29,498,932
Revenues:												
Investment returns, net	3,515,048	3,090,621	1,987,797	250,674	303,020	4,177,247	10,723,090	-	-	-	-	24,047,497
Net loss on sale of property and real estate held for sale	-	-	-	-	-	-	(229,897)	-	-	-	-	(229,897)
Change in value of trust agreements	7,359,040	1,400,840	1,227,132	345,945	146,135	112,396	(2,191,033)	-	-	-	(11,400,257)	(2,999,802)
Contributed nonfinancial assets	-	3,072,212	517,155	176,334	475,659	-	-	-	-	-	(4,241,360)	-
Other	12,392	83,619	12,822	-	104	-	6,728	-	-	-	(124)	115,541
Total Revenues	10,886,480	7,647,292	3,744,906	772,953	924,918	4,289,643	8,308,888	-	-	-	(15,641,741)	20,933,339
Reclassifications:												
Net assets released from restrictions	(16,564,426)	(6,433,728)	(3,339,097)	(1,044,673)	(1,379,462)	(1,873,165)	(4,753,695)	-	(3,599)	(22,165)	5,982,391	(29,431,619)
Total Reclassifications	(16,564,426)	(6,433,728)	(3,339,097)	(1,044,673)	(1,379,462)	(1,873,165)	(4,753,695)	-	(3,599)	(22,165)	5,982,391	(29,431,619)
CHANGE IN NET ASSETS	8,874,663	6,313,186	2,860,914	424,817	1,662,549	2,816,478	7,734,418	-	-	22,959	(9,709,332)	21,000,652
NET ASSETS - Beginning of Year	82,553,820	64,337,762	32,935,636	9,936,965	13,213,091	34,748,136	63,012,098	-	-	147,784	(105,732,209)	195,153,083
NET ASSETS - END OF YEAR	\$ 91,428,483	\$ 70,650,948	\$ 35,795,550	\$ 10,361,782	\$ 14,875,640	\$ 37,564,614	\$ 70,746,516	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 170,743	\$ (115,441,541)	\$ 216,153,735

Called worker compensation guidelines

0.73% Matrix Adjustment Factor
(multiply established Cash Housing
Allowances by 1.0073 for new FY)

WELS COMPENSATION GUIDELINES

Salary Matrix 2026–27

Range Spread	12,917	13,724	16,146	16,954	17,761	18,568	19,375	20,183	20,990	21,797
Service Incr.	431	457	538	565	592	619	646	673	700	727
Ranges	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
Experience										
0	25,834	27,448	32,292	33,907	35,521	37,136	38,750	40,365	41,980	43,594
1	26,265	27,905	32,830	34,472	36,113	37,755	39,396	41,038	42,680	44,321
2	26,695	28,363	33,368	35,037	36,705	38,374	40,042	41,711	43,379	45,047
3	27,126	28,820	33,907	35,602	37,297	38,993	40,688	42,383	44,079	45,774
4	27,556	29,278	34,445	36,167	37,889	39,612	41,333	43,056	44,779	46,500
5	27,987	29,735	34,983	36,733	38,481	40,231	41,979	43,729	45,478	47,227
6	28,417	30,193	35,521	37,298	39,073	40,850	42,625	44,402	46,178	47,953
7	28,848	30,650	36,059	37,863	39,665	41,469	43,271	45,074	46,878	48,680
8	29,279	31,108	36,598	38,428	40,257	42,087	43,917	45,747	47,577	49,407
9	29,709	31,565	37,136	38,993	40,849	42,706	44,563	46,420	48,277	50,133
10	30,140	32,023	37,674	39,558	41,441	43,325	45,208	47,093	48,977	50,860
11	30,570	32,480	38,212	40,123	42,033	43,944	45,854	47,765	49,676	51,586
12	31,001	32,938	38,750	40,688	42,625	44,563	46,500	48,438	50,376	52,313
13	31,431	33,395	39,289	41,254	43,217	45,182	47,146	49,111	51,076	53,039
14	31,862	33,853	39,827	41,819	43,809	45,801	47,792	49,784	51,775	53,766
15	32,293	34,310	40,365	42,384	44,401	46,420	48,438	50,456	52,475	54,493
16	32,723	34,767	40,903	42,949	44,993	47,039	49,083	51,129	53,175	55,219
17	33,154	35,225	41,441	43,514	45,585	47,658	49,729	51,802	53,874	55,946
18	33,584	35,682	41,980	44,079	46,177	48,277	50,375	52,475	54,574	56,672
19	34,015	36,140	42,518	44,644	46,769	48,896	51,021	53,147	55,274	57,399
20	34,445	36,597	43,056	45,209	47,361	49,515	51,667	53,820	55,973	58,125
21	34,876	37,055	43,594	45,774	47,953	50,134	52,313	54,493	56,673	58,852
22	35,306	37,512	44,132	46,340	48,545	50,753	52,958	55,166	57,373	59,578
23	35,737	37,970	44,671	46,905	49,137	51,371	53,604	55,838	58,072	60,305
24	36,168	38,427	45,209	47,470	49,729	51,990	54,250	56,511	58,772	61,032
25	36,598	38,885	45,747	48,035	50,321	52,609	54,896	57,184	59,472	61,758
26	37,029	39,342	46,285	48,600	50,913	53,228	55,542	57,857	60,171	62,485
27	37,459	39,800	46,823	49,165	51,505	53,847	56,188	58,529	60,871	63,211
28	37,890	40,257	47,362	49,730	52,097	54,466	56,833	59,202	61,571	63,938
29	38,320	40,715	47,900	50,295	52,689	55,085	57,479	59,875	62,270	64,664
30	38,751	41,172	48,438	50,861	53,282	55,704	58,125	60,548	62,970	65,391
31	39,182	41,629	48,976	51,426	53,874	56,323	58,771	61,220	63,670	66,118
32	39,612	42,087	49,514	51,991	54,466	56,942	59,417	61,893	64,369	66,844

See the following two pages for current synodical salary range assignments and above base compensation for called workers.

Synodical salary range assignments

Salary matrix is available on the previous page.

Early childhood ministry teacher (no degree)	A
Early childhood ministry teacher (associate's degree)	B
Early childhood ministry teacher (bachelor's degree)	C - F
Teacher (BS or BA base)	C - F
Secondary teacher	D - G
Early childhood ministry director	D - G
Prep professor	D - G
Staff minister	D - G
Principal	E - H
Christian giving counselor	E - H
Prep vice president	E - H
Prep dean	E - H
College professor	E - H
Pastor	E - H
Home missionary	E - H
World missionary	E - H
CMM associate administrator	E - H
CMM associate director	E - H
CMM national coordinator	E - H
Mission counselor	E - H
CMM administrator	F - I
CMM director	F - I
Prep president	F - I
College vice president	F - I
College dean	F - I
Seminary professor	F - I
Seminary vice president	F - I
College president	G - I
Seminary president	G - I
Synod president	J

Note: A periodic review (minimally once per year) should be undertaken to evaluate an individual's compensation level. Changing call responsibilities and educational levels may lead to a salary adjustment.

NOTES:

1. The online Called Worker Compensation Calculator at cwcompcalc.wels.net helps a calling body consider the impact of additional responsibilities and education in determining where in the suggested salary range the worker ought to be placed.
2. Columns C–J increase in 5 percent increments over column C. (For example, Rate Range E is 10 percent greater than Rate Range C, Rate Range F is 15 percent greater, etc.)
3. Each called worker's actual salary is determined by finding the applicable experience row and determining the appropriate rate range. (For example, for FY 2026–27 a teacher with 10 years' experience should receive a salary between \$37,674 and \$43,325. Salaries greater than \$37,674 would recognize additional education credentials and/or responsibility levels.)

4. The basis for the housing equity allowance is the entry level base salary (matrix column "C," 0 years of service).
5. The cost of living adjustment (COLA) is applied to the worker's salary.
6. Self-Employment Contributions Act (SECA) tax reimbursement, cash housing allowances, and/or housing equity are provided in addition to the salary amount.

Above base compensation components for called workers

1. Cost of living adjustment using Council for Community and Economic Research (C2ER) or similar COLA index. Should simply be \$0 if resulting COLA is negative.
2. Cash housing allowance if not provided housing (using HUD Fair Market Rental Values or local real estate info established upon hire date + adjusted annually based on the percent change recommended in upper left corner of the salary matrix; For FY 2026–27 this adjustment would be .73 percent). For renters, the cash housing allowance should be reviewed and reestablished annually until home purchase.
3. Social Security SECA allowance (7.65 percent of salary, cost of living, and housing value/cash housing/fair market rental of parsonage-teacherage).
4. Housing equity of 2 percent of entry-level base (Column C, 0 years of service) for workers in provided housing (parsonage/teacherage). Amount is \$646 for FY 2026–27.
5. VEBA health insurance or similar.
6. WELS Retirement Program.
7. Reimbursement for business-related expenses such as travel and conferences.

Note: Go to cwcompcalc.wels.net to use a web-based Called Worker Compensation Calculator.

Additional called worker compensation resources including the salary matrices are available at welsrc.net/human-resources.

Missions

Board for Home Missions

Our calling

We are . . . Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 5:20). Through his Great Commission, Christ calls us to be ambassadors of his Word, “to spread its light from age to age shall be our chief endeavor” (*Christian Worship* 640). Thus, the stated purpose of Home Missions is “the sharing of the gospel of Jesus Christ for the discipling of all people within the domestic mission fields of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod” (WELS Bylaws, Section 6.0).

Home Missions has the financial resources and partnerships that congregations don’t have, enabling us to support 157 congregations in the United States, Canada, and English-speaking West Indies. This includes 28 cross-cultural ministries.

Additionally, Home Missions supports WELS Campus Ministry, providing resources and encouragement to WELS congregations that serve college students around the United States and Canada. These congregations are vital in connecting college students with fellow Christians, strengthening their faith with the gospel message, and encouraging them to share that faith with other college students. The WELS Campus Ministry Committee currently provides nearly 50 campus ministries with financial support and assists hundreds of other congregations in their campus ministry outreach.

We carry out our work through our 14 district mission boards comprised of pastors and lay volunteers. The district mission boards direct and supervise the missions and mission work within their districts under the guidelines of the Board for Home Missions (see WELS Bylaws, Section 6.04). Two representatives from each district serve on the Board for Home Missions. The Board for Home Missions Executive Committee, consisting of members of the Board for Home Missions, approves new start and enhancement requests and helps set the direction for WELS Home Missions. District mission boards and home mission churches are supported by three home mission counselors, a Hispanic outreach consultant, an Asian ministry coordinator, and a Campus Ministry mission counselor. Mission counselors work with district mission boards to help start new home missions and provide counseling and assistance to home mission congregations and the home missionaries who serve them.

Reaching the lost with the gospel is central to our work of gathering God’s elect. With WELS’ support, we are reaching more of the lost with the gospel and seeing the gospel transform people’s hearts and lives. Visit wels.net/facesoffaith to read personal stories of how our missions are making a lasting impact in people’s lives.

We consider it a humbling privilege to lead WELS in church planting efforts across North America. We are thankful for the generous prayers and support of many.

Our current situation

“Christ through us”

Home Missions’ work naturally fits with the first two goals of WELS’ long-range plan, “Christ through us.”

Under the first priority of “Culture,” which focuses on cultivating a gospel-driven culture, Home Missions emphasizes shaping the culture of each new mission at its inception. Through the church planter’s intensive, the coaching program, and the mission counselor program, our core groups and missionaries are taught and trained in ways that help raise up culture-shaping leaders, foster a zealous gospel mindset, make outreach a personal effort, and encourage cross-bearing discipleship.

Home Missions also helps strengthen WELS’ backbone, which falls under the second priority of “Congregations.” With small core groups and fewer people to do the essential tasks required to start a home mission, the need is great for a majority of them to serve in many ways. Core members are encouraged and equipped to use their gifts in ways that will help them carry out their mission locally and ultimately reach more people with the gospel.

Enhancement grants and new mission starts also help strengthen WELS’ backbone. Enhancement grants provide needed support to existing mission-minded congregations so they can reach more of the lost in their community or help a mission-minded core group call a full-time pastor. Each new mission creates a new location that expands WELS’ reach. Whether it’s in an area that is one hour or more from the next WELS church or in a more densely populated area that can reach a new demographic, each new mission start expands WELS’ reach throughout North America. In this way, the “100 in 10” initiative fits well within WELS’ long-range plan.

100 Missions in 10 Years

When WELS adopted the “100 in 10” initiative with the goal to plant 100 new missions and enhance 75 existing ministries from 2023–2033, it aligned with Home Missions’ purpose. The initiative wasn’t the start of something new, but it renewed our focus to aggressively fulfill the outreach aspect of the Great Commission. It has also generated a healthy urgency.

We naturally revert to what is common and retreat to our comfort zone. “100 in 10” has stretched and served as a catalyst for us to work better together as a synod. It has strengthened our partnerships with those who work closely with us. God’s people have given generously for this initiative. This includes \$4.5 million in gifts for “100 in 10” since 2021, and \$3.2 million in gifts from individuals, estates, and congregations during the current fiscal year. Areas of ministry have also initiated new efforts in support of “100 in 10.”

As we now enter Year 4 of the “100 in 10” initiative, here is a list of the new missions and enhancements approved since 2023.

New starts:

1. Bentonville, Ark.
2. Boston, Mass.
3. Cincinnati, Ohio
4. Idaho Falls, Idaho
5. Kalispell, Mont.
6. Kronenwetter, Wis.
7. Marquette, Mich.

8. North Collin County, Texas
9. Panama City Beach, Fla.
10. Buffalo, Wyo.
11. Bend, Ore.
12. Cedar Lake, Ind.
13. Conway, Ark.
14. Easley, S.C.
15. Williston, N.D.
16. Cypress/Waller, Texas
17. Arlington, Tenn.
18. Erie, Colo.
19. Jarrell, Texas
20. Madison, Wis.
21. San Tan Valley, Ariz.
22. Altoona, Wis.
23. Buffalo, N.Y.
24. Naples, Fla.
25. Olathe, Kan.
26. The Sandhills, N.C.
27. West Richland, Wash.
28. Wilmington, N.C.
29. Bastrop, Texas
30. Greeneville, Tenn.
31. North Marana, Ariz.

Enhancements:

1. Beautiful Savior, West Des Moines, Iowa (restart)
2. Christ the King, Port Charlotte, Fla.
3. Divine Savior, Sienna, Texas
4. Fairview, Milwaukee, Wis.
5. Good Shepherd, Midland, Texas (unsubsidized)
6. Our Redeemer, Ladysmith, Wis. (unsubsidized)
7. Mount Calvary, Redding/Anderson, Calif.
8. Christ the King, Palm Coast, Fla.
9. Hope, Deerfield, Wis. (unsubsidized)
10. Cross of Christ, Las Cruces, N.M. (unsubsidized)
11. Calvary, Dallas, Texas
12. Crossroads, Chicago, Ill. (restart)
13. Faith, Prior Lake, Minn.
14. Good Shepherd, Plymouth, Wis. (restart)
15. Northdale, Tampa, Fla.
16. St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Wis.
17. St. Paul, Calgary, Alberta, Canada
18. Christ the Redeemer, Barre/Montpelier, Vt. (restart)
19. Christ, Clarksville, Md. (restart)
20. Living Word, Petaluma, Calif. (restart)
21. Living Word, Waukesha, Wis.
22. Redeemer, Edna, Texas
23. Risen Savior, Lakewood Ranch, Fla.

24. Saint Mark Mankato, Mankato, Minn.
25. Good Shepherd, Holmen, Wis.
26. Mount Olive, St. Paul, Minn.
27. Resurrection, Chesapeake, Va.

Visit wels100in10.net for more about these new starts and enhancements.

Financially, these new starts and enhancements are possible because of offerings and gifts from individuals, congregations, and affiliated ministries.

One of those affiliated ministries is Lutheran Women’s Missionary Society (LWMS). Last year LWMS gave more than \$266,000 in support of Home Missions. In addition to their financial support, their “Befriend a Missionary” program provides wonderful and unique ways to encourage missionaries and their families, including praying for them and providing cards and gifts of encouragement throughout the year. We are grateful for this ongoing partnership.

Divine Savior Ministries is a more recent ministry partner that has provided more than \$500,000 in gifts to Home Missions over the last two years. These gifts have enabled Home Missions to financially support unique requests that we normally do not fund.

We thank the Lord for these generous gifts.

WELS Church Extension Fund

Another vital and valuable partner to Home Missions is WELS Church Extension Fund (CEF). WELS CEF provides home mission congregations with matching grants for initial land purchase and construction. Additionally, where most commercial banks would not loan to a start-up congregation, CEF provides loans at a below-market interest rate. These loans and grants to mission congregations enable us to lower the overall operating costs for the mission.

Since 1993 CEF has provided more than \$50 million in grants to mission congregations. In the last 5 years, WELS CEF has approved/loaned \$47.1 million to 28 mission congregations and provided a total of \$12.6 million in land and facility grants. During that same time, CEF has given \$8 million in grants directly to Home Missions to start and sustain our missions.

What many don’t know is the investment opportunities WELS CEF provides. Individual WELS members, congregations, and affiliated organizations can consider supporting CEF through investment, savings, and retirement IRA certificates, as well as through gifts and bequests. These investments not only provide a meaningful way to steward God’s blessings but also play a vital role in their support of Home Missions.

We give God thanks for the partnership in the gospel that we share with CEF and its investors.

Joint Mission Council

The Joint Mission Council was created to help support cross-cultural outreach at congregations throughout North America. Much of this work centers around people connections, where immigrants who have joined WELS congregations in North America desire to reach out to their people group either in their community, their home country, or both. The Pastoral Studies Institute works alongside many cross-cultural ministries to provide pastoral training for their leaders, allowing them to continue working within their individual ministry groups. The Joint Mission Council is made up of representatives from Home Missions, World Missions, and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

A look ahead

Christ's mission for his Church remains the same. "We are . . . Christ's ambassadors, as though Christ were making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20). This is the mission he gave his Church when he said, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). Our mission is to reach the lost with the gospel and nurture the found with that same gospel as *Christ works through us* to gather his elect.

So, our work continues under the banner of "100 in 10," not with the primary goal of planting 100 missions in 10 years and enhancing 75 ministries during that same time. Rather, under the banner of the "100 in 10" initiative, we continue to aggressively plant new missions based on the resources Christ has given us, balancing optimism that the Lord will do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20) with the reality that we have finite resources, and the Lord of the Church does not guarantee the results we hope to see.

What this means is that we will continue to count the cost. While no dollar value can be placed on a single soul, with far more new mission opportunities than resources, we will strive to wisely steward the resources Christ gives us through his people. This not only applies to the number of new missions we approve, but it also applies to the current missions we support.

With a limited amount of money and manpower, saying "yes" to one request means we are saying "no" to another. Resources invested in one mission means those resources aren't available for another mission opportunity. This means we may need to start fewer missions for the sake of providing ongoing financial support that our healthy missions need, and we may need to withdraw support from missions that have a history of struggling and are not on a viable path to be self-supporting.

We do so with trembling hearts knowing our decisions have an impact on people's lives. But we also do so with confidence that Christ lives, Christ reigns, and Christ works through us. Even through our flawed efforts, he continues to do "immeasurably more than we could ask or imagine." This is no guarantee of results but a guarantee that he will bless our humble efforts . . . *as he chooses*. "To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen" (Ephesians 3:21).

Rev. Mark Gabb, reporter

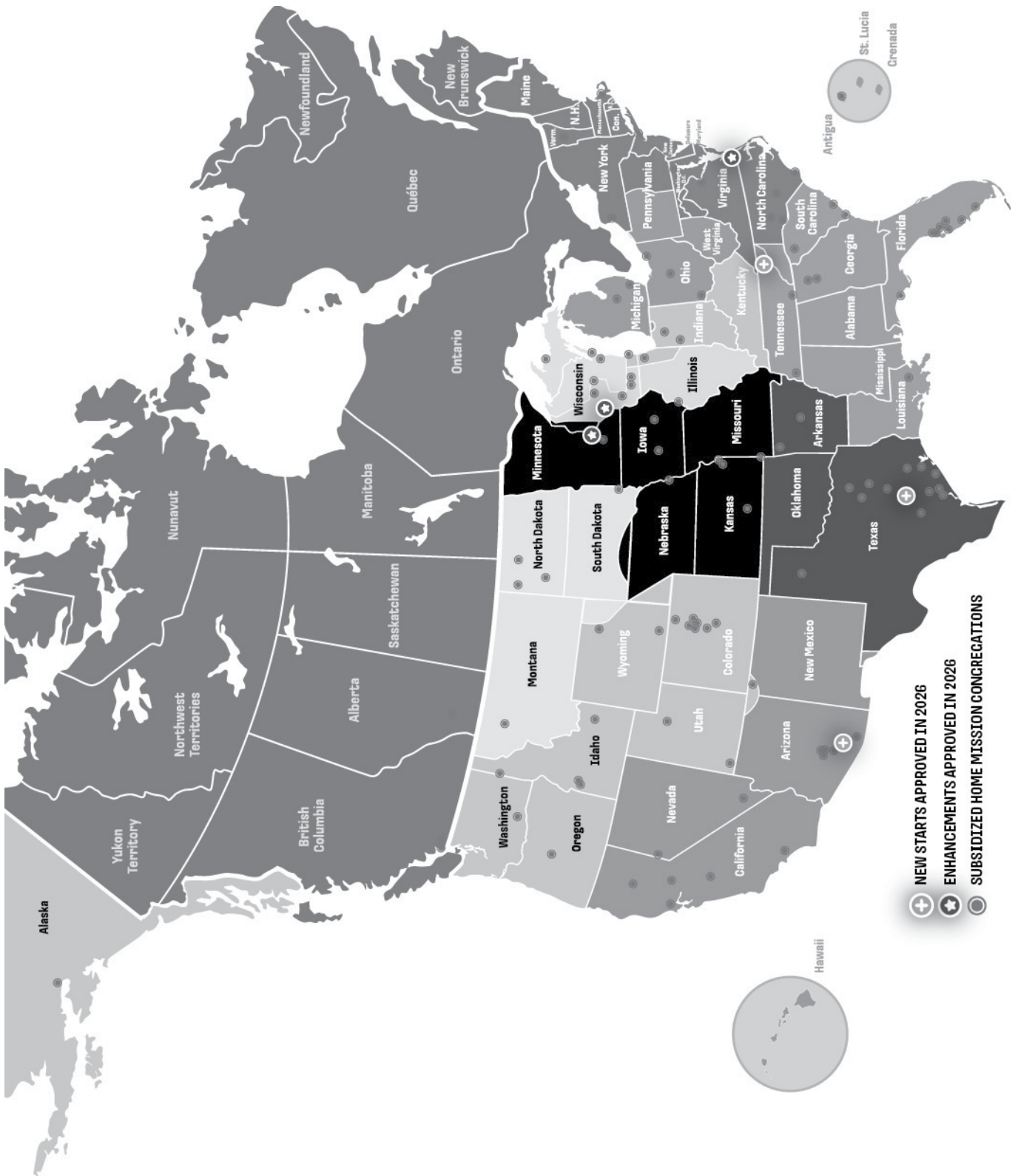
Rev. Matthew Brown, chairman of WELS Home Missions
Rev. Dustin Blumer, Southeastern Wisconsin Mission District
Rev. Timothy Bourman, North Atlantic Mission District
Mr. Eric Cereske, Arizona-California Mission District
Mr. Dallas Christ, Nebraska Mission District
Mr. Matthew Dettmann, Colorado Mission District
Rev. Brian Doebler, Arizona-California Mission District
Rev. Aaron Duve, Michigan Mission District
Rev. Benjamin Enstad, Northern Wisconsin Mission District
Mr. Brian Grundmeier, South Central Mission District
Mr. Roger Krahn, North Atlantic Mission District
Rev. Brett Krause, Colorado Mission District
Mr. Scott Krause, Western Wisconsin Mission District
Mr. Werner Lomker, WELS Canada Mission District
Rev. Jeffrey Mahnke, Western Wisconsin Mission District

Mr. David Malnes, Pacific Northwest Mission District
Rev. Peter Metzger, WELS Canada Mission District
Mr. Thomas Metzger, Michigan Mission District
Rev. Joel Naumann, Campus Ministry Committee
Mr. Nathan Paul, Northern Wisconsin Mission District
Dr. Douglas Rall, South Atlantic Mission District
Rev. Stephen Schmiel, Minnesota Mission District
Mr. Lee Schull, Dakota-Montana Mission District
Mr. Daryl Schultz, Minnesota Mission District
Rev. Kevin Schultz, Pacific Northwest Mission District
Rev. Aaron Schumann, Nebraska Mission District
Rev. Mark Schutz, Dakota-Montana Mission District
Mr. Scott Stratil, Campus Ministry Committee
Rev. Nathan Sutton, South Central Mission District
Mr. Steven Wolf, Southeastern Wisconsin Mission District
Rev. Benjamin Zahn, South Atlantic Mission District

Advisory:

Mr. Stefan Felgenhauer, director of WELS Missions Operations
Rev. Mark Gabb, administrator of WELS Board for Home Missions
Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president

WELS HOME MISSIONS MAP



-  NEW STARTS APPROVED IN 2026
-  ENHANCEMENTS APPROVED IN 2026
-  SUBSIDIZED HOME MISSION CONGREGATIONS

Board for World Missions

Our calling

Christ's love has done what no human being could ever imagine. He entered our world, gave himself for our salvation, and secured our eternity at his side. By the power of the Holy Spirit, that love fills our hearts and moves us to share Christ with a world that does not yet know him.

In response to this calling, the Board for World Missions is directed to carry out the responsibility of “the sharing of the gospel of Jesus Christ for the discipling of all people living in countries outside the United States of America and Canada and of those people who, because of cultural barriers, have not been made the responsibility of other agencies within the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod” (WELS Bylaws, Sec. 6.1).

Into a world marked by rapid growth and deep spiritual hunger, WELS World Missions is carrying Christ's unchanging gospel to places and people who have not yet heard it. Working side by side with national churches, missionaries, and volunteers, God is bearing visible fruit—raising up congregations, strengthening leaders, and drawing people from every culture to himself. Through evangelism, church planting, leadership training, and the development and distribution of gospel resources in many languages, the Lord continues to open doors no human planning could have engineered.

What follows is a summary of how the Lord is at work through this mission.

Our current situation

WELS World Missions carries out gospel outreach through regional mission teams that serve broad geographic and cultural areas. These teams bring together missionaries, national partners, and support structures to ensure that mission work is sustainable, confessional, and locally rooted.

A defining characteristic of this work is the close integration of missionary service, the training of national leaders, partnership with sister churches, and the use of digital tools to develop and distribute gospel resources.

WELS World Missions is currently working and partnering in **more than 60 countries** through a team of 50 WELS called workers. These missionaries serve alongside national churches to proclaim the gospel, train leaders, and establish sustainable ministry structures. This global network allows World Missions to respond to emerging opportunities while maintaining faithful, confessional outreach.

Board for World Missions

Over the next three years, the Board for World Missions is focused on strengthening training, collaboration, and global engagement in gospel ministry. This work is guided by clear, measurable goals that support sustainable mission growth:

- An average **10 percent annual increase** in those actively engaged in ministry training
- A **system for regular collaboration** between mission fields, including a virtual hub that enables communication and resource sharing across borders and languages
- A **global mission community of 450,000 people and growing**, connected through training, outreach, and shared gospel resources

Regional mission work

The following sections summarize this work by region, framed by a shared three-year focus established by the Board for World Missions.

Africa

Mission work in Africa is being strengthened through coordinated training, deepening partnerships, and shared resources across the continent. Missionaries have relocated to **Tanzania**, establishing a new regional hub for **Swahili-language ministry**, while **French-language work**, especially in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, continues to grow. Intentional work is underway with long-time partners in **Malawi and Zambia** to address a shortage of candidates for pastoral training, strengthening leadership pipelines for long-term sustainability.

The three-year picture in Africa:

- A **ministry training framework**, based on Pastoral Studies Institute (PSI) competencies, is being developed and coordinated across partner training programs.
- A **thriving relationship** with the two synods of the Lutheran Church of Central Africa continues, with active worker training underway.
- The **One Africa Team** is utilizing the **TELL French program** to support evangelism and leadership development throughout Francophone Africa. Think, Evaluate, Learn, Lead (TELL) provides Bible study curriculum focused on leadership training for students across the globe, preparing them to gather groups, lead Bible studies, and plant churches.

Native America

Native American mission work is advancing through coordinated leadership, local ownership, and culturally rooted ministry. A missionary residing in **New Mexico** continues to coordinate outreach to the **Navajo tribe**, supporting gospel ministry rooted in long-standing relationships. Coordination between the WELS schools in **Peridot and East Fork** is underway as enrollment grows, strengthening educational and congregational connections while expanding outreach opportunities.

The three-year picture in Native America:

- The **Native Christians Network** operates as a coordinated ministry—by Natives and for Natives—strengthening congregations and outreach in faithful partnership with WELS.
- **Native leaders are identified, equipped, and supported**, ensuring ministry is sustainable and accountable within each community.
- Through shared strategy and expanding digital outreach, **more people are being reached with God's Word** and are regularly engaging with the means of grace.

Europe

Mission work in Europe continues to grow through collaboration, evangelist development, and formal ministry training. A new **women's ministry program** is underway, reflecting growing engagement and ministry development. Across the region, the primary emphasis remains evangelism in partnership with local churches and the training of workers. In the **United Kingdom**, outreach has begun through **book clubs** centered on the Bible, with four active worship groups and growing participation as additional church plants are explored.

The three-year picture in Europe:

- **50 active, collaborating evangelists**, including **24 women**, are engaged in gospel outreach.
- **TELL students have planted 10 groups** across Europe.
- **Four seminarians have graduated**, with **20 currently studying** for ministry service.

Asia-Oceania

Mission efforts across Asia and Oceania are being sharpened through strategic growth and partnership alignment. Mission work in Vietnam, Nepal, and Bangladesh continues to grow rapidly as gospel opportunities expand. A new women's ministry coordinator has been called to support outreach. Hindi-language work and language training are being emphasized, while Asia Lutheran Seminary continues to graduate increasing numbers of workers for this growing harvest field.

The three-year picture in Asia-Oceania:

- **100 new means-of-grace groups** are being established across the region.
- A **complete realignment of internal and external partnerships** has clarified roles, goals, and collaboration.

Latin America

Mission work in Latin America is marked by strong engagement, clear pathways to congregational life, and intentional worker preparation. Additional groups are preparing to join *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*. Missionaries now serve from strategic hubs in **Mexico City, Mexico; Quito, Ecuador; and Miami, Fla.**, strengthening regional collaboration and supporting church planting, leadership development, and ongoing ministry throughout Latin America. Dozens of church plants have begun.

The three-year picture in Latin America:

- **15,000 people** have completed self-study resources.
- **4,000** have completed at least one live course.
- **2,000 individual planning sessions** have supported spiritual growth and leadership development.
- **257 groups have been planted**, with **25 now established as *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional* congregations.**

Multi-Language Productions

Multi-Language Productions supports global mission work by delivering faithful, accessible gospel resources across cultures and languages. The first **TELL student in Africa** has completed his coursework. Dozens more are on track. At the same time, **advertising and outreach efforts** are being explored to identify new contacts in **Europe and Australia**, supporting continued expansion of gospel resources and training opportunities.

The three-year picture for Multi-Language Productions:

- The gospel has been shared with **25 million people worldwide**, with **150,000 actively using discipleship resources.**
- An expanding library offers **500+ resources**, including films in 50 languages.
- **Formal translation training in Asia** supports faithful, culturally appropriate materials.

A look ahead

The work of WELS World Missions embraces these priorities from the "Commission" section of the WELS long-range plan:

Forge a borderless support network

Global partnerships connect mission fields, missionaries, and national churches through shared resources and prayer.

Equip a global missionary force

Indigenous leaders are trained to lead gospel outreach, while expatriate missionaries increasingly serve as trainers and multipliers.

Establish confessional Lutheran seminaries

Formal theological training programs prepare pastors and leaders for long-term, sustainable ministry.

Expand multi-language mission efforts

Translation, publication, and digital distribution of Lutheran resources support evangelism and discipleship worldwide.

Pioneer missions in high-risk and unreached areas

Innovative strategies, digital outreach, and discreet partnerships open doors where traditional structures are limited.

One example of how these long-range plan priorities are taking shape is the development of a new mission field in Senegal, a Muslim West African nation where access to the gospel has historically been very limited. Significant groundwork has already been completed, including onsite planning for language and culture immersion, housing, logistics, and long-term sustainability.

Missionary Dan Kroll has accepted a call to serve in Senegal, where he and his wife, Karen, will focus first on learning the Wolof language and culture as ministry begins among the Wolof people, a predominantly Muslim population with little exposure to Christianity. Plans are being made for a second missionary family to join them. This early phase reflects World Missions' broader emphasis on careful preparation and long-term relationship-building in new mission contexts.

Conclusion

As the Lord continues to open doors for the gospel around the world, WELS World Missions remains committed to proclaiming Christ's saving truth with clarity, faithfulness, and care. This work is carried out with confidence in God's promises—that his Word will not return empty and that he continues to gather his people from every nation.

Through missionaries, national church partners, trained leaders, and the faithful support of WELS congregations, the Lord continues to use these efforts to share Christ's love in expected and unexpected places. We thank God for the privilege of this work and pray that he will continue to bless our shared mission.

Rev. Larry M. Schlomer, reporter

Rev. Jonathan Schroeder, chairman

Mr. Matthew Doering, secretary

Rev. Michael Ewart

Mr. Mark Schulz

Mr. Arlin Bornschlegl

Advisory:

Mr. Stefan Felgenhauer, director of Missions Operations

Rev. Larry M. Schlomer, administrator of WELS Board for World Missions

Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president

WELS WORLD MISSIONS MAP

NORTH AMERICA & SOUTH AMERICA



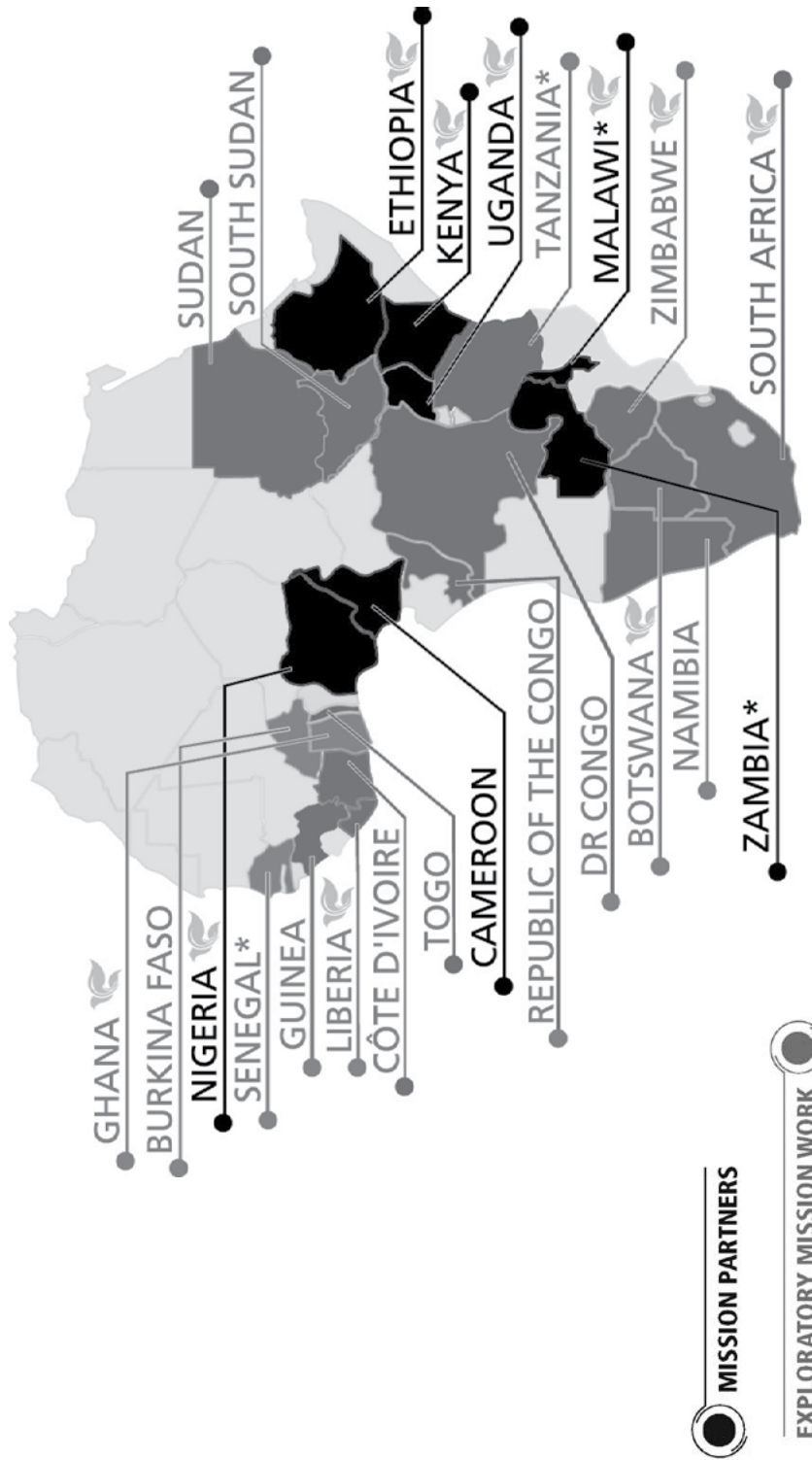
 **MISSION PARTNERS**

EXPLORATORY MISSION WORK 

*Countries where missionaries reside

WELS WORLD MISSIONS MAP

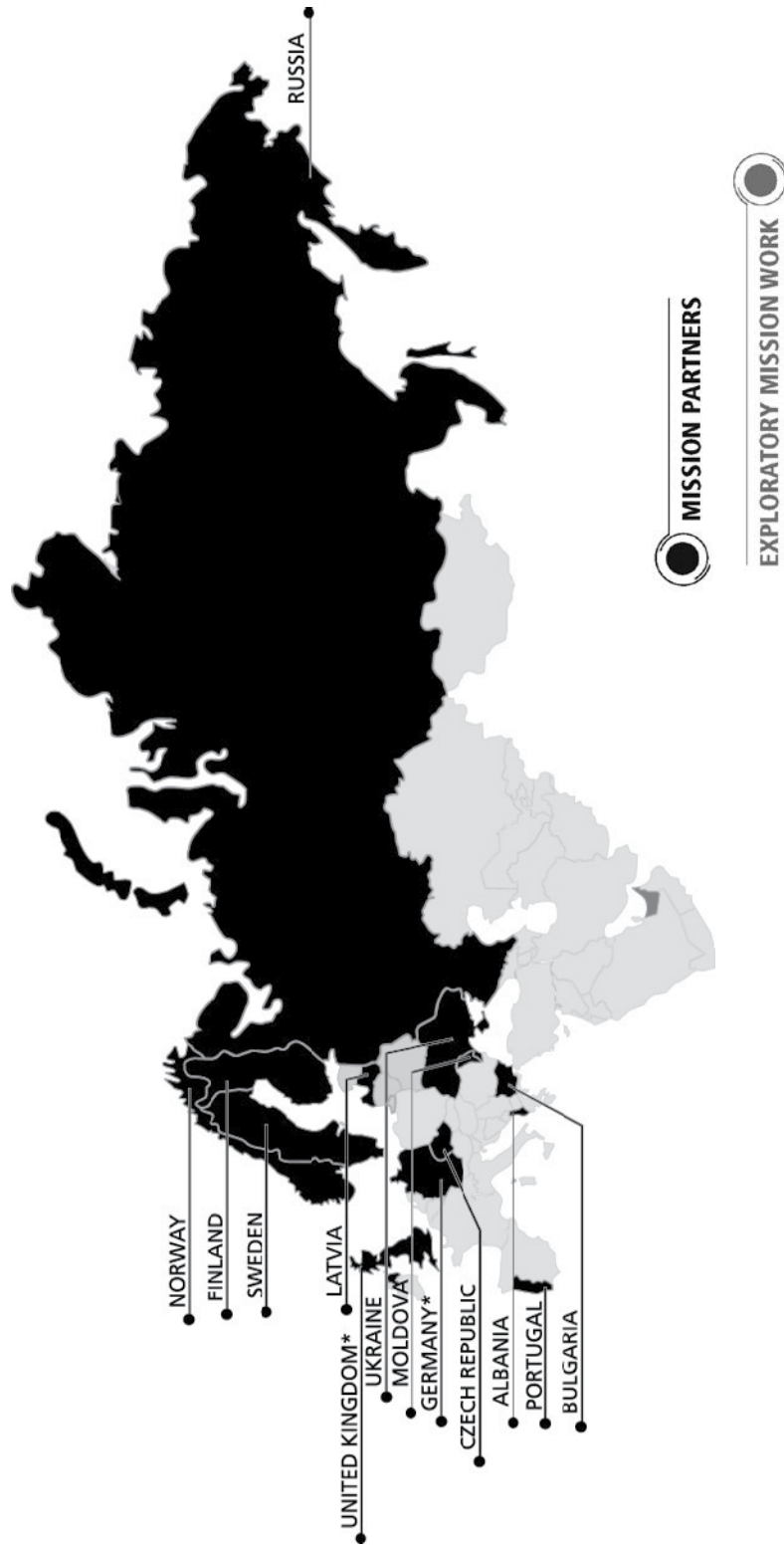
AFRICA



*Countries where missionaries reside

WELS WORLD MISSIONS MAP

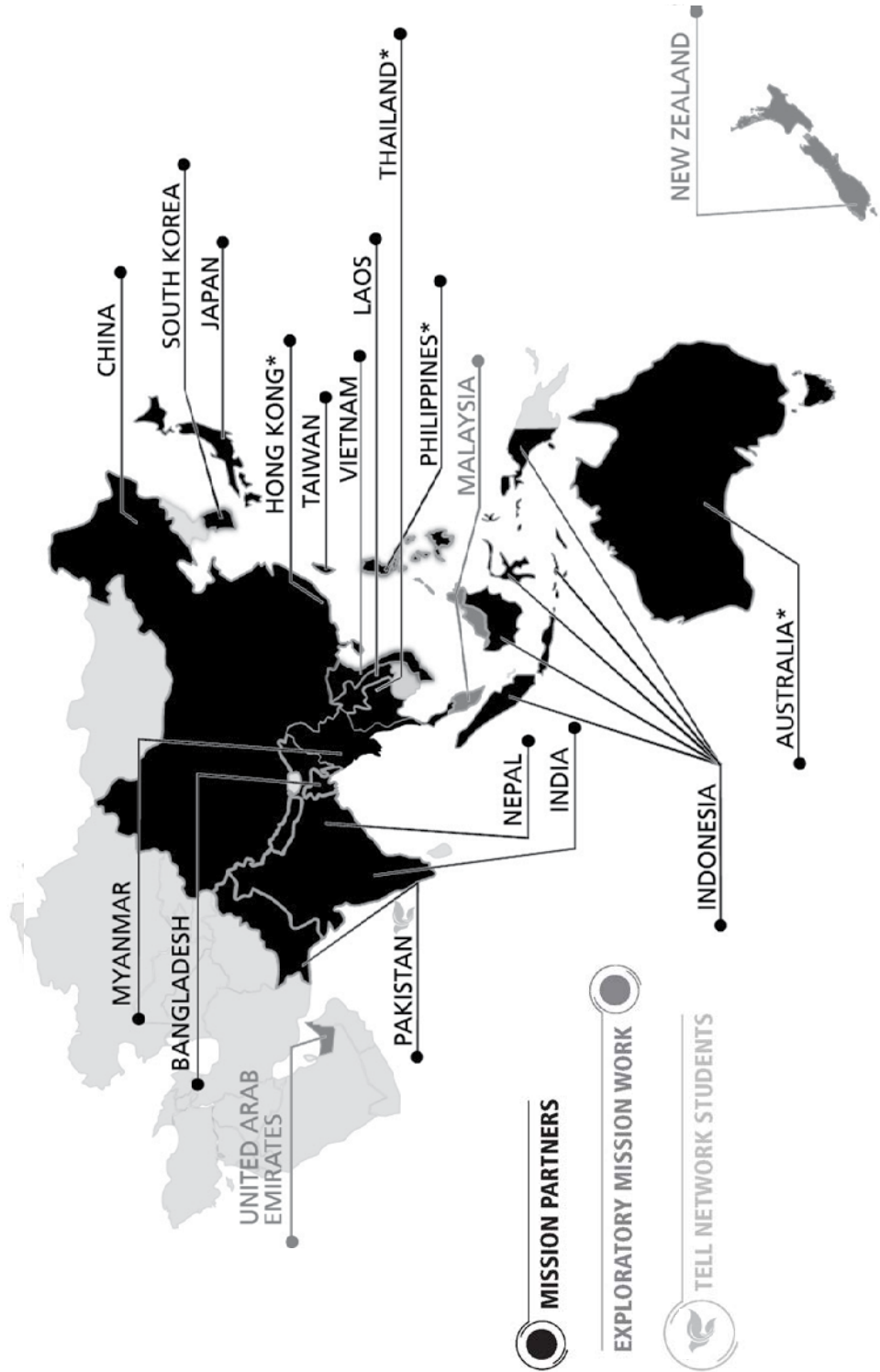
EUROPE & RUSSIA



*Countries where missionaries reside

WELS WORLD MISSIONS MAP

ASIA & AUSTRALIA



*Countries where missionaries reside

Board for Ministerial Education

Our calling

How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Romans 10:15).

The Board for Ministerial Education has been given the task to coordinate the efforts of WELS to provide a preaching and teaching ministry qualified to proclaim the gospel faithfully and universally. Pastors, teachers, staff ministers, and missionaries are prepared for the public ministry of the gospel to proclaim the good news of Christ's love to people in congregations, schools, and mission fields around the world. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and Martin Luther College also include in their purpose the continuing education of those who serve in the ministry of the gospel. Our report gives you an overview of our efforts to coordinate the work. Find the most recent reports from the individual schools at bme.welsrc.net through the WELS Resource Center.

Our current situation

To fulfill our purpose, we operate a four-school, three-tiered system of ministerial education. We own and operate two preparatory high schools: Luther Preparatory School in Watertown, Wis., and Michigan Lutheran Seminary in Saginaw, Mich. We also own and operate one ministry training college for pastors, teachers, and staff ministers, Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minn., and one pastor training seminary, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, Wis.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) offers theological training for men who intend to enter the pastoral ministry of WELS. It serves both first career and non-traditional students. Grow in Grace, the program for pastoral growth at WLS, offers opportunities for the theological and professional growth of called workers already serving in our fellowship. The Pastoral Studies Institute of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary guides the preparation of men who would like to serve only their own people groups as evangelists or pastors. The seminary is currently working on a building project that includes an education center (classrooms), faculty offices, and a gathering hall. Visit wls.edu and also see p. 117 for more information about WLS.

Martin Luther College

Martin Luther College (MLC) is the WELS college of ministry. MLC offers three different tracks of study to prepare men and women to meet the public ministry needs of WELS: the pre-seminary track for men to prepare them for entrance to WLS; the teacher track for men and women to prepare them to serve in early childhood centers, Lutheran elementary schools, and Lutheran high schools; and the staff ministry track to prepare men and women for various ministry roles within congregations. MLC offers various continuing education and graduate studies programs to help current called workers with continuing education. MLC offers ministry certification classes for those WELS members who already hold teaching degrees and/or licenses from other institutions who wish to be certified to teach in WELS schools. Because many schools have extended part-time jobs and provisional calls to those who have not received formal training as Christian educators, MLC has developed the Alternative Pathway to Professional Licensure Eligibility (APPLE) to support this growing family of educators. APPLE is designed

for returning, adult learners who have completed a two- or four-year degree at another institution but do not yet have an education degree. Additional efforts to address current teaching needs of WELS are detailed in the report from the Commission on Lutheran Schools. Visit mlc-wels.edu and also see p. 124 for more information about MLC.

Michigan Lutheran Seminary

Michigan Lutheran Seminary (MLS) is a boarding high school that serves the single purpose of preparing high school students for the public ministry of the gospel and encouraging them to enroll at MLC. Michigan does not offer a voucher program, but MLS receives grants for financial scholarships from the MLS Foundation, which also assists with capital improvements. Visit mlsem.org and also see p.130 for more information about MLS.

Luther Preparatory School

Luther Preparatory School (LPS) is also a boarding high school that serves the single purpose of preparing high school students for the public ministry of the gospel and encouraging them to enroll at MLC. LPS participates in the Racine, Milwaukee, and Wisconsin Parental Choice programs, allowing some Wisconsin families to use vouchers from the state to pay for education. LPS is currently gathering commitments to build a new music center and auditorium on their campus. Visit lps.wels.net and also see p. 134 for more information about LPS.

Finances

The Board for Ministerial Education distributes synod support to the ministerial education schools from a block grant supplied by the Synodical Council. This model has resulted in stable reserves and normal annual tuition increases at all the schools. MLC has seen positive blessings on its efforts to address the educational debt of its graduates, with decreases in the average debt owed by its graduates for five straight years, and the average debt of graduates is under 50 percent of their first-year salaries. The college has established programs to train students in good stewardship and to increase funds available for student assistance. The Congregational Partner Grant Program has increased its matching funds for tuition assistance provided by congregations to students who attend MLC. The college has an attainable goal of having enough resources available that no freshman should have to take a loan for education purposes.

Ministry recruitment counselors

Pastor and teacher vacancies in WELS remain a great concern. Of even greater concern is the birth rate drop and enrollment cliff that is coming in the 2030s. These realities have caused us to consider new ways of encouraging people for ministry. The ministry recruitment counselors (MRCs) are one of these new ideas that help to provide a solution to this problem. Thanks to generous donations, as of the writing of this report we have four called MRCs currently working in this position and will be looking to add one more. The MRCs serve in a unique form of the public ministry and provide gospel-centered encouragement and guidance to called workers, parents, students, and lay influencers, helping them identify and nurture individuals who may be suited for public ministry. The MRCs aim to encourage the encouragers, influence the influencers, and recruit the recruiters.

The MRCs are spread geographically around the country. Mary Heckendorf lives in Reno, Nev., and covers the Arizona-California and Pacific Northwest Districts. Pastor Mark Schroeder lives in Johnson Creek, Wis., and covers the Northern Wisconsin and Western Wisconsin Districts. Sam McKenna lives in Lake Mills, Wis., and covers the Southeastern Wisconsin and Michigan Districts. Pastor Donald Patterson lives in Austin, Texas, and covers the South Central, South Atlantic, and North Atlantic Districts. The final MRC will cover the Dakota-Montana, Minnesota, and Nebraska Districts. These positions are funded for four years through initial generous donations. We will be looking for continued donations to help fund these positions in future years.

Think tank

For the past year, a think tank group has been meeting to discuss ways of addressing the called worker shortage in our church body. Its focus has been on the “Calling” section of the “Christ through us” strategic plan for 2025–2035, especially the goal of expanding pathways into gospel ministry. Many different solutions have been suggested. The Board for Ministerial Education feels it is in the best interest of our church body to research every path possible to find solutions to the called worker shortage in our church body. Because of this, the think tank brought a recommendation to the Board for Ministerial Education, the Conference of Presidents, and the Synodical Council to invite Wisconsin Lutheran College and Martin Luther College to work with the Board for Ministerial Education to find possible solutions to the teacher shortage. Both the Board for Ministerial Education and Synodical Council passed that resolution in April. The Conference of Presidents will be discussing this recommendation in May. More reporting on this work will be given in future months.

Capital projects

Capital campaigns for buildings at the schools are reviewed and adopted by both the Synodical Council and the Conference of Presidents as a regular part of WELS’ ministry planning process and then are conducted in coordination with the Ministry of Christian Giving. A new Synod Capital Projects Fund has been established by the Synodical Council and is intended to assist the schools in their development and completion of large-scale capital projects, which may include the prudent use of debt. See the Synodical Council report (p. 45) for more details on the Synod Capital Projects Fund.

This past year, Credo Powered by Carnegie worked with all four of our ministerial educational schools to develop a comprehensive master site plan on each of the campuses. Those site plans were reviewed by the Synodical Council at its April meeting. Currently two of our schools are working on large building projects. WLS is planning to break ground in May on an education center, remodel old classrooms into faculty offices, and add a gathering space to the gymnasium. LPS is working toward building a music center and restoring the old gymnasium that is currently used for music and drama back to its original purpose. MLC and MLS continue to address facility needs and improvements on campus and are grateful for the many donations that support these efforts, along with the dedicated work and skill of local staff. The Lord gives us our daily bread, and we are grateful that the campuses are well maintained, with very few continuing maintenance projects unfunded in the ministry plan for the current biennium.

Partnerships

With the blessing and encouragement of the administrations of Home and World Missions, the ministerial education schools have established good partnerships with the world mission fields and self-supporting overseas churches in our fellowship to help develop their ministerial education programs. In the past few years, we have seen a dramatic increase in requests to the Pastoral Studies Institute of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary for help in training existing pastors and evangelists of various people groups to become confessional Lutherans. The reports of the Board for Home Missions (section on Joint Mission Council, p. 102) and the Commission on Inter-Church Relations (p. 14) detail some of those efforts. Our domestic ministerial education schools have seen some success in their plan to increase the numbers of under-represented minorities on their campuses and in their programs.

A look ahead

We give thanks that the Lord of the Church continues to supply our synod with young men and women who are willing to serve in full-time gospel ministry. It’s an extraordinary blessing that they believe that the Bible is the infallible Word of God and that they treasure the precious Lutheran heritage of proclaiming the unconditional gospel that has been passed to our generation with remarkable clarity.

We are grateful that they present themselves for service as faithful ministers of the gospel who subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions and seek to proclaim God's Word boldly. We also give thanks for the individual congregations and members in those congregations who still think—contrary to the practice of just about every other national church body—that the investment of energy and financial resources in the thorough preparation of candidates for the public ministry of the gospel and the deepening of those who are already serving is a sound and wise synodical commitment.

What can you do to help? Pray! Ask the Lord of the harvest to send more workers into his harvest fields. Encourage people you know to prepare for service in the ministry of the gospel. Support the ongoing work of preparing workers for God's kingdom.

Rev. Charles Vannieuwenhoven, reporter

Rev. Duane Rodewald, chairman
Teacher Daniel Markgraf, secretary
Mr. Paul Hahm
Rev. Stephen Helwig
Teacher James Henrickson
Rev. Steven Lange
Rev. Andrew Retberg
Mr. Brian Scheele
Rev. Timothy Spaude
Rev. Aaron Voss
Mr. Dean Waldschmidt
Mr. Adam Zastrow
Teacher Gerald Zeamer

Advisory:

Rev. Matthew Crass, Luther Preparatory School president
Mr. Kyle Egan, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer
Rev. Richard Gurgel, Martin Luther College president
Rev. Mark Luetzow, Michigan Lutheran Seminary president
Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president
Rev. Earle Treptow, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary president
Rev. Charles Vannieuwenhoven, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Our calling

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) equips pastors for the worldwide mission of WELS, including churches and cultural groups within its confessional fellowship. In partnership with sister seminaries and theological training programs of its fellowship, WLS accomplishes that singular purpose with two distinct emphases. Primarily, the seminary prepares men to begin pastoral ministry by providing the spiritual, theological, and professional training needed to enter that ministry. The seminary also partners with pastors in their ministry-long pursuit of spiritual, theological, and professional growth.

Our current situation

Enrollment

The 2025–26 school year began with an enrollment of 153 students, down two from the beginning of the 2024–25 school year, which was the highest enrollment since 2009–10. The senior class, with 41 students, is the largest since 2010, and the middler (second-year) class, which began with 45 students, was the largest since 2007. At the time of this writing, 43 men will be presented as candidates for assignment into the pastoral ministry. In addition to the 41 in the senior class is one who deferred assignment last spring and another whose training program, because of unique circumstances, concluded with a vicar year. Lord willing, 43 men will be assigned to serve as vicars.

Numbers are just numbers. It is important to mention that the Lord of the Church has done more in answering the prayers of his people than provide bodies. The men at the seminary preparing for service as pastors are incredibly gifted. All of them could have pursued many different lines of work but are willing to consider serving the Lord and his people in pastoral ministry. They are gifts from God.

People are sometimes surprised to learn that not every student who enrolls at the seminary successfully completes the program and presents himself for service as a pastor in Christ's church. The reality is that some enter the seminary uncertain about becoming pastors and determine along the way that they would like to serve their Savior in another vocation. Others face different challenges that lead them to step out of the program. Faculty members regularly meet with students to encourage them to continue their preparation on what feels like a long road to ministry. In the end, however, the desire to serve as a pastor is a gift the Lord gives. Three students have discontinued during the 2025–26 school year; all three have expressed a desire to return.

Early projections are that enrollment at the beginning of the 2026–27 school year will be near 150, down a few from the beginning of the 2025–26 school year.

Faculty

Rev. Dr. Aaron Jensen was installed as a professor of systematic theology and homiletics during the opening service of the 2025–26 school year. Jensen is primarily auditing classes this year and will move into the classroom in the fall. He is one of 14 men on the 18-man faculty who have begun service to the seminary in the last 10 years.

Eight of the men serving on the seminary faculty, in addition to their classroom responsibilities, are enrolled in academic programs to be even better equipped for the work the Lord has called them to do. The seminary's governing board, in extending calls for new professors, focuses on calling men who are known to be faithful, evangelical pastors rather than those who already have terminal degrees. At a school that describes its work as "pastors forming pastors to proclaim God's praise," it makes sense that the priority is having men who love parish ministry and are eager to help prepare another generation of pastors. Most faculty members first enter a doctoral program after accepting a call to the seminary. The governing board is committed to supporting every faculty member who desires to pursue an advanced degree, both with funding for the program and with a reduced teaching load to accommodate the additional work.

Field services

Vicars

During the third year of their seminary training, students serve as vicars and get to put into practice what they have learned. The vicar year is, in many ways, the most critical portion of a student's training

for pastoral ministry. While it is extremely beneficial, the program does carry a significant cost. During the 2025–26 school year, the seminary is contributing approximately \$400,000 to the program. The generous gifts of God’s people have made that possible, but that may not be a sustainable number for the long term.

There was some concern about what might happen for the 2026–27 school year, with a larger class and with the cost of the program to an individual congregation rising to \$50,400, an increase of more than \$2,700 from the year before. (That amount does not all go directly to the vicar. It provides health insurance for all the vicars and their families, subsidizes rental costs for all, and provides a stipend for the vicars, so that they can give their full time to ministry and not seek other employment to cover their costs.) Typically, 10 to 12 congregations applying for a vicar have the resources to cover the full cost for the year. We are happy to report that 15 congregations that applied for the 2026–27 school year can cover the entire cost. Three more are covering most of the cost, with the seminary filling in the gap. The remainder of the vicar class will be assigned to congregations that are only able to cover a portion of the cost.

The seminary has worked with the Board for World Missions to have a vicar serve in Colombia for the last five years, serving alongside a pastor in our sister church body. The seminary has also partnered with the Board for Home Missions and its Vicar in a Mission Setting program to identify places where a vicar could receive excellent training in gospel outreach in a mission-minded congregation. The Board for Home Missions and WLS cooperate financially in the program. Both anticipate an investment of around \$260,000 for 2026–27.

Each summer, the seminary provides a seminar to equip the supervising pastors for their important work of overseeing vicars. Faculty members explain the training the vicars have received and outline the experiences they would like the vicars to have in this critical year of training. Each new supervising pastor is required to attend; experienced supervising pastors are asked to participate in a training seminar at least once every five years. We thank the Lord of the Church for the many faithful pastors and supportive congregations who are willing to invest time and money in the training of a future pastor.

Early field training

The early field training program has been in place for more than 20 years. In it, first- and second-year students are assigned to a congregation in the area. They attend services each week and get involved in different activities to gain perspective on congregational life, with the goal of preparing them for their vicar year. The program is primarily Sunday-focused, in recognition of the students’ busy schedules during the week with classroom and work responsibilities. Four of the congregations participating in the program offer seminarians with Spanish-speaking abilities the opportunity to use them in ministry.

Student ministry program

Seminary students work part-time jobs during the school year to help cover their living costs. Most work in secular jobs and take advantage of opportunities to witness as they work alongside others. Some of the students work in ministry positions. During the 2025–26 school year, 31 students are serving in ministry positions that fit the training they have received. Twenty seniors are serving in a ministry position, with responsibilities in preaching, teaching, and visitation. Some receive housing as part of their compensation. Eleven first- and second-year students are serving in ministry positions with duties that fit the training they have received. In addition, six or seven students each year serve as summer student assistants in congregations across the United States. Typically more opportunities for such positions are available than students able to serve in them because of other responsibilities in the summer.

Education costs

The total cost of education at present is approximately \$35,000 per student per year. No student covers the entire cost out of his own pocket. Tuition and fees for 2025–26 were \$14,540 and will rise to \$14,915 for 2026–27. The difference between the total cost of education and tuition is addressed partially through the portion of WELS Congregation Mission Offerings designated for the seminary and primarily through the many generous gifts God’s people offer directly to the seminary’s scholarship fund. The students who live in the dorm pay about \$10,500 for room and board during the school year. Married students, who need to secure their own housing off campus, typically pay more for housing and food.

The seminary offers students need-based financial assistance. During the 2025–26 school year, every student who applied for assistance received aid to help defray the costs of attending. All told, the seminary provided a little more than \$1,000,000 from its general scholarship fund to assist students. Most of that came in the form of grants based on need. There were also campus service awards, which acknowledge students who carry out tasks for the well-being of the seminary family, and academic achievement awards, which honor classroom performance as reflected in the students’ grades. Donors have also provided additional gifts for students that are not reflected in that \$1,000,000. Thanks to the Lord’s gracious working in the hearts of generous donors, students, on average, received assistance exceeding the tuition costs for the year. Many also received assistance to defray their costs for room and board (or housing and food for married students).

The seminary’s financial aid officer, Rev. Dr. Stephen Geiger, carefully monitors student debt. No one wants to see students entering full-time service in the church with crippling debt, because it will have a negative impact on their ability to serve. The excellent work being done at MLC in financial planning has made a positive impact on student indebtedness. The seminary builds on that by offering annual financial presentations, as well as private guidance as needed. We are pleased to report that students do not leave the seminary with more educational debt than that with which they entered. Some may acquire additional debt through marriage. Most leave the seminary with less educational debt (and less debt overall) than when they entered.

Governing board

Jonathan Scharf, who had served as chairman of the governing board since 2017, when he was elected to that role by the Synod in Convention, stepped down last fall. We thank the Lord for Scharf’s faithful service as chairman and for the blessings he bestowed on the seminary through Scharf, who had the privilege of installing more than half of the men on the seminary faculty.

WELS President Mark Schroeder appointed Stephen Helwig, serving as pastor at Gethsemane, Omaha, Neb., and Christ Our Savior, Fremont, Neb., to complete Scharf’s term. We pray the Lord’s richest blessings on Helwig’s service.

Pastoral Studies Institute

The Pastoral Studies Institute (PSI) of WLS, in collaboration with WELS Joint Mission Council, continues to oversee pastoral training for men from various ethnic groups—Vietnamese, Hmong, and Sudanese, to name a few—in places across North America. The PSI Team consists of Harland (Skip) Goetzinger, who serves full-time as the director; E. Allen Sorum; and David Bivens. Bivens has a reduced teaching load in both semesters to allow him to travel and to teach PSI students both semesters. Sorum has a full schedule of teaching at the seminary in the second semester but not the first, freeing him up to travel and teach PSI students.

Members of the PSI Team have designed individual study plans for the 41 men from 16 people groups in 30 locations in North America currently enrolled in the program. The members of the PSI Team provide some of the instruction to the men enrolled, while also working with local pastors who teach other courses in the program's four levels. The prayer is that the men being prepared for ministry will not only be able to pastor a flock of their people group but will also be able to assist in bringing the gospel to their country of origin, as the Lord provides opportunities. Four men will graduate from the program this May.

The members of the PSI Team, who are called jointly by the seminary's governing board and WELS Joint Mission Council, work with each world mission's One Team. Their duties and responsibilities vary by field, from vetting mission opportunities to providing instruction to developing curriculum to offering counsel on various aspects of mission and ministry. The PSI Team collaborates with the One Team leader and the group WELS is seeking to reach to determine the best way for WELS to facilitate distinctively Lutheran ministries led by solidly Lutheran native leaders.

Grow in Grace

Grow in Grace, the program for pastoral growth at WLS, partners with pastors in their ministry-long pursuit of spiritual, theological, and professional growth. Grow in Grace offers courses and events, retreats and mentoring, study packages, and informal resources, all intended to encourage and equip pastors to serve where the Lord has placed them. God's people always benefit when their pastors stretch themselves with additional study, even if the study doesn't seem immediately connected to daily ministry duties.

At the time of this writing, 41 men are officially enrolled in the master's in sacred theology (STM) program. Many more have taken courses, but they have not yet requested an advisor and stated their desire to complete the program. Students who enroll in the program choose from one of nine focus areas. Nine pastors received STM degrees at the end of the 2024–25 school year, the largest in recent memory. Four pastors are on track to graduate in May.

Online courses are offered in fall, spring, and summer and have been well subscribed. The plan is to offer at least two online courses for each session. In even-numbered summers, Summer Quarter is held on campus. In odd-numbered years, Grow in Grace offers satellite continuing education events in at least nine of the synod's districts. While on-campus Summer Quarter may not be as convenient, many benefits are associated with being on campus, like daily worship in the chapel, access to the library, and opportunities to talk with brothers in ministry outside of the classroom. Travel grants have made it possible to support pastors from sister church bodies around the world to attend Summer Quarter this June (June 15–26, 2026); 13 are already planning to participate. Courses in the STM program are also offered on campus in January.

Each spring Grow in Grace arranges ministry celebration retreats for pastors and their wives celebrating 3-, 10-, 25-, and 35-year ministry anniversaries. The retreats provide collaborative opportunities for pastors to learn from one another and to gather with peers celebrating similar ministry milestones. Ninety pastors and 83 pastors' wives plan to attend this year's celebration retreats.

Grow in Grace also oversees a program of mentoring for new pastors during the first three years of their service as pastors. Experienced pastors are trained for the important work of encouraging new pastors as they take up the work of shepherding a congregation.

A look ahead

Building plans

Almost one hundred years ago the synod decided to build a new seminary. The seminary built in Wauwatosa in 1892 was no longer sufficient for the work of forming men for service as pastors in Christ's church. Our forebears were convinced that they could and should do better for the men preparing to be pastors. In 1929 they constructed a building in Thiensville (now Mequon, Wis.) that they prayed would be a blessing to the synod well into the future. Mission accomplished!

While there have been many updates to the buildings, it has become apparent that we can do better for the men preparing for pastoral ministry. The current classrooms are undersized, lack natural light, and were not designed with today's technology in mind. Some of the basement classrooms smell like a Wisconsin basement. Most faculty members do not have on-site offices. Small-group educational spaces and a large gathering area for students and their families do not exist. Simply put, the current facilities are not equipped to serve today's students, especially when it comes to the collaborative parts of learning. Like our forefathers, we want to do better, both to honor the Lord and for the benefit of students.

The Synodical Council (SC) granted WLS permission to move forward with the design and pre-construction phase of the project in spring 2025. During the 2025–26 school year, a seminary committee has worked with an architect and builder to design a new education center, a new gathering hall, and renovations that will provide on-site office space for professors, a student lounge, and a more accessible rare book room. The education center will have six classrooms. Two of them will be larger than any of the current classrooms, allowing some flexibility that current classroom spaces don't have. The other four classrooms in the new education center will be larger than most of the current classrooms and will facilitate collaborative learning. In addition, the education center includes five small-group educational spaces that will be used for group projects. The education center will connect to the current library and essentially enclose the circle.

The space that will connect the library to the education center, which students and faculty will pass through every day before and after chapel, will be a student lounge. Comfortable seating, a fireplace, and a coffee bar will invite people to spend time together. After chapel, students and faculty will meet in this welcoming space to talk informally, to build up relationships and set the stage for more important conversations down the road.

The new gathering hall will be connected to the current auditorium. The primary users of the gathering hall will be students and their families. At present, there really isn't a natural place for the wives of seminary students to meet. They are welcome to use the basement of the dormitory, but it's not very inviting, and they feel like they are intruding on the dorm students' space. The gathering hall will provide them a comfortable and beautiful space in which to meet. It's critical for them to build up relationships with one another for support and encouragement, not only during their husbands' time at the seminary but also beyond. The gathering hall will also be a great place to receive visitors who come to campus for concerts, conferences, and workshops.

Some of the current classrooms will be converted into on-site faculty offices, so that every professor has a readily accessible office. Students will know where to find their professors, and the result will be even more interaction between students and faculty. At a place where pastors are forming pastors, that kind of interaction will be extremely beneficial. Additionally, professors will have opportunity to work more regularly with their colleagues. That will make them better instructors, which will be a blessing to the students and ultimately to the people of God they will one day serve.

The project will cost in the range of \$15,600,000. With the approval of the Conference of Presidents (COP) and the SC, a capital campaign called “Compelled: Honoring the Legacy, Shaping the Future,” (or simply “Compelled”) has been initiated. The name of the campaign comes from the apostle’s words in 2 Corinthians 5:14–15, where Paul explained what led him to labor so fervently: “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” It’s Christ’s love that compels us to do more than the bare minimum to get by. Christ’s love moves us to give the Lord our very best and to do our very best as a synod in preparing men for service as pastors.

Though the campaign has not, at the time of this writing, entered the public phase, God’s people have offered generous gifts for the project. Between gifts, three-year commitments, and funds the seminary’s governing board has designated for the building project, 70 percent of the project cost has been achieved. With approval from both the COP and the SC, the plan is to break ground after the school year has been completed. If all goes according to the builder’s plans, the education center, gathering hall, and student lounge will all be completed in April 2027. Construction of onsite faculty offices can only begin when the current classrooms are no longer needed for instruction. The expectation is that the offices will be completed by August 2027. The initial goal had been to complete a building project by the hundredth anniversary on the Mequon campus in 2029. The Lord has done more than we had asked or imagined.

Construction will begin with the prayer that the Lord, through his people, will provide the 30 percent of the project cost that remains: \$4,700,000. That’s a significant amount of money, to be sure. But this is a generational opportunity to shape the future of pastoral training in WELS. This is an investment in the work we do together as a synod. With the support of generous partners who love the gospel, WLS can carry out its critical work in facilities that match the importance and urgency of its calling.

Enrollment projections

The numbers are concerning. A high number of pastor vacancies exist in our church body and that at a time when we as a synod are aggressively seeking to establish home missions and support the spread of the gospel throughout the world. The Lord has provided many opportunities for gospel proclamation, but the number of workers does not match our plans. Additionally, the number of young people in our church body is declining. A lower birth rate means fewer who can potentially prepare for service as pastors.

So, what are we to do? Jesus anticipated that question. “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matthew 9:37–38). We have reason to turn to the Lord in prayer. The more regularly we pray for gospel servants, both corporately and personally, the more readily we appreciate the Lord’s gift of public ministers of the gospel. It would be good also to pray for the work of the ministry recruitment counselors who have begun their work of encouraging the frontline encouragers. Additionally, all of us can look for opportunities to speak with gifted young people about the privilege of serving in the public ministry. All of us can strive to speak highly of the public ministry and those who serve in public ministry, so that young people can see how much God’s people value gospel servants. When young people see how important public ministry is and the eternal impact the Lord can have on others through them, they are more likely to seriously consider serving in that way.

Rev. Earle Treptow, reporter

Rev. Stephen Helwig, chairman
Teacher Philip Stern, secretary

Rev. Geoffrey Cortright
Mr. Greg Green
Mr. Tom Kissinger
Mr. Clayton Raasch
Rev. Eric Steinbrenner
Rev. Karl Walther

Advisory:

Rev. Jonathan Balge, adjunct member
Rev. Daniel Leyrer, Southeastern Wisconsin District president
Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president
Rev. Earle Treptow, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary president
Rev. Charles Vannieuwenhoven, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education

Martin Luther College

Our calling

It remains a challenging time for many higher education institutions in our country. The *Wall Street Journal* reports that more than 500 private, non-profit four-year institutions have closed in the past decade. Due to a continuing decline in the pool of available students and an increase in the percentage of high school students who are forgoing college, colleges and universities are locked in a competitive struggle for a significantly smaller pool of potential students. Trends would indicate that many more four-year institutions may disappear in the years ahead.

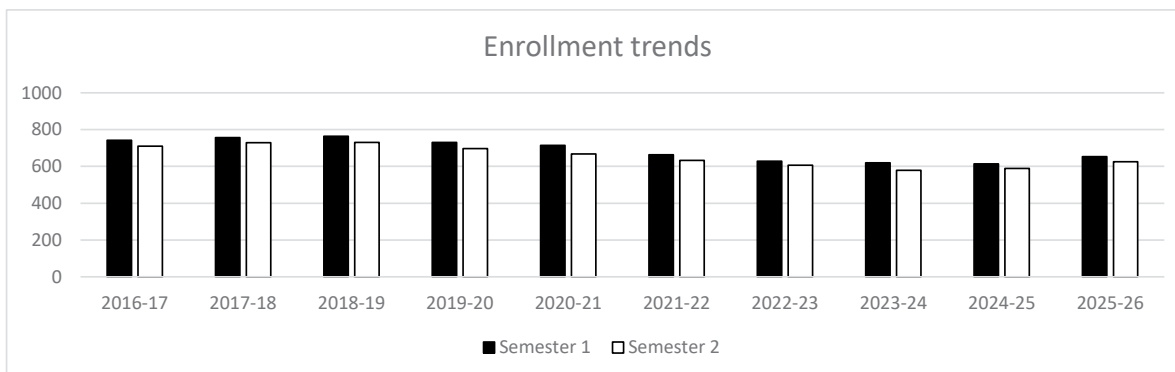
This is also true: Many of those institutions that have closed, or are in danger of closing, lost track of their unique purpose long ago. We have a great blessing at Martin Luther College (MLC) in having a clear and unchanging mission as the WELS college of ministry. The mission of MLC is to train men and women to meet the public ministry needs of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and to proclaim the Word of God faithfully and in accord with the Lutheran Confessions in the *Book of Concord*. To fulfill this mission, MLC carries out all instruction and programs of student life according to the gospel as revealed in the inspired and inerrant Word of God.

With that mission in mind, this report lays before our 12 districts some of God's gifts to the WELS college of ministry and a look ahead to some further opportunities for blessing.

Our current situation

God's gifts to MLC: Our undergraduate students

MLC's opening enrollment for fall 2025 was 653 full-time undergraduates. That was an increase of 39 from the previous school year and the first increase in fall enrollment since the 2018–19 school year. Since Jesus' words will never prove false—that the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few (Matthew 9:37)—we are thankful for each of those students on our campus, and we pray that the vast majority of them persevere in their studies and soon serve in the harvest fields of our WELS churches and schools.



God's gifts to MLC: Our academic programs

APPLE: MLC's Alternative Pathway to Professional Licensure Eligibility (APPLE) is still being developed, even as students are already completing coursework. APPLE is a fully online program to enable older adults to complete education degrees and become ministry-certified, license-eligible teachers available for calls into our WELS schools. APPLE was developed to respond to the growing need for teachers in our WELS schools. MLC will continue to garner feedback and explore options for APPLE to be one of several tools aligned with the needs of our church body and those seeking to serve as teachers in it.

Dual-credit courses: In partnership with our two preparatory schools and interested area Lutheran high schools, MLC continues to develop opportunities for dual-credit courses that enable students to earn both high school and college credit. Multiple high schools are offering these courses, and enrollments are growing. We pray that those students who have already earned college credit through these courses might be even more inclined to pursue the public gospel ministry at MLC.

Middle/Secondary education review: As part of a seven-year rotation of academic program reviews, MLC spent last year reviewing its middle/secondary education majors. One recommendation is to find ways to speed up completion for students in double majors. Another is to add more generalized pedagogical experiences for those training in the "niche" areas of middle/secondary education to better prepare them for possible assignments in elementary settings.

January term: MLC successfully completed its third January term, or J-Term, in 2026. A total of 311 unduplicated students completed education early field experiences and preseminary Greek/Hebrew language reviews. Another 38 preseminary students completed one of their early ministry experiences, and many other students took Daylight (mission) trips.

Support for early childhood teachers: MLC has developed a four-tier path of support for those serving in early childhood ministries across our synod. The first tier provides a basic understanding of early childhood for those new to this ministry, and the last tier awards an associate degree in early childhood education. All four tiers of support are now available, and hundreds of early childhood teachers are utilizing them—through online modules, one-credit courses, ministry certification courses, and associate degree coursework.

New Teacher Induction: MLC's New Teacher Induction program continues to provide trained mentors for teachers in their first two years of ministry, assisting them to not merely survive but thrive. The Conference of Presidents has increased the school contributions from \$1,000 to \$1,500 per new teacher per year to keep the program more in line with its actual costs. The next phase of growth focuses less on adding new initiatives and more on sharpening what's already in place—deepening mentor support, strengthening leadership continuity, and reinforcing shared tools with shared purpose.

Ministry certification: MLC provides a valuable service to the synod through theological training leading to ministry certification for WELS teachers who enter ministry from other institutions. In recent years, about 100 non-certified teachers have been called to WELS schools annually. The percentage of these teachers active in MLC's ministry certification program increased from 52 percent to 64 percent in 2025.

God's gifts to MLC: Financial

Higher education institutions are navigating a period of significant change due to shifting student demographics, financial pressures, and increased workforce challenges. This rapidly evolving landscape requires institutions to be nimble and to adapt quickly. How has MLC responded to these challenges?

Education costs—controlling student cost and indebtedness: Controlling costs for students will have a positive impact on enrollment, even during this time of a declining prospective student pool. Institutional aid awards have grown from \$3.7 million in FY 2021 to \$5.2 million in FY 2025, an increase of \$1.5 million or 41 percent. The entire \$1.5 million increase has come from funded sources. The reasons for this increase:

- God's people have supported MLC students through donations that average \$2.8 million per year, with peak donations of \$3.3 million in this five-year period. To God be the glory for this generous support!
- Strong market performance and donations have led to growth in endowments at MLC. In FY 2021, the college had \$17.9 million invested in endowments. By the end of FY 2025, the college had \$24.4 million in endowments, of which \$20 million is restricted for tuition assistance.
- WELS congregations have rallied to support students from their congregations. In addition to the \$1.5 million of increased aid provided by MLC, congregations have lifted up their students with additional aid through the Congregational Partner Grant Program. The annual congregational support has grown from about \$550,000 to \$775,000 over this same period.

How have these efforts affected student debt? MLC is thankful to report that the average student debt has decreased each of the last five years. Average MLC graduate debt hit a high in FY 2019 at just over \$21,000. By FY 2025, MLC seniors graduated with an average debt of just over \$14,000, which is less than half of the national average.

While there is still work to do, God is blessing our efforts to keep costs as low as possible for MLC students. In FY 2021, the cost of tuition, food, and housing for a full-time, resident student was \$22,900. That figure grew to \$26,020 by FY 2025. In FY 2021, the average amount paid by these students, after all grant and scholarship aid was accounted for, totaled about \$13,600, or 59 percent of the full cost. By FY 2025, the average amount paid by the student dropped to \$10,600, or about 41 percent of the full cost.

MLC's financial situation: How has MLC responded to the recent decline in undergraduate enrollment? We are aware that continuing to operate the college in the same historical manner will not position the college for continued success and longevity. In partnership with our synodical leaders, consultants from the Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities were engaged to assist the college with strategic planning. Over the last two years, much time has been spent studying the structure of the college and looking at sources of revenue and expenses.

By reorganizing the college, we hope to eliminate redundancies and enable a more efficient, lean operation. In our review, we have identified new sources of revenue for the college. And we've noted some academic programs whose graduates meet limited demand in our congregations. We continue to study these programs to determine whether they should be modified or perhaps sunset.

With regard to expenses, labor is one of the largest categories for higher education institutions, and MLC is no different. The Association of Governing Boards consultants focused on the full-time equivalent (FTE) at MLC. A good portion of the reorganization work, as well as the academic program review, will have a direct impact on FTE. New revenue streams may justify investment in FTE, but only if the revenue offsets the cost of the added FTE—in addition to generating overage to support the college. The college will continue to assess FTE and plan FTE based on the revised organizational structure and programming.

We pray that God continues to guide the decisions of the college's leadership, to position the college to thrive and to serve its mission for many years to come.

God's gifts to MLC: Campus buildings, improvements, and maintenance

Through the generous support of donors, MLC has been able to complete several significant improvements to its campus facilities.

Old Main entrance: The entrance to the iconic Old Main building received a much-needed renovation to replace severely deteriorated stairs. The project included the construction of a canopied entrance, a new stairwell providing access to both the first floor and the lower level (Print Services), and the installation of a stamped concrete patio.

Chapel rehearsal hall: With donor-supported funding and the skilled carpentry of MLC's maintenance team, the Chapel of the Christ Rehearsal Hall is nearing completion. The chapel rehearsal hall in the lower level of the chapel was left unfinished when the building was completed in 2010. The project is expected to be completed this summer and will serve the Wind Symphony, handbell choir, and other musicians for many years to come.

Dining hall: We are also in the midst of a complete renovation of our Luther Student Center cafeteria to enable our new food service vendor, Fresh Ideas, to continue the significant improvement to our campus food service that they began when they took over as our provider in January 2026.

Other: Other recent campus improvements include the installation of an adventure high ropes course, renovations to the restrooms and showers in Centennial Hall and Summit Hall, and window replacements in the Wittenberg Collegiate Center.

God's gifts to MLC: Charitable gifts through our Office of Mission Advancement

The Office of Mission Advancement is responsible for alumni relations, the donor database, and working with God's people in securing philanthropic support. From July 1, 2025, through February 28, 2026, we have been blessed to receive more than \$3.6 million in charitable gifts from 1,850 of God's people and congregations across the country and beyond.

Another significant factor in helping to ease the financial burden on students can be seen in the number of our endowed and annual named scholarships. For the 2025–26 school year, 150-plus active named scholarships provided monies for MLC financial aid awards. We are very thankful to God's people who support our future staff ministers, pastors, and teachers with financial gifts for these vital scholarships.

God's gifts to MLC: Blessings on our Admissions Office

"And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' " (Romans 10:15).

The MLC Admissions Office continues to make regular recruitment visits to the 28 WELS area Lutheran high schools and two WELS prep schools, Michigan Lutheran Seminary and Luther Preparatory School. We are very grateful to these schools that continue to encourage their students to consider public ministry.

MLC admission counselors also attend the WELS International Youth Rally, district/local youth rallies, and various summer camps to speak with high school and elementary school students.

Another key element of recruitment for ministry are the Focus on Ministry visits, in which MLC hosts often very large groups from WELS secondary schools, as well as groups from individual WELS congregations and schools. These Focus on Ministry groups get an opportunity to tour MLC's campus, visit classes, attend chapel, and meet with faculty members and coaches.

MLC Admissions also sponsors a Focus on Ministry at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, where high school boys visit the seminary campus to experience classes, attend chapel, and, most importantly, listen to current seminary students speak about their own paths to the pastoral ministry. We are thankful that in these last couple years, more and more pastors are inviting and accompanying high school boys from their congregations to these events.

Approximately 13,000 WELS high school students do not attend either an area Lutheran high school or synod prep school. MLC Admissions sees this as a great opportunity for ministry recruitment. We look forward to partnering with the new ministry recruitment counselors called by the Board for Ministerial Education to increase our contact with these students.

A look ahead

Our academic programs

MLC continues to explore how our staff ministry majors could meet WELS ministry needs even more effectively. We surveyed WELS congregations about areas where they would value specialized training in their staff ministers, and we're seeking input from numerous sources on how we might use outside resources to deliver instruction in these areas. These niche areas of study—including perhaps mental health counseling, leadership/management, and social media/marketing—would not replace the regular theological and practical training our staff ministers have always received directly through MLC but would provide some additional tools to staff ministers that would be a blessing to calling bodies.

To that end, MLC is exploring a memorandum of understanding with Bethany Lutheran College concerning a 3+2 program for staff ministry majors interested in earning their BS in Staff Ministry from MLC and an MA in Clinical Mental Health Counseling from BLC in five years. These graduates, with their dual degrees, would then be eligible for calls into the public ministry.

We hope these additions to our staff ministry program will be available beginning in the fall of 2027.

Ministry recruitment

MLC urges WELS parents, called workers, and lay leaders to encourage their children, students, and congregation members to consider the blessing of pursuing the public ministry. "Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task" (1 Timothy 3:1).

MLC is glad to host any family, called worker, or lay leader who wishes to bring their teens to campus for a visit. We are thankful to show those teens the campus where they can pursue the public ministry surrounded by students, staff, and faculty who share a common faith and who also treasure the gift of the public ministry that Jesus gave to his church.

Continued investment in MLC's campus

MLC continues to talk with God's people to raise awareness and support for additional campus renovations. Enhancing the attractiveness and functionality of our 142-year-old campus is another strategy to help increase enrollment, which results in more teachers, more staff ministers, and—after additional training at WLS—more pastors assigned into ministry.

MLC would be delighted to discuss the revised campus master plan, which features updates to Concord and Augustana Halls (including a new four-story connector between those two halls, providing much needed social space and easier elevator access), improvements to our athletic competition fields/venues, and renovations of both the Music Center and Music Hall.

Telling the MLC story more widely, winsomely, and well

A key element of the encouragement given by the consultants from the Association of Governing Boards was to strengthen how we tell the story of studying for public ministry at MLC. To use the consultants' terms, they urged MLC to become much stronger in brand identity and outreach throughout the synod. Too many in our synod do not know—or don't know well—the mission and ministry carried out on their behalf at MLC. To pursue that goal of strengthening brand identity and outreach, MLC has just established a new Marketing and Communications Office as a key part of its new organizational structure. We thank God for the blessing we trust this new office will be in telling the story of pursuing the public ministry at MLC.

Leading up to the establishment of that new office, MLC launched a brand refresh with a new brand mark. You: Knighted for Ministry will be the theme featured in all print and digital media produced by MLC. We are seeking to stay focused on our primary audience: those young and not-so-young men and women in whom God's Spirit will plant the desire to pursue the public gospel ministry. MLC's brand refresh will include a new website—focused primarily on those prospective students—that we hope to launch before the end of 2026.

Closing

It is with thanks to God that this report has outlined the gifts God has provided our WELS college of ministry over the past two years. And it is with confidence in his grace that we make our plans for the years ahead, knowing that only what he chooses to bless will prosper. Through all the challenges and opportunities before us, we remain thankful to God for the privilege our synod gives us to raise up the next generation of pastors, teachers, and staff ministers to proclaim the gospel across our country and around the world. For the sake of the gospel ministry, and in answer to the prayers of our entire synod, may God bless these efforts far beyond anything we might even have anticipated!

Rev. Richard Gurgel, reporter

Rev. Steven Lange, chairman
Teacher Joe Archer
Teacher Paul Kelm
Mr. Thomas Klaudt
Teacher Joel Lauber
Mr. Timothy Luetzow
Mr. Todd Marten
Rev. Peter Prange
Rev. Karl Schultz
Rev. Larry Seafert

Rev. Peter Snyder
Mr. Jacob Unke
Mr. Michael Valleau

Advisory:

Rev. Richard Gurgel, Martin Luther College president
Rev. Dennis Klatt, Minnesota District president
Mr. Michael Krueger
Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president
Rev. Charles Vannieuwenhoven, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education
Mr. Thomas Walters

Michigan Lutheran Seminary

Our calling

Located in Saginaw, Mich., Michigan Lutheran Seminary (MLS) exists to prepare high school students for the public ministry of the gospel, encouraging them to enroll in the WELS college of ministry, Martin Luther College. Though originally a pastoral seminary for the Michigan Synod, MLS has been encouraging and equipping high school students for gospel ministry since 1910 through a liberal arts education that emphasizes critical thinking, collaborative learning, and foundational ethics in biblical truths, language study, and the arts.

The Lord has blessed that single mission with more than 5,000 graduates and more than 1,500 alumni who have entered the public ministry of the gospel in WELS. More than 50 percent of the MLS class of 2025 enrolled at Martin Luther College to continue their training for the public ministry. Twenty MLS alumni are now studying at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. As vacancies in both the preaching and teaching ministry continue to rise, we thank the Lord for these students and the Spirit-given desire to serve the Lord in the public ministry.

In order to fulfill our calling, MLS maintains a safe and well-equipped campus to educate our students. The 17-acre campus is owned and operated by WELS and administered through the WELS Board for Ministerial Education and the MLS Governing Board. Sound financial stewardship supports the educational experiences that produce high-quality candidates for ministry with the goal of fulfilling Scripture's commission to entrust the Scriptures to reliable people who are qualified to teach others (2 Timothy 2:2).

WELS members support the ministry of MLS through their gifts to WELS and through individual offerings to the school. The MLS Foundation, a separate 501(c)(3), works collaboratively with MLS to provide additional funding for tuition assistance and capital improvements. In each of these sources of revenue, we are humbled by the generosity of God's people who support the ministry of the Lord.

MLS relies on three primary sources of funding to carry out its mission: 1) synodical support, 2) tuition and room and board revenue, and 3) generous gifts from God's people who desire to support worker training in WELS. In the absence of state-sponsored school choice programs, MLS continues to depend

on the generosity of God's people to help close the gap in meeting the tuition assistance needs of today's families. Because of that generous support, MLS remains committed to the promise that no student will be turned away from an MLS education purely for financial reasons.

Our current situation

Enrollment

A 2025–26 opening enrollment of 191 represents a stable enrollment over the past decade in spite of a declining student pool in the region surrounding the school. MLS students represent six WELS districts and four foreign countries. Approximately 60 percent of MLS students live in the dormitory while about 40 percent commute daily to campus.

The majority (80 percent) of MLS students come from non-called worker families, providing a fresh stream of first-generation ministry families alongside those from called worker families. MLS also reflects the growing diversity of the church with an increasing number of students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

MLS began the year with 17 international students from 4 countries (China, Korea, Germany, and Grenada), providing a wide variety of cultural experiences for our entire campus and future gospel ministry outreach. Several of our international alumni have enrolled at Martin Luther College after graduation, expanding the potential reach of WELS ministries around the world. This year alone, the Lord blessed our ministry to our Chinese students with the opportunity to baptize one student and the confirmation of two other students.

Admissions efforts continue to focus on reaching families both within and beyond the Michigan District. Travel, school visits, and congregation partnerships allow MLS to connect with prospective students across the country. For families traveling longer distances, MLS offers travel assistance to help offset the added costs associated with attending a residential school.

Ministry recruitment

With proper gospel motivation, encouragement for ministry remains central to everything we do at MLS. Each student receives an age-appropriate ministry experience every year on campus to help them make an informed decision about using their gifts as a pastor, staff minister, or teacher.

Freshmen hear ministry joys and opportunities from experienced called workers during Freshman Ministry Day. Sophomores participate in Sophomore Night, when representatives from Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary share information about ministry preparation and life on their campuses. MLS juniors take a multi-day tour of the WELS ministerial education schools, giving them an opportunity to see themselves as future students in our synod's training system. Seniors participate in the Taste of Ministry program, shadowing pastors, teachers, or staff ministers to gain firsthand insight into the work of gospel ministry. Interested seniors also have a "Second Look" opportunity to visit the MLC campus to assist in their vocation decision.

Mission ministry exposure continues to be an important emphasis. Through partnerships with WELS Board for Home Missions, many students have opportunities to experience ministry in mission settings and growing congregations. This year 13 young men were flown to WELS mission-minded congregations to experience mission ministry outside of the Midwest.

Approximately 20 percent of the student body participates in summer Project Titus mission trips, traveling to ministry settings across the country to assist congregations and experience new contexts for gospel

ministry. Because of the smaller size of our school, most students have the opportunity to participate in more than one Project Titus experience during their time at MLS. This year MLS has expanded our Project Titus locations to include our WELS ministry in Puerto Rico.

All students also participate in the annual Mission Seminar, where an experienced WELS pastor, teacher, or staff minister encourages our students with authentic and applicable ministry conversations. Upperclassmen meet twice each year with Martin Luther College admissions counselors, and twice-daily chapel services often include messages encouraging students to consider serving in the harvest fields.

Exit interviews with graduating seniors consistently indicate that the vast majority recall being personally encouraged to consider ministry and view that encouragement as genuine and evangelical. While the Holy Spirit alone creates the desire to serve in the public ministry, it remains our joy to encourage students to consider that calling.

Campus planning

MLS has partnered with Blueprint Schools to strengthen our identity throughout WELS and more clearly communicate our ministry to WELS congregations, schools, and families. We have adopted “Encouraging for Ministry, Equipping for Life” as our ministry statement with the hope that all WELS members will know exactly what we do as we encourage students for life in the public ministry of the gospel while simultaneously equipping them for whatever vocation they might choose. A new website is expected to be completed by the new school year that highlights our three pillars: Ministry in Action, Learning that Lasts, and Seminary Family for Life.

In partnership with WELS, MLS collaborated with Credo Powered by Carnegie to complete a master site plan that will guide campus facility improvements for the next decade or more. Phase one of the campus improvement plan will be the renovation of the commons and administration areas. Future areas of improvement include the sunken gardens, student-centered learning and recreational spaces on the first floor of the dormitory, library and chapel renovations, and turf athletic fields for both the football and softball teams to maximize our current footprint.

Finally, MLS completed a year-and-a-half-long self-study in preparation for our accreditation renewal through WELSSA. The site team viewed artifacts for more than 100 standards and confirmed that MLS provides the highest quality education that carries out the mission given to us. We were awarded an Exemplary Status accreditation for the next five years. Work now begins on the school improvement plan.

A look ahead

Strategic plan

MLS will conclude our five-year strategic plan entitled “Chosen People, Special Purpose” at the end of the 2025–26 school year. Several initiatives and objectives included in the plan have been accomplished, while a few remain potential opportunities for the future. The adopted vision states: “Michigan Lutheran Seminary cultivates a culture of ministry encouragement to educate and equip students with the gospel, empowering them to live as God’s chosen people and to declare his praises.”

To support that vision, several key goals for campus planning and decision-making were implemented:

- **COMPLETED:** Maximizing the effective use of faculty and staff resources through thoughtful administrative planning
- **COMPLETED (and ongoing):** Developing and refining a long-term campus master site plan
- **COMPLETED (and ongoing):** Improving communication with students, families, alumni, and supporters

- COMPLETED (and ongoing): Strengthening excellence in academic and extracurricular offerings
- ONGOING: Enhancing admissions efforts for student recruitment, retention, and encouragement toward the public ministry

MLS will develop a new strategic plan during the 2026–27 school year.

Tuition assistance

As the cost of education continues to rise, tuition assistance remains a vital part of the MLS ministry. Financial aid, grants, and scholarships help families provide their children with a Christian education and support the school’s promise that finances alone will never prevent enrollment. Ninety percent of the students who apply for financial aid receive on average over 40 percent of their tuition expenses, making MLS a reasonable option for every WELS member.

Endowed scholarships managed by MLS and the MLS Foundation continue to provide meaningful assistance to students both during their time at MLS and as they continue their education at Martin Luther College. Over the past five years, the number of endowed scholarships has more than doubled (and continues to grow) as we fulfill our promise to support families that desire a ministry minded, Christ-centered high school education.

Encouragement grants for incoming freshmen nominated by pastors, staff ministers, or teachers recognize students who demonstrate gifts in ministry potential, music, leadership, or other areas that may serve the church in the future. These programs continue to expand thanks to the generosity of donors who support worker training in WELS.

Thank you to Kevin Keller and John Melso for their four years of service on the MLS Governing Board. Both men have moved to new districts and have completed their service to their former district. Two new men will be elected to serve on the MLS Governing Board during this summer’s district conventions.

A request

Our WELS preparatory high schools continue to be among the most consistent sources of candidates for the public ministry of the gospel. At a time when the church faces both worker shortages and expanding mission opportunities, supporting our ministry with your gifts and with your children remains an important way to strengthen gospel work for generations to come.

It is relatively rare for a high school student to know with certainty that he or she will enter the ministry. That’s why we don’t expect them to know they want to serve in that way to attend MLS. We simply ask that they are willing to be encouraged for the splendid task of ministry. When you notice young people with gifts for service in the church, please encourage them to consider using those gifts. Encourage them to attend one of our preparatory schools and continue to support and pray for them along the way.

We trust the Lord will answer the prayers of his people as they “ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matthew 9:38).

Visit mlsem.org for more information about Michigan Lutheran Seminary.

Rev. Mark Luetzow, reporter

Rev. Andrew Retberg, chairman

Rev. Craig Engel, vice chairman, Minnesota District

Rev. Andrew Schroeder, secretary, Arizona-California District
Teacher Josh Glowicki, Nebraska District
Mr. Kevin Keller, Southeastern Wisconsin District
Teacher John Melso, Western Wisconsin District
Teacher Kevin Needham, Michigan District
Mr. Daryl Ohland, Northern Wisconsin District

Advisory:

Rev. Mark Luetzow, Michigan Lutheran Seminary president
Rev. Duane Rodewald, chairman of WELS Board for Ministerial Education
Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president
Rev. Snowden G. Sims, Michigan District president
Rev. Charles Vannieuwenhoven, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education

Luther Preparatory School

Our calling

Luther Preparatory School (LPS or Prep), Watertown, Wis., has a single mission given to it by the synod when the prep department was first established on the Watertown campus in 1865: To encourage and prepare high school students for service in the public ministry of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. That mission is central to everything we do—in the classroom, in co-curricular activities, in our worship services, and in the personal guidance given to every student.

LPS is owned and operated by WELS. The synod has given LPS the privilege and responsibility to carry out this important work. The LPS Governing Board, faculty, and staff are grateful to our church body, which supports the work of LPS with its prayers, gifts, and gospel-laced encouraging words.

Our gracious God through his life-giving Word continues to bless Prep in fulfilling its purpose. Year after year after year, 45 percent, 55 percent, 65 percent . . . and a couple of times 70 percent, of Prep's graduates enroll at Martin Luther College (MLC) to continue their preparations to become pastors, teachers, or staff ministers.

Luther Prep depends on three sources of funding to carry out its calling: 1) synod support; 2) payments for tuition, room, and board; and 3) special gifts from congregations, groups, and individuals. We are grateful for the gospel's work of prompting such generosity and thankful hearts in God's people.

Our current situation

Enrollment

Enrollment has remained fairly stable over the past 14 years. LPS opened school year 2025–26 with an enrollment of 392. Our students come from 27 states, 4 foreign countries, 171 congregations, and all 12 WELS districts. More than two-thirds of our students come from lay families. The dormitories house 88 percent of LPS students. All of our students are WELS/ELS members.

Recruitment to LPS, with an eye on future full-time gospel ministry, remains a top priority. We always invite and welcome all WELS upper-grade students to visit our campus, shadow a Prep student, and spend a night in one of the dormitories to get a feel for Prep life. We host annual recruitment events such as WELS area and national co-ed basketball tournaments, Phoenix for a Day, the fall play, children's theater, and the musical, as well as numerous summer athletic camps. Each year these events bring 4,500 WELS grade school students from across the country to our campus. Prep has doubled its recruitment efforts. Dominique Wrobel accepted a call to serve in our recruitment department. Her full-time work will begin this July.

Because so many of God's people throughout WELS support Prep's financial aid, we want all parents to know that Prep will do whatever it can to keep financial concerns from becoming a major obstacle in enrolling their children. The Lord has blessed Prep in being able to significantly increase its financial aid assistance, while averaging a less than 3 percent annual increase in tuition costs over the past 20 years.

Preparing for the mission

The Word is central in all we do. Chapel services—the heartbeat of Prep's daily living—are held twice daily. All classes are taught from a scriptural perspective, and students are encouraged in their personal devotional lives. The Holy Spirit works through the means of grace to encourage and prepare our young people for lives of gospel ministry and service.

The LPS curriculum is designed to prepare students to meet or exceed the requirements of Martin Luther College. LPS recognizes the need and desire for future musicians in our Lutheran congregations and classrooms. More than 95 percent of our students take piano lessons. The LPS organ program produces the most organ students for MLC. All students participate in chorus their first year, with more than 90 percent continuing thereafter. One in three Prep students are involved in the concert band, jazz band, brass choir, handbell choir, and string and guitar ensembles. Our select Prep Singers group sings at worship services in area congregations throughout the year and tours outside of Wisconsin every year during our spring break. All students take at least one year of Latin and three consecutive years of a foreign language in order to thoroughly prepare them for future language studies, especially those in the biblical languages.

Luther Prep has 13 varsity athletic teams with most of them having lower level(s), 3 drama/music productions, 10 choir/instrument groups, as well as various clubs, intramurals, etc.

Because our purpose is to prepare future pastors, teachers, and staff ministers, LPS offers age-appropriate ministry experiences to its students. All of our seniors take part in our Taste of Ministry program, in which prospective pastor students spend a weekend with WELS pastors both near and far away from Watertown, and our prospective teacher students spend two days in a classroom with area elementary school teachers. Project Timothy is a program designed to provide mission, ministry, and cross-cultural experiences to LPS students. Fifty-eight students will assist with outreach and education programs of mission congregations in Arizona, Florida, Virginia, Georgia, Texas, Alaska, New Mexico, North Carolina, Germany, and Ecuador. Also, senior boys are given the opportunity to prepare and speak an evening devotion to the student body. It is a common practice for their classmates to speak words of encouragement to these young men after the devotion is given.

Each year the entire junior class visits Martin Luther College. By the time our students graduate, each one will have met at least four times with an MLC recruiter. An array of missionaries, professors, teachers, pastors, and MLC and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary students present topical ministry workshops at our annual Ministry Day. The entire student body takes part in Ministry Day. Sophomores also take an annual trip to the seminary, and seniors in the LPS pastor track visit the seminary each fall for worship,

class visitation, and a tour. For seniors who are unsure about their future, Prep offers a “second look” trip to MLC. All of these efforts foster a ministry-minded student body.

The State of Wisconsin offers three Parental Choice Programs for Wisconsin residents: Milwaukee, Racine, and Wisconsin Parental Choice Programs. Parents who fall under a designated family-size based income threshold receive a voucher from the State of Wisconsin from these programs that pays the tuition costs of education for their children at participating private and religious schools.

The governing board approved Prep’s entry into these programs in 2017. Each year the governing board reviews these programs to ensure that they are consistent with the mission of LPS. Approximately 150 students participate in these Parental Choice programs. These programs have proven to be financially beneficial to our parents who are offering their sons and daughters for ministry. They have also afforded LPS the opportunity to award additional financial aid to many other families who are not able to participate in the programs. What is more, several students from urban areas who knew little if anything about WELS ministry as eighth-grade students are now enrolled at MLC and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. We consider it a blessing that all of our Choice students have been WELS members.

Charlie Vannieuwenhoven, LPS dean, accepted a call to serve as administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education and completed his service at Prep at the end of 2025. Brad Krause, a 1999 graduate of Luther Prep, will begin his service as the new dean of students this coming fall.

After 53 years of teaching piano and organ to prep and college students on the synod’s Watertown, Wis., campus, faithful, gifted, and dedicated Bethel Zabell retired this past December.

Capital projects/improvements

LPS strives to maintain and keep in good repair the synod’s beautiful 35-acre campus and buildings. Major projects this past year included a new roof for the student union, upgrades in HVAC controls, and new windows for the dining hall.

A look ahead

Music is an integral component of our heritage, the church, and Lutheran worship. The Lord has blessed LPS with an excellent music program and numerous musically gifted students, all preparing for service in the church. The LPS music auditorium, built during President William Taft’s administration, is 114 years old.

Prep received permission from WELS Synodical Council this past biennium to gather gifts for the construction of a new music center. The estimated total cost for the new facility is \$16 million. Prep remains in what is known as the “quiet phase” in seeking gifts. As of this writing, the Lord has blessed Prep with \$8.5 million in gifts and commitment toward the building of a new music center. We are grateful to our Lord and his people who continue to support this much needed facility. When Prep reaches \$11.2 million in gifts and commitments, which is 70 percent of the goal, the governing board will go to WELS Synodical Council to request approval to put a shovel in the ground, understanding \$4.8 million will still need to be raised.

The music center will include a performing arts theater with seating for 600, designated choir and band rooms, piano/organ studios, practice rooms, classrooms, ample restrooms, a climate control system, and so much more. Prep has hired Strang as the architect firm and Catalyst Construction as the construction firm.

When a new music center is built, the present 1912 auditorium would be repurposed to its original use and serve as a secondary gymnasium to accommodate our freshmen teams, wrestling team, dance team, and a plethora of intramural teams, as well as function in several other capacities.

“Magnify” is the name of the music center campaign. Music’s noble purpose is to praise and proclaim the God of salvation. The Magnify theme stems from Psalm 96:2: “Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day,” as Prep students are being encouraged and prepared to proclaim the Savior’s name from pulpits, in classrooms, living rooms, hospital rooms, etc. throughout the world. The theme also echoes Mary’s Magnificat. We pray a new music center serves our WELS students preparing for ministry for another century, as the old one has.

LPS welcomes all WELS/ELS students to apply for enrollment with a recommendation from their pastor and, if applicable, teacher. We know that very few eighth-grade students have a definite plan for their lives after college. They will be encouraged and prepared for full-time ministry in their years at Prep. Should they choose a different direction after graduating, we know that they will be firmly grounded in faith and will serve the Lord Jesus and his church in some other vocation.

Prep is grateful for all of its students. Parent after parent after parent has expressed that the LPS experience has brought them closer to their children for life. While all parents make some sacrifices, it is always our intent to offer ample financial aid. If the awarded aid is insufficient, LPS administration welcomes conversations with parents to bridge the gap.

Jesus said, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Luke 10:2). The saints have been praying that prayer for the past two millennia. With the large number of vacancies in WELS pastoral and teaching ministries, and with our desire to establish even more home and world missions, the Lord’s invitation to prayer becomes even more compelling. We pray fervently that the Lord will move the hearts of parents to offer their sons and daughters for gospel ministry and that young people will consider the high calling of gospel ministry.

Much more information regarding “Magnify” and almost everything else Prep related can be found at lps.wels.net or by calling 920-261-4352.

Rev. Matthew Crass, reporter

Rev. Timothy Spaude, chairman

Rev. Daniel Schmidt, vice chairman

Teacher Peter Gumm, secretary

Teacher Seth Fitzsimmons

Mr. Clark Holz

Rev. Jesse Johnston

Mr. Jack May

Rev. Jonathan Werre

Advisory:

Rev. Matthew Crass, Luther Preparatory School president

Rev. Michael Jensen, Western Wisconsin District president

Rev. Duane Rodewald, chairman of WELS Board for Ministerial Education

Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president

Rev. Charles Vannieuwenhoven, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education

Subsidiaries and Benefit Plans

A number of subsidiary groups and one affiliate (WELS Benefit Plans) serve the synod. These entities do not receive support from the synod's operating budget. Each is governed by a board that is accountable to the synod via the Synodical Council.

WELS Historical Institute

Our calling

WELS Historical Institute has the privilege and opportunity to serve the synod in preserving, researching, and communicating the history of Christ's love to and through our church body. WELS Historical Institute has the following purposes:

1. To promote interest in the history of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (hereinafter referred to as the synod) and Lutheranism in general;
2. To assist WELS' archivist in the collection and preservation of articles and artifacts of historical value;
3. To stimulate historical research and to publish its results in journals, newsletters, and other such publications;
4. To maintain Salem Landmark Church, birthplace of the Wisconsin Synod, and WELS Museum.

WELS Historical Institute is thankful for the opportunities to serve WELS through researching and promoting the study of our synod's history. History, in general, is vitally important. Our salvation is founded on real historical events. The continuing study of church history is the study of God's work in the world, through his church and through the proclamation of his Word by his church, to gather his believers into his church. As we study WELS history, we grow in our gratitude for God's work through and for our beloved synod.

Our current situation

WELS Historical Institute endeavors to carry out its purposes for WELS in a variety of ways. The work of Susan Willems, the WELS archivist (see p. 72), preserves WELS history and provides an avenue for research. Fruits of historical research are published in *WELS Historical Institute Journal* and communicated in presentations about events, people, congregations, schools, and developments in WELS history. Visit the WELS Historical Institute website at welshistoricalinstitute.org to find many of these livestreamed, recorded, and archived presentations. A WELS History YouTube page has been developed to house other videos about WELS history.

WELS Historical Institute was very active during the last two years with the 175th anniversary of WELS. A special anniversary dinner was held in May 2025 with speeches by President em. Karl Gurgel and President Mark Schroeder. Prof. Joel Otto served as the keynote speaker. About 80 people were in attendance. Numerous presentations were held throughout the year. The "Our Great Heritage" series on the history of WELS ministerial education schools continued with a special presentation at the

2025 synod convention by Prof. Paul Koelpin on the history of ministerial education in New Ulm, Minn. President Schroeder gave a presentation at the 2025 WELS Historical Institute annual meeting on the history of prep school education in Watertown, Wis. Prof. Otto gave a presentation on 175 years of change in WELS worship. Pastor Jeremiah Gumm led a tour of Union Cemetery in Milwaukee where a number of historical figures from the early history of the Wisconsin Synod are buried. Prof. Otto's 2025 synod convention essay was entitled "175 years of God's surprising grace to the Wisconsin Synod." Teacher Carl Nolte again led the annual hymn sing, and Pastor Paul Meier organized the annual German Christmas service. Both events were held in the Salem Landmark Church. Video recordings of most of these presentations are available on the WELS Historical Institute website.

The WELS Historical Institute website is the place where many of the resources developed in connection with the 175th anniversary continue to be available. Bulletin inserts on key events in synod history, an interactive timeline, and a Bible study connected to *Christ Through Us: A Pictorial History of the Wisconsin Synod, 1850–2025* are excellent resources for teaching synod history. The pictorial history book and the more academic treatment, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, which was updated for the synod anniversary by Prof. em. John Brenner, are available from Northwestern Publishing House. The WELS Historical Institute website also has resources to help congregations research, tell, and celebrate their history.

As part of the anniversary celebration, WELS Historical Institute reprinted "The WELS Forty-Niners," the most popular issue of *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. It is being offered as a free gift to new members of WELS Historical Institute. Visit welshistoricalinstitute.org/membership to join and receive this gift. Members receive an e-newsletter several times a year and a subscription to *WELS Historical Institute Journal*.

Several WELS writers again received recognition by Concordia Historical Institute for their contributions to American Lutheran historiography. In 2024, Pastor Peter Prange received an award of commendation for his *Wielding the Sword of the Spirit* trilogy, while Pastor Benjamin Schaefer received an award of commendation for his master's thesis, "Avoiding the Hornet's Nest: Woman Suffrage and Synodical Conference Lutherans," that was published in the *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*. In 2025, Pastor Nathan Pope received recognition for his book, *Those Villa Street Lutherans: The Story of First Evangelical Lutheran Church of Racine, Wisconsin*. Pastor Mark Braun was recognized for his article in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, "A Quieter Walkout: The LCMS Mission Affirmations." Pastor Allen Schroeder received an award of commendation for his article, "Rev. David Friedrich Johannes Beer: The Last Director of Michigan Lutheran Theological Seminary of Saginaw, Michigan, 'Gottes Wort und Luthers Lehr,'" which appeared in *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. In both years, several WELS authors received honorable mention recognition. It is encouraging to see that those outside of our fellowship are taking an interest in what WELS historians are researching and writing about.

WELS Historical Institute continues its work of maintaining and restoring the WELS Museum and Salem Landmark Church. The bathrooms were refurbished in early 2025. Extensive reorganization of the WELS Museum has been accomplished by the new museum curator, Pastor William Schaefer. In 2024 the museum opened a new display space called "The Gallery" featuring a wall of pictures from our WELS history and other items in our collections. Additionally, the curator has begun working more closely with the synod archivist to better align the museum collections with the archive collections. Special thanks to Schaefer for the many hours he donates to keep the museum in good shape and to host tour groups. Visits to the WELS Museum can be arranged through the WELS Historical Institute website at welshistoricalinstitute.org/visit/salem-museum.

A look ahead

WELS Historical Institute has prepared another slate of presentations for 2026. The “Our Great Heritage” series will continue with a presentation by Pastor Justin Dauck on the history of Northwestern Lutheran Academy and a presentation by Prof. Otto on the history of Northwestern College in 2026. Two webinars are commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church (ELFK) of Germany. A cemetery tour, hymn sing, and the German Christmas service are also on the calendar. See welshistoricalinstitute.org/events for details.

WELS Historical Institute seeks to have a presence at events such as the national Lutheran Women’s Missionary Society Convention, the National Conference on Lutheran Leadership, and the synod convention. Thanks to Susan Willems and various volunteers for staffing the WELS Historical Institute table at such events.

WELS Historical Institute continues to face challenges with the upkeep of the Salem Landmark Church. A master site plan needs to be developed, and lead abatement issues need to be handled before other major projects can be tackled, such as the repainting and repair of the steeple and tuckpointing. Ongoing interior work continues to be carried out as funds are available. Gifts to WELS Historical Institute are always welcome to carry out these projects that retain the history of this venerable building on the site of the synod’s founding.

It is the hope and prayer of WELS Historical Institute that the study and telling of WELS history becomes an opportunity for WELS members to praise God for how Christ has worked through us in the past. A focus on God’s grace to us in the past can help us appreciate and maybe even accentuate our confessional Lutheran identity. Perhaps our history can also be an inspiration as the Lord continues to work through us to grow his kingdom.

Prof. Joel Otto, reporter

Prof. Joel Otto, chairman

Mr. Daniel Nommensen, vice chairman

Rev. William Schaefer, secretary and museum curator

Mr. Ryan Haines, treasurer

Rev. Justin Dauck

Mr. Kyle Egan, *ex officio*

Mr. Steve Miller

Mr. Carl Nolte

Rev. Peter Prange

Ms. Mary Rindfleisch

Rev. Benjamin Schaefer

Rev. Paul Schleis

Rev. Robert Weiss

Advisory:

Prof. em. John Brenner, editor, WELS Historical Institute Journal

Mrs. Susan Willems, WELS archivist

WELS Church Extension Fund, Inc.

Our calling

WELS Church Extension Fund, Inc. (CEF), is a self-supporting, not-for-profit, wholly-owned subsidiary corporation of WELS. Its primary purpose is to provide loans and grants for mission congregations whose parsonage, land, and facility projects are under the direction of WELS Board for Home Missions and loans to mission-minded self-supporting congregations for facility expansion and renovation as tools for gospel outreach.

Our current situation

CEF is financially strong as it maintains a stable and conservative balance sheet with a healthy capital-to-asset ratio of more than 50 percent. Funding to conduct our calling comes primarily from three sources: member investments, operating revenue, and gifts and bequests. Individual WELS members, WELS congregations, and affiliated organizations of WELS may invest in CEF term certificates and savings certificates. As of March 2026, more than 2,500 investors have entrusted CEF with approximately \$110 million investments. WELS member investments in CEF provide the principal funding for the loan program. Net revenues from operations, investments, and gifts and bequests made to CEF provide funding for the congregational grant program and special grants to Home Missions. CEF remains committed to balancing an affordable lending rate structure for borrowers while also offering competitive interest rates for our investment certificates. As market conditions continue to evolve, CEF will monitor and adjust its approach to ensure both the sustainability of its lending program and the attractiveness of its investment offerings.

Loan program

As of March 2026, the CEF loan portfolio includes 187 loans, with more than \$200 million in outstanding balances. Currently CEF has three congregations in the construction process with \$7.9 million outstanding to complete those projects, inclusive of \$1.6 million of grant dollars from WELS CEF. There are three additional congregations whose loans have been approved by WELS CEF and soon will start their building projects of \$7.8 million, inclusive of \$2.0 million of grant dollars from WELS CEF.

Grant program

CEF provides matching grants to eligible mission congregations after they have provided a minimum 10 percent down payment for their initial land purchases, existing facility purchase, or new facility construction projects. A congregation's down payment dollars combined with a CEF matching grant allow the mission congregation to move forward with a more manageable loan payment. CEF has provided matching grants to mission congregations of \$4.6 million, \$3.2 million, and \$0.3 million during the fiscal years ended June 30, 2025, 2024, and 2023, respectively.

Special grants to Home Missions

In addition to the matching grant program to borrowing mission status congregations, CEF provides special grants to WELS Board for Home Missions for assisting mission congregations with operations, land, and facility projects. These grants totaled \$1.3 million, \$1.6 million, and \$2.1 million during the fiscal years ended June 30, 2025, 2024, and 2023, respectively.

A look ahead

We pray by God's grace that WELS CEF will continue to benefit from positive operational results, ensuring the safety and soundness required of financial institutions, and be able to continue to provide loans

and grants over and above its present lending operations and matching, endowment, and unrestricted net asset grant programs to assist more congregations and Home Missions.

CEF remains committed to strengthening its role as a mission partner, supporting Home Missions and the congregations it serves. As it looks forward, it recognizes the importance of continued collaboration, clear communication, and expanded resources to assist mission congregations in navigating the complexities of real estate and financing.

To better serve congregations, CEF leadership has increased on-site visits, fostering deeper relationships and ensuring a better understanding of each mission's unique context. Additionally, CEF continues to hold regular meetings with Home Missions' leadership to enhance alignment and strengthen our shared mission.

CEF is also working on website improvements to make key information more accessible and provide additional educational resources for CEF investors and borrowers. While this project will take time to implement, our goal is to create a more user-friendly platform that better serves congregations in the long term.

At the same time, maintaining a healthy and disciplined approach to operations remains essential to CEF's long-term financial health. Ensuring a fair and attractive interest rate environment for both investors and borrowers allows CEF to continue serving WELS congregations while upholding its fiduciary responsibility.

CEF also continues to encourage individual WELS members, congregations, and affiliated organizations to consider supporting CEF through investment, savings, and retirement IRA certificates, as well as through gifts and bequests. These investments not only provide a meaningful way to steward God's blessings but also play a vital role in advancing our shared mission by enabling CEF to continue offering financial resources to growing congregations. CEF deeply appreciates the trust and support of its investors and mission partners as it continues working together with them in God's kingdom.

Contact WELS CEF at 1-866-511-7793 or cef@wels.net. Visit wels.net/cef.

Mr. Brian Roser, reporter

Mr. Timothy Boerneke, chairman

Mr. David Hirons, vice chairman

Mr. Ron Kerr, secretary

Mr. James Bodendorfer

Mr. Kyle Egan, *ex officio*, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer

Mr. Timothy Gensmer

Mr. Mark Hartman

Mr. Joel Kock

Mr. Timothy McFarlane

Rev. Michael Otterstatter

Advisory:

Rev. Mark Gabb, administrator of WELS Board for Home Missions

Mr. Stefan Felgenhauer, director of WELS Missions Operations

WELS Foundation, Inc.

Our calling

Established in 1965, WELS Foundation, Inc., serves the Synodical Council by managing and directing gifts for religious, charitable, and educational purposes that support gospel ministry. For more than 60 years, WELS Foundation has partnered with members, congregations, and ministries to advance the gospel through faithful financial stewardship.

Our current situation

WELS Foundation exists to help God's people support gospel ministry through WELS by providing planned giving services and administrative support for gifts benefiting WELS congregations and ministries. Over the last three fiscal years (FY23–FY25), WELS Foundation distributed \$47.9 million in donor-directed gifts to WELS ministries.

WELS Foundation currently administers more than 1,300 charitable gifts on behalf of WELS members, including endowments, charitable gift annuities, charitable remainder trusts, and donor-advised funds.

As of Dec. 31, 2025, total assets were \$242.9 million, with net assets of \$95.3 million. These assets are invested and managed for the benefit of WELS ministries according to donor designations. Supported ministries include WELS Missions and Ministerial Education Schools (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Martin Luther College, Luther Preparatory School, and Michigan Lutheran Seminary), congregations, and numerous affiliated ministries such as area Lutheran high schools. Assets held long term are invested through WELS Investment Funds. Through this work, WELS Foundation strengthens long-term support for gospel ministry across the synod and in local congregations.

Endowment funds

Endowment funds are permanently restricted and established to receive and administer gifts designated for long-term ministry support. Gifts may include cash, stocks, bonds, mutual funds, bequests, life insurance, real estate, or other assets.

Expenditures from endowments provide ongoing support for gospel ministry. Donor-designated endowments can benefit congregations, area Lutheran high schools, or other WELS-affiliated ministries. WELS Foundation also administers synodical endowments for WELS, Home and World Missions, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Martin Luther College, Luther Preparatory School, and Michigan Lutheran Seminary.

As of Dec. 31, 2025, WELS Foundation administered 470 endowment funds with a total market value of \$168.0 million.

Charitable gift annuities

A charitable gift annuity allows a member to give cash or securities to WELS Foundation in exchange for fixed quarterly payments for life. After the donor passes, the remaining funds support the designated congregation or ministry. Payments may begin immediately or be deferred to a future date.

As of Dec. 31, 2025, WELS Foundation administered 652 charitable gift annuities with a total market value of \$17.0 million.

Charitable remainder trusts

A charitable remainder trust allows a donor to transfer assets, such as cash, securities, or real estate, while retaining a specified income interest, usually for life. When the trust ends, remaining assets pass to the designated WELS ministry or ministries.

As of Dec. 31, 2025, WELS Foundation serves as trustee for 99 charitable remainder trusts with a total market value of \$28.3 million.

Donor-advised funds

Donor-advised funds allow individuals, families, or corporations to make tax-deductible contributions and recommend grants to qualified WELS ministries over time. They can include current gifts, deferred gifts (charitable gift annuities or trusts), or testamentary gifts (wills, trusts, insurance policies, or retirement accounts).

As of Dec. 31, 2025, WELS Foundation administered 107 donor-advised funds with a total market value of \$9.7 million.

Pass-through gifts processed

Not all WELS ministries have the capacity to process complex gifts. Through Dec. 31, 2025, WELS Foundation distributed \$6.5 million from 708 pass-through gifts processed in fiscal year 2026. These gifts can include appreciated securities, IRA charitable distributions, real estate, life insurance, and agricultural products. Proceeds were directed to the WELS ministries designated by the donors.

Other gift administration services

WELS Foundation provides administration for letters of instruction and a variety of gifts, including securities, qualified charitable distributions from IRAs, real estate, life insurance contracts, agricultural gifts, and other donor-designated gifts.

Educational webinars

In 2025, WELS Foundation hosted 12 webinars on planned giving topics. These sessions were offered at no cost to WELS Christian giving counselors, mission advancement representatives, and congregational planned giving committees, providing timely resources to support donors and ministries.

A look ahead

WELS Foundation continues to produce videos highlighting the blessings and benefits of planned gifts. These resources can be viewed at wels.net/foundation/endowment-funds.

Other efforts include

- Reports to WELS conferences and conventions;
- A biannual newsletter, *Grace of Giving*, produced in partnership with WELS Ministry of Christian Giving, highlighting planned gifts and their impact;
- A quarterly newsletter for WELS Foundation partners, providing resources to help them serve their donors;
- Sponsorship and display presence at WELS local and national events, including the National Conference on Lutheran Leadership (Chicago, January 2026) and the mission advancement sectionals at the WELS Association of Lutheran High Schools Conference (March 2026); and
- Marketing materials and promotional support for WELS gatherings, including Lutheran Women's Missionary Society rallies; promotional materials may be requested at gf.wels.net/promotional-materials.

WELS Foundation stands ready to assist congregations, schools, and affiliated ministries within each district as they plan for future ministry support. To carry out its mission, WELS Foundation will continue to:

- Provide knowledgeable planned giving support to members through Christian giving counselors and mission advancement representatives;
- Offer diverse planned giving opportunities, including charitable gift annuities, charitable remainder trusts, donor-advised funds, and endowment administration; and
- Provide printed and online educational materials about planned giving opportunities to benefit WELS ministries.

Learn more at wels.net/foundation.

Mr. James Holm, reporter

Mr. Mark Maurice, chairman

Mr. Mark Schulz, vice chairman

Mr. Michael Krueger, secretary

Mr. Kyle Egan, *ex officio*, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer

Rev. Jonathan Kolander

Mr. Scott Neitzel

Mr. John Pahmeier

Mr. David Wendland

Advisory:

Rev. Kurt Lueneburg, director of WELS Ministry of Christian Giving

Rev. Charles Vannieuwenhoven, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education

WELS Investment Funds, Inc.

Our calling

WELS Investment Funds, Inc., was established in 1997 to serve under the Synodical Council by providing investment portfolios for the benefit of WELS, its schools, congregations, and affiliated organizations. The organization exists to help ministries steward long-term financial resources in support of gospel work.

Our current situation

WELS Investment Funds provides cost-effective, professionally-managed investment portfolios designed specifically for WELS ministries. WELS Investment Funds currently manages more than \$400 million in investments for WELS ministries, including more than 270 congregations and affiliated organizations.

WELS congregations, area Lutheran high schools, and other affiliated ministries are encouraged to utilize WELS Investment Funds for long-term investment needs such as endowment, scholarship, and reserve funds. By pooling resources across the synod, participating ministries benefit from institutionally priced investment opportunities and professional oversight that would not otherwise be available individually. As participation grows, the cost efficiencies increase, another way WELS ministries support one another.

Through prudent oversight and diversified investment strategies, WELS Investment Funds aims to support the long-term stewardship of ministry resources.

Governance and oversight

WELS Investment Funds Board of Directors is responsible for overall governance and operations. Directors are members of WELS congregations, nominated from throughout the synod, vetted by WELS Human Resources, and appointed by the Synodical Council. Currently, eight qualified directors serve on the board.

Day-to-day operations are carried out by WELS employees leased to WELS Investment Funds.

The board has retained Mercer Investments LLC (Mercer) as investment consultant. As a co-fiduciary, Mercer provides investment recommendations and implements board-approved strategies and oversees portfolio construction and monitoring performance in alignment with established investment policies.

Investment portfolios

WELS Investment Funds offers four investment portfolios, collectively known as the WELS Funds.

WELS Balanced Fund

Seeks long-term capital growth with a low to moderate level of current income. Target allocation: 60 percent equity/40 percent fixed income. Mid- to long-term investment horizon.

WELS Endowment Fund

Seeks long-term capital growth with some current income and is designed primarily for endowment funds. Target allocation: 75 percent equity/25 percent fixed income. Long-term investment horizon.

WELS Equity Fund

Seeks long-term capital growth through a diversified portfolio of equity securities. Target allocation: 100 percent equity. Long-term investment horizon.

WELS Income Fund

Seeks income by investing primarily in investment-quality debt securities. Target allocation: 100 percent fixed income. Short- to mid-term investment horizon.

The Balanced and Endowment Funds invest in differing allocations of the same underlying mutual funds as the Equity and Income Funds. The Equity and Income Funds are available for ministries that desire a customized asset allocation approach.

Market environment

Despite a 20 percent drop in April 2025 due to tariff and trade war fears, the S&P 500 ended calendar year 2025 up 18 percent and hit 39 all-time highs. International stocks also had a great year, returning 32 percent and outperforming the US by their widest margin since 1993. Despite these strong returns, there are many risks and challenges present that investors will face going forward—heightened geopolitical tensions, AI adoption and its impact on unemployment, AI spending, government spending, and so on.

The WELS Investment Funds portfolios remain diversified and aligned with long-term strategic asset allocation targets, utilizing a combination of indexed and actively managed investment strategies. This disciplined approach is intended to help manage short-term volatility while maintaining focus on long-term ministry objectives.

Additional information

In 2025, WELS Investment Funds produced a 25-year anniversary video highlighting its history and its role in supporting WELS congregations, schools, and affiliated ministries. The video is available online for ministry leaders and investors at wels.net/wif.

Director biographies, the investment policy statement, audited financial statements, and the most recent annual report to WELS ministries are available at wels.net/welsfunds.

A look ahead

Marketing and communication efforts include:

- Reports to WELS conferences and conventions;
- Distribution of quarterly WELS Fund fact sheets via email and at display booths;
- Recorded quarterly update webinars featuring market recaps, performance reviews, and Mercer's economic outlook shared via email, posted online, and promoted on WELS' LinkedIn page;
- Educational videos and brief Q&A updates addressing topics impacting ministry investors;
- In-person display presence at national and regional WELS events; and
- Marketing materials and promotional support for WELS gatherings, including Lutheran Women's Missionary Society rallies; promotional materials may be requested at gf.wels.net/promotional-materials.

Participation in quarterly updates continues to increase as more WELS members and ministry leaders seek to understand how investment stewardship supports gospel ministry. WELS Investment Funds stands ready to assist congregations, schools, and affiliated ministries within each district as they review their long-term investment objectives, asset allocation, costs, and time horizons. Committed to prudent fiduciary oversight and cost-effective management, WELS Investment Funds values its partnership with congregations, schools, and affiliated ministries, working together to review investment objectives and support the long-term stewardship of ministry resources.

To schedule a complimentary investment review, either in person or via conference call or video, contact 414-256-3206 or jim.holm@wels.net.

Mr. James Holm, reporter

Mr. John Wenker, chairman

Mr. Max Wenck, vice chairman

Mr. Ronald Schmitz, secretary

Rev. Charles Degner

Mr. Kyle Egan, *ex officio*, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer

Mr. Benjamin Schmidt

Mr. Dustin Schwobe

Mr. Jon Vannice

Mr. Matthew Zuleger

Advisory:

Rev. Kurt Lueneburg, director of WELS Ministry of Christian Giving

WELS Benefit Plans

Our calling

The WELS Benefit Plans Office (the “Benefit Plans”) serves synodical workers and organizations through the administration of the WELS Voluntary Employees’ Beneficiary Association (VEBA) Plan, the WELS Pension Plan, and the WELS Shepherd Plan. Oversight of the VEBA Plan is the responsibility of the WELS VEBA Commission, and oversight of the Pension and Shepherd Plans is the responsibility of the WELS Retirement Program Commission. Each commission is composed of four to nine members appointed by WELS Synodical Council, including at least one pastor and one male teacher from the called worker roster and at least one layman. The *ex officio* member appointed by the WELS president serves in addition to the members appointed by the Synodical Council. Contributions toward the cost of plan benefits and operations are held in separate trusts, each invested in diversified accounts with outside money managers overseen by an independent investment advisory firm. The plans employ outside professionals that provide benefit design, actuarial, consulting, banking, legal, and auditing services.

Our current situation

Much of the work to freeze the Pension Plan and begin providing retirement benefits through defined contributions to workers’ Shepherd Plan accounts was completed by the end of 2022. During 2023–25, the focus of the Retirement Program Commission and Benefit Plans shifted to improving Shepherd Plan administrative efficiencies and evaluating options to improve worker benefits in future years.

Improved efficiencies have allowed defined contributions to be deposited into workers’ Shepherd Plan accounts earlier in each quarter since the retirement program transition, providing workers with earlier access to the investment and use of those funds. Shepherd Plan administrative fees paid by participants from 2023–25 decreased by 14.6 percent due to significant growth in Plan participants and assets, as the total market value of plan assets increased from \$289.4 million as of Dec. 31, 2023, to \$437.4 million as of Dec.31, 2025 (+51.1 percent). The administrative fees will further decrease by 8.0 percent in 2026 due to continuing efficiency improvements and plan growth.

Although the Pension Plan was frozen on Dec. 31, 2021, the plan must continue investing its assets to earn market returns in order to continue paying current and future benefits to retirees. Active management of the plan assets will continue into the foreseeable future until the plan is fully terminated. While plan termination is a long-term goal, the reality is that termination is not anticipated to occur until many years in the future. An important reason for this timing is that the plan’s benefit liabilities, when valued on a termination basis according to current industry standards, exceed the plan’s benefit liabilities when valued according to the Retirement Program Commission’s current actuarial assumptions, leading to a 90 percent funded status on a termination basis as compared to a 112 percent funded status valued using current actuarial assumptions.

To better position the plan for its eventual termination, the commission has taken several actions to de-risk the plan based on the recommendations of its actuarial and investment professionals and with the approval of the Synodical Council. One such action has been to reduce exposure of the plan’s assets to investment risk by gradually updating investment allocations and target returns to be more conservative. Another de-risking action has been to reduce the plan’s exposure to mortality risk and long-term benefit liabilities by paying benefits to terminated vested participants with present value benefits of \$7,000 or

less as one-time lump sums rather than as monthly annuities for life. Although these de-risking actions have decreased the plan's funded status (which compares the plan's assets with the present value of benefit liabilities), these actions have been a prudent step to enhance the security of plan benefits for participants and toward using actuarial assumptions that align with more conservative industry standards for valuing benefit liabilities on a termination basis.

The Pension Plan's funded status increased from 105 percent as of Jan. 1, 2025, to 112 percent as of Jan. 1, 2026, based on the Retirement Program Commission's actuarial assumptions effective on the respective valuation dates. This funded status improvement permitted the commission to keep the quarterly retirement contribution rate charged to calling bodies unchanged for 2027 and will mark the seventh consecutive year of no increases to this rate. The plan's estimated funded status as of Jan. 1, 2026, on a termination basis using current industry standards was 90 percent.

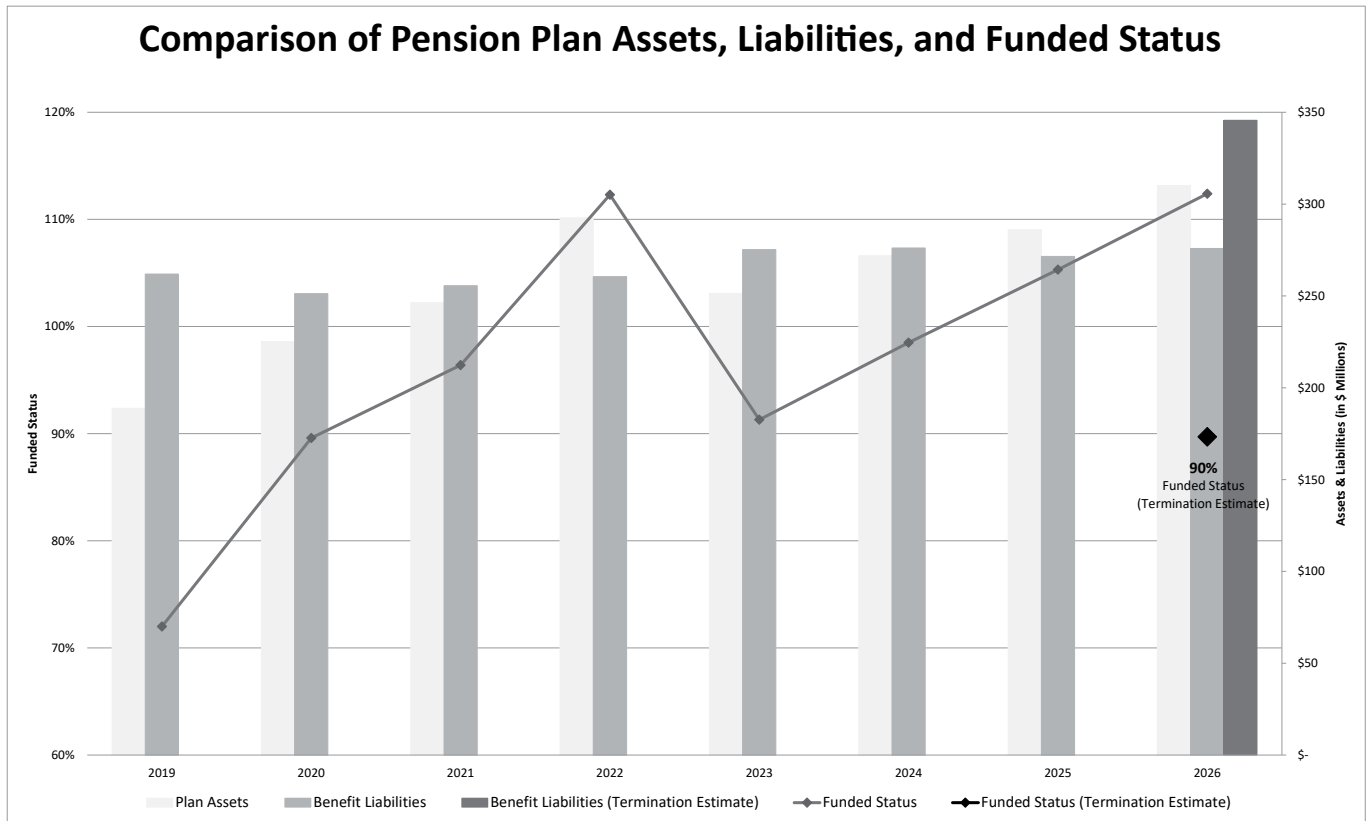
The VEBA Plan has maintained relatively stable membership levels, as 2026 plan membership is above its 20-year average while more than 80 percent of calling bodies continue to participate. However, VEBA Plan claims experience turned sharply worse following the COVID-19 public health emergency due to a return to care utilization, significant cost inflation, more severe catastrophic claim situations, and the recent introduction of advanced, high-cost drugs and treatments. The addition of government-required benefits for COVID-19 and mental health parity as well as compliance with new government reporting requirements have also increased plan costs. Although the VEBA Commission provided rate stability by not increasing rates for the 2021 and 2022 plan years, the aforementioned headwinds required rate increases of 9.5 percent for 2023, 11 percent for 2024, 7 percent for 2025, and 8.5 percent for 2026.

In 2025, the VEBA Commission began a three-year effort to update the VEBA Plan's rate regions and rating factors so that rates will better reflect current health care costs across the country. The health care industry has changed significantly since the plan's former rate regions were developed approximately 15 years ago, and improved data has allowed the plan's actuaries to better assess the relative differences in health care costs across local markets. The new regional rating factors will be implemented over three years to spread out the financial impacts to sponsoring organizations.

Beginning in 2026, the VEBA Commission partnered with Leap Health to obtain specialty medications at significantly reduced costs while offering members the convenience of receiving these medications by expert medical professionals in the comfort of their homes. The commission is working with its advisors to explore several other partnerships and strategies to reduce costs for both the VEBA Plan and its members while improving access to care and plan membership experience in future years.

The Pension and VEBA trusts achieved investment gains of 12.7 percent and 10.3 percent, respectively, in 2025, and 9.3 percent and 5.9 percent, respectively, in 2024. Unaudited results from the 2025 plan year show net assets available for benefits in the Pension and VEBA trusts as \$310.0 million and \$36.3 million, respectively. In comparison, final audited results from the 2024 plan year show net assets available for benefits in the Pension and VEBA trusts as \$286.1 million and \$35.0 million, respectively. Both commissions continue to evaluate investment allocation and diversification strategies that are expected to achieve target returns with reduced risk.

Comparison of Pension Plan Assets, Liabilities, and Funded Status



A look ahead

The commissions and Benefit Plans will continue their emphasis on maintaining long-term stability for the VEBA, Pension, and Shepherd Plans, while considering new ways to engage participants and calling bodies through improved communications.

The Retirement Program Commission will continue to balance the need to preserve the security of Pension Plan benefits earned by workers with the desire to enhance the defined contribution plan, while minimizing the cost to calling bodies. The commission closely monitors the retirement benefit contribution rate charged to calling bodies and its impact on the Pension Plan’s funded status. The commission will continue to prudently de-risk the Pension Plan based on market conditions and the plan’s experience.

The commission also monitors the Shepherd Plan’s financial activities and noticed that only 54 percent of workers who received defined contributions also contributed their own dollars to their Shepherd Plan accounts in 2025. The Shepherd Plan provides a diversified set of investment options and helpful financial planning resources for workers to manage the contributions made to their accounts. Increasing awareness of these opportunities will help workers to meet their financial goals for retirement. In addition, because retirement benefit contributions are made to workers’ accounts each quarter, it is more important than ever for organizations to timely report call status changes to WELS so that workers timely receive the correct contributions.

The VEBA Commission and its advisors will carefully monitor the higher inflation environment and uncertainties with financial markets as well as the long-term impacts of the pandemic and their impacts on the VEBA Plan. To ensure that the VEBA Plan maintains sufficient reserves during this high-cost period, for 2027 the VEBA Commission will consider increasing rates (potentially in the double digits) and deductible and coinsurance amounts to maintain pace with inflation. The plan design changes may include discontinuation of the \$500/individual and \$1000/family deductible amounts currently available

under VEBA Plan option 1. In addition, the VEBA Commission and Benefit Plans will be more closely observing worker participation in the VEBA Plan and health care arrangements at participating calling bodies to protect the plan's long-term sustainability in the rapidly changing health care environment. Providing an affordable health plan with consistent nationwide benefits is essential to supporting synodwide mission and ministry activities.

Benefit Plans, as well as the VEBA and Retirement Program Commissions, are acutely aware of the need to keep benefit plan costs as low as possible to allow calling bodies to preserve valuable assets to fund ministry efforts. The primary goal for the benefit plans going forward is to strike the best balance between acceptable costs to calling bodies and meaningful benefits to participants.

Mr. Joshua Peterman, reporter

WELS VEBA Commission:

Mr. James Gabriel, chairman

Mr. Todd Poppe, vice chairman

Mr. Norman Sowatzke, secretary

Mr. Kyle Egan, *ex officio*, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer

Mr. Kyle Koltz

Teacher Daniel Markgraf

Rev. Joel Sauer

Advisory:

Mr. Joshua Peterman, director of WELS Benefit Plans

Ms. Lori Schrank, claims manager of WELS Benefit Plans

WELS Retirement Program Commission:

Mr. Thomas Medema, chairman

Mr. Lee Miller, vice chairman

Mr. Samuel Kruschel, secretary

Mr. Kyle Egan, *ex officio*, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer

Teacher James Hahm

Rev. James Turriff

Mr. Jeffrey Verbeke

Advisory:

Mr. Joshua Peterman, director of WELS Benefit Plans

Northwestern Publishing House

Our calling

The WELS Constitution states, "The object and purpose of the synod shall be to extend and conserve the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church." As outlined in the constitution, Northwestern Publishing House (NPH) fulfills this object and purpose by "printing, publishing, purchasing, selling, and disseminating literature that maintains Lutheran doctrine and practice" and "by furnishing appropriate literature for parish schools, Sunday schools, missions, institutions, and churches." NPH is

governed by a board of directors, responsible for fulfilling this purpose through establishing employee duties and adopting policies for the operation of NPH.

The mission of Northwestern Publishing House is to deliver biblically sound, Christ-centered resources within the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and beyond. For 135 years, NPH has prepared resources that are consistent with this mission and aligned with Lutheran doctrine and practice. The proceeds NPH receives from sales of materials to individuals, congregations, and schools are used to develop and publish new resources. Our calling, then, is to continue to proclaim God's love in Christ through the careful use of the resources God grants us through purchases of the resources we make available.

Our current situation

We humbly thank God for all he has done to protect our workers and set before us many ministry opportunities over the past 12 months. While challenges to Christian publishing and supply chain remain, NPH is positioned, God willing, to provide long-term, sustainable service to the church and fulfillment of the synod's objective of publishing literature that maintains our Lutheran doctrine and practice.

Print publishing program

NPH continues to publish new books, music, and many other valuable Christ-centered resources every year. NPH constantly seeks new ways to remain good financial stewards by achieving greater efficiencies and reducing printing expenses through pursuing multiple print bids, just-in-time printing of short print runs, print-on-demand, and digital distribution.

Pastors, teachers, WELS members, and other Christians can find a continuously expanding selection of new resources along with previously published NPH books, Bible studies, curriculum, church supplies, and doctrinally reviewed books and materials from other publishers at NPH's website, nph.net, or by calling 800-662-6022.

Over the last year, NPH published:

Books

"Who Do You Say I Am?"—Answers Right From Jesus, John Braun
Girl Time: Conversations on Godly Character, Deborah Schroeder
Active Learning Resources for Growing in Grace, Kyle Bitter
Christ Through Us (175th pictorial history book), John Braun and Joel Otto
Open My Heart to Hear: Hymn-Based Devotions, edited by Jeremy Bakken
The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans (Second Edition), Edward C. Fredrich II and John M. Brenner
Your Word for Mine: Real Crises—Real Rescue, edited by Jane Schlenvogt-Dew
Ephesians: The Unsearchable Riches of Christ, Roy Hefti
God's Design for Male and Female: Pastoral Letter, Doctrinal Statements, and Essays,
edited by Curtis Jahn
Letters to the Expecting Mama, Kristen Emily Behl
The Story of God's Love (audiobook)
From the Beginning: God's Salvation Plan (People's Bible Devotions)
He Is the Christ (People's Bible Devotions)
I Can Go to Church!: A Unique Guide for Kids, Madeline Lindke and Rachel Youngblom
Yearbook 2026

Periodicals

Meditations daily devotional
Forward in Christ monthly magazine

Music

Keyboard music

Hymn of the Day Organ Preludes Series—Volume C, arranged by Dale Witte

Hymn of the Day Organ Preludes Series—Volume DEFG, arranged by Linda Moeller

Thankful Songs Shall Rise Forever, arranged by David Scherschel

Choral pieces

Heaven Is My Home

O Christ the Same

O Jesus Christ, Your Manger Is

Arise, Shine, for Your Light Has Come

I Am the Resurrection and the Life

Jesus, We Will Sing

Surely He Has Borne Our Infirmities

When God the Spirit Came

Worship resources

Christian Worship: Lutheran Hymnal (large print)

Hope. Peace. Joy. Love. (2025 Christmas kit)

Visit the NPH website regularly to discover resources that support your ministry and materials that will strengthen the faith of your members.

Digital publishing program

NPH continues to expand content in ways that are relevant today with 248 books in e-book format, distribution of 161 titles through Logos, 3,776 downloadable products, 7 audio books, digital *Forward in Christ*, and the *Meditations Daily Devotional* app for both iOS and Android platforms. While digital publishing is an important strategy for NPH, distribution of digital products represents a relatively small portion of a publisher's sales, and therefore print versions remain critical to NPH's success as a ministry.

Bible studies

NPH publishes Bible studies on a variety of subjects, including books of the Bible; current religious, moral, and social topics; and studies of our Lutheran heritage. NPH Bible studies are offered in a variety of formats to meet the needs of churches today, including traditional adult group studies and small group studies, both adaptable for online virtual learning. With the objective of serving our churches with timely and relevant Bible studies, NPH released:

The Baptismal Life Discussion Guide

Christ Through Us

The Council of Nicaea and Its Creed

Quick to Listen

A Walk Through the Book of Revelation

5-Minute Bible Studies for Women

Christian Worship: Musician's Resource

The new *Christian Worship: Musician's Resource* is a powerful web-based tool that allows musicians to access, purchase, and print scores for a wide variety of instruments for the rites, psalms, and hymns in the new hymnal and Psalter, enabling them to contribute their talent in worship. *Christian Worship: Musician's Resource* currently has more than 2,200 musical resources and is continuing to grow.

Church supplies

An increasingly popular auto-ship service for Communion cups and wafers is now available for all churches. The program provides churches with easy and automatic replenishment of Communion supplies. A full range of church supplies are available online and for pickup at the NPH office.

Collaborative projects

NPH continues to collaborate with WELS commissions, committees, and parasynodical agencies. The largest most comprehensive collaboration is currently with WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools to develop a new theology curriculum for early childhood through high school.

A look ahead

People's Bible devotions

Currently under development is a new series of books/e-books related to the People's Bible commentaries. People's Bible devotions are being developed to address relevant issues facing WELS members today and to encourage a deeper study of God's Word through the People's Bible commentaries. The 12 books in the series will be introduced over time (late 2025 thru mid-2028) and will roughly align with the order of the books of the Bible. The planned organization of the series is as follows:

From the Beginning: God's Salvation Plan (The Pentateuch) (released October 2025)

Being People of the Promise (Joshua–2 Samuel)

Faithful God—Flawed Followers (1 Kings–Esther)

Wisdom and Folly (Poetical Books)

Hope in Dark Times (The Major Prophets)

God Has a Word for You (The Minor Prophets)

He is the Christ (Matthew and Mark) (released October 2025)

The Gospel Knows No Boundaries (Luke and Acts)

I Want to Know Christ (Paul's Great Epistles)

Until Christ Comes—Passing on the Gospel (Paul's Mission and Pastoral Epistles)

You Are God's Special Possession (The Universal Epistles)

We Have Seen His Glory (Books of John)

Individual Bible studies

The 5-Minute Bible Studies series confronts the reality that people today are busy, and their time in God's Word is becoming increasingly compromised. Many, in fact, have simply stopped regular personal study. To address this trend, 5-Minute Bible Studies provides a "read anywhere," quick but thought-provoking study of God's Word. Each study includes an application, questions for reflection, and a simple yet meaningful prayer. The series currently has books designed for teens, families, couples, and women.

Anticipated projects (2026–2028)

Books (some titles are temporary)

90 Devotions in 90 Days, various authors (for those recovering from addictions)

Hope That Holds, Ashley Copland (devotional for those who love someone addicted)

Being the People of the Promise (People's Bible Devotions), Brian Doebler and Matthew Doebler

A Congregation in Crisis, Jonathan Brohn (Bible study on 1 Corinthians)

EHV Large-Print Bible

Free From Shame, Stephen Lange

Gospel-Centered Mentoring, Matthew Doebler
Parish Guidebook, edited by James Tiefel
Peter, Theologian of the Cross, Michael Berg
Prepared to Answer (audiobook), Mark Paustian
We Have Seen His Glory (People's Bible Devotions), Daniel Balge and Jonathan Balge

Music

Ancient Cradle Song, Jeremy Bakken (2026 children's Christmas service)

Our thanks

First and foremost, we humbly and gratefully give thanks to our gracious God who has sustained us and allowed us to continue serving him in his kingdom work of spreading the gospel.

One of NPH's key objectives is to help our synod's called workers combat the false doctrine and humanistic philosophy that tempts those they serve to stray from God's truth. We work diligently to support them with trustworthy ministry tools that provide biblically sound, Christ-centered, and confessional Lutheran teaching.

We thank the many pastors, staff ministers, and teachers who make NPH a trusted partner in their ministry.

Mr. Jeremy Angle, reporter

Rev. Luke Werre, chairman

Mr. Dwight Luedtke, vice chairman

Mr. Jeremy Korell, treasurer

Mr. Matthew Groth, secretary

Rev. Justin Dauck

Mr. Kyle Egan, *ex officio*, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer

Prof. Paul Koelpin

Prof. Steven Pagels

Mr. John Pratt

Mr. Joel Raasch

Administrative officers:

Mr. Jeremy Angle, president

Rev. Chris Cordes, vice president, publishing

Mr. Eric Krueger, vice president, finance and accounting

Committee on Constitutional Matters

Our calling

The Committee on Constitutional Matters serves under the Conference of Presidents to interpret the constitution and bylaws for the synod and its constituency. It is responsible for maintaining and distributing accurate updates of these documents as changes are made by the Synod in Convention.

Our current situation

In addition to revising the document to incorporate the amendments approved by the 2025 convention, the committee has been asked to address six opinion questions and to provide one ruling on constitutional matters since the convention to the date of this report.

The current editions of the WELS Constitution and Bylaws and the Constitution for the Districts are available on the WELS website at wels.net/about-wels/synod-reports. You may also contact the President's Office to request a printed copy.

Rev. Eric Steinbrenner, reporter

Rev. Eric Steinbrenner, chairman
Mr. Kenneth Gosch
Rev. Richard Waldschmidt



Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
N16W23377 Stone Ridge Drive
Waukesha, WI 53188-1108