

# Proceedings

2025

WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD  
Waukesha, Wisconsin

Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
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**Note:** Many references to the *Book of Reports and Memorials* (BORAM) are included within the convention resolutions. Unless otherwise noted, these are referencing the 2025 BORAM, which can be found at [wels.net/synod-convention](https://wels.net/synod-convention).

# Voting delegates

## Arizona-California District

### Pastors

Thomas Barthel  
Daniel Baumler  
Sean De Frain  
Brian Doebler  
Michael Foley  
Matthew Frey  
David Parsons  
Gary Pufahl  
Mark Schroeder

### Teachers and staff ministers

Philip Bischoff  
Albert Karnopp  
Craig Kiecker  
Joshua Severeid  
Timothy Treder

### Laymen

Kevin Andreen  
Kevin Baughman  
Norbert Clarkson  
Brandon Fasching  
Warren Folkerts  
Jack Fox  
Kenneth Gariepy  
Jake Gumm  
Jeff Hansen

Floyd Pinkney  
Justin Rhoads  
Dave Rogers  
Carl Schueler  
Jim Volz  
David Warnke  
Jeff Weinstein  
Kevin Wente

## Dakota-Montana District

### Pastors

Douglas Free  
Peter Metzger  
Aaron Ody  
Jonathan Werre

### Teachers and staff ministers

Matthew Bauer  
Eric Martens

### Laymen

Allan Ashton  
Troy Aswege  
Gary Bubbers  
Kent Frerichs  
David Grabitske  
Norman Gullixson

Dale Hettick  
Jon Meyer  
Deon Olson  
Robert Schmidt  
Lee Stroschine

## Michigan District

### Pastors

Hernandez Daylo  
Brian Keller  
Lon Kuether  
John Meyer VI  
Richard Miller  
David Putz  
Paul Schaefer  
Snowden Sims  
Richard Tuttle  
Kurt Uhlenbrauck

### Teachers and staff ministers

Steven Bunde  
Jeffrey Falck  
Kevin Lemke  
Greg Milbrath  
Jordan Siegler

### Laymen

Ron Bude  
Dan Butler  
Joe Churches  
Jeremy Dennings  
Craig Ehinger  
William Frelitz  
Bob Goddard  
Ken Hall  
Randy Kimbler  
Ned Kleinke  
Marty Kurth  
William Mashke

Josh Paeth  
Gary Raffel  
Jason Salaway  
Craig Schuette  
Kent Stuebs  
Brett Timmerman  
Al Wildman  
Keith Wojahn  
Tom Wood

## Minnesota District

### Pastors

Emile Burgess  
David Endorf  
Seth Georgson  
Robert Guenther  
Brian Kom  
Paul Meitner  
Michael Neumann  
Matthew Rauh  
David Scharf  
Keith Schreiner  
Peter Sternberg  
Joel Thomford  
Daniel Walters

### Teachers and staff ministers

Heath Dobberpuhl  
Adam Frey  
Jared Matthies  
Philip Meitner  
Bradley Nehls  
Anthony Perry  
Kirk Schauland  
Duane Vance  
Eric Wolf

### Laymen

Greg Bartz  
Dave Bilitz  
Mike Boyd  
Mike Christensen  
Kim Class  
Edward Cohrs  
James Fox  
James Hadler  
Elwood Heldt  
Brian Johnson  
Douglas Klein  
Darrell Lawrence  
Ken Meek

Greg Menke  
Wayne Scheffler  
Ralph Schneekloth  
Zuber Shah  
Michael Spencer  
Gene Wales  
Doug Yerks  
Arlyn Zeitz  
Richard Zeman

## Nebraska District

### Pastors

Justin Dauck  
Steven Kahrs  
Steven Prah  
James Seiltz  
Kevin Stellick  
Martin Valleskey

### Teachers and staff ministers

Scott Brown  
Michael Schaefer

### Laymen

David Chance  
Stephen Davies  
Justin Dorn  
Mike Friesenegger  
Johnathon Geasler  
Matthew Gibbs  
Thomas Jacobs  
Joel Kassulke

Loren Milbrath  
Michael Miller  
Chad Moyer  
Stan Nolte  
Ward Putnam  
Jesse Tuttle  
John Workentine

## North Atlantic District

### Pastors

Michael Sullivan  
Clayton Welch  
Paul Workentine

### Teachers and staff ministers

Brent Bitter

### Laymen

Bob Harrison  
Phil Lallier  
Bob Liero  
Peter Palmer

Dylan Planer

## Northern Wisconsin District

### Pastors

Paul Doletzky  
Michael Ewart  
Jonathan Kuske  
Jason Liebenow  
Micah Martin  
Thomas Mielke  
Brett Naumann  
David Olson  
Christopher Rathje  
John Stelter  
Timothy Wagner  
Steven Wall  
Michael Willitz

### Teachers and staff ministers

Guy Gast  
Brian Haack  
Donald Kerr  
Mark Koelpin  
Jeffrey Loberger  
Corey Marohn  
Peter Schaeewe  
Timothy Thies  
David Wilson  
Dale Witte

### Laymen

Les Achterberg  
Mike Armitage  
Joseph Baehman  
Tim Bentz  
Steve Crossman  
Tim Doro  
Leonard Gunderson  
Willis Gunst  
Todd Herman  
Greg Keiler  
Tom Koeslin  
Richard Krueger

Micah Leppala  
Henry Meyer  
Gustave Mielkie  
Jay Minzlaff  
Mike Nelson  
Tom Oetjen  
Carl Pudlo  
Jason Schmidt  
Nathan Schmiede  
Jerry Schnelle

## Pacific Northwest District

### Pastors

Mark Parsons  
Aaron West  
Patrick Wilcox  
Timothy Wilkens

### Teachers and staff ministers

Ryan Schmeling

### Laymen

Todd Francis  
Ben Martens  
Brendan Parker  
David Stuhlmiller

Jeremiah Zajic

## South Atlantic District

### Pastors

Craig Born  
Isaac Crass  
Caleb Free  
Patrick Freese  
Timothy Rosenow  
Keith Schleis  
Jesse Stern

### Teachers and staff ministers

Edwin Fredrich  
Steven Haag  
Erik Parsons  
Justin Siegler  
Mark Thiesfeldt

### Laymen

Joaquin Cameselle  
Brent Cox  
Dwight Greear  
Keith Hartmann  
James Klecka

Tony McKey  
Landon Meahl  
Brian Nordin  
Scott Piotter  
Luke Schemm  
Timothy Weaver  
Craig Zastrow

## South Central District

### Pastors

Daniel Laitinen  
Daron Lindemann  
Jeremy Schulz  
James Skorzewski

### Teachers and staff ministers

Seth Herrmann  
Ian Watson

### Laymen

Scott Anderson  
Harvey Fierro  
Derrick Hahn

Jared Hieb  
Josiah Kroll  
Andrew Portnoy  
Matt Wordell

## Southeastern Wisconsin District

### Pastors

Brian Adams  
Michael Bartsch  
Scott Bergemann  
Samuel Degner  
Kenneth Fisher  
Matthew Kiecker  
John Koester  
Jonathan Kruschel  
Kirk Lahmann  
Kevin Raddatz  
Matthew Scharf  
Thomas Schultz  
Joel Schwartz  
Keith Siverly  
Bradley Taylor  
Martin Wildauer  
Aaron Winkelman  
Bradley Wordell

### Teachers and staff ministers

Christopher Bartsch  
Andrew Becker  
Zachary Cvikel  
Leonard Epple  
Matthew Evans  
Ned Farley  
Bradley Gurgel  
Brian Humann  
Thad Jahns  
Joshua Johnson  
Kevin Klug  
Chad Lindemann  
Daniel Markgraf  
Paul Marquardt  
Lance Meyer  
Joshua Nelson  
James Rademan  
Joshua Schoeneck  
Joel Schultz  
Zachary Seeger  
Jason Snodie  
Timothy Thierfelder  
Travis Wendt  
John Werner

### Laymen

Del Abel  
Matt Ampe  
John Baron  
Mark Brandau  
Owen Breitreutz  
John Chung  
Justin Foxen  
Steven Groth  
Dave Kluge  
Rick Kneser  
Joseph Lopina  
William Marzinske  
Len Punke  
Joshua Quint  
Michael Schultz  
Tom Schulz  
David Schweiger  
Darren Shuff  
Rory Vircks  
David Voss  
Kevin Willis  
Danny Woltman

# Western Wisconsin District

## Pastors

Shaun Arndt  
James Backus  
Philip Bigelow  
Timothy Blauert  
Titus Buelow  
Clint Burow  
Jordan Ertl  
Geoffrey Kieta  
Stephen Kruschel  
John Melke  
Daniel Olson  
Bryan Prell  
Mark Reichert  
Aaron Schrimpf  
Nathan Wilke

## Teachers and staff ministers

Micah Biesterfeld  
Daniel Busch  
David Dodge  
Eric Duve  
Steven Gartner  
Joseph Gumm  
Peter Micheel  
Jonathan Mumm  
George Radloff  
Thomas Rosenow  
Frederick Uttech  
Matthew Wurster

## Laymen

Jim Allen  
J-D Backhouse  
Chris Benner  
Brad Bettin  
Kyle Bowman  
Terry Feil  
David Gruber  
Farley Haase  
Donald Hahnke  
Steve Haring  
Tim Heil  
Roger Hermanson  
Bill Homstad

Terry Landwehr  
Gary Meyer  
Thomas Mueller  
David Nitardy  
David Proksch  
Ed Roland  
Tony Schadt  
Scott Schneider  
Bob Schroeder  
Carl Schwartz  
Tom Weyenberg  
Bill Ziche

## World missionaries

Luis Acosta  
Jonathan Bare  
Erik Landwehr  
Howard Mohlke

# Advisory delegates

## Officers

Rev. Mark Schroeder, president  
Rev. James Huebner, first vice president  
Rev. Joel Voss, second vice president  
Rev. Robert Pasbrig, recording secretary  
Mr. Kyle Egan, chief financial officer and treasurer

## District presidents

Rev. Douglas 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. Donald 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

## Synodical Council

Rev. John Bortulin, pastor-at-large  
Mr. Seth Hansen, Dakota-Montana District  
Mr. Chris Kestner, Michigan District  
Mr. Noel Ledermann, Arizona-California District  
Mr. Brent Masters, Pacific Northwest District  
Dr. Ryan Olson, North Atlantic District  
Mr. Thomas Plitzuweit, teacher-at-large  
Mr. Chip Woods, Nebraska District

## Board for Ministerial Education

Rev. Matthew Crass, president, Luther Preparatory School  
Rev. Richard Gurgel, president, Martin Luther College  
Rev. Mark Luetzow, president, Michigan Lutheran Seminary  
Rev. Duane Rodewald, chairman, Board for Ministerial Education  
Rev. Earle Treptow, president, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

\* Also served as voting delegate

## Home and World Missions

Rev. Matthew Brown, chairman, Board for Home Missions  
Rev. Mark Gabb, administrator, Board for Home Missions  
Rev. Larry M. Schlomer, administrator, Board for World Missions  
Rev. Jonathan Schroeder, chairman, Board for World Missions

## Congregational Services

Rev. Jonathan Hein, coordinator, Congregational Services and director, Commission on Congregational Counseling  
Mr. Paul Patterson, associate director, Commission on Lutheran Schools  
Mr. James Rademan, director, Commission on Lutheran Schools\*

## Other

Mr. Jeremy Angle, president, Northwestern Publishing House  
Prof. James Danell, chairman, Commission on Inter-Church Relations  
Mr. James Holm, executive director, WELS Foundation/WELS Investment Funds, Inc.  
Rev. Kurt Lueneburg, director, Ministry of Christian Giving  
Mr. Dennis Maurer, director, Human Resources  
Mr. Dan Nommensen, director, Communication Services  
Mr. Joshua Peterman, director, WELS Benefit Plans  
Rev. James Pope, executive editor, *Forward in Christ*  
Mr. Brian Roser, executive director, WELS Church Extension Fund, Inc.  
Rev. Daniel Sims, director, WELS Christian Aid and Relief  
Mr. Martin Spriggs, chief technology officer  
Rev. Eric Steinbrenner, chairman, Committee on Constitutional Matters

\* Also served as voting delegate

# Floor committees

## Committee #1: President's Report

Pastor David Scharf, chairman  
Teacher Joseph Gumm, secretary  
Pastor Luis Acosta  
Pastor Robert Guenther  
Pastor Micah Martin  
Pastor Aaron Ody  
Pastor Joel Schwartz  
Pastor Jesse Stern  
Teacher Christopher Bartsch  
Teacher Eric Martens

Teacher Anthony Perry  
Layman Kevin Andreen  
Layman Mike Christensen  
Layman Todd Francis  
Layman Ken Hall  
Layman Bill Homstad  
Layman Loren Milbrath  
Layman Tony Schadt  
Layman Carl Schueler  
Layman Doug Yerks

## Committee #2: Conference of Presidents

Pastor Samuel Degner, chairman  
Teacher Mark Thiesfeldt, secretary  
Pastor Craig Born  
Pastor Steven Prah  
Pastor Matthew Scharf  
Pastor Keith Schreiner  
Pastor Jonathan Werre  
Teacher Joshua Johnson  
Teacher Jeffrey Loberger  
Teacher Erik Parsons  
Layman Joseph Baehman

Layman Tim Bentz  
Layman Brent Cox  
Layman Brandon Fasching  
Layman Marty Kurth  
Layman Gary Meyer  
Layman Luke Schemm  
Layman David Stuhlmiller  
Layman Jim Volz  
Layman Kevin Willis  
Layman Richard Zeman

## Committee #3: Commission on Inter-Church Relations

Pastor Daron Lindemann, chairman  
Teacher Zachary Seeger, secretary  
Pastor Paul Doletzky  
Pastor Matthew Kiecker  
Pastor Keith Schleis  
Pastor Kurt Uhlenbrauck  
Teacher Zachary Cvikel  
Teacher Steven Gartner  
Teacher Corey Marohn  
Teacher Joshua Severeid

Layman John Chung  
Layman Justin Dorn  
Layman Jack Fox  
Layman Randy Kimbler  
Layman Andrew Portnoy  
Layman Justin Rhoads  
Layman Ralph Schneekloth  
Layman Scott Schneider  
Layman Michael Schultz  
Layman Craig Zastrow

## **Committee #4: Congregational Services—Churches**

Pastor Mark Schroeder, chairman  
Teacher Kevin Klug, secretary  
Pastor Timothy Blauert  
Pastor Hernandez Daylo  
Pastor Michael Ewart  
Pastor John Koester  
Pastor Michael Neumann  
Staff Minister Peter Schaeewe  
Teacher Albert Karnopp  
Teacher Justin Siegler

Layman Allan Ashton  
Layman Brad Bettin  
Layman Owen Breikreutz  
Layman Tim Doro  
Layman Kenneth Gariepy  
Layman Jonathon Geasler  
Layman Dwight Greear  
Layman Josiah Kroll  
Layman Ed Roland  
Layman Tom Schulz

## **Committee #5: Congregational Services—Schools**

Teacher Matthew Bauer, chairman  
Teacher Brian Humann, secretary  
Pastor Patrick Freese  
Pastor Jonathan Kruschel  
Pastor Lon Kuether  
Pastor Bryan Prell  
Pastor Christopher Rathje  
Pastor Martin Valleskey  
Staff Minister Philip Bischoff  
Teacher Micah Biesterfeld  
Layman Kyle Bowman

Layman Stephen Davies  
Layman Matthew Gibbs  
Layman Jake Gumm  
Layman Farley Haase  
Layman Donald Hahnke  
Layman Rick Kneser  
Layman Mike Nelson  
Layman David Proksch  
Layman Darren Shuff  
Layman Kevin Wentz  
Layman Tom Wood

## **Committee #6: Ministry of Christian Giving and Communication Services**

Pastor Geoffrey Kieta, chairman  
Teacher Greg Milbrath, secretary  
Pastor Mark Reichert  
Pastor Timothy Rosenow  
Teacher Heath Dobberpuhl  
Teacher Erik Landwehr  
Teacher Chad Lindemann  
Teacher John Werner  
Layman Jim Allen  
Layman Ron Bude

Layman Warren Folkerts  
Layman David Grabitske  
Layman Leonard Gunderson  
Layman James Klecka  
Layman Chad Moyer  
Layman Floyd Pinkney  
Layman Wayne Scheffler  
Layman Carl Schwartz  
Layman David Schweiger

## **Committee #7: Synodical Council**

Pastor Joel Thomford, chairman  
Teacher Eric Wolf, secretary  
Pastor Jonathan Bare  
Pastor Philip Bigelow  
Pastor Sean De Frain  
Pastor Douglas Free  
Pastor Jonathan Kuske  
Pastor Jeremy Schulz  
Pastor Bradley Taylor  
Staff Minister Thad Jahns  
Teacher Kevin Lemke  
Teacher Timothy Treder

Layman Matt Ampe  
Layman Greg Bartz  
Layman Chris Benner  
Layman Steve Crossman  
Layman Mike Friesenegger  
Layman Keith Hartmann  
Layman Todd Herman  
Layman Greg Menke  
Layman Jon Meyer  
Layman Stan Nolte  
Layman Dave Rogers  
Layman Jesse Tuttle

## **Committee #8: Financial results and ministry financial plan**

Pastor Gary Pufahl, chairman  
Staff Minister Brent Bitter, secretary  
Pastor Justin Dauck  
Pastor David Endorf  
Pastor Brian Kom  
Pastor Thomas Mielke  
Pastor Kevin Raddatz  
Pastor Aaron Winkelman  
Teacher Adam Frey  
Teacher Matthew Wurster  
Layman Mike Armitage

Layman David Chance  
Layman Kent Frerichs  
Layman Tim Heil  
Layman Dale Hettick  
Layman Richard Krueger  
Layman David Nitardy  
Layman Ward Putnam  
Layman Kent Stuebs  
Layman David Warnke  
Layman John Workentine

## **Committee #9: Long-range strategic plan**

Pastor Bradley Wordell, chairman  
Teacher Daniel Markgraf, secretary  
Pastor Shaun Arndt  
Pastor Daniel Baumler  
Pastor Titus Buelow  
Pastor Clint Burow  
Pastor David Olson  
Pastor Patrick Wilcox  
Teacher Joshua Nelson  
Teacher Kirk Schauland  
Teacher Jason Snodie

Layman J-D Backhause  
Layman Joe Churches  
Layman Kim Class  
Layman Elwood Heldt  
Layman William Mashke  
Layman Landon Meahl  
Layman Thomas Mueller  
Layman Bob Schroeder  
Layman Lee Stroschine  
Layman Jeff Weinstein

## **Committee #10: Support Services**

Pastor Caleb Free, chairman  
Teacher Craig Kiecker, secretary  
Pastor Seth Georgson  
Pastor Howard Mohlke  
Pastor Brett Naumann  
Pastor Daniel Olson  
Pastor Aaron West  
Teacher Jared Matthies  
Teacher Jonathan Mumm  
Teacher Timothy Thierfelder  
Teacher Travis Wendt

Layman Les Achterberg  
Layman Gary Bubbers  
Layman William Frelitz  
Layman Norman Gullixson  
Layman Willis Gunst  
Layman Bob Harrison  
Layman Roger Hermanson  
Layman Douglas Klein  
Layman Scott Piotter  
Layman Matt Wordell

## **Committee #11: Subsidiaries and Benefit Plans**

Pastor Matthew Frey, chairman  
Teacher Duane Vance, secretary  
Pastor Emile Burgess  
Pastor Brian Keller  
Pastor John Melke  
Pastor James Skorzewski  
Pastor John Stelter  
Pastor Peter Sternberg  
Teacher Scott Brown  
Teacher Ned Farley  
Teacher Seth Herrmann  
Teacher Michael Schaefer  
Teacher Joel Schultz

Layman John Baron  
Layman Kevin Baughman  
Layman Dave Bilitz  
Layman Bob Liero  
Layman Ken MEEK  
Layman Michael Miller  
Layman Deon Olson  
Layman Carl Pudlo  
Layman Robert Schmidt  
Layman Timothy Weaver

## **Committee #12: Northwestern Publishing House**

Pastor James Backus, chairman  
Teacher Bradley Gurgel, secretary  
Pastor Michael Foley  
Pastor Daniel Walters  
Pastor Martin Wildauer  
Pastor Nathan Wilke  
Teacher Philip Meitner  
Teacher Lance Meyer  
Teacher George Radloff

Teacher Jordan Siegler  
Layman Troy Aswege  
Layman Dan Butler  
Layman Edward Cohrs  
Layman Harvey Fierro  
Layman Steven Groth  
Layman David Gruber  
Layman Jeff Hansen  
Layman Dylan Planer

## **Committee #13: Christian Aid and Relief**

Teacher Frederick Uttech, chairman  
Pastor Paul Schaefer, secretary  
Pastor Thomas Barthel  
Pastor Steven Kahrs  
Pastor Daniel Laitinen  
Pastor Matthew Rauh  
Pastor Michael Sullivan  
Teacher Donald Kerr  
Teacher Mark Koelpin  
Layman Joaquin Cameselle

Layman James Fox  
Layman Tony McKey  
Layman Gustave Mielkie  
Layman Peter Palmer  
Layman Jerry Schnelle  
Layman Michael Spencer  
Layman Tom Weyenberg  
Layman Keith Wojahn  
Layman Bill Ziche

## **Committee #14: Home Missions**

Pastor Kirk Lahmann, chairman  
Teacher Matthew Evans, secretary  
Pastor Scott Bergemann  
Pastor Jordan Ertl  
Pastor Richard Miller  
Pastor Kevin Stellick  
Pastor Clayton Welch  
Teacher Jeffrey Falck  
Teacher Paul Marquardt  
Teacher Ian Watson  
Layman Scott Anderson

Layman Justin Foxen  
Layman Bob Goddard  
Layman James Hadler  
Layman Brian Johnson  
Layman Greg Keiler  
Layman Phil Lallier  
Layman William Marzinske  
Layman Brian Nordin  
Layman Nathan Schmiede  
Layman Al Wildman

## **Committee #15: World Missions and Joint Mission Council**

Pastor Paul Workentine, chairman  
Teacher David Dodge, secretary  
Pastor Kenneth Fisher  
Pastor Stephen Kruschel  
Pastor Richard Tuttle  
Pastor Timothy Wagner  
Pastor Steven Wall  
Teacher Andrew Becker  
Teacher Brian Haack  
Teacher Ryan Schmeling  
Teacher David Wilson  
Layman Norbert Clarkson

Layman Craig Ehinger  
Layman Steve Haring  
Layman Jared Hieb  
Layman Thomas Jacobs  
Layman Ned Kleinke  
Layman Darrell Lawrence  
Layman Ben Martens  
Layman Jay Minzlaff  
Layman Len Punke  
Layman Joshua Quint  
Layman Danny Woltman

## **Committee #16: Ministerial Education**

Pastor Peter Metzger, chairman  
Teacher James Rademan, secretary  
Pastor David Putz  
Pastor Aaron Schrimpf  
Pastor James Seiltz  
Pastor Keith Siverly  
Pastor Timothy Wilkens  
Teacher Steven Bunde  
Teacher Timothy Thies  
Teacher Dale Witte

Layman Mark Brandau  
Layman Joel Kassulke  
Layman Dave Kluge  
Layman Terry Landwehr  
Layman Henry Meyer  
Layman Josh Paeth  
Layman Brendan Parker  
Layman Gary Raffel  
Layman Zuber Shah  
Layman David Voss

## **Committee #17: Constitutional Matters**

Pastor Brian Doeblen, chairman  
Pastor John Meyer VI, secretary  
Pastor Brian Adams  
Pastor Jason Liebenow  
Pastor Thomas Schultz  
Pastor Michael Willitz  
Teacher Eric Duve  
Teacher Guy Gast  
Teacher Peter Micheel  
Teacher Thomas Rosenow  
Teacher Joshua Schoeneck

Layman Del Abel  
Layman Derrick Hahn  
Layman Tom Oetjen  
Layman Jason Salaway  
Layman Jason Schmidt  
Layman Craig Schuette  
Layman Rory Vircks  
Layman Gene Wales  
Layman Jeremiah Zajic  
Layman Arlyn Zeitz

## **Committee #18: Elections**

Pastor Isaac Crass, chairman  
Teacher Bradley Nehls, secretary  
Pastor Michael Bartsch  
Pastor Paul Meitner  
Pastor David Parsons  
Pastor Mark Parsons  
Staff Minister Leonard Epple  
Teacher Daniel Busch  
Teacher Edwin Fredrich

Teacher Steven Haag  
Layman Mike Boyd  
Layman Jeremy Dennings  
Layman Terry Feil  
Layman Tom Koeslin  
Layman Micah Leppala  
Layman Joseph Lopina  
Layman Brett Timmerman

## **Committee #19: Steering**

Pastor Joel Zank, chairman, Northern Wisconsin District President  
Pastor Joel Heckendorf, Arizona-California District President  
Pastor Donald Patterson, South Central District President  
Pastor Snowden Sims, Michigan District President

# President's Report

*July 22, 2025*

*Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.*

*President Mark Schroeder*

This year marks 175 years of God's grace to our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. And while there may be a temptation on an anniversary such as this to look at our own efforts and accomplishments, our anniversary and convention theme place the focus where it belongs. On Christ. On his gospel. On his grace. On him, as he works through clay jars like us.

Our history bears out that all has depended on Christ and that it is only by his grace that he has chosen to work through us.

In 1817, on the 300th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, Prussia's King Frederick William III declared that the Lutheran and Reformed denominations in Prussia were to be combined into a single united church. The two denominations were to be united, but they were free to maintain their respective Lutheran and Reformed doctrinal teachings. The Lutherans who were content with this forced union and its relaxed views on the importance of doctrinal purity and on fellowship were soon called "New Lutherans." This was in contrast with the "Old Lutherans" who took a strong stand against such a compromise of the Lutheran doctrine and practice.

In Langenburg, Germany, a mission society, comprised of New Lutherans, had been established with the laudable purpose of sending Lutheran missionaries to America to serve the growing number of German Lutheran immigrants. Three Lutheran pastors who had been sent to America by the Langenburg Mission Society in Germany were serving congregations in the Milwaukee area. There were already several congregations of Old Lutherans in the Milwaukee area, and those congregations were not about to accept these pastors as genuine and faithful Lutherans. So those three New Lutheran pastors—John Muehlhaeuser, John Weinmann, and William Wrede—determined that they needed to establish their own synod. And that is exactly what they did.

In 1849, they met at Grace Lutheran Church in Milwaukee to form what they called "The First German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin" and elected John Muehlhaeuser, the pastor at Grace, as the first synod president. In typical German fashion, the resolution included the phrase, "The name should be perpetuated for all time under that name and designation." The next year, on May 26, 1850, those three pastors, along with two others, serving a total of 18 congregations, officially adopted a constitution for the new synod. That is the event we are commemorating 175 years later.

While Pastor Muehlhaeuser was filled with a strong faith and love for the Savior, as well as a consuming zeal to share the gospel with as many people as possible, his New Lutheran background resulted in a willingness to compromise on doctrinal and fellowship principles. As a result, the new synod did not have a problem with close relationships with Reformed churches, even in worship settings. Many Wisconsin Synod congregations had both Reformed and Lutheran members. Muehlhaeuser himself wrote, "Just because I am not strictly Lutheran or Old Lutheran, I am in a position to offer every child of God and servant of Christ the hand of fellowship over the ecclesiastical fence." In other words, he believed that denominational differences in doctrine were needless barriers between Christians and their congregations. Pure confessional Lutheranism was not in his background or his nature.

President Muehlhaeuser did become a more committed Lutheran as years went by, but it was not until the synod elected John Bading as its second president that the Wisconsin Synod would become a truly confessional Lutheran synod. Under Bading's leadership (and with the continuing encouragement of the Missouri Synod) the Wisconsin Synod recognized that doctrinal differences were important matters and that faithfulness to God's Word and

adherence to the Lutheran Confessions were non-negotiable. In his first presidential addresses in 1861 and 1862, Bading stressed the importance of adherence to the Lutheran Confessions both in theory and in practice. He encouraged the delegates to be willing to sacrifice “good and blood, life and limb, and rather suffer all than depart one hair’s breadth from the truth we have learned.” He encouraged the 1862 convention to repudiate all unionistic practices. That was officially and publicly done six years later at the 1868 synod convention, and it is a position that the synod still holds to this day. By God’s grace and by the power of his saving gospel, the Wisconsin Synod had followed President Bading’s leadership and clearly demonstrated that it had shed the stigma of being New Lutheran. In 1868 the Wisconsin Synod was welcomed into fellowship by the largest of the Old Lutheran synods, the Missouri Synod.

The years since then have demonstrated that in all things—in times of challenge and times of outward blessings, Christ has continued to work through us to build his kingdom. He has preserved our synod through times of doctrinal controversies and kept us faithful to his Word. He has enabled our synod to weather depressions, wars, civil unrest, a radically changing culture, pandemics, and political turmoil. He has enabled us to grow from a small midwestern synod into a synod that spans the country and works to spread the gospel in dozens of countries around the world. He has given us faithful and well-trained called workers and sanctified laypeople.

Christ has done all of this. And by his grace he has permitted us to be a part of what he does as he works through us.

As we look at our synod today, important issues lie before us, both challenges and opportunities. At this convention, you will hear of both. We will neither hide from the challenges nor ignore the opportunities.

Christ has been working through us as we have committed ourselves to opening one hundred new home missions in ten years. We are now in the third year of that effort. Even though the increasing cost of planting new missions (especially in terms of rent, land, and buildings), as well as the pastoral shortage, are combining to make an ambitious undertaking even more challenging, we remain committed to planting as many new missions as resources allow.

Even as we plant new home missions in areas that are not served easily by other WELS congregations, some congregations negatively affected by demographic changes have made the decision to close or merge with other congregations nearby. In some cases, those congregations have sold property and given part of the proceeds to WELS home missions. In this way, even though a congregation in one location may close, the members’ love for the Savior has enabled a new mission to be planted elsewhere. This enables gospel ministry to continue in a new location and, in some cases, frees up a pastor to be called to a different congregation.

Christ has been working through us beyond our borders and across the sea. At this convention you will hear the encouraging reports from WELS World Missions about the many doors that the Lord is opening for the proclamation of the gospel. Missionaries have been sent to new mission fields in places like the United Kingdom and Australia. The relationship with the Hmong Fellowship Church in Vietnam is being strengthened through the theological education we are providing for its pastors. Mission churches are maturing into independent Lutheran synods. New approaches to mission work are being implemented with encouraging results. Lutheran church bodies seeking faithful and confessional partners are joining in fellowship with WELS. You will hear much more about these blessings.

Our ministerial education schools are strong and healthy, with enrollments either stable or increasing. Our system for training called workers is unlike any other. We’ve been encouraged by observers from outside of our synod never to let it go. Christ is continuing to prepare faithful and well-trained workers for his harvest field, through us.

Christ continues to strengthen our congregations through his gospel, and it is that gospel that is at the heart and focus of everything done by WELS Congregational Services. It is not the role of the synod to tell congregations how to carry out their ministries. Certainly, the role of the synod is not to encourage the use of flashy programs or gimmicks to “grow the church.” But one thing the synod does is to provide gospel-based tools and resources to help congregations carry out those ministries with faithfulness and excellence. Christ is at work in our congregations, speaking to his people through his Word, creating and strengthening their faith through the means of grace, blessing them with his presence in worship, equipping young and old to serve, and moving their members to go into their communities with the invitation that Philip gave to Nathanael, “Come and see.” It’s all about Christ and what he does, and we thank him that he has chosen to work through us.

The 2024 statistics have been gathered from our congregations, with 95 percent reporting (a very high percentage). While total membership declined by 0.8 percent from 330,618 to 327,943, it was the smallest annual decline since 2011. Weekly worship increased by 2.9 percent, bringing us close to where worship attendance was prior to COVID. There were also increases in adult and youth Bible study attendance, the fourth year of annual increases. Spiritual gains have been trending upward, while spiritual losses downward. In 2024, the synod was blessed with 4,126 adult confirmations, the most since 2012 and the second highest total in 50 years. Spiritual losses (people leaving for other churches or no church at all) have been declining. In 2024, we had 2,315 net spiritual losses, the lowest total since WELS began keeping that record. Births totaled 2,985, compared to the previous decade when the average was 5,700. There were 3,445 youth confirmations, the lowest in WELS history. In summary, we can see progress and blessings in those statistics, as well as trends that continue to be a reason for concern.

Those statistics describe some clear blessings. But they should also move us to take a moment to think about some of the challenges our synod is facing in these interesting times. One challenge that is being felt across our synod is the shortage of called workers. This shortage is causing more and longer vacancies in congregations. It is resulting in more calls and more frequent calls for called workers. It is affecting the work that is being done in both our congregations and in our schools.

We have been working to address that shortage in a number of ways. Parents and congregation members are being asked to encourage the young people in our congregations to consider preparing for the public ministry. Congregations are being encouraged to provide financial assistance to their members who are enrolled at Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. We are urging those who are no longer active in the pastoral and teaching ministry to consider once again serving as called workers. Martin Luther College is implementing programs to enable non-MLC-trained teachers to become synod certified and to provide a path for people who have degrees other than in education to be equipped to serve as teachers. A generous gift from a WELS donor will soon enable new staffing for specialized recruitment personnel. We pray that all of these efforts will soon bear fruit and that the Lord of the Church will provide workers to serve in his harvest field.

Another challenge is related to the first and that is in the demographics of our synod. Parallel to what is happening in our culture, our church population is aging, and the number of births is declining. This results in a smaller pool of young people who will become pastors and teachers, and it presents challenges to congregations as their membership—and that of our of synod—declines. We can be thankful that we have seen a healthy increase in adult confirmations (many of whom are parents who bring their children with them), as well as a growing number of people in weekly worship and Bible study. We pray that God will enable us to overcome these challenges and to recommit ourselves to personal “come and see” evangelism efforts.

Certainly, we face the challenges posed by a hostile and unbelieving culture. Truths and values that have undergirded our society and have been proclaimed by the Christian church for centuries have been discarded at an alarming pace in recent years even by Christian church bodies. But this should not cause us to run and hide or to cower in fear. In fact, this should convince us all the more that we are perfectly positioned to have an impact on a sick and dying world, because we have exactly what that world needs: the Sword of the Spirit, the powerful Word of God, and the saving gospel of Jesus Christ that changes hearts, changes lives, and changes eternity.

It’s a time for us not to take that Word and the grace it proclaims for granted. Luther reminded us, “For you should know that God’s Word and grace is like a passing shower of rain which does not return where it has once been. . . . And you need not think that you will have it forever, for ingratitude and contempt will not make it stay. Therefore, seize it and hold it fast.”

Along with the challenges come the wonderful God-given opportunities for Christ to work through us. Later in this convention you will hear the many ways in which God is building his church—in our congregations, in our schools, in our home mission fields, and in places around the world. You will hear about needed building projects at two of our ministerial education schools. You will receive reports of the faithful work that is being done in all areas of our synod. Far from being in retreat, the powerful gospel continues to do what God has sent it to do—rescuing sinners from eternal death, assuring them of their full and free forgiveness in Christ, and equipping them to serve their Savior with lives of love for him and for others.

God’s people in our synod have been faithful and generous in their financial support for the work that we do together. I am thankful the congregations have been increasing their offerings for our synod’s mission and ministry.

May his gospel continue to motivate and move us to live as wise and faithful stewards of all his blessings. It is all about Christ, and we can be thankful that he has chosen to work through undeserving and flawed sinners like us.

So, what do we need to remember, now that we look back on 175 years of our synod's history and look ahead to the days and years to come?

Imagine for a moment that you have a life-threatening medical condition. Your only treatment option is a very risky, experimental surgery. The doctors have told you that it's likely that you will not survive the operation. But you decide to go ahead. As you're being prepped for surgery, your family gathers around you. You know that this may be the last time you see them this side of heaven. What would you say? What would your final words be? No doubt, you would express your love for your family. You would express your faith and trust in your Savior. And, undoubtedly, you would give them some final words of encouragement and advice—words to guide them when you are gone, words that they will always remember and never forget.

As Paul is writing his second letter to his beloved co-worker Timothy, Paul is locked away in prison in Rome. He knows that this time he will not go free. He will soon lose his life for the sake of the gospel. And so, he writes this letter, his final words to his spiritual son, Timothy. In those words, he refers to Timothy as "my child, whom I love." He confesses his faith and trust in God's promise clearly. "I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on, there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness. The Lord, the righteous Judge, will give it to me on that day." He also speaks words of encouragement and advice—words that he wants Timothy to remember and to live by in the days and years to come: "My son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus."

These words were not intended for Timothy alone. They are spoken to us as well. These are especially fitting words for us, as we look back on 175 years and recall how God's grace has come to us and all who went before us, and how God has made us strong through the power of his Word. And it's a fitting reminder as we look ahead knowing we can remain strong as God's grace continues to come to us through his Word and sacrament. So, as we learn from the past, and as we look ahead to the future, remember always what Paul said to Timothy: "Be strong. Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." Recognize the source of your strength. Depend on that strength to meet the challenges you will face. And be confident and joyful in that strength as you carry out the mission you've been given.

*Soli Deo Gloria!*

Respectfully submitted,



WELS President Mark Schroeder

# Reports and resolutions

## Committee #1: President's Report

### **Subject: Membership—called workers**

Reference: Report from the President's Office

Resolution No. 01

WHEREAS the following pastors, professors, graduate tutors, male teachers, and male staff ministers are recommended by their respective district presidents for voting membership in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod; therefore be it

Resolved, that the following be graciously welcomed into the voting membership of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) and Martin Luther College (MLC):

### **ARIZONA-CALIFORNIA DISTRICT**

Rev. Jacob D. Bitter, King of Kings Lutheran Church, Garden Grove, Calif., from WLS  
Rev. Mark Jiang, Apostles Lutheran Church, San Jose, Calif., from WLS  
Mr. William H. Mears, California Lutheran High School, Wildomar, Calif., from MLC  
Mr. Matthew T. Rieger, East Fork Lutheran School, Whiteriver, Ariz., from MLC  
Mr. Espen J. Storlie, St. Mark Lutheran School, Citrus Heights, Calif., from MLC  
Mr. Joshua D. Zander, California Lutheran High School, Wildomar, Calif., from MLC

### **DAKOTA-MONTANA DISTRICT**

Mr. Joseph P. Nash, Great Plains Lutheran High School, Watertown, S.D., from MLC

### **MICHIGAN DISTRICT**

Rev. Jonathan C. Gumm, Immanuel Lutheran Church, Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., from WLS  
Rev. Benjamin T. Roekle, St. John, Riga, Mich., from WLS  
Mr. William J. Costin, Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich., from MLC

### **MINNESOTA DISTRICT**

Rev. Zachary D. Flunker, Mt. Olive Lutheran Church, Delano, Minn., from WLS  
Rev. Christopher S. Gorr, Shepherd of the Lakes Lutheran Church, Fairmont, Minn., from WLS  
Rev. Malachi D. Mortensen, Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., from WLS  
Rev. JonAlden D. Pedersen, Salem Lutheran Church, Stillwater, Minn., from WLS  
Mr. Elijah Dorn, Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School, New Ulm, Minn., from MLC  
Mr. Corey S. Deyo, Samuel Lutheran School, Marshall, Minn., from MLC  
Mr. Alexander T. Ritter, Trinity Lutheran School, Nicollet, Minn., from MLC

### **NEBRASKA DISTRICT**

Rev. Joshua B. Sprain, Zion Lutheran Church, Valentine, Neb., from WLS  
Rev. John J. Wenzel, Beautiful Savior/St. Paul/Zion, O'Neill, Neb./Naper, Neb./Bonesteel, S.D., from WLS  
Mr. Seth S. Veers, Rocky Mountain Lutheran High School, Commerce City, Colo., from MLC

Mr. Noah T. Worster, Nebraska Evangelical Lutheran High School, Waco, Neb., from MLC  
Mr. Daniel A. Zabel, St. Paul Lutheran School, Plymouth, Neb., from MLC

#### **NORTH ATLANTIC DISTRICT**

Rev. Nathaniel B. Stein, Christ Lutheran Church, Clarksville, Md., from WLS

#### **NORTHERN WISCONSIN DISTRICT**

Rev. Peter W. Christie, Mt. Olive Lutheran Church, Suamico, Wis., from WLS  
Rev. Caleb J. Raasch, St. Paul/Zion/Bethany, Hurley, Wis./Mercer, Wis./Bruce Crossing, Mich., from WLS  
Mr. Eric M. Raasch, Christ Alone Lutheran Academy, Princeton, Wis., from MLC

#### **SOUTH ATLANTIC DISTRICT**

Rev. Noah W. Satorius, Northdale Lutheran Church, Tampa, Fla., from WLS  
Rev. Christopher G. Walther, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Deltona, Fla., from WLS  
Mr. Noah J. Kvidt, The Divine Savior School, Doral, Fla., from MLC  
Mr. Adam C. Rosenbaum, Divine Savior Academy, Doral, Fla., from MLC  
Mr. Noah J. Uhlenbrauck, St. Paul Lutheran School, Beverly Hills, Fla., from MLC

#### **SOUTH CENTRAL DISTRICT**

Rev. Phillip Valdez, Abiding Savior Lutheran Church, Killeen, Texas, from WLS  
Mr. Kyle M. Doering, Calvary Lutheran School, Dallas, Texas, from MLC  
Mr. Nathan G. Helwig, Divine Savior Academy—Sienna, Missouri City, Texas, from MLC

#### **SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN DISTRICT**

Rev. Jacob F. Borgwardt, Crossroads Lutheran Church, Chicago, Ill., from WLS  
Rev. Jordan J. Massiah, Crown of Life Lutheran Church, Hubertus, Wis., from WLS  
Mr. Joshua W. Aden, Christ the Lord Lutheran School, Brookfield, Wis., from MLC  
Mr. Zachary D. Klement, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wis., from MLC  
Mr. Matthew R. Curtis, St. John Lutheran School, Libertyville, Ill., from MLC  
Mr. Isaiah J. Loersch, Star of Bethlehem Lutheran School, New Berlin, Wis., from MLC  
Mr. Kevin R. Renner, St. John's Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, Wis., from MLC  
Mr. Elijah A. Schoof, Risen Savior Lutheran School—East, Milwaukee, Wis., from MLC

#### **WESTERN WISCONSIN DISTRICT**

Rev. Quinn D. Billitz, First Lutheran Church, La Crosse, Wis., from WLS  
Rev. Ethan M. Carter, Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis., from WLS  
Rev. Jacob M. Kieselhorst, Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis., from WLS  
Rev. Ryan H. Mitchell, Christus Lutheran Church, Delavan, Wis., from WLS  
Rev. Nathaniel S. Wranovsky, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Wausau, Wis., from WLS  
Mr. Zachary J. Arndt, Christ-St. John's Lutheran School, West Salem, Wis., from MLC  
Mr. Brian D. Friesenegger, Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis., from MLC  
Mr. David H. Hirsch, St. Mark's Lutheran School, Watertown, Wis., from MLC  
Mr. George T. Sims, St. Peter Lutheran School, Schofield, Wis., from MLC

*Pastor David Scharf, chairman*

*Teacher Joseph Gumm, secretary*

#### **ADOPTED**

##### **Subject: Membership—congregations**

Reference: Report from the President's Office

Resolution No. 02

- WHEREAS 1) the following congregations are recommended by the district president for voting membership in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod; and
- WHEREAS 2) the constitutions of the congregations have been examined and approved by the district constitution committees; therefore be it

Resolved, that these congregations be graciously welcomed into the voting membership of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod:

**MINNESOTA DISTRICT**

Anchored in Christ Ministries, Greenfield/Rockford, Minn.

**SOUTH CENTRAL DISTRICT**

Divine Savior Lutheran Church, Liberty Hill, Texas  
Christ Our Refuge Lutheran Church, Hewitt, Texas

*Pastor David Scharf, chairman*

*Teacher Joseph Gumm, secretary*

**ADOPTED**

**Subject: Appointments 2023–25**

Reference: Report from the President's Office

Report No. 01

*Accounting Oversight Committee Synodical Council Liaison*

Mr. Ryan Grunewald

Mr. Seth Hansen

Mr. Daniel Riebe

*Associate director of the Commission on Worship*

Rev. Bryan Gerlach

*Board for Ministerial Education*

Rev. Aaron Voss

Rev. Michael Woldt

*Christian Aid and Relief*

Mr. Steven Vasold

*WELS Church Extension Fund, Inc., Board of Directors*

Mr. James Bodendorfer

Mr. Timothy Gensmer

Mr. David Hirons

Mr. Ronald Kerr

Mr. Tim McFarlane

Rev. Michael Otterstatter

*Commission on Evangelism*

Rev. Jay Bickelhaupt

*Commission on Inter-Church Relations*

Rev. Jonathan Bilitz

Rev. David Bivens

Rev. John Koelpin

Rev. Joel Naumann

Rev. Bradley Wordell

*Commission on Lutheran Schools*

Mr. Christopher Joch

Rev. Phillip Sievert

Mr. Jon Thibaudeau

*Commission on Special Ministries*

Mr. Paul Wolfgramm

*Interim director of the Commission on Worship*  
Rev. Paul Prange

*Northwestern Publishing House Board of Directors*  
Teacher Matthew Groth  
Rev. Steven Pagels  
Mr. John Pratt  
Mr. Joel Raasch

*Publication Review Committee*  
Rev. Jeffrey Berg  
Rev. Luke Boehringer  
Rev. James Langebartels  
Rev. David Schneider  
Rev. Peter Wells

*Support Committee*  
Rev. Brett Brauer  
Rev. Michael Enderle  
Rev. Stephen Helwig  
Rev. Aaron Steinbrenner  
Rev. Jon Zabell

*Synodical Council*  
Rev. Charles Westra (Conference of Presidents representative)

*Task Force on Teacher Shortage*  
Jim Rademan, chairman  
Dr. Benjamin Clemons  
Pres. Richard Gurgel  
Mrs. Cindi Holman  
Mr. Theodore Klug  
Mr. Michael Koestler  
Rev. Carlos Leyrer  
Mr. Philip Leyrer  
Dr. John Meyer  
Rev. Donald Patterson  
Rev. Paul Prange  
Rev. Charles Westra  
Dr. Jeffery Wiechman  
Mr. Ryan Wiechmann  
Rev. Joel Zank

*Task Force on Called Worker Recruitment*  
Rev. Paul Prange, chairman  
Rev. Jonathan Hein  
Rev. Philip Hirsh  
Mr. Theodore Klug  
Rev. Donald Patterson  
Mr. Cameron Schroeder  
Pres. Earle Treptow

*WELS Foundation, Inc., Board of Directors*  
Mr. Mark Maurice  
Mr. Mark Schulz

*WELS Investment Funds, Inc., Board of Directors*  
Mr. Benjamin Schmidt

Mr. Ronald Schmitz  
Mr. Dustin Schwobe  
Mr. Jonathan Vannice  
Mr. Max Wenck  
Mr. Matthew Zuleger

*WELS Retirement Program Commission*

Mr. Samuel Kruschel  
Mr. Lee Miller  
Rev. James Turriff  
Mr. Jeffrey Verbeke

*WELS VEBA Commission*

Mr. James Gabriel  
Mr. Todd Poppe  
Mr. Norm Sowatzke

*Pastor David Scharf, chairman*

*Teacher Joseph Gumm, secretary*

**Subject: President's Report**

Reference: Report from the President's Office  
Report No. 02

After 175 years of existence, it might be easy to step back and congratulate ourselves on all that our synod has accomplished not just in this country but around the world. We thank President Schroeder for his reminder that all of the successes, all of the growth, all of the continued faithfulness to doctrinal truth and purity—all of it is because Christ has done it, and it is only by his grace that we are allowed “to be a part of what he does as he works through us.”

While the challenges of this gospel work are great—whether they be demographic or cultural, the blessings far outweigh them. As new missions are planted and the gospel is proclaimed at home and abroad, as the need for more workers to serve the church with their lives is so very evident, as we embark on this next stage of our synod's existence, we join our president in voicing Paul's encouragement to Timothy: “Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” For it is this grace that will sustain us and strengthen us for the work he has set before us.

*Pastor David Scharf, chairman*

*Teacher Joseph Gumm, secretary*

## Committee #2: Conference of Presidents

**Subject: Report of the Conference of Presidents**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 8-15, 17-23  
Report No. 01

*Conference of Presidents*

We give thanks for the faithful work of the Conference of Presidents (COP) in overseeing doctrine and practice within WELS. We commend the COP for issuing a pastoral brief on critical theory in response to resolutions passed

by previous synod conventions and for its pastoral letter on the roles of men and women. We appreciate the clarity these have brought and are encouraged to hear of their positive reception.

We thank God for allowing the COP, in its role as assignment committee, to fulfill its goal of not assigning MLC teacher graduates to school principal positions. We also praise God that 2024 saw the highest Congregation Mission Offerings in our synod's history.

We commend the COP for authorizing Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and Luther Preparatory School to launch generosity campaigns for upcoming building projects and pray that these efforts bless future generations.

We urge all members to pray for and encourage future church workers, as the COP continues to address pastoral and teaching shortages. We also commend the approval of a new Teaching Ministry Certification proposal, simplifying the path for uncertified or non-active teachers who desire to serve.

We pray for the pastors and teachers who have recently accepted calls extended by the COP to serve in various areas of ministry and extend heartfelt appreciation to the pastors whose terms of service on the COP have recently concluded.

We give thanks for the special 175th anniversary synodwide thank offering and the many celebratory events and resources honoring God's grace across our history. We pray this anniversary inspires renewed dedication to gospel ministry.

#### *WELS Support Committee*

We are grateful that the committee has met all support needs, currently aiding 22 retired called workers and spouses. We commend the committee's ongoing care for those who have served faithfully.

#### *Translation Liaison Committee*

We appreciate the committee's continued engagement with Bible translation updates and feedback to translation groups. We commend its plans to offer online reviews of significant English translations and to prepare a book on Bible translation and pray that these resources will help to address confusion and concerns among our people. We recognize with gratitude the dedicated service of the seven members of this committee, all of whom have faithfully served since 2013.

#### *Continuing Education for Called Workers Committee*

We give thanks for the ongoing continuing education opportunities offered through Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and Martin Luther College, including options that help address our current shortage of called workers. We encourage our workers to pursue continuing education and urge our churches and schools to support them in that pursuit.

*Pastor Samuel Degner, chairman*

*Teacher Mark Thiesfeldt, secretary*

### **Subject: Memorial (2025-01): Encouragement for education about the history, tenets, and threat of critical theory, and the Lutheran response**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 195,196

Report No. 02

Our committee has decided not to present this memorial to the convention. We do not deny the dangers of critical theory (CT); this particular lie of Satan is pernicious and pervasive, as the memorial's author states. However, several factors led us away from agreement with the resolution, including the following:

- The Conference of Presidents has already composed and disseminated a pastoral brief on the subject, pursuant to a resolution from the 2023 convention. "The brief was intended to be a summary of critical theory to equip called workers and lay members with an understanding of its background and nature to help them respond in a biblical way. Since it was never intended to be a comprehensive overview of all aspects of the history and essence of critical theory, the Conference of Presidents has determined not to add to or revise the document (which could be a neverending process) unless it is found to contain factual or doctrinal errors. Rather, the COP will

encourage those interested to do additional research on their own" (*Book of Reports and Memorials*, p. 9). Our committee agreed.

- The memorial states that there is "a need to further educate the pastors, teachers, leadership, and laity of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod on the history, character, tenets, and threats of CT in a way that prepares our people to appropriately respond." We questioned whether another document prepared by the Conference of Presidents would best accomplish that purpose, especially if critical theory is "multiheaded" and "ever-evolving." Rather, we felt that other WELS groups and institutions (e.g., the Institute for Lutheran Apologetics, Northwestern Publishing House, or WELS Campus Ministry) would be better positioned to provide such education to our people, if and how they see fit.

Instead of asking the COP to prepare another document, then, we offer the following:

- We encourage our called workers and others in positions of influence in our church body to learn about critical theory, understand how it impacts the people they serve, and do what they can to equip the saints to contend with it in their lives and ministries.
- We suggest that those who have studied and written about critical theory share their work through available channels, e.g., *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, *Forward in Christ*, circuit and conference gatherings, conferences for laypeople, etc.
- We urge our called workers and lay members alike to "be prepared to defend the faith and offer reasons for the hope they have in Christ," and to proclaim boldly and persistently God's truth to counter this and all of Satan's lies.

*Pastor Samuel Degner, chairman*

*Teacher Mark Thiesfeldt, secretary*

**Subject: Unprinted memorial (2025-04): Pastoral call frequency and its impact on pastor, family, and congregation**

Reference: Unprinted memorial (2025-04) on [welsconvention.net/boram](http://welsconvention.net/boram)

Report No. 03

Our committee understood the spirit behind this memorial; frequent and/or multiple calls can indeed "place significant emotional, spiritual, and logistical burdens on pastors, pastors' families, and congregations." At the same time, we recognized that every call provides the opportunity for reflection by pastors and their congregations on the work the Lord has given them. We also realized that extending the exemption period from six to twelve months after a returned call would result in fewer candidates available for call lists—a problem at a time when lists are already short because of the high number of vacancies.

While we acknowledge that no call process that involves human beings is perfect (even as the One who calls us is), we also recognize that well-intended changes to our process can have unintended consequences. We are aware that our Conference of Presidents discusses this process regularly and trust that they will continue to do so. Therefore, we have decided not to bring this memorial to the floor.

*Pastor Samuel Degner, chairman*

*Teacher Mark Thiesfeldt, secretary*

# Committee #3: Commission on Inter-Church Relations

## **Subject: The work of the Commission on Inter-Church Relations**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 23-27

Report No. 01

Praise God for the work of the Commission on Inter-Church Relations. The purpose of this commission is to represent WELS “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.”

The Commission on Inter-Church Relations “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.”

The One Team concept guides the work of the Commission on Inter-Church Relations together with WELS Board for World Missions, “interacting with emerging churches throughout the world that require theological education and mentoring in order to bring them to a more mature confessional stance.” This applies also to individuals. The One Team concept allows the Commission on Inter-Church Relations to contribute doctrinally, working in partnership with world missionaries who, for example, bring insights about financial assistance or logistics.

We affirm the Commission on Inter-Church Relations and its use of 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. [This toolkit] 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.”

May God continue to guide the work of the Commission on Inter-Church Relations in Africa, Asia-Oceania, Europe, and Latin America and with domestic church bodies in North America. We pray for God’s wisdom and strength as the Commission on Inter-Church Relations responds to requests from many of these church bodies about doctrine and confession. We are glad that the Commission on Inter-Church Relations encourages and supports the translation of the Book of Concord as needed into all the languages of the people among whom they are working.

We acknowledge that the Bulgarian Lutheran Church no longer gathers as a church around Word and sacraments, and thus they are no longer a church with whom we may be in fellowship.

Christ is at work around the world. “The next international convention of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC)—a worldwide fellowship of Lutheran church bodies of which WELS is a member—is planned for May 29–June 1, 2026, in Lusaka, Zambia” (the first time an international CELC convention will be held on the continent of Africa).

Representatives of WELS, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod continue to meet for informal discussions, outside the framework for fellowship. We rejoice that the Commission on Inter-Church Relations is communicating to the members of the WELS the purpose and results of these informal discussions.

We support the thoughtful decision of the Commission on Inter-Church Relations to defer a declaration of fellowship with the Africa Mission Evangelism Church in Tanzania. This allows the Africa Mission Evangelism Church to rally around its new leadership, as this church body distributes and discusses its statement of faith as widely as possible.

We are heartened to know that our One Africa Team has concrete plans to maintain close contact with the Africa Mission Evangelism Church. We ask God to grant his blessing as we continue “with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Timothy 4:2) to work toward the day when we will be able to declare fellowship with them.

Finally, by the grace of God four men have served faithfully on the Commission on Inter-Church Relations (Pastor Bart Brauer, Pastor Thomas Fricke, Prof. Bill Tackmier, and Pastor Benjamin Tomczak). This summer they “will complete their final terms on the commission. This represents a significant change for a body with only ten members. We thank God for their service to him and his church. We pray that the three pastors and one professor who will be succeeding them after this summer’s convention will be equally blessed as they carry out the privileged task of seeking out and fostering church relations.”

*Pastor Daron Lindemann, chairman*  
*Teacher Zachary Seeger, secretary*

## Committee #4: Congregational Services—Churches

### **Subject: Congregational Services—Churches**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 35-50

Report No. 01

WELS Congregational Services exists to encourage and equip congregations for faithful and fruitful gospel ministry.

We give thanks to our gracious heavenly Father for the many resources that these commissions have faithfully provided to many of our congregations. We have been blessed by the faithful efforts and diligent work of those who lead these commissions: Pastor Jonathan Hein—Congregational Counseling; Pastor Donn Dobberstein—Discipleship; Pastor Eric Roecker—Evangelism; Pastor Joel Gaertner—Special Ministries; and Pastor Paul Prange—Worship. Our committee would like to especially acknowledge Pastor Bryan Gerlach, who served as the director of WELS Commission on Worship since 1995 and retired this past biennium, as well as Mr. Dave Hochmuth for his faithful services overseeing WELS Prison Ministry’s efforts for the past seven years.

The committee marveled over the many and varied programs that Congregational Services offers to feed and equip the faithful, as well as reach the lost. We noted what a blessing it was that Congregational Services interacted with between 70 and 90 churches and schools at any given point in time in the past biennium, representing a 150 percent increase in active consultations from a decade prior. We encourage the delegates to become familiar with the many programs and resources described in the report. A number of men from our committee noted their congregational use of several of the resources (for example: [madeknown.net](http://madeknown.net) for more information on LGBTQ issues; *Conquerors through Christ* for those struggling with pornography; *Let’s Go: Personal Witnessing Training* for congregations hoping to enhance their outreach mindset). The committee encourages the delegates to draw attention to this information in your home congregation as well as in neighboring congregations. We also encourage the laymen and called workers of our synod to subscribe to and receive information from the Congregational Services website. The website address is [welscongregationalservices.net](http://welscongregationalservices.net). The committee notes with joy that a great many resources from Congregational Services are free of charge.

Due to the decline of youth and women’s attendance and participation in congregational life, we encourage the delegates to promote the upcoming WELS International Youth Rally and WELS Women’s Ministry events as a means to engage those demographic groups.

We pray that the Lord of the Church continues to bless Congregational Services as their commissions continue to provide beneficial resources for our congregations and ministries.

*Pastor Mark Schroeder, chairman*

*Teacher Kevin Klug, secretary*

## Committee #5: Congregational Services—Schools

### **Subject: Lutheran schools**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 35-46; Lutheran Schools report  
Report No. 01

Over the past biennium, WELS Lutheran schools have been richly blessed with historic levels of enrollment across early childhood, elementary, and high school levels. This surge, initially sparked by the pandemic, has largely sustained into the 2024–25 school year, demonstrating the ongoing demand for Christ-centered education. Despite this encouraging growth, the number of school sites has declined due to school closures and mergers, underscoring the importance of strategic planning and support.

One of the most pressing challenges continues to be the teacher and school leader shortage. Each year, nearly 300 teachers are needed to fill vacancies caused by retirements and increased enrollment. Additionally, one in seven schools are without a school leader. We are deeply thankful for the work of the Commission on Lutheran Schools and Martin Luther College in responding to this need. Through a multi-faceted approach—graduating new teachers, welcoming back previously trained WELS educators, and equipping provisionally called teachers from secular backgrounds—our schools are being staffed with capable, mission-driven leaders. In addition, the leadership training programs for principals and early childhood directors, along with ongoing professional development cohorts, are preparing the next generation of school leaders with excellence and care.

We also commend the thoughtful and collaborative work being done on the new theology curriculum project. This initiative reflects a strong commitment to doctrinal fidelity and age-appropriate spiritual instruction. The inclusion of educator feedback and phased development for early childhood, elementary, middle school, and high school ensure that the curriculum will meet the unique needs of every learning level.

Accreditation continues to be a vital measure of quality and accountability in our Lutheran schools. We commend the Commission on Lutheran Schools for continuing to encourage all WELS schools to pursue WELS School Accreditation (WELSSA) as a way to commit to continuous improvement and gospel-focused excellence. We are thankful for the accreditation team's willingness to accommodate different governance models while maintaining rigorous standards. WELSSA's recognition by Wisconsin's YoungStar system is a testament to the program's credibility and benefit to early childhood ministries.

A key outreach initiative, Telling the Next Generation, remains essential. With a significant percentage of students in our schools coming from unchurched families, Telling the Next Generation provides practical strategies to connect these families to the gospel. Every school is encouraged to develop and implement a clear harvest strategy to reach the lost and make full use of this mission opportunity.

We offer heartfelt thanks to Ms. Cindi Holman for her 14 years of devoted service as national coordinator for early childhood ministries. Her tireless efforts have laid a strong foundation for early childhood education in WELS. As we welcome Ms. Jamie Walta to this role, we urge all early childhood ministry programs to take full advantage of the rich and growing set of resources now available to support and strengthen early childhood ministry.

With gratitude to God, we recognize the many ways he is blessing WELS schools and ask for continued prayers and support as we face challenges and seize opportunities to serve the next generation in faith and excellence.

*Teacher Matthew Bauer, chairman*

*Teacher Brian Humann, secretary*

## Committee #6: Ministry of Christian Giving and Communication Services

### **Subject: Congregation Mission Offerings**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, p. 28

Report No. 01

We give thanks to the Lord that 2024 was the fifth consecutive calendar year in which congregations offered a record total of Congregation Mission Offerings. We note that these are absolute figures and not adjusted for inflation. We encourage clarity in reporting these kinds of figures. We rejoice that those record offerings were given during a time when the total number of members in WELS has been declining year over year.

*Pastor Geoffrey Kieta, chairman*

*Teacher Greg Milbrath, secretary*

### **Subject: Use of resources**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 28-29

Report No. 02

The work of the Ministry of Christian Giving requires significant financial and human resources. There are industry standards for the cost of development programs, and at the same time there is a well-documented shortage of called workers in our synod. We encourage the membership of our synod to recognize that the work of the Ministry of Christian Giving is God-pleasing and a necessary part of the synod's work. We also urge the Ministry of Christian Giving and the Conference of Presidents to be cognizant of both the accepted industry standards and the limited number of called workers available as they plan for the number of Christian giving counselor positions that will be funded, such as the new mid-level counselor that is included in the ministry financial plan that was approved at this convention. We also encourage the members and the ministries of WELS to make use of the services of the Ministry of Christian Giving.

*Pastor Geoffrey Kieta, chairman*

*Teacher Greg Milbrath, secretary*

### **Subject: Channels of communication**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 31-33

Report No. 03

Communication Services maintains a wide range of channels to communicate the mission of WELS to the members of the synod. These channels are carefully chosen and maintain a high-quality look and feel. We encourage the synod convention delegates to make use of these channels and to find creative and practical ways to encourage their congregations to integrate them into their local ministries.

*Pastor Geoffrey Kieta, chairman*  
*Teacher Greg Milbrath, secretary*

**Subject: WELS brand refresh and wels.net redesign**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, p. 33  
Report No. 04

Communication Services has announced an intention to refresh the WELS brand and to redesign **wels.net**. We encourage Communication Services to clearly communicate to the synod the need, the cost, and the potential blessings that will come from these efforts. We note the value of WELS having a clear and consistent identity, both for our members and for prospects. We also note that **wels.net** receives 3.7 million site visits per year; therefore we encourage Communication Services to make it as user-friendly as possible.

*Pastor Geoffrey Kieta, chairman*  
*Teacher Greg Milbrath, secretary*

## Committee #7: Synodical Council

**Subject: Departing Synodical Council members**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 52-53  
Report No. 01

We give thanks to God for the work of those Synodical Council members who have or are concluding their work on the Synodical Council: Mr. Kenneth Gosch, Dakota-Montana District; Mr. Steven Hansen, Arizona-California District; Pastor Joel Heckendorf, pastor-at-large; Mr. Thomas Schermerhorn, Northern Wisconsin District; Mr. Lee Hitter, director of WELS Communication Services, advisory; Pastor Paul Prange, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education, advisory; Mr. Sean Young, senior director of WELS Missions Operations, advisory; Pastor James Huebner, WELS first vice president; and Pastor Joel Jenswold, pastor-at-large.

*Pastor Joel Thomford, chairman*  
*Teacher Eric Wolf, secretary*

**Subject: Strategic capital planning for ministerial education schools**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, p. 54  
Report No. 02

We note the change in the planning for capital projects at WELS ministerial education schools. In 2023, the Synodical Council established the Synod Capital Projects Fund, which has a balance of \$5 million. A portion of this fund is to be used for site design and planning costs, while the remainder is used to accelerate project initiation. Once 70 percent of the capital needed for a project is raised using a "quiet phase" of generosity, construction can begin. The remaining 30 percent of the project is financed, with a public generosity campaign to help repay the debt. This new process will allow capital projects to begin sooner and avoid a long debt service. Initial steps have already been taken on major capital projects at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and Luther Preparatory School.

*Pastor Joel Thomford, chairman*  
*Teacher Eric Wolf, secretary*

**Subject: Compensation Review Committee**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, p. 55

Report No. 03

WELS Called Worker Compensation Guidelines (synod code) provide recommended compensation guidelines for synod called workers. Many self-supporting congregations use these guidelines as well. We note with concern that the Synodical Council has discovered that many congregations do not fully understand these guidelines, their various components, or tools available. Thus, many calling bodies might feel that they are following “synod code” when, in reality, they are not offering compensation that equals synod code. We applaud the Synodical Council's efforts to enhance congregations' understanding and awareness of WELS Called Worker Compensation Guidelines and also the tools available to congregations at [welsrc.net/human-resources](https://welsrc.net/human-resources), including several videos, a compensation calculator, etc.

We are thankful for the Synodical Council's work to give congregations, called workers, and future called workers a greater understanding of the unique IRS tax status given to WELS called workers, so that called workers can enjoy the full benefit of their tax status.

Increasing a calling body's understanding of WELS Compensation Guidelines and a called worker's unique tax status could possibly be accomplished through a series of videos to instruct congregations.

We applaud the Synodical Council's efforts to adjust the salary matrix to offset the impact of inflation on called worker salaries.

*Pastor Joel Thomford, chairman*

*Teacher Eric Wolf, secretary*

**Subject: Ministerial education recruitment encouragers**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, p. 57

Report No. 04

We applaud the four years of funding provided through a generous donor for five recruitment encouragers across the synod for ministerial education. The encouragers will be based locally in several districts and will work to enhance our recruitment efforts. We pray that this effort will enhance our recruitment efforts for pastors, teachers, and staff ministers. This effort comes at a crucial time of high vacancy rates for called workers.

*Pastor Joel Thomford, chairman*

*Teacher Eric Wolf, secretary*

## Committee #8: Financial results and ministry financial plan

**Subject: Ministry financial plan (2025–27) FY26/FY27**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 88-113

Resolution No. 01

WHEREAS 1) our gracious and merciful God has blessed WELS with generous financial offerings from congregations and individuals; and

- WHEREAS 2) the Synodical Council has prayerfully and thoughtfully studied the needs, opportunities, and resources which the Lord of the Church has provided; and
- WHEREAS 3) the Synodical Council is cautiously optimistic of the expected offerings through Congregation Mission Offerings, the Financial Stabilization Fund, individual gifts, and additional sources of revenue; and
- WHEREAS 4) the Synodical Council has proposed a conservatively aggressive financial plan for the FY26/FY27 biennium that thoughtfully balances expected financial support with the financial needs for gospel ministry; therefore be it
- Resolved. a) that we adopt the Synodical Council's ministry financial plan for the FY26/FY27 biennium; and be it further
- Resolved. b) that through our synodical entities, we encourage every congregation and WELS member to generously support the ministry the Lord has entrusted to our synod; and be it finally
- Resolved. c) that we pray for the Holy Spirit to move people to give generously and cheerfully to support the synod's efforts to share the good news of Jesus.

*Pastor Gary Pufahl, chairman*  
*Staff Minister Brent Bitter, secretary*

## **ADOPTED**

### **Subject: Ministry financial plan (2025–2027)**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 88-113  
Report No. 01

We praise and thank our gracious Lord for blessing WELS with financial stability. Congregation Mission Offerings, the Financial Stabilization Fund, and other unrestricted funds increased in previous fiscal years. WELS exceeded projections and ended with an overall increase in reserves. Estimates indicate that this trend will continue in the next biennium. WELS subsidiaries remain financially healthy with sufficient reserves. The floor committee appreciates the careful attention the Synodical Council gave to the budget planning over a 15-month period. We recognize that our ministerial education schools are the chief component of the financial plan and encourage the Synodical Council to continue giving careful attention to funding these essential institutions. We praise God for the Financial Stabilization Fund and support the plan to spend it down in the budget during the next biennium. The floor committee recommends the Synodical Council explore options for acquiring input on the ministry financial plan from the districts ahead of future synod conventions. Finally, the floor committee encourages the Synodical Council to be mindful of inflation and rising living costs as it considers changes to the called worker salary scale and compensation guidelines.

*Pastor Gary Pufahl, chairman*  
*Staff Minister Brent Bitter, secretary*

# Committee #9: "Christ through us" long-range strategic plan

## **Subject: Adoption of long-range strategic plan: 2025–2035**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 60-71 (slightly edited in convention files)

Resolution No. 01

- WHEREAS 1) the triune God's long-range plan (eternal plan) is the salvation of sinners through the atoning work of the Son by the sanctifying work of the Spirit; and
- WHEREAS 2) by God's grace, his gospel continues to shine brightly among us and Christ continues to work through us; and
- WHEREAS 3) the stated mission of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) is 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"; and
- WHEREAS 4) WELS Congregational Services did a comprehensive situational assessment for the past two years—including cultural analysis, pulse surveys, exit surveys, and listening sessions—which led to the identification of key issues facing WELS; and
- WHEREAS 5) the 2025 long-range plan addresses these key issues and was developed as an issues-based plan with input from every area of WELS ministry; therefore be it
- Resolved, a) that we give thanks to the Lord for all his good gifts to our beloved church body for these past 175 years; and be it further
- Resolved, b) that we pray fervently that God's will would continue to be done among us and through us; and be it further
- Resolved, c) that we adopt the revised 2025 long-range strategic plan with its four priorities—culture, congregations, commission, calling—and 20 goals for the next five biennia; and be it finally
- Resolved, d) that we urge all areas of WELS ministry, under the direction of the Synodical Council, to establish SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) objectives for ministry, to fund and implement them with the four priorities and 20 goals of the long-range plan, and to ensure that the initial set of these SMART objectives and corresponding Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) is included in the 2026 *Report to the Twelve Districts*.

*Pastor Bradley Wordell, chairman*  
*Teacher Daniel Markgraf, secretary*

**ADOPTED**

# Committee #10: Support Services

**Subject: Technology**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 78-80  
Report No. 01

WELS Technology exists to support WELS ministries by providing technology tools and resources that can be used to advance the gospel. Its work includes the areas of Web Services, Information Services, and Software Services. We are thankful for the work Technology has undertaken over the last biennium in improving and expanding synod websites, in updating and upgrading computer security, in implementing new software to improve capabilities, and in hosting an AI summit. Looking ahead, technology will work to improve communication capabilities, implement security and infrastructure improvements, and consider how artificial intelligence can be used in a God-pleasing manner.

*Pastor Caleb Free, chairman*  
*Teacher Craig Kiecker, secretary*

**Subject: Financial Services**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 80-82  
Report No. 02

Financial Services prepares and provides accounting and financial information that supports and serves WELS ministries. It provides numerous services to many areas of ministry. Recently it has completed all necessary audits on the financial statements; implemented new accounting standards; developed strategic plans to help the synod's ministerial education schools through a new Synod Capital Projects Fund; monitored and made planning assumptions for the support forecast, ministry financial plan, and other important areas of financial service. This provides stability and confidence to our synod and its work with the assets that God has provided. We thank Chief Financial Officer Kyle Egan and the rest of the dedicated Financial Services staff for their valuable and continued work in all of these areas.

*Pastor Caleb Free, chairman*  
*Teacher Craig Kiecker, secretary*

**Subject: Human Resources**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 82-83  
Report No. 03

Human Resources oversees the personnel functions for synod personnel. We are thankful that the Lord has provided our Human Resources department with many layworkers who have staffed key positions throughout this last year. We also give thanks for the 10-plus years of service given by Mr. Dennis Maurer, director of Human Resources. As he looks to retire in early 2026, we support the critical search for his successor and intentional development plan for a smooth transition for the new director.

*Pastor Caleb Free, chairman*  
*Teacher Craig Kiecker, secretary*

**Subject: Facility Services**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, p. 84

Report No. 04

Facility Services provides support services for the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry. The WELS Building Fund was created to ensure adequate funding for maintenance and improvement of the Center for Ministry and Mission. A portion of the rents paid by WELS subsidiaries and affiliates that use the Center for Ministry and Mission go to the Building Fund. Recently, three new offices were completed, dehumidifiers were installed in the archives, and a compressor was replaced on one of the HVAC units. Looking ahead, Facility Services is working on key infrastructure improvements and ongoing preventative maintenance. Overall the Center for Mission and Ministry is in good to excellent condition. We are grateful for the work of Facility Services in maintaining a God-pleasing physical workspace.

*Pastor Caleb Free, chairman*

*Teacher Craig Kiecker, secretary*

## Committee #11: Subsidiaries and Benefit Plans

**Subject: WELS Historical Institute**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 173-175

Report No. 01

WELS Historical Institute has been “actively involved” in the promotion and planning of the 175th anniversary celebration of the Wisconsin Synod. Digital and online resources include bulletin inserts, videos, promotional materials, and more. They can be found at [welshistoricalinstitute.org/175th](http://welshistoricalinstitute.org/175th). A banquet and a bus tour are being planned for the celebration as well, along with multiple presentations on the history of WELS.

Currently, a presentation series entitled “Our Great Heritage” is running. The presentation of Prof. Paul Koelpin on ministerial education in New Ulm, which was presented at this year’s synod convention, is part of this series. President Mark Schroeder will also present on prep schools in Watertown, Wis., at the institute’s annual meeting in October 2025.

The institute has also spent much of its time maintaining the WELS museum as well as restoring Salem Landmark Church. A number of upgrades and repairs have been made to the church recently through grants and donations. Free tours are available by appointment.

Membership in the institute is encouraged in order to promote the unity of our synod as well as to gain valuable insight into our past. You can find out more at [welshistoricalinstitute.org](http://welshistoricalinstitute.org).

*Pastor Matthew Frey, chairman*

*Mr. Duane Vance, secretary*

**Subject: WELS Church Extension Fund, Inc.**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 175-177

Report No. 02

The Church Extension Fund exists primarily to provide loans and grants to mission congregations. Through member investments, operation revenue, and gifts and bequests, this subsidiary is able to work with the Board for Home Missions to financially help new congregations build and expand.

Currently, the Church Extension Fund services 191 loans with more than \$205 million in outstanding balances. It has also been able to provide the Board for Home Missions with an annual grant in order to help congregations purchase land, build facilities, and complete projects.

We thank Mr. Scott Page for his dedication to serving as the executive director of the Church Extension Fund. He retired from the position on June 30, 2024, after 10 years of service. Mr. Brian Roser has taken on the vacated role after being a part of the Church Extension Fund since 2016. This has provided a seamless transition for congregations. We thank our Lord for providing the right leaders at the right time.

*Pastor Matthew Frey, chairman*

*Mr. Duane Vance, secretary*

**Subject: WELS Foundation, Inc.**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 177-179

Report No. 03

WELS Foundation “provides planned giving services and administrative support for gifts benefiting WELS congregations and ministries.” Total assets at the end of the last calendar year were \$203.6 million. Assets are distributed to WELS entities and specified by the individual donor through charitable gift annuities, charitable remainder trusts, donor-advised funds, and endowments.

In 2024, WELS Foundation hosted 12 educational webinars on a variety of different topics to help the financial planners of our synod, congregations, and schools to better understand what options are available and how to go about managing larger charitable gifts. They have also produced videos on the blessings and benefits of planned gifts for use by individuals, schools, or congregations. They are archived and can be accessed at [wels.net/foundation](https://wels.net/foundation).

*Pastor Matthew Frey, chairman*

*Mr. Duane Vance, secretary*

**Subject: WELS Investment Funds**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 179-181

Report No. 04

WELS Investment Funds provides investment opportunities for organizations affiliated with our synod, such as congregations and schools. It manages more than \$330 million in investments for more than 250 WELS ministries. WELS Investment Funds offers four investment portfolios:

- The WELS Balanced Fund
- The WELS Endowment Fund
- The WELS Equity Fund
- The WELS Income Fund

Despite some uncertain economic times recently, “The WELS investment portfolios have notched solid returns amid these challenges, benefiting from the discipline in staying in the market and prudent risk management through diversification.” Anyone in charge of long-term investments for their congregations or schools should contact Jim Holm, executive director of WELS Investment Funds, at [jim.holm@wels.net](mailto:jim.holm@wels.net).

*Pastor Matthew Frey, chairman*

*Mr. Duane Vance, secretary*

**Subject: WELS Benefit Plans**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 181-183

Report No. 05

WELS Benefit Plans serves synodical workers in three ways: 1) the WELS Voluntary Employees' Beneficiary Association (VEBA), 2) the WELS Pension Plan, and 3) the WELS Shepherd Plan.

1) WELS VEBA

More than 80 percent of calling bodies participate in WELS VEBA. As with all other insurance, however, rates are scheduled to increase along with deductible and coinsurance amounts. This will vary depending on the location of the called worker. "Improved data has allowed the VEBA 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."

2) WELS Pension Plan

At the end of 2021, the WELS Pension Plan was frozen, and retirement benefits were officially moved into the WELS Shepherd Plan.

3) WELS Shepherd Plan

More participants in the WELS Shepherd Plan have resulted in a 9.8 percent decrease in administrative fees. Additionally, the total market value from 2022 to 2024 has increased 55.5 percent. Although "only 55 percent of workers who received defined contributions also contributed their own dollars to their Shepherd Plan account in 2023," the WELS Benefit Plans Office encourages as many called workers as possible to take advantage of the system as they try to "strike the best balance between acceptable costs to calling bodies and meaningful benefits to participants."

WELS Benefit Plans encourages: "It is more important than ever for organizations to timely report call status changes to WELS so that workers timely receive the correct contributions."

*Pastor Matthew Frey, chairman*

*Mr. Duane Vance, secretary*

## Committee #12: Northwestern Publishing House

**Subject: General thanksgiving**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 184-187

Report No. 01

We thank God for the faithful work of Northwestern Publishing House (NPH), which continues to fulfill its charge to support the doctrine and practice of the evangelical Lutheran church by publishing biblically sound, Christ-centered resources.

In the past biennium, NPH has released a strong collection of new books, Bible studies, worship materials, and devotional resources. Its continued development of tools to support the Christian Worship hymnal suite and its expanding library for church musicians have been a blessing for congregations.

NPH has also made great strides in digital publishing—enhancing access to devotions, books, and study materials through e-books, downloads, and mobile apps. Its new digital catalog encourages members to stay rooted in daily Scripture use. We encourage NPH to continue providing its materials in both print and digital formats.

The addition of a remote editing team has helped streamline production, and its close collaboration with various WELS ministries—such as Lutheran Schools, Multi-Language Productions, and Communication Services—amplifies our shared gospel witness.

Upcoming projects, including a devotional series connected to the People's Bible and new children's books, show NPH's commitment to nurturing faith across all ages in the home. We encourage NPH to provide materials that meet the needs of children in urban settings.

We commend NPH for its diligent and gospel-centered service and pray for God's continued blessing on its ministry to our dear synod.

*Soli Deo Gloria.*

*Pastor James Backus, chairman*

*Teacher Brad Gurgel, secretary*

## Committee #13: Christian Aid and Relief

### **Subject: Report on Christian Aid and Relief**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 75-77

Report No. 01

WELS Christian Aid and Relief, one of our synod's ministries of compassion, helps our congregations and missions all around the world help people in need. These efforts are not funded through Congregation Mission Offerings but by special gifts of God's people in WELS. This aid can help build trusting relationships that lead to opportunities to share the good news of our Savior. Pastor Daniel Sims is the director of this work.

With thanksgiving to God for his work through his people, the committee notes Christian Aid and Relief has three categories for its work:

**Disaster relief:** When there is a disaster such as a fire, flood, or hurricane that impacts a community where WELS has a congregation or mission, WELS Christian Aid and Relief works with the congregation to help the community clean up and rebuild. They do this by providing funding, trained volunteer labor, equipment, leadership, and logistics. Leaders have been trained to lead such disaster relief deployments with more planned for the future.

**Humanitarian aid:** Christian Aid and Relief partners with Home and World Missions to provide basic needs to those who lack them through humanitarian aid programs. Grants are used for food distribution, school supplies, clean water, etc.

To assist self-supporting congregations in compassion ministry, Christian Aid and Relief provides annual matching grants of up to \$4,000 to congregations that are reaching out to their communities with the compassion of Christ. Examples of such work are food pantries, community gardens, pregnancy care, etc.

**Individual relief:** If a person in our congregations, whether called worker, congregational member, or neighbor, is undergoing a serious medical or financial crisis that is beyond the capacity of the local congregation to handle, assistance is coordinated through the local pastor with Christian Aid and Relief.

Plans for this biennium include training more disaster deployment leaders, producing a manual to assist in deployment of disaster trailers, and coordinating a chainsaw training program.

Christian Aid and Relief has resources available, including presentations to communicate this valuable opportunity to serve those in need. Christian Aid and Relief intends to improve its communication to educate WELS people about the work and its support.

May we take to heart God's Word in Galatians 6:10, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who belong to the household of faith."

*Teacher Fred Uttech, chairman*  
*Pastor Paul Schaefer, secretary*

## Committee #14: Home Missions

### **Subject: Response to Board for Home Missions' report**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 115-120  
Report No. 01

With great joy and excitement for the mission work Christ is accomplishing through us (as a synod and as individual Christians), our committee directs the delegates' attention to the work of the Board for Home Missions (BHM), especially to the efforts related to the 100 Missions in 10 Years initiative that began in 2023. We thank God for the many new mission starts and enhancements that he has graciously blessed. We also thank the BHM for its faithful service to the Lord and his church in making these starts and enhancements realities. We fervently pray that the Lord would continue to bless this "100 in 10" effort and provide opportunities for mission work that are yet to be seen.

Our committee directs the delegates' attention to the many resources the BHM has made available to the synod, including the "100 in 10" website ([wels100in10.net](http://wels100in10.net)) and the Mission Journeys website ([wels.net/missionjourneys](http://wels.net/missionjourneys)), which provide updates and opportunities for support in mission efforts.

Our committee recognizes the considerable and rising costs in financial and human resources associated with mission work. We therefore encourage the BHM to continue to be "aggressively realistic" and "the best and wisest stewards of WELS resources" when considering available finances and personnel for mission work, not forgetting the many opportunities to train laity to support mission work.

Finally, our committee directs the delegates' attention to the blessed partnership of the BHM with the Vicar in a Mission Setting program, the WELS Church Extension Fund, the Lutheran Women's Missionary Society, WELS Campus Ministry, the Joint Mission Council, and WELS Mission Journeys.

We thank the Lord for how richly he has blessed us. Not only has he given us the gospel, but he has also given us the privilege of sharing the gospel. May he continue to bless our beloved church body, especially the BHM, with wisdom as he works through us to carry his gospel into the world.

*Pastor Kirk Lahmann, chairman*  
*Teacher Matthew Evans, secretary*

# Committee #15: World Missions and Joint Mission Council

## **Subject: Board for World Missions and Joint Mission Council**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 145-147

Report No. 01

This world is gripped by the shadows of death and sin as Satan actively seeks to keep souls enslaved. Board for World Missions advances the gospel into cultures other than our own to bring the freedom and healing of Jesus to souls trapped in this darkness. Joint Mission Council partners with World Missions and Home Missions where home and world opportunities intersect.

This cross-cultural work is challenging physically, emotionally, and spiritually for missionaries and support staff. Missionaries sacrifice much even as they enjoy unique privileges of sharing Jesus with others. While there are setbacks and dangers in every effort, behind each statistic shared are precious and priceless souls bought by the blood of Jesus. Their eternity has been changed because of what Jesus did for them, shared by human beings we send in our place.

Most of their stories we will not know until we meet them in heaven. Yet it is good and proper for us to recognize, give thanks and pray for, and tell everyone the good news of faithful training and mentoring of leaders in the mission fields located in Latin America, Asia-Oceania, Africa, Native America, and Europe. This has led to the tremendous growth of souls connected to the life-saving message of the gospel.

For example:

- The strategy of multiplication ministry in the training and mentoring of national leaders who will carry out the gospel ministry.
- Sixty pastors have graduated from the seminary in Vietnam and are ministering to more than 165,000 in the Hmong Evangelical Lutheran Church.
- Thirty-seven new church groups located throughout Latin America who are working toward fellowship with our sister church, *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*.
- Support of 8,000 souls located in a country that is less than 1 percent Christian.

Actions we encourage:

- We fully endorse the 10-year goals that have been proposed by World Missions and ask for your support and prayers as they carry out this work.
- We urge everyone to make use of Mission Journeys to place them in mission fields and evangelism efforts outside of their own communities.
- We urge everyone to regularly make use of the mission advancement resources at [wels.net/missions](http://wels.net/missions) to publicize all these blessings with your congregation in partnership with your church leaders.

Thanks we give:

- For many years of faithful service on the Joint Mission Council: Paul Prange as chair of the Joint Mission Council and Sean Young as director of mission operations.
- For all the blessings God gave our Asia-Oceania Team through Steve Witte, the head of the Asia-Oceania Team, as we keep his family in our prayers as they mourn his passing.
- For the work of Neil Birkholz overseeing the diaspora ministry.
- For Skip Goetzinger and his team at the Pastoral Studies Institute.
- For the mission advancement team for communicating the efforts of World Missions to our synod.
- For Pastor Makisimu Musa of the Obadiah Lutheran Synod in Uganda attending our convention.

- For the work of Bishop Kaaya of the African Mission Evangelical Church in Tanzania to work towards fellowship with WELS and for Bishop Judah who will continue this work.

*Pastor Paul Workentine, chairman*  
*Teacher David Dodge, secretary*

## Committee #16: Ministerial Education

### **Subject: Board for Ministerial Education**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 135-172  
Report No. 01

In this anniversary year, it is a joy to read the faithful work that our ministerial education schools have continued to conduct to train called workers, to prepare qualified lay leaders, but above all to raise young Christians in faith in their Savior.

Because the work our ministerial schools do is so vital for our synod and God's kingdom, we encourage WELS members and congregations to stay informed about their activity and promote it locally. Regular updates can be found at **[bme.welsrc.net](http://bme.welsrc.net)**.

Especially as high vacancy rates persist, it also is encouraging to read of the excellent work that our schools are already doing to recruit young people for ministry, but there is still work that WELS members and congregations can do. Prioritize outreach. If WELS is smaller, it only stands to reason that enrollment at our schools will be smaller too.

Encourage young people for ministry directly. Speak positively about ministry so that it can be seen as the noble task it is. Share the information of confirmation- and college-aged students with our synodical high schools and college so that their admission counselors can speak directly with them too.

Our schools have been a precious heritage for our synod for many years. We pray God continue to bless them for many more.

*Pastor Peter Metzger, chairman*  
*Teacher James Rademan, secretary*

### **Subject: Financial support for synodical schools**

Reference: Memorial (2025-02); *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 196-197  
Report No. 02

Memorial 2025-02 acknowledges that our church body has been blessed with a strong ministerial education system to supply called workers. As additional called workers are needed in our synod, the memorial requests the Synodical Council to allocate a higher percentage of the Financial Stabilization Fund to assist with financial needs, particularly for Martin Luther College (MLC).

However, this committee does not believe that a further drawdown of the synod's Financial Stabilization Fund is a viable mechanism to accomplish long-term financial strength. The ministry financial plan for this biennium is the result of a detailed, collaborative process encompassing all areas of ministry, including the four ministerial education schools. The Financial Stabilization Fund is an essential component of the ministry financial plan, being

actively used to fund about 34 percent of Synod Operating Support. In fact, the current ministry financial plan already includes aggressive use of the Financial Stabilization Fund, with deliberate, strategic drawdown designed to support current ministry.

Furthermore, MLC has a plan in place to address its budget shortfalls through focused efficiencies and, if needed, the use of available reserve funds. MLC has also set and achieved the goal of reducing deficit spending for FY 2026–27 and has committed to balanced budgets beyond FY2027, while maintaining an emphasis on keeping costs to the student low.

Therefore, we do not recommend Memorial (2025-02) for adoption at this convention.

Rather, we encourage the members of our synod to keep MLC and all our synodical schools in their prayers and to promote the need for financial contributions to MLC's general operating funds to provide a long-term solution to the current financial challenge.

And finally, we commend the work of MLC to the Lord of the harvest, that he may continue to bless its efforts in raising the next generation of called workers for our synod and his kingdom.

*Pastor Peter Metzger, chairman*

*Teacher James Rademan, secretary*

### **Subject: Influences of critical theory at MLC**

Reference: Memorial (2025-03); *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 197-198

Report No. 03

Floor committee #16 agrees that ideologies incompatible with Scripture are becoming more widespread in higher education and in new standards of the Professional Educator Licensing Standards Board (PELSB) for teacher licensure. We also agree with MLC's President Gurgel, that a public accrediting body would not have a Christian worldview.

Martin Luther College has assured the floor committee that the PELSB does not mandate how MLC meets the standards but rather allows them to meet the standards in light of God's Word. MLC is also clear in its communication with the PELSB, ensuring that its stance and decisions are well understood. MLC continues to communicate its conviction to not have pre-service teachers teaching lessons in public schools where lesson content would disagree with Scripture. Neither pre-service candidates nor graduates in our Lutheran school system are ever required to demonstrate adherence in a way that disagrees with Scripture to obtain or renew a Minnesota teaching license.

Through the Minnesota Association of Colleges and Teacher Education, MLC and other Christian colleges have a voice at the table in discussions with the PELSB, which allows MLC and colleges like them to determine how and where in the curriculum the PELSB's standards are met.

Therefore, we do not recommend Memorial (2025-03) for adoption at this convention.

We commend the work of MLC and its clear adherence to Scripture as it works through the challenges that come with securing licensure opportunities for teacher candidates.

*Pastor Peter Metzger, chairman*

*Teacher James Rademan, secretary*

# Committee #17: Constitutional Matters

## **Subject: Proposed bylaw revision—Procedure for nominating synodical officers**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 189-193

Resolution No. 01

- WHEREAS 1) both the Conference of Presidents and the Arizona-California District have brought recommendations regarding our synod's procedure for nominating synodical officers (president, first vice president, second vice president, and recording secretary); and
- WHEREAS 2) some difficulties have been identified in the current procedure including the short amount of time that delegates have to review that information and the short time (24 hours) that these elected men have to decide to accept or decline what is a divine call with significant spiritual and administrative duties that are also life-changing decisions for them and their families; and
- WHEREAS 3) our synod regarding other elected positions has long allowed men to accept or decline nominations well in advance, and voters consider factual biographies prior to convention then cast votes at the synod convention; and
- WHEREAS 4) both recommendations bear much in common, with the only noteworthy differences being (1) the specific deadline for submitting nominations (the Conference of Presidents' recommendation suggests June 1 and the Arizona-California District's recommendation suggests April 30, both with time allowed for the nominees to accept or decline) and (2) the parties who are authorized to submit nominations (the Conference of Presidents' recommendation suggests the convention's delegates and the Arizona-California District's recommendation suggests each member congregation of the synod, both allowing only for one submission per party); and
- WHEREAS 5) the assigned committee agrees with the Conference of Presidents and considers its recommendation both to address the "grassroots" involvement concern of the Arizona-California District's recommendation by continuing to use the delegates for nominations and provides a more streamlined process; therefore be it
- Resolved, that the synod in convention adopt the recommendations for election and the bylaw changes in the synod bylaws section 2.80 proposed by the Conference of Presidents as found on pages 190-191 of the convention's *Book of Reports and Memorials*.

*Pastor Brian Doeblen, chairman*

*Pastor John Meyer VI, secretary*

## **ADOPTED**

## **Subject: Amendment to the bylaws for the WELS Retirement Program Commission**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 193-194

Resolution No. 02

- WHEREAS 1) the WELS Retirement Program Commission desires to bring a recommendation to the synod convention regarding the amount of appointed members on the commission; and
- WHEREAS 2) their proposal seems to provide a needed amount of flexibility; and

WHEREAS 3) our committee preferred, after consultation with the author of the recommendation, to include language that continued to require the participation of at least one layman on the commission; therefore be it

Resolved, that the synod in convention adopt the recommendations for bylaw changes in the synod bylaws section 7.40 regarding the size and makeup of the WELS Retirement Program Commission proposed by the WELS Retirement Program Commission as found on pages 193-194 of the convention's *Book of Reports and Memorials* with the minor amendment regarding the requirement of at least one layman on the commission in section 7.40(b) listed here.

*Pastor Brian Doebler, chairman*  
*Pastor John Meyer VI, secretary*

(b) The commission shall consist of ~~one pastor, one teacher and four laymen~~ not less than four nor more than nine members, including at least one pastor, at least one teacher, and at least one layman, appointed by the Synodical Council. Appointments shall be for a term of four years. Members may succeed themselves twice. A vacancy on the commission shall be filled as soon as practicable by appointment by the Synodical Council. The president's designee, if one is appointed per 7.40(d), shall be an ex-officio member of the ~~board of directors~~ commission and shall serve in addition to the members appointed by the Synodical Council.

## **ADOPTED**

### **Subject: Amendment to the bylaws for the WELS VEBA Commission**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, p. 194  
Resolution No. 03

WHEREAS 1) the WELS VEBA Commission desires to bring a recommendation to the synod convention regarding the amount of appointed members on the commission; and

WHEREAS 2) their proposal seems to provide a needed amount of flexibility; and

WHEREAS 3) our committee preferred, after consultation with the author of the recommendation, to include language that continued to require the participation of at least one layman on the commission; therefore be it

Resolved, that the synod in convention adopt the recommendations for bylaw changes in the synod bylaws section 7.50 regarding the size and makeup of the WELS VEBA Commission proposed by the WELS VEBA Commission as found on page 194 of the convention's *Book of Reports and Memorials* with the minor amendment regarding the requirement of at least one layman on the commission in section 7.50(b) listed here.

*Pastor Brian Doebler, chairman*  
*Pastor John Meyer VI, secretary*

(b) The commission shall consist of ~~one pastor, one teacher and four laymen~~ not less than four nor more than nine members, including at least one pastor, at least one teacher, and at least one layman, appointed by the Synodical Council. Appointments shall be for a term of four years. Members may succeed themselves twice. A vacancy on the commission shall be filled as soon as practicable by appointment by the Synodical Council. The president's designee, if one is appointed per 7.50(d), shall be an ex-officio member of the ~~board of directors~~ commission and shall serve in addition to the members appointed by the Synodical Council.

## **ADOPTED**

### **Subject: Thank you to Committee on Constitutional Matters**

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 189-194  
Report No. 01

Floor Committee #17 wishes to thank Rev. Eric Steinbrenner, Mr. Kenneth Gosch, and Rev. Richard Waldschmidt for their efforts as the Committee on Constitutional Matters. These gentlemen have reviewed and approved the proposals brought before our Synod in Convention and will handle any updates approved by the delegates. Thank you for your service to our Lord and our synod.

*Pastor Brian Doebler, chairman*  
*Pastor John Meyer VI, secretary*

## Committee #18: Elections

**Subject: Elections**

Report No. 01

**First Vice President of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod**

Rev. Joel Voss

**Second Vice President of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod**

Rev. John Bortulin

**Recording Secretary of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod**

Rev. Tyler Peil

**Synodical Council, member (2 pastors)**

Rev. Jonathan Bauer

Rev. Bart Brauer

**Synodical Council, member (teacher or staff minister)**

Mr. Thomas Plitzuweit

**Board for World Missions, chairman (pastor)**

Rev. Jonathan Schroeder

**Board for World Missions, member (teacher or staff minister)**

Mr. Matthew Doering

**Board for Home Missions, chairman (pastor)**

Rev. Matthew Brown

**Board for Ministerial Education, member (pastor)**

Rev. Aaron Voss

**Board for Ministerial Education, member (teacher or staff minister)**

Mr. James Henrickson Jr.

**Board for Ministerial Education, member (layman)**

Mr. Adam Zastrow

**Martin Luther College Governing Board, chairman (pastor)**

Rev. Steven Lange

**Commission on Evangelism, chairman (pastor, teacher, staff minister, or layman)**

Rev. Douglas Tomhave

**Commission on Lutheran Schools, chairman (pastor, teacher, staff minister, or layman)**

Rev. Kevin Westra

**Board of Appeals, chairman (pastor)**

Rev. Kenneth Brokmeier

**Board of Appeals, member (2 pastors)**

Rev. Steven Lange

Rev. Paul Zell

**Board of Appeals, member (3 teachers or staff ministers)**

Mr. Benjamin Priebe

Mr. Steven Rosenbaum

Mr. Mark Werre

**Board of Appeals, member (2 laymen)**

Mr. Greg Galler

Mr. William Schaefer

*Pastor Isaac Crass, chairman*

*Teacher Bradley Nehls, secretary*

# 2025 memorial and bylaw revision disposition

<b>Memorial/Bylaw</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Committee</b>	<b>Disposition</b>	<b>Reference</b>
2025-01	Encouragement for education about the history, tenets, and threat of critical theory, and the Lutheran response	Mr. Brian A. Heinitz, Henderson, Nev.	#2 Conference of Presidents	Addressed and dismissed in a committee report	Report 02-GR-03
2025-02	Financial support for synodical schools	Arizona-California District in convention	#16 Board for Ministerial Education	Addressed and dismissed in a committee report	Report 16-GR-02
2025-03	Ensuring our worker training college is protected from the influence of the critical theory worldview	Mr. Brian A. Heinitz, Henderson, Nev.	#2 Conference of Presidents	Addressed and dismissed in a committee report	Report 16-GR-03
Bylaw Section 2.80	Procedure for nominating synodical officers	Conference of Presidents	#17 Committee on Constitutional Matters	Resolution adopted	Resolution 17-01
Bylaw Section 7.40	WELS Retirement Program	WELS Retirement Program Commission	#17 Committee on Constitutional Matters	Resolution adopted	Resolution 17-02
Bylaw Section 7.50	WELS VEBA Commission	WELS VEBA Commission	#17 Committee on Constitutional Matters	Resolution adopted	Resolution 17-03



# Revisions to the WELS Bylaws

The 2025 synod in convention passed the following revisions to the WELS Bylaws (see the report of the Constitutional Matters Floor Committee, pp. 41-43 of this book). Additions are underlined. Deletions are indicated by a strikethrough. These bylaw changes were recommended by the Conference of Presidents and the Office of the President. Background rationale is provided. Only those areas of the bylaws recommended for change and adopted by the 2025 synod convention delegates are included here; those not being amended are not printed in this recommendation but can be found in the synod Constitution and Bylaws if reference is needed. For a complete, updated copy of the WELS Constitution and Bylaws, visit [wels.net/about-wels/synod-reports](https://wels.net/about-wels/synod-reports) or contact the President's Office at 414-256-3202 for a printed copy.

## **Recommendation #1: Procedure for nominating synodical officers (submitted by the Conference of Presidents)**

**Background:** *This recommendation suggests a change in the procedure for nominating synodical officers (president, first vice president, second vice president, and recording secretary).*

**Rationale for the changes:** *Our current procedure for the election of officers presents some difficulties both for convention delegates and for those who are nominated and elected.*

*Currently, when the election is held at the convention, each delegate is asked to submit one nominee for the position. Once those names are submitted, the top five candidates for the office of president and the top three candidates for the offices of first vice president, second vice president, and recording secretary, are placed on the election ballot. Each delegate then receives the biographical information of the candidates and is given only a short time to review that information. This puts the delegates in the position of having to cast a vote for someone about whom they may have very limited knowledge.*

*When it comes to those who are actually elected to these positions, they are expected to make their decision to accept or decline this divine call in 24 hours. In the case of the synod president, the acceptance of this call means leaving his current place of service and moving his family to within driving distance of the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry in Waukesha, Wis. It is a life-changing decision for him and his family, and the current procedure allows only a very short time for him to consider the call and to seek counsel and advice from his wife and others. And even though the offices of vice president and recording secretary do not require the person elected to leave his current place of service, they do involve significant commitments of responsibility, time, and travel with no opportunity to consult with his current calling body.*

*To address these concerns, the Conference of Presidents suggested the following changes:*

- *On or before May 15 prior to the convention, delegates will be asked to submit one name for each office being filled.*
- *Delegates will be required to submit their nominations by June 1.*
- *As it is done currently, for the office of president the five nominees who have received the largest number of nominations, and for the offices of vice president and recording secretary the three nominees who have received the largest number of nominations, will comprise the ballot. No additional nominations will be allowed at the convention.*
- *The ballots, along with biographical information, will be sent to all delegates by June 15.*

- *The actual elections will take place at the convention.*

*This change will enable the delegates to have more time to consider names that they might nominate. It will also give them several weeks to discuss the names on the ballot with the members of congregations that they represent or with others whose opinions they value.*

*Even though a quick decision will still be necessary, this change will also enable the nominees to at least begin considering their willingness and ability to serve, should the Lord call them to that position.*

*The change will take place at the 2027 convention.*

## Synod Bylaws

### Section 2.80

#### Election of the President, Vice Presidents, and Recording Secretary

(a) The election of the president and second vice president, or, in alternate conventions, the first vice president and recording secretary, shall take place at each regular synod convention and shall precede all other elections. Any of these offices vacated by election prior to the end of the officer's term shall be filled by election at that convention for the remainder of the unexpired term. If an office other than the president is vacated by election, a nominating ballot will be held at the convention in which each delegate is asked to nominate one person. The three nominees who shall have received the most number of votes on the nominating ballot shall be the candidates for that office. After biographical information on each candidate is provided, the election will then be conducted as specified in Section 2.80(d).

(b) ~~The nomination election~~ of candidates for the offices of president and second vice president, or first vice president and recording secretary, shall be conducted by the synod in convention in alternate conventions in the following manner. on written nominating ballots. Notice of a request for nominations for these positions shall be given to the convention voting delegates by May 15 prior to the convention. A secure and verifiable means to submit nominations electronically (along with instructions) will be made available by the recording secretary. Nominations must be received by June 1 of the convention year to be considered valid. For the office of president anyone listed on the most current synodical roster of "pastors - active" shall be eligible. For the office of vice president only parish pastors on the same roster shall be eligible. For the office of recording secretary, all male called workers listed as active in the most current synodical roster shall be eligible.

(c) ~~The five nominees who shall have received the largest number of votes on the nominating ballot~~ nominations for president shall be the candidates for that office. The recording secretary shall notify the top five nominees of their nomination and seek their consent to appear on the ballot. In the event of a death, declination, or unavailability of any candidate, the nominee having the next highest number of votes shall be added to the ballot. In the event of a tie for the final candidate position, all names involved in the tie shall be included as candidates. No additional candidates may be nominated from the floor of the convention. The ballot, along with biographical information for each nominee, will be provided to the delegates and published on the synod website by June 15. The nominating ballot shall not be declared an election.

(d) The synod in convention shall then proceed to the election. If no candidate receives the majority of the votes cast on the first ballot, the name of the candidate receiving the fewest votes shall be stricken, and a new ballot shall be taken. The balloting shall continue in this manner until one candidate shall have received the majority of the votes cast. The chair will then ask for a motion to make the election unanimous.

~~(d)~~(e) The nomination and election of the vice presidents and recording secretary shall follow the same procedure as followed in the nomination and election of the president, except that the three nominees who shall have received the largest number of votes on the nominating ballot nominations for first vice president, second vice president, and recording secretary shall be the candidates for the respective office.

(e)(f) The term of any newly elected officer shall begin immediately after the close of the regular convention at which the officer is elected. In the event of the election of a new synod president, the Synodical Council may ask the departing synod president to assist the newly elected president in a time of transition as established by the Synodical Council.

## Synod Bylaws

### Section 2.80

#### Election of the President, Vice Presidents, and Recording Secretary

(a) The election of the president and second vice president or first vice president and recording secretary shall take place at each regular synod convention and shall precede all other elections. Any of these offices vacated by election shall be filled by election at that convention for the remainder of the unexpired term.

(b) The nomination of candidates for the offices of president and second vice president or first vice president and recording secretary shall be conducted ~~by the synod in convention in prior to~~ alternate conventions ~~on written nominating ballots, as follows:~~ For the office of president anyone listed on the ~~most current synodical roster of "pastors - active"~~ shall be eligible. For the office of vice president only ~~parish pastors on the same roster shall be eligible.~~ For the office of recording secretary, all male called ~~workers listed as active in the most current synodical roster shall be eligible.~~

i. Each member congregation of the synod shall be entitled to nominate one candidate for each office. For the office of president anyone listed on the most current synodical roster of "pastors - active" is eligible for nomination. For the office of vice president only parish pastors on the same roster shall be eligible. For the office of recording secretary, all male called workers listed as active in the most current synodical roster shall be eligible. The nomination of ineligible candidates will be disregarded and not counted.

ii. The recording secretary shall provide a secure and verifiable method that will offer opportunity for every congregation of the synod to submit a nomination. He shall, with the approval of the Synodical Council, obtain the assistance necessary to accomplish this task.

iii. The nominating process shall begin on April 1 in the same year of the convention and be closed April 30. There shall be no opportunity provided for additional nominations.

iv. The recording secretary may engage, with the approval of the Synodical Council, an external auditing firm to tabulate the nominations.

(c) The five nominees who shall have received the largest number of votes on the nominating ballot in the aforementioned nomination process for president shall be the candidates for that office, after they have been contacted by the recording secretary and consented to serve. The recording secretary shall notify the top five nominees and receive their response in writing by May 31. In the event of the death, declination, or unavailability of any candidate, the nominee having the next highest number of votes shall become a candidate. In the event of a tie for the final candidate position, all names involved in the tie shall be included as candidates. The nominating ballot shall not be declared an election. The list of the top five shall be sent to the approved synod convention delegates along with factual, biographical information about each nominee, such as age, residence, number of years in the ministry, present position, offices previously held in a district or the synod, former ministry calls/locations, and any other specific experience and qualification for the office. The approved nomination list will be published on the synod's website by July 1. The synod in convention shall then proceed to conduct the election when gathered together in person. If no candidate receives the majority of the votes cast on the first ballot, the name of the candidate receiving the fewest votes shall be stricken, and a new ballot shall be taken. The balloting shall continue in this manner until one candidate shall have received the majority of the votes cast.

## **Recommendation #2: Amendment to the bylaws for WELS Retirement Program Commission (submitted by the commission)**

### **Synod Bylaws**

#### **Section 7.40**

##### **WELS Retirement Program Commission**

(a) There shall be a WELS Retirement Program Commission that shall serve the Synodical Council by administering the synod's retirement program, including the synod's pension plan and the synod's 403(b) (9) retirement income account plan (the "Plans"), in keeping with the Plan document(s) approved by the Synodical Council.

(b) The commission shall consist of ~~one pastor, one teacher and four laymen~~ not less than four nor more than nine members, including at least one pastor and at least one teacher, appointed by the Synodical Council. Appointments shall be for a term of four years. Members may succeed themselves twice. A vacancy on the commission shall be filled as soon as practicable by appointment by the Synodical Council. The president's designee, if one is appointed per 7.40(d), shall be an ex-officio member of the ~~board of directors~~ commission and shall serve in addition to the members appointed by the Synodical Council.

## **Recommendation #3: Amendment to the bylaws for the WELS VEBA Commission (submitted by the commission)**

### **Synod Bylaws**

#### **Section 7.50**

##### **WELS VEBA Commission**

(a) There shall be a WELS Voluntary Employees' Beneficiary Association (VEBA) Commission that shall serve the Synodical Council by operating and administering the group medical plan(s) approved by the Synodical Council for the benefit of the synod's workers and such other workers within the synod who may qualify under the plan(s).

(b) The commission shall consist of ~~one pastor, one teacher, and four laymen~~ not less than four nor more than nine members, including at least one pastor and at least one teacher, appointed by the Synodical Council. Appointments shall be for a term of four years. Members may succeed themselves twice. A vacancy on the commission shall be filled as soon as practicable by appointment by the Synodical Council. The president's designee, if one is appointed per 7.50(d), shall be an ex-officio member of the ~~board of directors~~ commission and shall serve in addition to the members appointed by the Synodical Council.

# Financials

The financial information listed on the following pages summarizes the ministry financial plan (budget) approved for the 2025–27 biennium by the 2025 convention delegates, outlined on pp. 34 and 35 in Resolution No. 1 from Committee #7: Ministry Financial Plan (Budget).

## **Proposed ministry financial plan for 2025–26 and 2026–27 biennium (FY26/FY27 biennium)**

### ***Development of ministry financial plan***

Planning for the FY26/FY27 biennium was initiated in April 2024 or about 14 months before the start of the biennium. At that time, the Synodical Council approved initial planning assumptions that would increase synod operating support levels by an average of 3.5 percent annually, including overall wage increases of 3.5 percent in FY26 and 2.0 percent in FY27, healthcare cost increases of 10.0 percent annually and retirement plan expenses remaining flat each year. The Synodical Council asked the WELS president to work with the areas of ministry to draft an initial ministry financial plan using this level of synod support for its review at their fall 2024 meeting. With this general direction by the Synodical Council, the areas of ministry, schools, and support services subsidiaries, working with their boards and commissions, proceeded to develop their ministry plans.

In late summer/early fall 2024, initial planning meetings were held with the areas of ministry, ministerial education schools, and support service subsidiaries to walk through their plans. Each individual plan was then consolidated into an overall Synod ministry financial plan for review by the Synodical Council in November 2024. In April 2025, the WELS president submitted a slightly modified ministry financial plan to the Synodical Council, updated for the carryforward impact of current FY25 financial results and slightly modified CMO projections for FY26 and FY27 based on 2025 subscriptions. After review of the proposed plan, the Synodical Council approved the FY26/FY27 biennium plan as presented.

### ***Congregation Mission Offerings***

Prior to 2019, CMO had historically been flat to slightly declining since 2008. However, in each of the last six calendar years there has been an increase in CMO. Calendar year reported CMO for 2024 was \$23.9 million, an increase of \$511,000 (or 2.2 percent) over the prior year and \$708,000 (or 3.0 percent) better than 2024 subscriptions. Calendar year 2025 subscriptions serve as the baseline for CMO projections in the FY26/FY27 biennium. CMO subscriptions for 2025 are \$23.7 million, down 0.9 percent compared to actual 2024 CMO receipts but the highest level of subscriptions on record. CMO projections included in the ministry financial plan assume a 0.5 percent increase for both calendar year 2026 and 2027 based on recent CMO trends.

### ***Summary of ministry financial plan for FY26 & FY27***

The proposed ministry financial plan for FY26 includes synod support for operating expenses of \$35.9 million, other expenses in areas of ministry and at the schools of \$66.4 million, and \$18.8 million of expense at the subsidiaries for a total ministry financial plan of \$121.1 million. The \$35.9 million of synod support is proposed to be allocated to the areas of ministry as follows:

- Home Missions—\$6.6 million (or 18.3 percent of total synod support)
- World Missions—\$7.9 million (or 22.0 percent of total synod support)
- Ministerial Education—\$9.2 million (or 25.6 percent of total synod support)
- Congregation & District Ministry—\$7.9 million (or 22.0 percent of total synod support)
- Ministry Support—\$4.3 million (or 12.1 percent of total synod support)

The FY27 proposed plan includes synod support for operating expenses of \$36.6 million, other expenses in areas of ministry and at the schools of \$64.4 million, and \$17.6 million of expense at the subsidiaries for a total ministry financial plan of \$118.6 million. The \$36.6 million of synod support is proposed to be allocated to the areas of ministry as follows:

- Home Missions—\$6.8 million (or 18.6 percent of total synod support)
- World Missions—\$8.1 million (or 22.2 percent of total synod support)
- Ministerial Education—\$9.4 million (or 25.8 percent of total synod support)
- Congregation & District Ministry—\$7.8 million (or 21.2 percent of total synod support)
- Ministry Support—\$4.5 million (or 12.2 percent of total synod support)

The proposed financial plan relies heavily on the drawdown of the Financial Stabilization Fund, approximately \$8.0 million over the FY26/FY27 biennium—and on areas of ministry and schools using \$9.9 million of reserves in addition to other funding sources or one-time funds to sustain ongoing ministry.

The following is a brief summary of the ministry financial plan for FY26 and FY27 for the four ministerial education schools and support service subsidiaries.

### **Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary**

The financial position of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary is anticipated to remain strong as they project a combined surplus without donor restrictions of \$128,000 over the biennium.

- Total support without donor restrictions for FY26 is forecast to be \$8.5 million driven by anticipated average on-campus enrollment of 111 students plus a class of 35 vicars. Total expenses for FY26 are forecast to be \$8.2 million, leading to a surplus of \$345,000.
- Total support without donor restrictions for FY27 is forecast to be \$8.5 million driven by anticipated average on-campus enrollment of 98 students plus a class of 39 vicars. Total expenses for FY27 are forecast to be \$8.7 million, leading to a deficit of \$218,000.
- Ending FY27 reserves without donor restrictions are anticipated to be \$13.3 million.

### **Martin Luther College**

The financial position of Martin Luther College is anticipated to remain stable over the next biennium despite continued enrollment challenges. Martin Luther College is projecting a combined deficit without donor restrictions of \$757,000 over the biennium.

- Total support without donor restrictions for FY26 is forecast to be \$28.4 million driven by anticipated average enrollment of 590 students. Total expenses for FY26 are forecast to be \$28.6 million, leading to a deficit of \$255,000.
- Total support without donor restrictions for FY27 is forecast to be \$26.4 million driven by anticipated average enrollment of 600 students. Total expenses for FY27 are forecast to be \$26.9 million, leading to a deficit of \$502,000.
- Ending FY27 reserves without donor restrictions are anticipated to be \$14.6 million.

### **Luther Preparatory School**

Luther Preparatory School's financial position is anticipated to remain stable over the next biennium with a combined surplus without donor restrictions of \$17,000 over the biennium.

- Total support without donor restrictions for FY26 is forecast to be \$10.6 million driven by anticipated average enrollment of 415 students. Total expenses for FY26 are forecast to be \$10.6 million, leading to a surplus of \$3,000.
- Total support without donor restrictions for FY27 is forecast to be \$10.3 million driven by anticipated average enrollment of 415 students. Total expenses for FY27 are forecast to be \$10.3 million, leading to a surplus of \$14,000.
- Ending FY27 reserves without donor restrictions are anticipated to be \$6.4 million.

### **Michigan Lutheran Seminary**

Michigan Lutheran Seminary's financial position is anticipated to remain stable over the next biennium with a combined surplus without donor restrictions of \$30,000 over the biennium.

- Total support without donor restrictions for FY26 is forecast to be \$4.7 million driven by anticipated average enrollment of 190 students. Total expenses for FY26 are forecast to be \$4.7 million, leading to a surplus of \$23,000.
- Total support without donor restrictions for FY27 is forecast to be \$4.8 million driven by anticipated average enrollment of 191 students. Total expenses for FY27 are forecast to be \$4.8 million, leading to a surplus of \$7,000.
- Ending FY27 reserves without donor restrictions are anticipated to be \$1.9 million.

### **WELS Church Extension Fund**

The financial position of WELS Church Extension Fund is anticipated to remain strong as they project a combined surplus without donor restrictions of \$2.4 million over the biennium.

- Total support without donor restrictions for FY26 is forecast to be \$12.1 million. Total expenses for FY26 are forecast to be \$11.9 million, leading to a surplus of \$223,000.
- Total support without donor restrictions for FY27 is forecast to be \$12.7 million. Total expenses for FY27 are forecast to be \$10.5 million, leading to a surplus of \$2.2 million.
- Ending FY27 reserves without donor restrictions are anticipated to be \$97.8 million.

### **WELS Foundation**

The financial position of WELS Foundation is anticipated to remain strong. WELS Foundation will continue to work with the Ministry of Christian Giving to encourage new gift instruments and is privileged to continue to administer and distribute donor directed gifts to various WELS ministries. WELS Foundation is also expected to continue to distribute planned grants to WELS for general operations of \$400,000 for both FY26 and FY27.

### **WELS Investment Funds**

WELS Investment Funds does not have reserves because it invests and administers funds for others. The low-cost operating structure is managed through an administrative fee currently set at 16 basis points. The administrative fee may fluctuate from plan levels based on actual market conditions and the size of the overall WELS Investment Funds portfolio.

### **Northwestern Publishing House**

While in a stable financial position, Northwestern Publishing House is projecting to improve their financial situation through a combined surplus without donor restrictions of \$1.3 million over the biennium.

- Total support without donor restrictions for FY26 is forecast to be \$5.9 million. Total expenses without donor restrictions for FY26 are forecast to be \$5.3 million, leading to a surplus of \$633,000.
- Total support without donor restrictions for FY27 is forecast to be \$6.0 million. Total expenses without donor restrictions for FY27 are forecast to be \$5.4 million, leading to a surplus of \$668,000.
- Ending FY27 reserves without donor restrictions are anticipated to be \$17.3 million.

### ***Other unrestricted support***

The following assumptions have been used related to unrestricted support (other than CMO) managed within the Financial Stabilization Fund.

- **Grants (\$2,859,000 in FY26 and \$2,865,000 in FY27)**—The majority of the grants come from the Schwan Foundation and are projected to be approximately \$1.9 million per year for FY26 and FY27. WELS Foundation's unrestricted net asset policy facilitates the transfer of undesignated net assets to support WELS general ministries with projected grants of approximately \$400,000 per year for FY26 and FY27. Other grants include distributions of approximately \$580,000 per year from multiple sources.
- **Gifts from individuals (\$1,450,000 in both FY26 and FY27)**—The vast majority of these unrestricted gifts come from individuals and congregations and are projected to be approximately \$1.2 million per year for FY26 and FY27. In addition, gifts are forecasted from various special appeals for WELS Mission & Ministry. Gifts to these programs are projected to be approximately \$250,000 per year for FY26 and FY27.
- **Unrestricted bequests (\$2,300,000 in both FY26 and FY27)**—Unrestricted bequests represent estate gifts to WELS without donor restrictions and are projected to be approximately \$2.3 million per year for FY26 and FY27. These estimates are based on recent trends, however, due to the unpredictable timing of the distribution of an estate gift, they are difficult to project.

- **Investment income (\$2,800,000 in FY26 and \$2,500,000 in FY27)**—Investment income represents returns on non-endowed funds, the continued investment returns from existing annuity contracts, and other investable reserves. Current annuity contracts will terminate upon the death of each annuitant. Given current annuity contract returns of between 3.0 percent and 4.0 percent and expected decreasing interest rates and levels of investable reserves, investment income is projected to decrease from current levels in each year of the next biennium.
- **Endowment distributions & Other (\$370,000 in FY26 and \$390,000 in FY27)**—Includes distributions from WELS operating endowment funds and other miscellaneous income sources including but not limited to subsidiary rental payments as defined by the Synodical Council's Building Fund policy, the synod's workers compensation and group insurance dividend programs, which fluctuate based on WELS' overall annual loss ratio, and proceeds from the corporate credit card rebate program. Slight increases during the biennium were assumed.

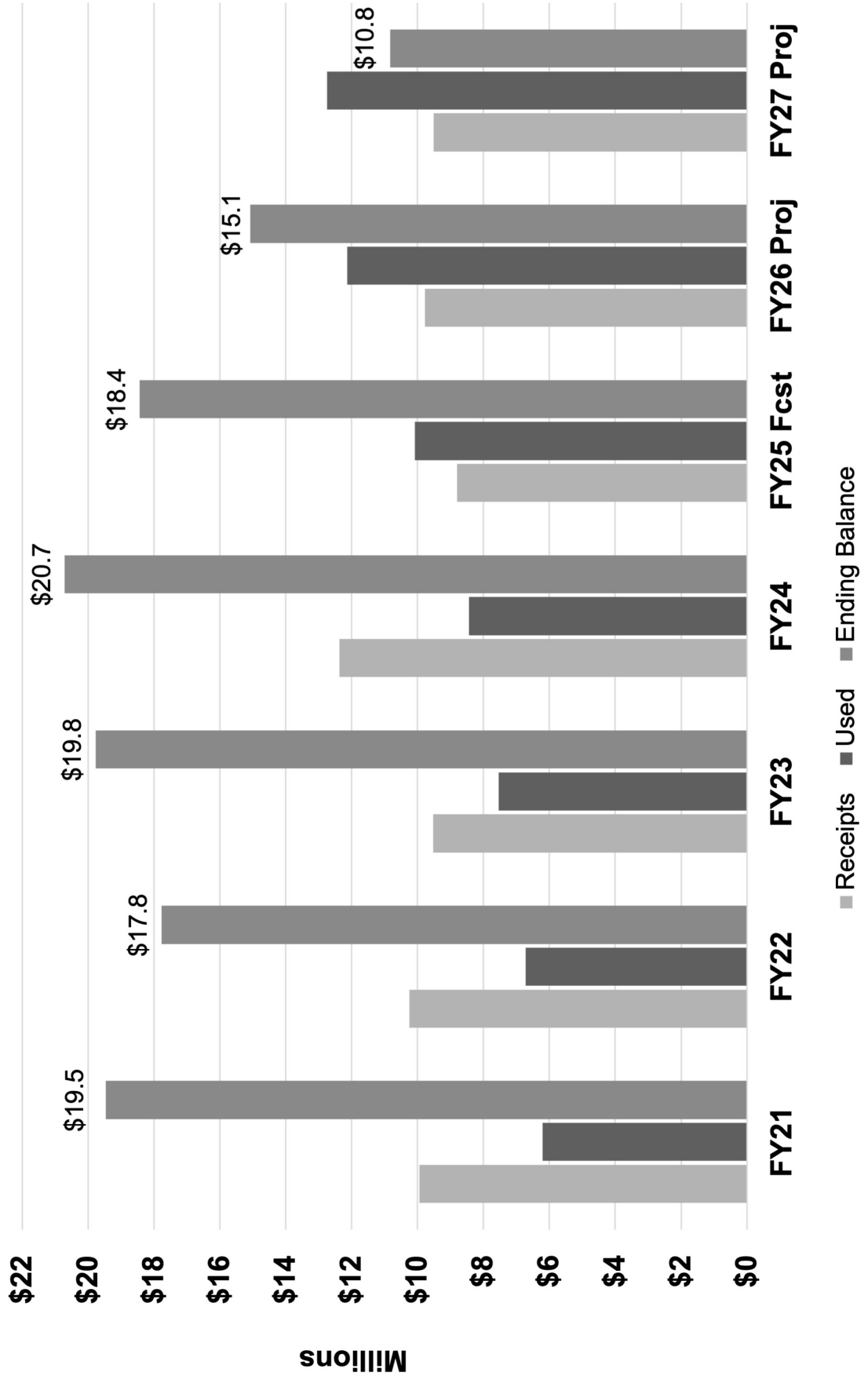
The cumulative total of these sources of support into the Financial Stabilization Fund are projected to be approximately \$9.8 million in FY26 and \$9.5 million in FY27. With planned FY26 synod support of \$35.9 million and CMO projections of \$23.8 million, transfers out of the Financial Stabilization Fund for synod operating support during FY26 are planned to be approximately \$12.1 million. As directed by the Synodical Council starting in FY24, there is also an annual transfer of \$1.0 million from the Financial Stabilization Fund to the Synod Capital Projects Fund in each year of the next biennium. The projected support in FY26 of \$9.8 million, combined with the transfers out for synod operating support and the Synod Capital Projects Fund totaling \$13.1 million results in a forecasted reduction in the balance of the Financial Stabilization Fund of approximately \$3.4 million to end FY26 with a balance of approximately \$15.1 million. In FY27, synod support levels are forecasted to reach approximately \$36.6 million with CMO projections of \$23.9 million leading to an increased level of transfers out of the Financial Stabilization Fund for synod operating support at \$12.7 million. This transfer, along with the \$1.0 million transfer to the Synod Capital Projects Fund results in a forecasted reduction in the balance of the Financial Stabilization Fund of approximately \$4.3 million to end FY27 with a balance of approximately \$10.8 million.

Two primary factors (other than the noted levels of non-CMO unrestricted support above) that could impact the balance of the Financial Stabilization Fund in the upcoming biennium include how each area of ministry performs as compared to their operating budgets funded from synod support as well as the level of CMO received as compared to projections. If savings are seen within area of ministry operating budgets and/or congregations exceed the projected annual 0.5 percent increase in CMO, less will need to be transferred from the Financial Stabilization Fund to cover WELS' operating expenses. However, if CMO receipts fall short of the projected annual 0.5 percent increase, additional transfers out of the Financial Stabilization Fund may be needed (which would draw the balance of the Financial Stabilization Fund lower) or spending reductions may be deemed necessary.

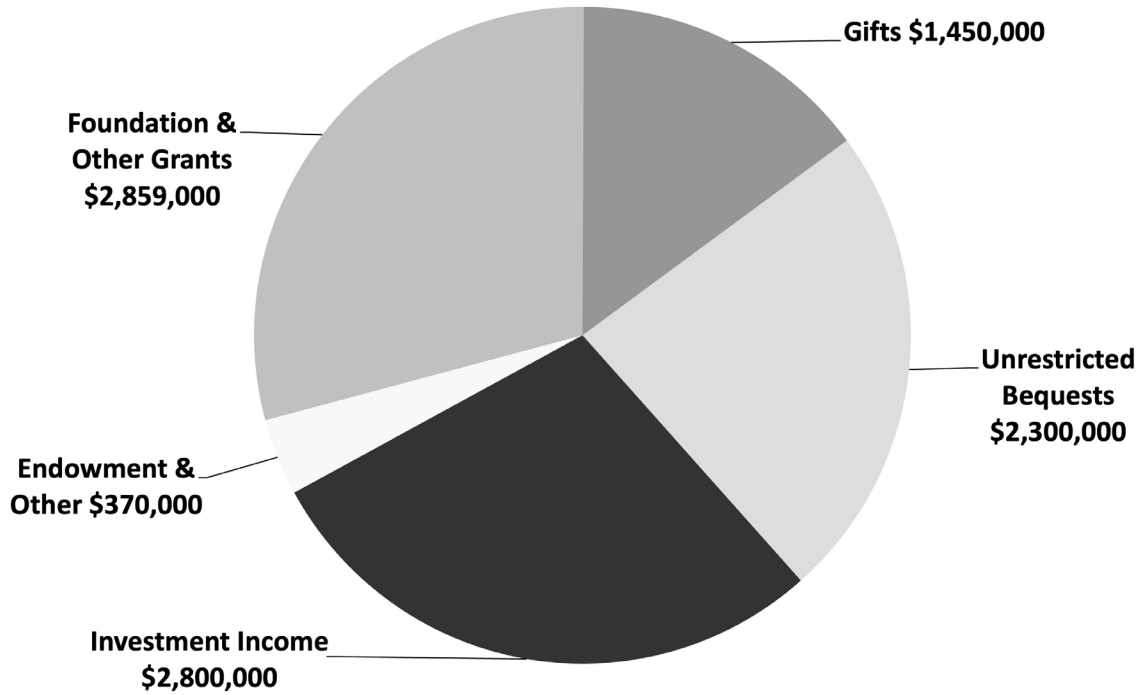
We are thankful to be able to present this ministry financial plan for FY26 and FY27 trusting in God's gracious care for us in our Lord Jesus. At the same time, we also recognize that such trust does not diminish the responsibility God himself entrusts to us to be wise stewards of the finances for the overall synod and its areas of ministry, ministerial education schools, and support service subsidiaries. We ask for God to provide us with the wisdom and leadership to carry out these plans for the next biennium.

*Mr. Kyle Egan, reporter*

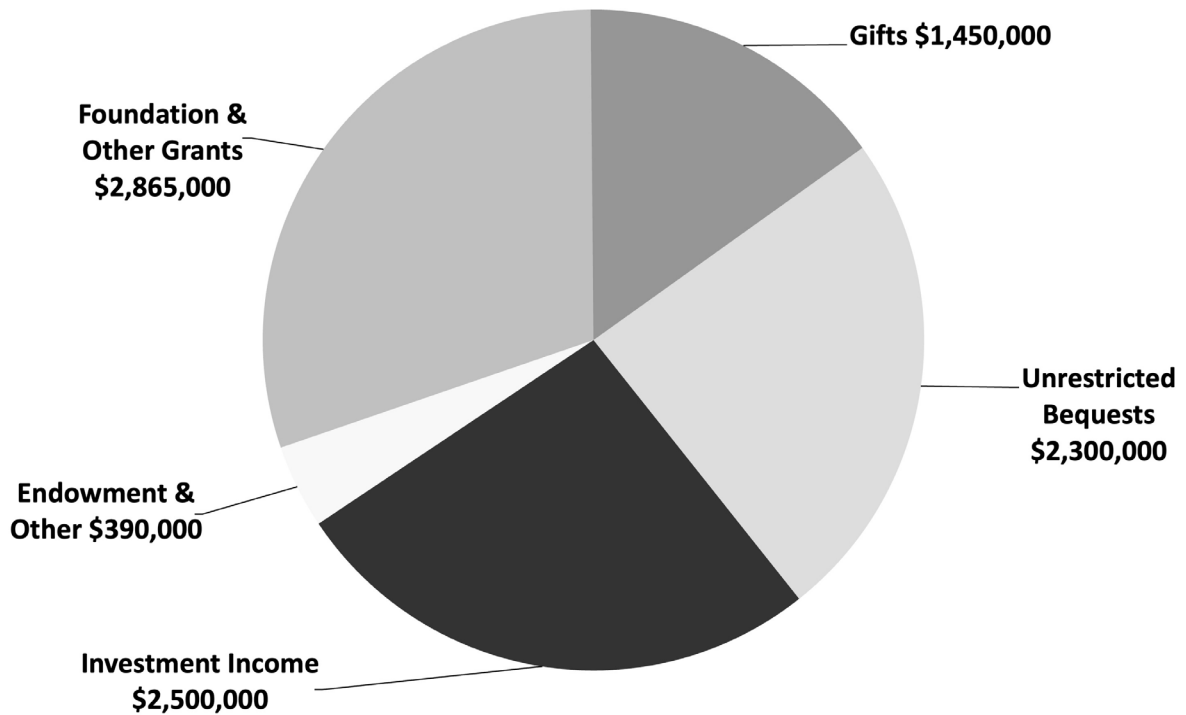
# Financial Stabilization Fund



**FY 2025-26 Support  
Financial Stabilization Fund  
\$9,779,000**



**FY 2026-27 Support  
Financial Stabilization Fund  
\$9,505,000**



**Ministry Financial Plan Summary of Expenses  
Funded by Synod Support and Special Funds, Gifts, Tuition and Fees**

SUMMARY	FY24 Actual			FY25 Plan			FY26 Plan			FY27 Plan		
	Synod Support	Special, gifts, tuition, fees	Total Expenses	Synod Support	Special, gifts, tuition, fees	Total Expenses	Synod Support	Special, gifts, tuition, fees	Total Expenses	Synod Support	Special, gifts, tuition, fees	Total Expenses
	FTE			FTE			FTE			FTE		
Home Missions	6,120,000	5,341,956	11,461,956	6,314,000	7,367,000	13,681,000	6,580,000	8,812,000	15,392,000	6,800,000	8,858,000	15,658,000
World Missions	7,369,000	5,642,133	13,011,133	7,597,000	7,373,000	14,970,000	7,900,000	5,970,000	13,870,000	8,140,000	6,164,000	14,304,000
Ministerial Education	8,653,520	38,158,645	46,812,165	8,947,000	42,796,700	51,743,700	9,179,000	45,193,000	54,372,000	9,447,000	43,854,000	53,301,000
Congregation & District Ministry	6,363,297	2,705,102	9,068,399	7,229,000	2,756,000	9,985,000	7,882,000	3,089,000	10,971,000	7,755,000	2,260,000	10,015,000
Ministry Support	3,527,632	2,521,986	6,049,618	4,076,000	2,722,000	6,798,000	4,352,000	3,305,000	7,657,000	4,476,000	3,248,000	7,724,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>32,033,449</b>	<b>54,369,822</b>	<b>86,403,271</b>	<b>34,163,000</b>	<b>63,014,700</b>	<b>97,177,700</b>	<b>35,893,000</b>	<b>66,369,000</b>	<b>102,262,000</b>	<b>36,618,000</b>	<b>64,384,000</b>	<b>101,002,000</b>

Synod Support	FY24			FY25			FY26			FY27		
	% of total	% change		% of total	% change		% of total	% change		% of total	% change	
Home Missions	19.1%	3.1%	3.2%	18.5%	3.2%	4.2%	18.3%	4.2%	19.6%	18.6%	3.3%	
World Missions	23.0%	3.1%	3.1%	22.2%	3.1%	4.0%	22.0%	4.0%	19.0%	22.2%	3.0%	
Ministerial Education	27.0%	3.1%	3.4%	26.2%	3.4%	2.6%	25.6%	2.6%	68.1%	25.8%	2.9%	
Congregation & District Ministry	19.9%	3.3%	13.6%	21.2%	13.6%	9.0%	22.0%	9.0%	12.1%	21.2%	-1.6%	
Ministry Support	11.0%	7.4%	15.5%	11.9%	15.5%	6.8%	12.1%	6.8%	5.0%	12.2%	2.8%	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>3.6%</b>	<b>6.6%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>6.6%</b>	<b>5.1%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>5.1%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>2.0%</b>	

Special fund expenses	FY24			FY25			FY26			FY27		
	% of total	% change		% of total	% change		% of total	% change		% of total	% change	
Home Missions	9.8%	21.7%	37.9%	11.7%	19.4%	19.6%	13.3%	19.6%	13.8%	13.8%	0.5%	
World Missions	10.4%	-8.3%	30.7%	11.7%	15.1%	-19.0%	9.0%	-19.0%	9.6%	9.6%	3.2%	
Ministerial Education	70.2%	3.6%	12.2%	67.9%	10.5%	5.6%	68.1%	5.6%	68.1%	68.1%	-3.0%	
Congregation & District Ministry	5.0%	15.1%	1.9%	4.4%	10.1%	12.1%	4.7%	12.1%	3.5%	3.5%	-26.8%	
Ministry Support	4.6%	-15.5%	7.9%	4.3%	7.9%	21.4%	5.0%	21.4%	5.0%	5.0%	-1.7%	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>3.2%</b>	<b>15.9%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>12.5%</b>	<b>5.3%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>5.3%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>-3.0%</b>	

Total Expenses	FY24			FY25			FY26			FY27		
	% of total	% change		% of total	% change		% of total	% change		% of total	% change	
Home Missions	13.3%	11.0%	12.5%	14.1%	12.5%	12.5%	15.1%	12.5%	15.5%	15.5%	1.7%	
World Missions	15.1%	-2.2%	15.1%	15.4%	15.1%	-7.3%	13.6%	-7.3%	14.2%	14.2%	3.1%	
Ministerial Education	54.2%	3.5%	10.5%	53.2%	10.5%	5.1%	53.2%	5.1%	52.8%	52.8%	-2.0%	
Congregation & District Ministry	10.5%	6.6%	10.1%	10.3%	10.1%	9.9%	10.7%	9.9%	9.9%	9.9%	-8.7%	
Ministry Support	7.0%	-3.5%	12.4%	7.0%	12.4%	12.6%	7.5%	12.6%	7.6%	7.6%	0.9%	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>3.3%</b>	<b>12.5%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>12.5%</b>	<b>5.2%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>5.2%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>-1.2%</b>	

Support Services Subsidiaries	FY24 Actual			FY25 Plan			FY26 Plan			FY27 Plan		
	Synod Support	Special, gifts, tuition, fees	Total Expenses	Synod Support	Special, gifts, tuition, fees	Total Expenses	Synod Support	Special, gifts, tuition, fees	Total Expenses	Synod Support	Special, gifts, tuition, fees	Total Expenses
	FTE			FTE			FTE			FTE		
WELS Church Extension Fund	-	6,014,230	6,014,230	-	7,025,000	7,025,000	-	11,877,000	11,877,000	-	10,520,000	10,520,000
WELS Foundation	-	1,118,083	1,118,083	-	1,157,000	1,157,000	-	1,127,000	1,127,000	-	1,140,000	1,140,000
WELS Investment Funds	-	497,882	497,882	-	535,000	535,000	-	554,000	554,000	-	572,000	572,000
Northwestern Publishing House	-	4,814,654	4,814,654	-	5,017,000	5,017,000	-	5,284,000	5,284,000	-	5,358,000	5,358,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>12,444,849</b>	<b>12,444,849</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>13,734,000</b>	<b>13,734,000</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>18,842,000</b>	<b>18,842,000</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>17,590,000</b>	<b>17,590,000</b>

<b>TOTAL WELS &amp; SUBSIDIARIES</b>	<b>32,033,449</b>	<b>66,814,671</b>	<b>98,848,120</b>	<b>34,163,000</b>	<b>76,748,700</b>	<b>110,911,700</b>	<b>35,893,000</b>	<b>85,211,000</b>	<b>121,104,000</b>	<b>36,618,000</b>	<b>81,974,000</b>	<b>118,592,000</b>
			<b>524.57</b>			<b>541.77</b>			<b>541.20</b>			<b>536.60</b>

**Ministry Financial Plan Summary of Expenses  
Funded by Synod Support and Special Funds, Gifts, Tuition and Fees**

	FY24 Actual			FY25 Plan			FY26 Plan			FY27 Plan					
	Synod Support	Special, gifts, tuition, fees	Total Expenses	Synod Support	Special, gifts, tuition, fees	Total Expenses	FTE	Synod Support	Special, gifts, tuition, fees	Total Expenses	FTE	Synod Support	Special, gifts, tuition, fees	Total Expenses	FTE
<b>Home Missions</b>															
Board and Administration	844,984	146,600	991,584	937,433	138,700	1,076,133	5.25	1,008,500	113,000	1,121,500	5.25	1,041,400	113,000	1,154,400	5.25
Vicars in Missions	160,969	29,826	190,795	259,135	-	259,135	0.00	260,000	-	260,000	0.00	275,000	25,000	300,000	0.00
Campus Ministry	441,074	109,716	550,790	446,600	132,980	579,580	1.50	706,600	1,000	707,600	1.50	726,500	1,000	727,500	1.50
Multi-cultural Ministry	731,594	857,753	1,589,347	788,777	1,411,818	2,200,595	1.00	743,000	665,600	1,408,600	1.00	718,000	667,000	1,385,000	1.00
Outreach Ministry	3,941,379	3,451,926	7,393,305	3,882,055	4,969,545	8,851,600	3.00	3,861,900	6,958,400	10,820,300	3.00	4,039,100	6,998,000	11,037,100	3.00
Joint Mission Council Ministry	-	746,135	746,135	-	713,957	713,957	5.38	-	1,074,000	1,074,000	5.38	-	1,054,000	1,054,000	5.38
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>6,120,000</b>	<b>5,341,956</b>	<b>11,461,956</b>	<b>6,314,000</b>	<b>7,367,000</b>	<b>13,681,000</b>	<b>16.13</b>	<b>6,580,000</b>	<b>8,812,000</b>	<b>15,392,000</b>	<b>16.13</b>	<b>6,800,000</b>	<b>8,858,000</b>	<b>15,658,000</b>	<b>16.13</b>

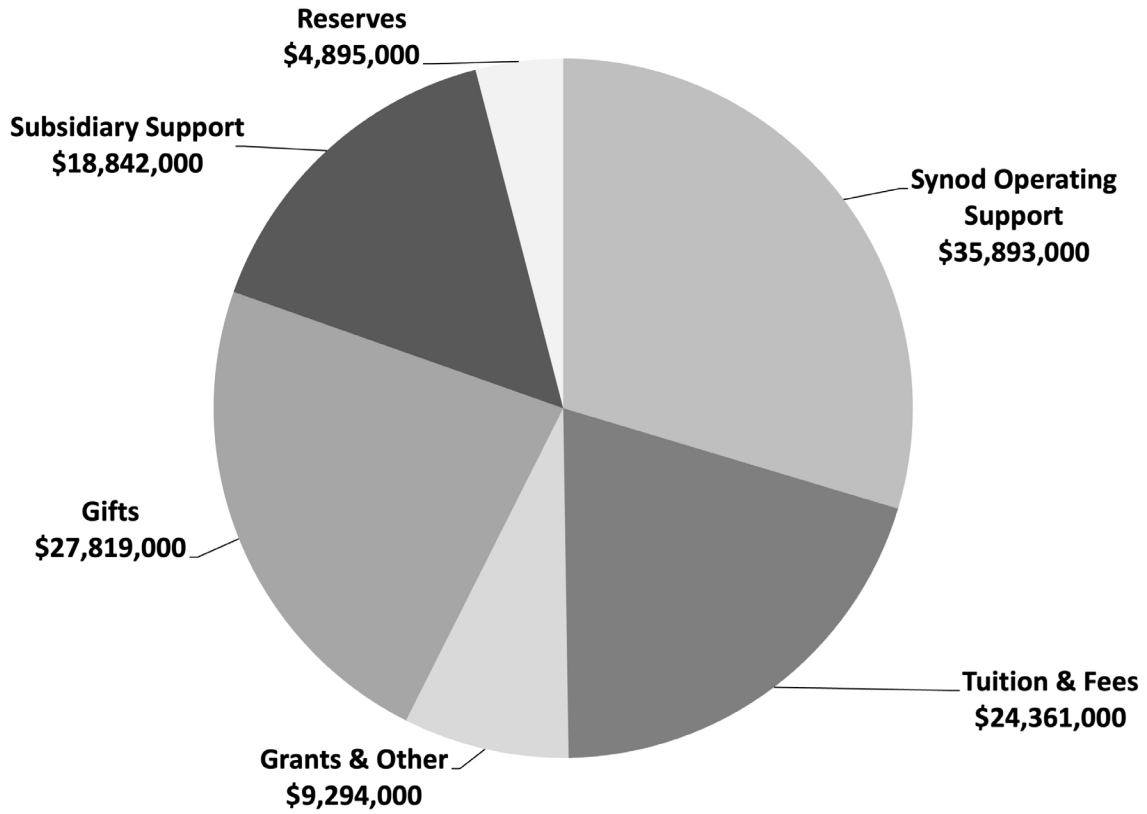
<b>World Missions</b>															
Board and Administration	591,120	168,808	759,928	657,646	404,050	1,061,696	5.50	491,000	100,000	591,000	4.00	504,000	100,000	604,000	4.00
Africa	1,056,309	892,167	1,948,476	929,813	1,665,210	2,595,023	8.70	1,395,000	863,000	2,258,000	8.70	1,412,000	935,000	2,347,000	8.70
Europe	717,175	778,984	1,496,159	737,196	436,658	1,173,854	3.50	890,000	419,000	1,309,000	2.50	910,000	419,000	1,329,000	2.50
Latin America	1,350,151	196,214	1,546,365	1,406,006	162,789	1,568,795	11.00	1,390,000	101,000	1,491,000	11.00	1,467,000	110,000	1,577,000	11.00
Native America	315,528	473,115	788,643	356,372	453,572	809,944	4.50	489,000	237,000	726,000	4.50	452,000	213,000	665,000	4.50
Asia	1,653,657	2,116,182	3,769,839	1,578,659	3,168,600	4,747,259	17.00	1,679,000	2,983,000	4,612,000	17.00	1,821,000	3,206,000	5,027,000	17.00
New Initiatives	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.00	-	90,000	90,000	0.00	-	90,000	90,000	0.00
Multi-Language Publications	1,349,659	514,650	1,864,309	1,769,308	320,000	2,089,308	8.00	1,134,000	462,000	1,596,000	8.00	1,131,000	331,000	1,462,000	8.00
Joint Mission Council	-	432,483	432,483	-	599,621	599,621	3.00	-	463,000	463,000	3.00	-	475,000	475,000	3.00
Missionary Support	335,401	69,530	404,931	162,000	162,500	324,500	1.00	432,000	302,000	734,000	1.50	443,000	285,000	728,000	1.50
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7,369,000</b>	<b>5,642,133</b>	<b>13,011,133</b>	<b>7,597,000</b>	<b>7,373,000</b>	<b>14,970,000</b>	<b>62.20</b>	<b>7,900,000</b>	<b>5,970,000</b>	<b>13,870,000</b>	<b>60.20</b>	<b>8,140,000</b>	<b>6,164,000</b>	<b>14,304,000</b>	<b>60.20</b>

<b>Ministerial Education</b>															
Board and Administration	220,343	1,199,847	1,420,190	265,000	1,270,000	1,535,000	1.00	236,500	1,290,000	1,526,500	1.00	239,000	1,380,000	1,619,000	1.00
Retiree Health Care	27,177	-	27,177	25,000	-	25,000	0.00	26,500	-	26,500	0.00	25,000	-	25,000	0.00
Ministry Recruitment Counselors	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.00	-	783,000	783,000	5.00	-	840,000	840,000	5.00
Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary	867,000	6,036,927	6,903,927	893,000	7,624,000	8,517,000	39.00	918,000	7,242,000	8,160,000	38.75	945,000	7,802,000	8,747,000	38.50
Martin Luther College	3,864,000	20,814,320	24,678,320	3,980,000	23,313,000	27,293,000	194.74	4,098,000	24,507,000	28,605,000	186.50	4,221,000	22,719,000	26,940,000	182.15
Luther Preparatory School	2,488,000	6,872,875	9,360,875	2,562,000	7,161,000	9,723,000	68.50	2,640,000	7,948,000	10,588,000	71.24	2,718,000	7,604,000	10,322,000	71.24
Michigan Lutheran Seminary	1,187,000	3,234,676	4,421,676	1,222,000	3,428,700	4,650,700	40.05	1,260,000	3,423,000	4,683,000	43.00	1,299,000	3,509,000	4,808,000	43.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8,653,520</b>	<b>38,158,645</b>	<b>46,812,165</b>	<b>8,947,000</b>	<b>42,796,700</b>	<b>51,743,700</b>	<b>343.29</b>	<b>9,179,000</b>	<b>45,193,000</b>	<b>54,372,000</b>	<b>345.49</b>	<b>9,447,000</b>	<b>43,854,000</b>	<b>53,301,000</b>	<b>340.89</b>

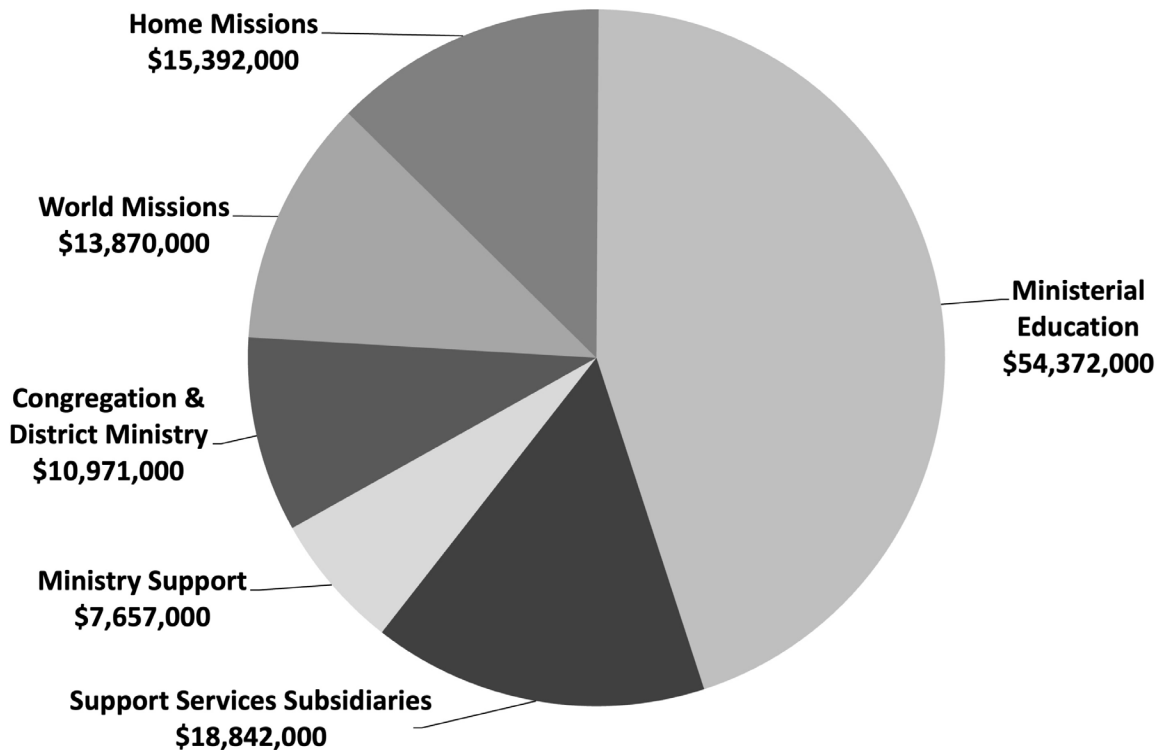
**Ministry Financial Plan Summary of Expenses  
Funded by Synod Support and Special Funds, Gifts, Tuition and Fees**

	FY24 Actual			FY25 Plan			FY26 Plan			FY27 Plan			
	Synod Support	Special, gifts, tuition, fees	Total Expenses	Synod Support	Special, gifts, tuition, fees	Total Expenses	Synod Support	Special, gifts, tuition, fees	Total Expenses	Synod Support	Special, gifts, tuition, fees	Total Expenses	FTE
<b>Congregation &amp; District Ministry</b>													
Congregation Services	1,565,000	1,926,258	3,491,258	1,560,000	2,537,000	4,097,000	1,622,000	2,768,000	4,390,000	1,684,000	2,034,000	3,718,000	17.75
Conference of Presidents	100,046	(2,355)	97,691	124,000	50,000	174,000	132,400	25,000	157,400	135,000	25,000	160,000	0.00
Christian Giving	2,063,051	(5,643)	2,057,408	2,588,000	8,000	2,596,000	2,665,000	10,000	2,675,000	2,746,000	10,000	2,756,000	20.48
Communication Services	755,925	103,089	859,014	1,094,000	101,000	1,195,000	1,357,000	88,000	1,445,000	1,145,000	93,000	1,238,000	10.30
District Ministries	1,413,392	36,902	1,450,294	1,434,000	-	1,434,000	1,543,000	50,000	1,593,000	1,614,000	50,000	1,664,000	1.00
Convention	130,989	96,042	227,031	-	-	-	135,000	100,000	235,000	-	-	-	0.00
CICR	10,399	550,809	561,208	44,000	60,000	104,000	42,600	48,000	90,600	46,000	48,000	94,000	0.00
Special Support	23,311	-	23,311	70,000	-	70,000	70,000	-	70,000	70,000	-	70,000	0.00
Support	301,184	-	301,184	315,000	-	315,000	315,000	-	315,000	315,000	-	315,000	0.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>6,363,297</b>	<b>2,705,102</b>	<b>9,068,399</b>	<b>7,229,000</b>	<b>2,756,000</b>	<b>9,985,000</b>	<b>7,882,000</b>	<b>3,085,000</b>	<b>10,971,000</b>	<b>7,755,000</b>	<b>2,260,000</b>	<b>10,015,000</b>	<b>49.53</b>
<b>Ministry Support</b>													
Facilities	213,873	389,567	603,440	310,000	320,000	630,000	322,000	930,000	1,252,000	334,000	858,000	1,192,000	0.50
Synodical Council	66,205	468,672	534,877	86,000	512,000	598,000	86,000	525,000	611,000	87,000	540,000	627,000	0.00
Synod Presidium	362,816	89,407	452,223	408,920	100,000	508,920	429,000	-	429,000	436,000	-	436,000	2.00
Special Task Forces	102	-	102	2,000	-	2,000	2,000	-	2,000	2,000	-	2,000	0.00
Archives	96,599	-	96,599	109,080	-	109,080	136,000	-	136,000	141,000	-	141,000	1.00
Technology	1,576,916	2,415	1,579,331	1,782,000	40,000	1,822,000	1,970,000	-	1,970,000	2,015,000	-	2,015,000	14.00
Financial Services	925,880	-	925,880	1,050,000	-	1,050,000	1,092,000	-	1,092,000	1,136,000	-	1,136,000	9.50
Human Resources	285,241	415	285,656	328,000	-	328,000	315,000	-	315,000	325,000	-	325,000	1.80
CAR	-	1,571,510	1,571,510	-	1,750,000	1,750,000	315,000	-	1,850,000	-	1,850,000	1,850,000	2.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3,527,632</b>	<b>2,521,986</b>	<b>6,049,618</b>	<b>4,076,000</b>	<b>2,722,000</b>	<b>6,798,000</b>	<b>4,352,000</b>	<b>3,305,000</b>	<b>7,657,000</b>	<b>4,476,000</b>	<b>3,248,000</b>	<b>7,724,000</b>	<b>30.80</b>

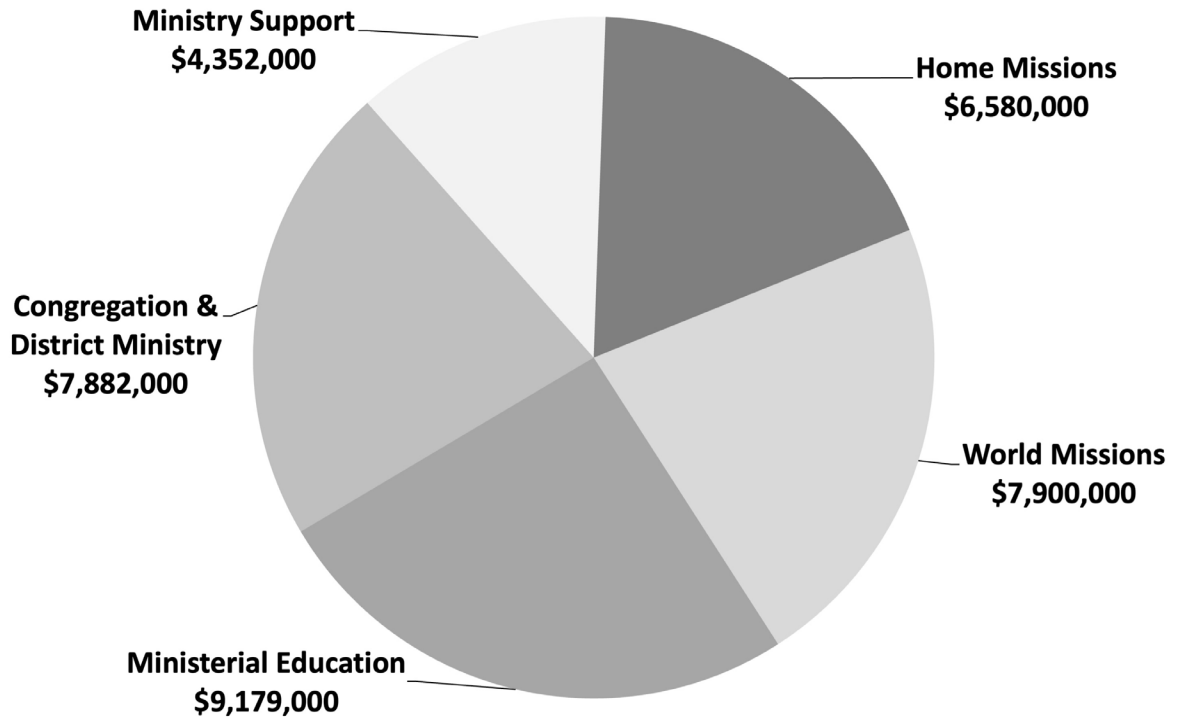
**FY 2025-26 Total Ministry Plan Support  
\$121,104,000**



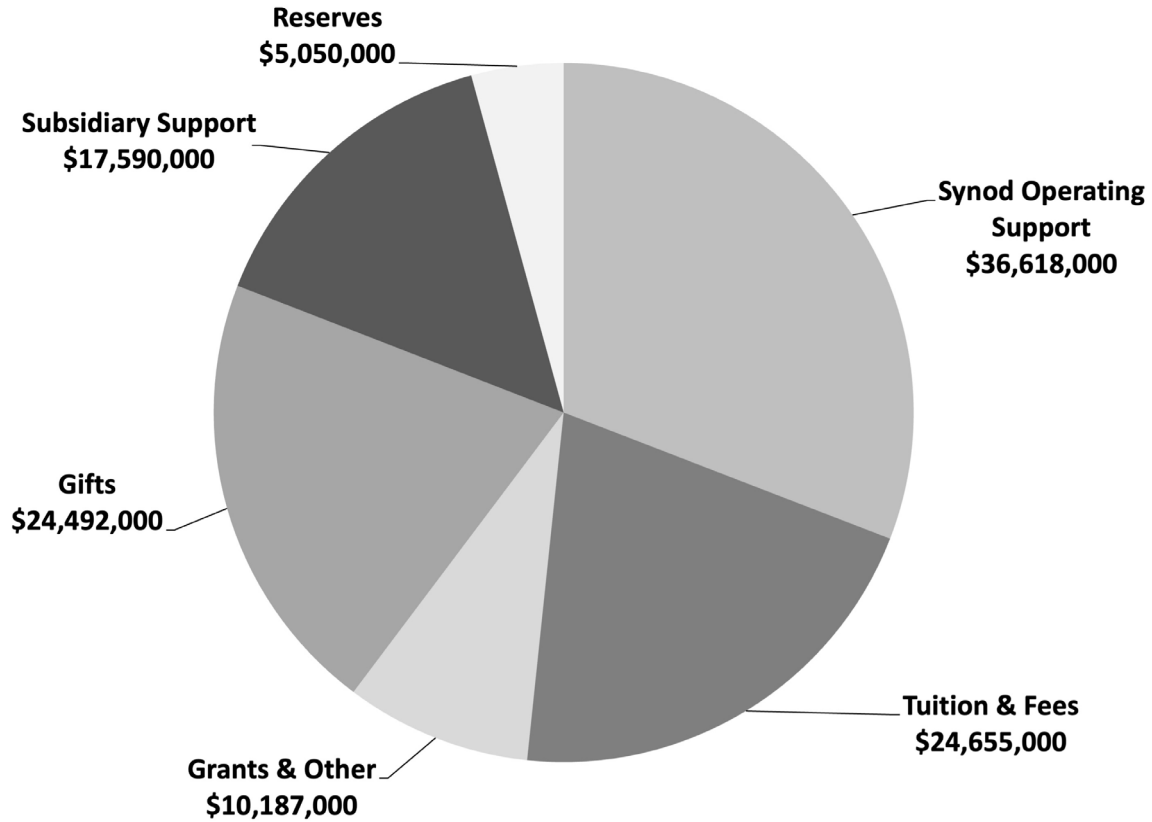
**FY 2025-26 Total Ministry Plan Expenses  
\$121,104,000**



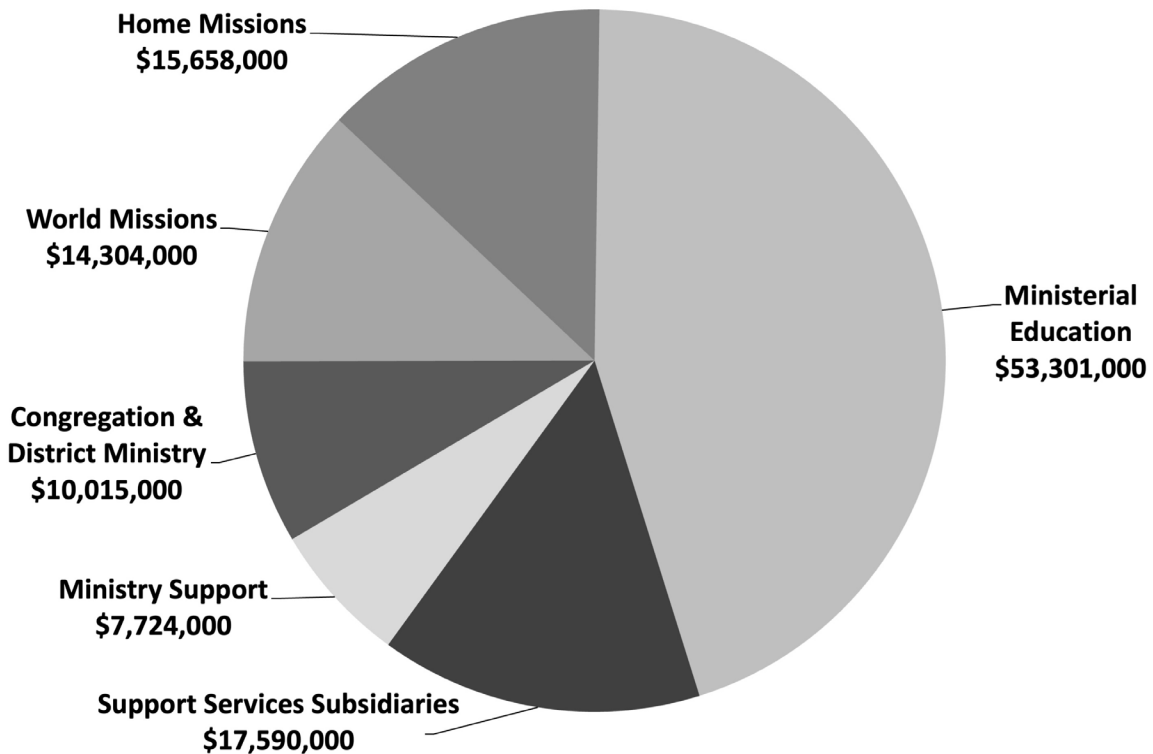
## FY 2025-26 Synod Operating Support Allocation \$35,893,000



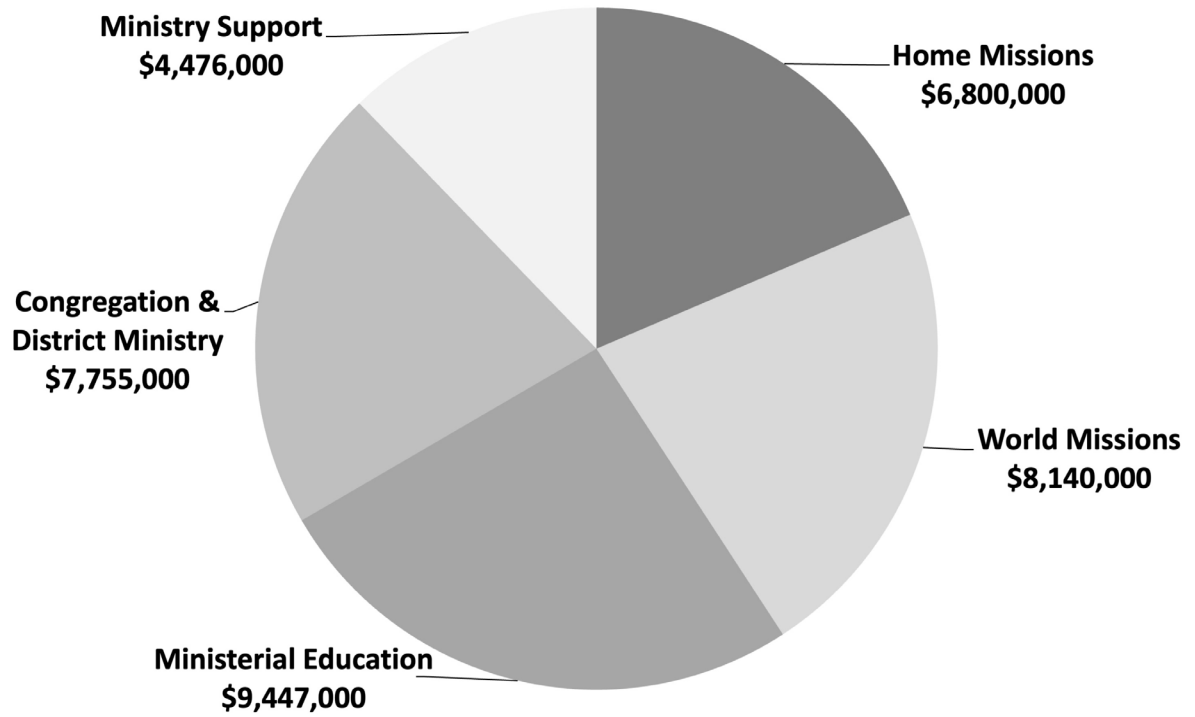
**FY 2026-27 Total Ministry Plan Support  
\$118,592,000**



**FY 2026-27 Total Ministry Plan Expenses  
\$118,592,000**



## FY 2026-27 Synod Operating Support Allocation \$36,618,000





# Minutes

## **Monday, July 21, 2025**

At 4:00 p.m., a delegate orientation was held in the gymnasium. Presenters were Rev. Joel Voss, WELS second vice president; Mr. Martin Spriggs, WELS chief technology officer; and Mr. Dan Nommensen, WELS communications director.

Following the evening meal served in the cafeteria, the opening communion service was held at 6:30 p.m. in the Chapel of the Christ. The presiding minister was Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president, and the preacher was Rev. Mark Gabb, WELS Home Missions administrator.

After the service, floor committees met to organize and plan.

At 9:00 p.m., refreshments were available under a tent on campus.

## **Tuesday, July 22, 2025**

At 8:00 a.m. the Lutheran Women's Missionary Society (LWMS) presented the flags of all the countries in which WELS has a presence. Mrs. Paula Windschitl and Mrs. Jackie Hieb, LWMS Minnesota Valley Circuit, led the presentation. The ladies were thanked for their presentation.

At 8:21 a.m., Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president, called the 68th Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod to order. There were several announcements. The opening devotion was led by Rev. Robert Guenther. The organist was Prof. Jacob Behnken.

Rev. Richard Gurgel, Martin Luther College president, was introduced and spoke words of welcome.

Rev. Mark Schroeder presented his written President's Report. The printed copy was distributed after the presentation.

Rev. Mark Schroeder presented a thank you and hand-carved Luther seals to Rev. James Huebner in recognition of 16 years as first vice president and to Rev. Robert Pasbrig for 20 years as recording secretary. There were rounds of applause.

Rev. Isaac Crass, chairman of Floor Committee #18: Elections, offered a prayer and read the position description for the WELS first vice president. The nominating ballot for the position of first vice president was held.

Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president, read a letter of greeting from Rev. Artur Villares, president of the Lutheran Church of Portugal. He then introduced special guests and observers, including Rev. Karl Gurgel, former Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod president; Rev. Glenn Obenberger, Evangelical Lutheran Synod president; Dr. Matthew Harrison, Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod president; Rev. James Krikava, Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod representative; Rev. Joseph Naumann, Church of the Lutheran Confession vice president; Rev. Makisumu Musa, Obadiah Lutheran Synod of Uganda president; Rev. Baltazar Kaaya, Africa Mission Evangelism Church of Tanzania bishop; and Rev. John Braun, WELS 175th Anniversary Planning Committee member.

At 9:35 a.m., a break was declared.

The morning session resumed at 10:00 a.m.

Floor Committee #18: Elections reported the four nominees for the position of first vice president: Rev. Michael Jensen, Rev. Bart Brauer, Rev. John Bortulin, and Rev. Joel Voss. Biographies were shared with the assembly. Electronic voting for the first vice president took place.

Mr. Kyle Egan, WELS chief financial officer, presented the synod's financial report for 2024 and the first 9 months of 2025.

Floor Committee #18: Elections reported. The names of Rev. John Bortulin, Rev. Joel Voss, and Rev. Bart Brauer remained on the ballot. The second ballot for first vice president was cast.

Mr. Kyle Egan, WELS chief financial officer, returned to the podium and presented the ministry financial plan.

Floor Committee #18: Elections reported the results of the second ballot for the WELS first vice president. Rev. Joel Voss and Rev. John Bortulin remained on the ballot, and a third ballot was cast.

President Schroeder introduced Rev. Glenn Obenberger, Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) president, who brought greetings from the ELS. Schroeder introduced Rev. Makisumu Musa, president of the Obadiah Lutheran Synod of Uganda, who addressed the assembly. Rev. Karl Gurgel, former WELS president, was introduced, and he offered words of encouragement.

Floor Committee #18: Elections reported the election of Rev. Joel Voss as the first vice president of WELS. It was moved and supported that the call of Rev. Voss first vice president be unanimous. The motion carried. Voss announced the acceptance of this call.

Since Voss had been serving as the second vice president, an election of a new second vice president (two-year term) took place. The job description was read, and a nominating ballot was held.

Rev. Robert Guenther offered a meal prayer, and the morning session adjourned for lunch at 11:40 a.m. An optional 30-minute tour of the Chapel of the Christ was offered during the lunch hour.

The afternoon session was called to order by President Schroeder at 1:15 p.m.

Floor Committee #18: Elections reported the three men nominated for second vice president: Rev. Michael Jensen, Rev. Bart Brauer, and Rev. John Bortulin. The ballot was cast.

Mr. Jeremy Angle, president of Northwestern Publishing House, was introduced. He spoke of the production of the 175th anniversary book, *Christ Through Us*. Each convention delegate would be gifted with a copy of the book.

Floor Committee #18: Elections presented the second ballot for WELS second vice president with the names Rev. Bart Brauer and Rev. John Bortulin. The voting took place.

Prof. Joel Otto, WELS Historical Institute's chairman, WELS 175th Anniversary Planning Committee chairman, and seminary professor, was introduced. He spoke of materials available for promoting the celebration of the 175th anniversary of WELS. He then presented the convention essay. His interesting presentation used numerous photos, slides, and hymns rather than reading the essay. A copy of the essay was available in each delegate's convention folder. It was moved and supported to thank the essayist. The motion carried.

Floor Committee #18: Elections announced the election of Rev. John Bortulin as WELS' second vice president. It was moved and supported that the call to Rev. Bortulin be unanimous. The motion carried.

At 3:00 p.m., the afternoon session took a break.

The afternoon session resumed at 3:15 p.m.

Rev. Jonathan Hein, WELS Congregational Services coordinator and WELS Long-Range Planning Task Force member, presented a summary of the long-range strategic plan, "Christ through us."

It was moved and supported to thank all those involved with developing the long-range strategic plan. The motion carried.

Rev. John Bortulin announced his acceptance of the call to serve as WELS' second vice president.

Rev. Isaac Crass, chairman of Floor Committee #18: Elections, presented the job description of the WELS recording secretary. The nominating ballot was cast.

Rev. David Scharf, chairman of Floor Committee #1: President's Report, presented the committee's report. Reference was made to Report No. 01.01. Report No. 01.02 was read.

- **Resolution No. 01.01 was moved and supported. The motion carried.**
- **Resolution No. 01.02 was moved and supported. The motion carried.**

It was moved and supported to dismiss the committee with thanks. The motion carried.

Rev. Isaac Crass, chairman of Floor Committee #18: Elections, announced the three top nominees for the position of WELS recording secretary: Rev. Bart Brauer, Rev. David Parsons, and Rev. Tyler Peil. More information and the election will come tomorrow.

At 4:30 p.m., Rev. Robert Guenther closed the afternoon session with prayer.

After the evening meal, floor committees met as needed, and Prof. Paul Koelpin made a presentation on the history of Martin Lutheran College. Fellowship and refreshments followed.

### **Wednesday, July 23, 2025**

At 8:00 a.m., President Mark Schroeder called the convention to order. The opening devotion was led by Rev. Steven Prael, Foundation, Peyton, Colo. Prof. Jacob Behnken served as the organist.

Floor Committee #18: Elections reported three nominees for the position of recording secretary: Rev. Bart Brauer, Rev. David Parsons, and Rev. Tyler Peil.

Prof. James Danell, chairman, presented an update about the work of the Commission on Inter-Church Relations.

Floor Committee #18: Elections returned to the podium, and the election for recording secretary was conducted.

Rev. Jonathan Schroeder, chairman, and Rev. Larry Schlomer, administrator, presented the Board for World Missions report.

Floor Committee #18: Elections led a second ballot for the position of recording secretary. On the ballot were Rev. Bart Brauer and Rev. Tyler Peil. The ballot was cast.

Pastor Gary Pufahl, chairman, presented the report of Floor Committee #8: Financial results and ministry financial plan.

- **Resolution No. 08.01 was moved and supported. There were several questions and comments. The motion carried.**

At 9:48 a.m., a break was declared.

The morning session resumed at 10:08. Floor Committee #18: Elections reported the election of Pastor Tyler Peil as recording secretary. It was moved and supported to make the call to Pastor Peil unanimous. The motion carried.

Rev. Matthew Brown, chairman, and Rev. Mark Gabb, administrator, presented the report from the Board for Home Missions. A video, "Faces of Faith," depicting mission work in Marquette, Mich., was shown.

Rev. Jonathan Hein, WELS Congregational Services coordinator; Rev. Paul Prange, WELS Commission on Worship director; and Mr. James Rademan, WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools director, presented information about Congregational Services. Questions were asked. The men were thanked for their work and their report.

Mr. Jeremy Angle, Northwestern Publishing House President, presented the Northwestern Publishing House report.

Rev. Isaac Crass came to the podium representing Floor Committee #18: Elections. Pastor Tyler Peil accepted the call to serve as recording secretary. Rev. Isaac Crass presented the 2025 convention ballot, reading the job descriptions for each position. Eleven election ballots were cast.

At noon, the morning session adjourned for lunch.

After the afternoon session was called to order at 1:16 p.m., Floor Committee #18: Elections held elections for synod boards and commissions. Three run-off elections were also held.

Mr. Bradley Price, president and CEO of Lutheran Military Support Group asked military veterans and first responders to stand. Next, spouses and parents of these men were asked to stand. They received a round of applause for their service. He reported the work carried out by Lutheran Military Support Group. A video was shown.

Dr. Daniel Johnson, president, Wisconsin Lutheran College, presented information about the college. A short video was shown.

Floor Committee #18: Elections reported the need for additional run-off elections. The run-off elections were held.

Rev. Duane Rodewald, chairman of the Board for Ministerial Education; Rev. Matthew Crass, Luther Preparatory School president; Rev. Mark Luetzow, Michigan Lutheran Seminary president; Rev. Earle Treptow, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary president; and Rev. Richard Gurgel, Martin Luther College president, each spoke.

At 2:50 p.m., a break was declared.

The afternoon session resumed at 3:11 p.m.

Rev. Richard Gurgel, president of Martin Luther College, spoke of the school. He shared a video with the assembly.

Floor Committee #18: Elections reported the need for three more run-off elections. The voting took place.

Rev. Paul Workentine, chairman of Floor Committee #15: World Missions and Joint Mission Council, read Report No. 15.01. It was moved and supported to accept the report with thanks. The motion carried.

Rev. Kurt Lueneburg, director of the Ministry of Christian Giving, reported for the ministry.

Floor Committee #18: Elections presented two more run-off ballots. The votes were cast and elections were completed.

Rev. Daniel Sims, director, WELS Christian Aid and Relief, spoke of the work of the group.

Rev. Brian Doebler, chairman of Floor Committee #17: Constitutional Matters, spoke of recommended bylaw changes. Report No. 17.01 was read.

- **Resolution No. 17.01 was moved and supported. The motion was carried by unanimous vote.**
- **Resolution No. 17.02 was moved and supported. The motion was carried by unanimous vote.**
- **Resolution No. 17.03 was moved and supported. The motion carried.** The committee was thanked for its report.

Rev. Peter Metzger, chairman of Floor Committee #16: Ministerial Education, read Report No. 16.01. There were questions. Report No. 16.02 and Report No. 16.03 were read.

It was moved and supported that Report No. 16.03 be recommitted for additional study. The motion was defeated.

It was moved and supported to accept the report of this committee with thanks. The motion carried.

The committee was thanked for its report.

Mr. Frederick Uttech, chairman of Floor Committee #13: Christian Aid and Relief, read Report No. 13.01. It was moved and supported to accept the report with thanks. The motion carried.

Prof. Samuel Degner, chairman of Floor Committee #2: Conference of Presidents, read Report No. 02.01, Report No. 02.02, and Report No. 02.03. It was moved and supported to accept the committee's reports with thanks. The motion carried.

Teacher Matthew Bauer, chairman of Floor Committee #5: Congregational Services–Schools, read Report No. 05.01. It was moved and supported to accept the committee's report with thanks. The motion carried.

Rev. Geoffrey Kieta, chairman of Floor Committee #6: Ministry of Christian Giving and Communication Services,

read Report No. 06.01, Report No. 06.02, Report No. 06.03, and Report No. 06.04. It was moved and supported to accept the committee's report with thanks. The motion carried.

Rev. Kirk Lahmann, chairman of Floor Committee #14: Home Missions, read Report No. 14.01. It was moved and supported to accept the committee's report with thanks. The motion carried.

At 5:14, Rev. Steven Pahl closed the afternoon session with prayer.

At 6:30 p.m. WELS Missions presentations were offered. Representing World Missions were Rev. Luis Acosta, Academia Cristo, for Spanish ministry in the US; Mr. Erik Landwehr for Native American missions; Rev. Jonathan Bare, Asia Lutheran Seminary; and Rev. Howard Mohlke, One Africa Team. Home Missions presentations were made by Rev. Caleb Free, Risen Savior, Lakewood Ranch, Fla.; Rev. Mark Schroeder, Peace, Gilbert, Ariz.; Rev. Jonathan Bourman, Saint Mark Mankato, Mankato, Minn.; and Rev. Steven Pahl, Foundation, Peyton, Colo.

Fellowship and refreshments followed the presentations.

### **Thursday, July 24, 2025**

The morning session was called to order at 8:01 a.m. by President Schroeder. The opening devotion was led by Rev. Jesse Stern, Bay Pines, Seminole, Fla. The organist was Prof. Jacob Behnken, and Prof. Jon Hermanson served as cantor.

Rev. Isaac Crass, chairman of Floor Committee #18: Elections, reported election results.

Rev. Bradley Wordell, chairman of Floor Committee #9: Long-Range Strategic Plan, presented the committee's report and offered thanks to several individuals.

• **Resolution No. 09.01 was moved and supported. Comments and questions were offered. The motion carried.** The committee and all who worked on the plan were thanked.

President Schroeder spoke of the suspension of fellowship with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) in 1961 and described the meetings that have taken place in more recent years. He introduced Dr. Matthew Harrison, president of the LCMS. Dr. Harrison addressed the assembly. He stated that it is a miracle that the LCMS still exists. The highlights (of Dr. Harrison's career) are the meetings with WELS. "The WELS pushes us to turn to the Word of God." He hopes that fellowship can someday be restored. It was a blessing that WELS suspended fellowship with LCMS—and Dr. Harrison joked that WELS should have done it sooner. He brought warm greetings from LCMS. Dr. Harrison was given a standing round of applause. President Schroeder thanked Dr. Harrison for what he is doing and promised that the LCMS is in our prayers.

Rev. Caleb Free, chairman of Floor Committee #10: Support Services, read Report No. 10.01, Report No. 10.02, Report No. 10.03, and Report No. 10.04. It was moved and supported to thank the committee. The motion carried.

Rev. Joel Thomford, chairman of Floor Committee #7: Synodical Council, presented Report No. 07.01, Report No. 07.02, Report No. 07.03, and Report No. 07.04. It was moved and supported to accept the report and to thank the committee. The motion carried.

Rev. Daron Lindemann, chairman of Floor Committee #3: Commission on Inter-church Relations, read Report No. 03.01, Report No. 03.02, and Report No. 03.03. It was moved and supported to thank the committee. The motion carried.

Rev. Matthew Frey, chairman of Floor Committee #11: Subsidiaries and Benefit Plans, read Report No. 11.01, Report No. 11.02, Report No. 11.03, Report No. 11.04, and Report No. 11.05. It was moved and supported to thank the committee. The motion carried.

Rev. James Backus, chairman of Floor Committee #12: Northwestern Publishing House, read Report No. 12.01. It was moved and supported to accept the report with thanks. The motion carried.

Rev. Mark J. Schroeder, chairman of Floor Committee #4: Congregational Services–Churches, read Report No. 04.01. It was moved and supported to receive the report with thanks. The motion carried.

At 9:50 a.m. closing remarks were offered by Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president. Following his words, it was moved and supported to adjourn the 68th Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The motion carried.

The assembly joined in singing "God's Word is Our Great Heritage."

The closing service and installation of officers in the Chapel of the Christ took place at 10:15 a.m. The presiding minister was Rev. Richard Gurgel, Martin Luther College president, and the preacher was Rev. Douglas Free, Dakota-Montana District president.

Respectfully submitted,  
Rev. Robert W. Pasbrig,  
WELS recording secretary

# Convention presentations

For a complete list of convention presentations, see the minutes, which begin on p. 65.

## Opening service sermon: Are you kidding me?!

July 21, 2025

Chapel of the Christ, Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.

Rev. Mark Gabb

John 1:9-14

It's not an overstatement to say that we are at a critical and crucial time in our synod's history. I don't say that to downplay or diminish the blessings the Lord has given our church body over the last 175th years. After all, look where we are today by God's grace: from a synod of three congregations in Milwaukee to a synod with 1,200+ congregations all over the U.S. and a presence in nearly 50 countries around the world where we are in fellowship with another 300,000 of God's people. God's Word is being proclaimed in over 250 grade schools, 350 early childhood centers, and 29 area Lutheran high schools. We have two prep schools, WLC, MLC, and WLS. As we look at where we are today, the Lord has indeed blessed our synod, and we give God great thanks for this.

At the same time, look at where we are today: We are a church body that has decreased in members for all but one of the last 35 years. In 1990 WELS membership was at 421,000. Today we are now under 328,000. During that time we lost members for all but one of those years. We have been bleeding slowly for three-and-a-half decades. We still are. Today the largest demographics of losses are among confirmands and young adults, especially young women. We're losing our future members today. At the same time, nearly 500 of our churches average less than 50 in worship each Sunday, while 175 of those churches average less than 25 in worship. Add to this the high vacancy rate in our schools and churches and the increasing costs for "doing ministry." It's not an overstatement to say that we are at a crucial and critical time in our synod's history.

How's that for a rousing start to our sermon! But I don't site those realities to dampen our spirits or silence our celebration but to encourage us to face and embrace them. After all, we can't ignore them. Doing that doesn't make them go away.

So how do we face them? Is it by emphatically and energetically approving our synod's long-range plan? Maybe. But those plans don't matter if we aren't facing and embracing the challenges before us through the light of God's Word. God's Word is what encourages and emboldens us in our work. And the Word that we get to consider this evening is from John 1, the Christmas gospel.

You know this section of Scripture well. I like to think of it as the Grand Canyon of God's grace. If you've been to the Grand Canyon you know what I mean. You don't really see it in all its beauty and majesty until you're standing at the rim of the canyon. John 1 is like that. From the first verse, the Holy Spirit stacks one profound truth on another in a simple, matter-of-fact sort of way: "In the beginning was the Word." OK. "And the Word was with God." OK. "And the Word was God." Wow! OK. "Through him all things were made." Alright. "Without him

nothing was made that has been made." OK. So the Word was God and the Word made the heavens and the earth. And now, in him is life, eternal life that gives light to all mankind. So this Word gives life to all people.

Then we get to our text: "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." (verses 9-13)

Until now, John hasn't made it personal. Everything he says is true and applies to the people of this world, but he gets personal as we get to the rim of the "Grand Canyon." "And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" . . . **us!** Are you kidding me?! God came to live among **us** . . . in a sinful world filled with sinful people! Are you kidding me?! The one who said, "Let there be light," and there was light became the one who lived in this sin-darkened world? The one who placed the stars in the sky now came to this place, this sinful world to live among us, sinful people? Are you kidding me?! The one whom the heavens cannot hold was conceived and lived in Mary's womb for nine months before coming into this world as an infant that was wrapped in rags and placed in a feeding trough. Really? Are you kidding me? No.

It was my four-year-old daughter that unknowingly helped put this truth into perspective. On one of those rare occasions that I was changing a dirty diaper, my daughter was standing next to me and asked, "Daddy, did Jesus have to wear diapers?" "Of course," I answered, "Jesus was a baby." To which she responded: "Well, why did God have to wear diapers?"

Yeah, why did God have to wear diapers? He didn't "have to," but God chose to come into the world that was and is messier, smellier, and more stinky than a dirty diaper. Long before the fall into sin, long before creation, God planned our salvation deciding that the Word would become flesh and make his dwelling among us to live for us, in us, and through us.

And now, by God's grace **we** have seen his glory, the glory of the One and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. God planned this in eternity, too. God chose us "in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight." God orchestrated the events in history so that your heart was touched with the gospel so that the Holy Spirit opened your eyes to see the glory of the truth that the Word became flesh to make his dwelling among us and that he did this for us. We come to the Lord's Supper tonight receiving the very body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. We once again get to see the glory of the Word made flesh!

This truth changes us! We can't see it and still be the same. You can't walk away from the Grand Canyon and say, "Huh, big deal." In the same way, we can't see the Grand Canyon of God's grace and yawn, saying, "Huh, big deal." No, we see the Grand Canyon of God's grace and we are a new creation. God has worked in us the desire to no longer live for ourselves but for him who died and was raised again. God works in us this desire to give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord, living lives of self-sacrifice, taking up our crosses and following Christ. God works in us to be his ambassadors and do our part to carry out the Great Commission.

All this is true, and yet there is another sobering reality that we see. With the apostle Paul we lament: the good I want to do I don't do and the evil I don't want to do I keep on doing. We want to serve him with all our hearts, but we don't. Rather than self-deny we self-indulge. Rather than self-sacrifice we live selfishly. We squander our time and misuse the gifts that God gives us to serve him. We avoid making the hard decisions and having the hard conversations. Our response to Christ's love is embarrassing and shameful. We find ourselves uttering, "Are you kidding me? This is how I respond to Christ's love and Christ's calling?" Maybe you even envision God look at you in disgust saying: "Are you kidding me?! This is how you return my favor to you? Really?!"

But he doesn't. He doesn't, because the Word became made flesh and lived among us; because Christ came to this earth to live for us, to die for us, and to rise for us. God doesn't look at you in disgust but he looks at you as his baptized children, washed clean in the blood of Jesus, wrapped beautifully in his robe of righteous. God delights in you because Christ lived among us, but not like us. He lived the life we could and suffered the curse of sin that we should have endured. 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 5:21). And we sit back in amazement again saying, "Are you kidding me?!" No.

And now, the Word who became flesh and made his dwelling among us, works through us. Yes, **us!** This is our convention theme and our theme of our synod's long-range plan—"Christ through us." He has made us ambassadors of his grace. He has given us—from lay members, to lay leaders, to synod leaders—the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations. Christ's plan is to carry out his work through us. There is no Plan B! It wasn't through the angels but through each of us!

Is this overwhelming at times? Yes! Especially as we look at the challenges ahead, especially as we know that we have work to do, hard work to do that will require making sacrifices and making difficult decisions. For all of us, we can look at the work Christ has called us to do and find ourselves saying once again, "Are you kidding me?! **Me?**" This happened to me a few months ago when I went into President Schroeder's office to ask him a question. I didn't expect him to ask me to preach for synod convention. My immediate thought was, "Are you kidding me?!" It still is! "Who am I for such a task?" I still find myself asking that question as I serve in my role as administrator for the Board for Home Missions. "Are you kidding me?! Really?!"

Brothers and sisters, we all will have those moments especially as we recognize that we are at a crucial and critical time in our synod's history. The challenges and realities haven't changed in the last 20 minutes. Yet we have a mission that Christ has given his church to be carried out through us. When giving the Great Commission, Christ equipped us with his powerful Word, his powerful promises, and his perpetual presence. All this gives us confidence and boldness to face and embrace challenges before us, in whatever ways that's needed. It might mean there will need to be hard choices, difficult decisions, and uncomfortable conversations. It might mean making sacrifices you'd rather not make. And when you find yourself saying, "Are you kidding me?!", remember: the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us to live for us, so that he could live in us, so that he could carry out his work through us.

Are you kidding me? Christ's response: Absolutely not! Amen.

# Essay:

## 175 years of God's surprising grace to the Wisconsin Synod

July 21-24, 2025

Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.

Prof. Joel D. Otto

### Introduction

Why celebrate a 175th anniversary? It doesn't have an easily remembered Latin term like "centennial" (100th anniversary), "sesquicentennial" (150th anniversary), or "bicentennial" (200th anniversary). In fact, there isn't even agreement on what Latin term to use, and some have been invented.<sup>1</sup> The 500th anniversary of the Reformation is still in recent memory. Why spend time focusing on an anniversary that doesn't even have one zero, much less two zeroes at the end?

This is a good question, especially since we live in a nation that doesn't always appreciate history. With the 24-hour news cycle, the availability of so much information in the palm of one's hand, and a general disdain for what the past might be able to teach us, many people in our society seem to be either ignorant of history or simply aren't interested (and this seems to be especially true of the younger generations).<sup>2</sup>

But maybe that is precisely why the 175th anniversary of the Wisconsin Synod is worth commemorating and celebrating. Congregations and church bodies typically make a bigger deal about quarter-century anniversaries for good reason. Twenty-five years is approximately a generation. This anniversary marks seven generations that the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) has existed. In the grand scope of Christian history, that may seem insignificant—not even one-tenth of the history of the Christian church and just over one-third of the history of the Lutheran church. But in the context of Lutheranism in America, this anniversary becomes significant. It is true that the first Lutheran church body in America, the Pennsylvania Ministerium, was founded in 1748, and other Lutheran church bodies date to the decades following.<sup>3</sup> However, with the exception of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), WELS is the oldest Lutheran church body that has retained its identity to the present.<sup>4</sup> All the older Lutheran church bodies have been swallowed up in various mergers that culminated in the establishment of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in 1988. Recent decisions about human sexuality have led some ELCA congregation to leave and form new church bodies, thus moving those congregations another step farther from their origins.<sup>5</sup>

So, the fact that WELS is celebrating 175 years—seven generations—makes us unique. This uniqueness is worth our attention. And church history is really all about God's gracious activity in his church and in the world for his church.

It is interesting to see how various psalms employ history for different reasons. Psalm 105 recounts how God kept his covenant with Abraham and his descendants so that we might not forget that "he remembers his covenant forever, the promise he made, for a thousand generations" (Psalm 105:8 NIV). Psalm 106 uses the history of God's

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<sup>1</sup> The Wikipedia page for "Anniversary," [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anniversary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anniversary), offers eight options for the 175th anniversary. My favorite is "septuagintaquinquecentennial." It just rolls off the tongue.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Koelpin recently addressed this in his excellent article, "'O God, Our Help in Ages Past, Our Hope for Years to Come': Thoughts on the Value of Studying the Church's History," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 122, no. 1 (2025): 5-26. For a condensed version, see Paul Koelpin, "The value of history," *Forward in Christ* 112, no. 2 (2025): 20.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the New York Ministerium was founded in 1786, the North Carolina Synod in 1803, and the Ohio Synod in 1818.

<sup>4</sup> The LCMS was founded in 1847.

<sup>5</sup> Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC) was founded in 2001; the North American Lutheran Church was founded in 2010.

people to lead us to repentance. “We have sinned, even as our ancestors did; we have done wrong and acted wickedly” (Psalm 106:6). After cataloguing many of the sins of Israel, the psalmist points to God’s mercy, which leads us to pray, “Save us, LORD our God, and gather us from the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise” (Psalm 106:47).

Psalm 44 reminds us that God has won the victories, so we boast in him and not in our actions (Psalm 44:1-7). Psalm 78 urges us to see that God’s gracious work in history is not something we keep to ourselves. “My people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth with a parable; I will utter hidden things, things from of old—things we have heard and known, things our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done” (Psalm 78:1-4). The psalmist then spends more than 60 verses citing various episodes in Israel’s history from the Exodus to David’s rule. Psalm 107 recounts the deliverance at the Red Sea and the journey to the Promised Land so that God’s people will be led to give thanks. “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story—those he redeemed from the hand of the foe, those he gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south” (Psalm 107:1-3).

All of these can find application for us as we commemorate the 175th anniversary of WELS. This anniversary is an opportunity for us to remember God’s faithfulness to his promise that the gospel will be preached throughout the world until Jesus returns (Matthew 24:14). By his grace, our church body has had a part to play in God keeping that promise. The anniversary theme reflects that: “Christ through us.” As we review WELS history, we can note that WELS is not the church triumphant. By his grace, God has worked among us and through us, despite sins, mistakes, and wrong-headed decisions. An honest look at our history can lead us to confess our sins and shortcomings and to rely on his grace for forgiveness and strength to continue working. An anniversary like this can help us appreciate how God has worked in surprising ways through sinful and flawed men and women. By his grace, God’s Word has won victories through our synod’s efforts to carry out the church’s mission. Since this is the first anniversary in the 21st century, this anniversary is an opportunity for a new generation to learn about God’s surprising grace to and through WELS for 175 years. Finally, reflecting on our synod’s history can lead us to give thanks for God’s enduring love to us.

Maybe you are seeing a theme here. Fifty years ago, the synod’s quasiquicentennial was simply “Grace 125.” Kurt Eggert wrote his hymn, “Not unto Us,” for that anniversary. Two stanzas are worth our attention.

Amazing grace—that chose us ere the worlds were made;  
    amazing grace—that sent your Son to save;  
    amazing grace—that robed us in your righteousness  
        and taught our lips to sing glory and praise.  
O faithful love—that shepherded through faithless years;  
    forgiving love—that led us to your truth;  
    unyielding love—that would not let us turn from you  
        but sent us forth to speak pardon and peace.<sup>6</sup>

The more I’ve studied, taught, and presented on our synod’s history, the more amazed I am at his faithful and surprising grace to WELS. There are so many places where things could have gone sideways, and WELS would be a different synod today, if it would even still exist. Instead, by his amazing grace, the message of his amazing grace in Christ has been at the heart of what WELS is all about. His faithful love has shepherded our churches, schools, called workers, and members through our times of faithlessness and various challenges in the church and the world. His forgiving love has kept our synod faithful to his truth, even if, at various times, it has been a journey for our synod to find and hold on to the truth. His unyielding love has enabled us to stand firm on the truth of God’s Word in the face of a society that increasingly turns away from it. By his grace, he has blessed our feeble efforts “to proclaim pardon and peace.”

<sup>6</sup> *Christian Worship* 582:2,3.

I pray that we will find it worth our time to review, reflect on, and remember some episodes of God's surprising grace to WELS during our 175 years of history. I pray that we will continue to be "taught . . . to sing glory and praise" for his grace to us.

## Beginnings: A "mild" Lutheran synod

That the church body originally known as the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin got off the ground and survived its early years is a miracle of God's surprising grace. On December 8, 1849, four men met at Grace Church in Milwaukee to discuss starting a new Lutheran synod in Wisconsin. All of them could trace their roots back to the Barmen Mission House and the Langenberg Mission Society in Germany. Wilhelm Wrede was serving Salem in Granville, northwest of Milwaukee. Johann Weinmann was serving St. John's in Oakwood, south of Milwaukee. Wrede and Weinmann had arrived in America together in 1846. By 1848, they had moved to Wisconsin and were joined by Johannes Muehlhaeuser, who had been serving a Lutheran congregation in Rochester, New York, since 1838. Muehlhaeuser founded Grace earlier in 1849. The fourth man, Paul Meiss, was a dropout from the Barmen Mission House. But he had managed to pay his way to America and pass himself off as a pastor. He was serving several groups in and around Schleisingerville (now Slinger).

Other Lutheran synods were operating in the Milwaukee area in the late 1840s. The Buffalo Synod's Trinity church was in Freistadt, the oldest Lutheran church in Wisconsin.<sup>7</sup> The Missouri Synod's Trinity church was a neighbor to Grace in Milwaukee. But these Barmen men didn't like the strictness and exclusivity of the "Old Lutherans" of Buffalo and Missouri. While Muehlhaeuser, Wrede, and Weinmann wanted to be Lutheran and loved the Lutheran biblical message of justification by grace alone through faith alone, they also had been trained to be tolerant of the differences between Lutheran and Reformed. They didn't appreciate and maybe didn't even completely understand the differences between Lutheran and Reformed. None of them had received extensive theological education. They knew the Lutheran Confessions. However, they didn't know them well and they weren't completely committed to them. Theirs was a "Mild Lutheranism." They wanted to offer an alternative to the "Old Lutheranism."

They met again on May 26, 1850, to officially bring this new enterprise into existence. They were joined by Kaspar Pluess, a pastor who was serving in the Sheboygan area, and Jacob Conrad, a man who was distributing religious literature but desired to be a pastor. Muehlhaeuser, who had been elected president and tasked with writing the constitution, chaired the opening convention. Conrad was assigned to Wrede for further training so he could serve as a pastor. The Wisconsin Synod was born.<sup>8</sup>

But of those pastors at that founding convention, only Muehlhaeuser and Conrad were still in the synod at its tenth anniversary. Meiss was expelled for scandalous behavior in 1851. Pluess left in 1852 to join the Reformed Church in New York. Weinmann took a call to a church in Baltimore in 1853 and died at sea in 1858. Wrede returned to Germany in 1855 and never returned to America.

God's surprising grace kept things going, despite the vacillation of the fledgling synod's confession and the lack of pastors. Slowly, faithful pastors trickled into the synod. Carl Goldammer, who would establish congregations in the Manitowoc area, arrived in 1851. Johannes Bading, who is perhaps the most influential and important synod president in our history, entered the synod in 1853. Philipp Koehler, who became the confessional conscience of the synod, began serving in the Wisconsin Synod in 1855.

## The lack of quality pastors

This fledgling synod could have gone off the rails at the very beginning. There just weren't enough pastors for the great need as German immigrants were flooding into the new state of Wisconsin and pushing into the frontier areas. Some pastors trickled over from the German mission societies. But they were very uneven in quality of character

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<sup>7</sup> Today, Freistadt is part of Mequon, a suburb north of Milwaukee.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, I was also born on May 26 (but a different year).

and doctrinal knowledge and integrity. For every Bading and Koehler, there was a Ludwig Nietmann, a man whose name became an adjective in Wisconsin Synod circles to describe pastoral incompetence and meddling.

Nietmann was a real piece of work. He had been convicted in Buffalo for being a *schweinedeib*, a pig thief. He moved his family to Wisconsin to stay a step ahead of the law. Later it was revealed that he had spent time in prison back in Germany. He was also charged with stealing a Christmas tree from a cemetery.

But this criminal behavior was not known about him when he became the first full-time teacher at St. John's in the town of Greenfield.<sup>9</sup> When the pastor serving St. John's retired, a member approached the synod about having Nietmann ordained. Desperate times called for desperate measures. In 1859, he took a call to St. John's in Newtonburg, near Manitowoc. Then his past caught up to him. He had to write, sign, and read a letter at the synod convention resigning from his call, resigning from the synod, and promising never to pass himself off as a pastor again. He left the synod, but he managed to worm his way into serving as a pastor at independent Lutheran churches in the Oconomowoc area and later at Immanuel in Kewaunee.<sup>10</sup> He tried to start his own synod. He preached for Masonic ceremonies, at Methodist and Baptist churches, and meddled in the affairs of neighboring Wisconsin Synod congregations. Eventually, the members at Immanuel terminated the call in which he was serving. A new graduate, August Pieper, was assigned to Immanuel in 1879 to clean up Nietmann's mess and bring the church into the Wisconsin Synod.

But God's surprising grace was at work in the Nietmann story. One of his daughters, Lydia, settled with her family in the Kewaunee area. One of her daughters, also named Lydia, married a farmer named Otto Stuebs. They had 13 children. Among them was a daughter, Edna, who married a young pastor named Rudolph Otto. A son, Arden, became a pastor. Another son, Ralph, was a carpenter who had two sons enter the pastoral ministry of WELS (Ralph and William). Several generations of WELS pastors and teachers have come from Nietmann's family tree, including Pastor Justin Dauck and pastors with the last name "Otto" and "Stuebs." Jacob Kieselhorst, who recently graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, ushers in another generation of ministers of the gospel from the Nietmann family tree. Several more are in the WELS ministerial education system.<sup>11</sup> Only by God's surprising grace could so many proclaimers of Christ come from a disgraced pastor who was a pig thief.

## **"A well in our country": Ministerial education**

With sagas of men like Nietmann and the ongoing shortage of pastors, it is easy to see why Bading, when he became synod president in 1860, pushed to the top of the synod agenda the establishing of a seminary. Other options had been considered. The "apprentice" program took too long and was not producing reliable results. One Wisconsin Synod student, Johann Heinrich Sieker, graduated from Gettysburg Seminary. But there did not seem to be enough emphasis on German at Gettysburg, and there was the concern that the men would not want to return to serve in Wisconsin. In the early 1860s, the Missouri Synod's seminaries in St. Louis and Fort Wayne were not palatable options for theological reasons. The "Old Lutheran" theology was still not appealing to many of the "mild Lutherans" of the Wisconsin Synod.

Bading was convinced that to provide sufficient pastoral candidates who were reliably trained the Wisconsin Synod needed to start its own seminary. "We must dig a well in our country, in our synod, that will supply the workers."<sup>12</sup> Bading's determination over three synod conventions finally led the fledgling Wisconsin Synod to take the leap in the middle of the Civil War to start its own pastor training program in Watertown, Wis., in 1863. It had small

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<sup>9</sup> This is still a WELS congregation, St. John's on South 68th St. and Forest Home Ave. in Milwaukee.

<sup>10</sup> The Oconomowoc congregations now belong to the LCMS. Immanuel in Kewaunee eventually joined the Wisconsin Synod. Oconomowoc is about 30 miles west of Milwaukee. Kewaunee is on the shore of Lake Michigan about one hundred miles north of Milwaukee.

<sup>11</sup> The information for the Nietmann story comes from Pastor Justin Dauck's research and paper as part of the WLS Master of Sacred Theology (STM) degree. Dauck received his STM degree in May. His paper, "Johann Christian Carl Ludwig Nietmann: A Study of the Difficulty of Vetting Pastoral Candidates in the Early Years of the Wisconsin Synod" (2025), can be found in the WLS online essay file.

<sup>12</sup> *Proceedings of the 1862 Convention of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Other States*, as quoted in John M. Brenner and Peter M. Prange, *Jars of Clay: A History of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (1863–2013)* (Mequon, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 2013), 22.

beginnings with one professor, Eduard Moldehnke, and one student. Moldehnke was a university-trained pastor who had just arrived to serve as the synod's *reiseprediger*.<sup>13</sup> The synod quickly realized that a feeder school was needed, so a college and prep school, Northwestern, was founded in 1865. Bading was dispatched to Germany to raise funds to pay for the new campus and building.

Again, we see God's surprising grace at work. The whole enterprise could have fallen apart numerous times. Moldehnke resigned in 1866 when the synod called a second theology professor to the new institution. He felt it was a waste of precious resources. Adolph Hoenecke, another university-trained pastor who had arrived in Wisconsin in 1863, was the new professor and became the voice of confessional Lutheran theology for the Wisconsin Synod—a true gift of God's grace. A lack of students was supplemented by Missouri Synod students in the early 1870s. The school was often strapped for cash, partly because of some ill-fated financial decisions. But local farmers often came through with necessary foodstuffs for the school.

Initially, Northwestern struggled to find its identity. The first president, Adam Martin, who had been educated at a Lutheran seminary in New York, wanted to make Northwestern into the "Harvard of the West." But as the Wisconsin Synod gravitated to confessional Lutheranism, Martin resigned and left the synod. By God's grace, the next three presidents served for over one hundred years between them: August Ernst, E. E. Kowalke, and Carleton Toppe.<sup>14</sup> Besides giving the school direction as a "school of the prophets" and being leaders in the synod, they were theologians, especially Kowalke and Toppe. Ernst's leadership helped the synod weather the loss of the first building when it burned down because of a lightning strike. Some worried this would be the end of the school, maybe even the end of the synod in 1894. The synod responded with the funds to replace the building within a year.<sup>15</sup>

The school in Watertown was the beginning of what grew into the ministerial education system we have today, thanks to close relationships with our neighbors in Minnesota and Michigan. The Minnesota Synod, founded in 1860, established Dr. Martin Luther College (DMLC) in New Ulm, Minn., in 1884 as its ministerial education school. The Michigan Synod, also founded in 1860, established Michigan Lutheran Seminary (MLS), first in Manchester, Mich., and then in Saginaw, as its ministerial education school in 1885. In 1892, the three synods established a federation, the Joint Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan and Other States. While each synod retained its independence, the federation enabled cooperation in certain areas like publishing, "foreign" missions,<sup>16</sup> and ministerial education. The New Ulm school became a preparatory school and the college for training teachers. The Watertown school served as a prep school and the college for pre-seminary training. The Saginaw school became a preparatory school. The federation constructed a new seminary in Wauwatosa, Wis., in 1893.

Again, we see God's surprising grace in action. There were initial problems in Michigan. Many of the Michigan pastors did not want to give up their seminary, and the Michigan Synod even withdrew from the federation. But by 1910, the system was functioning as originally intended. The framework established in 1892 continues to this day. As similar systems in other church bodies have disintegrated over the years, God in his surprising grace has preserved ours, even as it has gone through various changes over the years. The Wauwatosa seminary relocated to Mequon, Wis., in 1929.<sup>17</sup> In 1928, a new preparatory school—Northwestern Lutheran Academy—was founded in Moberg, S.D. That school was closed in 1979 when the New Ulm preparatory school was relocated to Prairie du Chien, Wis., to form Martin Luther Preparatory School (MLPS). The amalgamation of MLPS and the Watertown preparatory school to form Luther Preparatory School and the amalgamation of DMLC and Northwestern College to form Martin Luther College (MLC) occurred in 1995.

Throughout the decades faithful and gifted professors and energetic staff have labored to train workers for the harvest field. The members of the synod have supported the ministerial education system of WELS with generous

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<sup>13</sup> Literally, "traveling preacher." The *reiseprediger* traveled around the state serving scattered groups of German immigrants with the Word and sacraments and trying to gather them into congregations.

<sup>14</sup> Ernst served as president from 1871 to 1919, Kowalke from 1919 to 1959, and Toppe from 1959 to 1987.

<sup>15</sup> An excellent recounting of the early history of Northwestern is told by Erwin Ernst Kowalke in *Centennial Story: Northwestern College, 1865–1965* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1965).

<sup>16</sup> In the early Wisconsin Synod, missions were considered "foreign" that were done in a different language than German or English. They were not necessarily overseas missions.

<sup>17</sup> For an excellent history of the WELS seminary, see Brenner and Prange, *Jars of Clay*.

gifts for countless building projects and financial assistance, with volunteering and prayer, and, most importantly, with their sons and daughters. For more than 160 years, this system has provided a consistent supply of consistently trained ministers of the gospel who have shepherded congregations, taught in classrooms, and reached out with the gospel of Jesus Christ. This system is a unique blessing not seen in other church bodies. It has been a blessing for our church body. Let us not take this blessing for granted. Our ministerial education schools, professors, staff, and students have been gifts of God's surprising grace.

## A "turn to the right": Becoming a more confessional synod

In addition to manpower shortages in the early years—and often throughout our synod's history—financial struggles were especially acute in the early decades. Support from the German mission societies helped keep the young Wisconsin Synod afloat. They especially funded the *reiseprediger* program. In addition, Bading leveraged his connections in Germany and even Russia to raise funds for the new institution in Watertown.

At the same time, Muehlhaeuser's experience serving in New York led to close connections with the Pennsylvania Synod, the oldest and, at the time, the largest Lutheran church body in America.<sup>18</sup> Timothy Grundmeier, a history professor at MLC, recently researched and wrote an excellent article detailing how the Pennsylvania Synod was, in a very practical way, our "mother," and the Wisconsin Synod and Minnesota Synod were its "younger daughters."<sup>19</sup> Annual cash grants were sent to the presidents of the "western" synods for distribution to pastors in need. As the Wisconsin Synod struggled to stay afloat financially during the early years, God's grace provided benefactors who took an interest in this new church body.

But with this financial support came some doctrinal entanglements. Muehlhaeuser and other early Wisconsin Synod pastors were not interested in a confessionally rigorous doctrinal position. They probably did not even know what that meant, although they had seen evidence of it in the "Old Lutherans" of the Missouri Synod. And they didn't like what they felt were uncharitable attacks on other Christian churches, including other Lutherans. Many of the early Wisconsin Synod pastors served congregations of Reformed and Lutheran members. In addition, the German mission societies expected that the pastors they sent to Wisconsin would have a willingness to serve such "union" congregations.<sup>20</sup> The Missouri Synod regularly criticized the Wisconsin Synod for its "unionistic" practices of accepting money from the mission societies and serving congregations of both Lutheran and Reformed. These criticisms continued into early 1868 and were often expressed in harsh ways. The Wisconsin Synod was regularly accused of being "unLutheran" and having only a paper confession.

The Pennsylvania connection helped the Wisconsin Synod move in a more confessional direction in the early 1860s. The Pennsylvania Synod had broken fellowship with less confessional church bodies in the East because some of their theologians, like Samuel Simon Schmucker, were attempting to "Americanize" the Augsburg Confession by altering articles on the Lord's Supper, baptism, original sin, end times, and confession.<sup>21</sup> Some of those eastern Lutheran synods didn't subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions; they were more Reformed than Lutheran. They were trying to fit into the revivalism that had swept the American Christian scene in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Pennsylvania Synod had even established a rival seminary to Gettysburg in Philadelphia in 1864 under the guidance of Charles Porterfield Krauth, a confessional pastor and theologian.<sup>22</sup> Krauth's influence led to the founding of a new Lutheran organization of synods in 1867 called the General Council. William Streissguth<sup>23</sup> and Adam Martin represented the Wisconsin Synod at the organizational meeting the previous year. The Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan Synods were all charter members, and the Wisconsin Synod was the second largest synod in the General Council.

<sup>18</sup> The Pennsylvania Synod numbered about 50,000 members in the 1860s.

<sup>19</sup> Timothy D. Grundmeier, "Pennsylvania's 'Youthful Daughter': Reexamining the Early History of the Wisconsin Synod," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 122, no. 2 (2025): 89-140.

<sup>20</sup> Since 1830, the Prussian Union, a government policy forcing the Reformed and Lutheran state churches to form one "Evangelical" church, had been taking hold in more and more German territories.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Simon Schmucker, one of the founders of the Gettysburg Seminary in 1826, and several other theologians had published and distributed the "Definite Synodical Platform" with its American "Recension" of the Augsburg Confession in the mid 1850s.

<sup>22</sup> Ironically, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia and Gettysburg Seminary merged in 2017 to form United Lutheran Seminary.

<sup>23</sup> Streissguth served as Wisconsin Synod president from 1865–1867.

There were also internal influences that were leading the Wisconsin Synod to “turn to the right.” Bading had received training at the more confessional Lutheran Hermannsburg Mission House. He was elected president in 1860 when Muehlhaeuser asked not to be reelected. Philipp Koehler arrived in America with an appreciation for the Lutheran Confessions.<sup>24</sup> Gottlieb Reim wrote the first synod convention essay in 1861 in which he emphasized that the Wisconsin Synod stood on the Lutheran Confessions.<sup>25</sup> E. E. Sauer was battling Reformed influences in Schleisingerville (Slinger). These four pastors formed the old Northwestern Conference in the last half of the 1850s and served to provide a leavening of confessional Lutheranism to the young Wisconsin Synod.<sup>26</sup> The arrival of Hoenecke in 1863, with his university training and vast knowledge of the orthodox Lutheran theologians, was the final piece of the puzzle. In his surprising grace, God provided men determined to stand on Scripture and convinced that the Lutheran Confessions were a correct exposition of the Scripture’s teachings, especially its emphasis on the forgiveness of sins purchased by Christ and delivered in the Word and sacraments.

Everything came to a head at the 1868 synod convention held at First Lutheran Church in Racine, Wis. Muehlhaeuser had died the previous September. President Bading began his address to the convention by noting the passing of the synod’s “father, founder, and mediator.” He then proceeded to say that it was time for the synod to stop “vacillating.” “On the one hand, we openly accepted all the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church, a fact which the synod pronounced virtually every year, yet on the other hand, we considered the relationship with the societies which are incorporated with the United Church and the Union to be something proper. . . . The vacillations . . . must have an end.”<sup>27</sup> In an act of God’s surprising grace, the synod delegates walked away from the financial support of the mission societies, including a substantial amount that Bading had raised for Northwestern during his overseas trip. But the synod proved that it didn’t have merely a “paper” confession.

At the same convention, the question arose about membership in the General Council. There were high hopes for this association, especially in the cash-strapped and pastor-starved Wisconsin Synod. The Pennsylvania Synod was providing funds. Maybe students from the eastern church bodies would consider attending Northwestern. But already at the 1867 convention of the General Council, it was evident that there were doctrinal issues. “Questions arose over end times teaching (some were advocating for the false teaching of millennialism), the proper practice of church fellowship (some were fine with Reformed pastors preaching in Lutheran churches), and membership in lodges (some were allowing members to belong to non-Christian lodges such as the Masons).”<sup>28</sup> The synod resolved to withdraw from the General Council if adequate, biblical answers were not provided at the next General Council convention. When answers were not provided, the Wisconsin Synod withdrew in 1869 amid charges of a hasty withdrawal.

In these decisions to walk away from the money and the other potential benefits of a larger association, God’s surprising grace was at work for the Wisconsin Synod. With the exceptions of the Minnesota Synod, which withdrew from the General Council in 1871, and the Michigan Synod, which withdrew in 1888, every synod of the General Council, through a series of mergers, is today part of the ELCA, a church body that has abandoned scriptural teaching and the Lutheran Confessions. God’s grace spared us. While a few Wisconsin Synod men left because of this decision—most notably, Adam Martin—the synod’s firm stance got the attention of men like August Ernst, Reinhold Adelberg, and Friedrich Notz, who were serving in the East. They became key leaders and educators in the Wisconsin Synod in the decades that followed.<sup>29</sup> Again, surprising gifts of God’s grace.

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<sup>24</sup> See Peter M. Prange, “‘We Do Not Have a City Here’: A Missionary’s Farewell Sermon,” *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 42, no. 1 (2024): 1-18, and Peter M. Prange, “Christian Philipp Koehler and Wisconsin’s Ostensible ‘Turn to the Right,’” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 98, no. 2 (2025): 21-46.

<sup>25</sup> Gottlieb Reim, “Confessional Position of the Ev. Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin” (presented at the Synod Convention, Watertown, Wis., 25–31 May 1961), tr. by Arnold O. Lehmann in *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 14, no. 1 (1996): 3-8. Reim served as Wisconsin Synod president from 1863 to 1865.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Braun, “Wisconsin’s ‘Turn to the Right,’ Part Two,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2002): 83. The old Northwestern Conference has been honored throughout the history of Wisconsin Synod with the names of institutions: Northwestern College, Northwestern Publishing House, etc.

<sup>27</sup> *Proceedings of the 18. Convention of the German Evangel.-Luther. Synod of Wisconsin and Other States*, tr. by Arnold O. Lehmann, *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 21, no. 1 (2003): 6.

<sup>28</sup> John Braun and Joel Otto, *Christ Through Us: A Pictorial History of the Wisconsin Synod, 1850–2025* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2024), 40.

<sup>29</sup> Ernst, as noted earlier, served as president of Northwestern College, 1871–1919. Adelberg served as pastor of St. Mark’s, Watertown, and St. Peter, Milwaukee, as well as an adjunct professor of English at the synod’s seminary. Notz was the longtime Hebrew professor at Northwestern (1872–1911).

Now, instead of looking farther afield, the synod looked closer to home. The Iowa Synod, which sent a sizable and imposing group to the Wisconsin Synod's 1867 convention, was a possibility for fellowship.<sup>30</sup> But closer examination of Iowa's doctrinal position revealed concerning positions on the end times and open questions. Fellowship with the Iowa Synod never materialized. There had been contacts with the Minnesota Synod as early as 1863. Minnesota was struggling with the same vacillating doctrinal position as the Wisconsin Synod until Johann Heinrich Sieker, the Wisconsin Synod man who had been trained at Gettysburg, became Minnesota Synod president.<sup>31</sup> While doctrinal unity was achieved at meetings in La Crosse, Wis., in the fall of 1869, formal fellowship finally occurred in 1871 after the Minnesota Synod withdrew from the General Council.

The more astonishing move "west" involved the Missouri Synod, those "Old Lutherans" with whom our founders initially didn't want to associate. The 1868 convention directed President Bading to pursue meeting with leaders of the Missouri Synod to determine if unity existed. C. F. W. Walther, the Missouri Synod president, was pleased when Bading brought his synod's resolution before the Northern District of the Missouri Synod. A few months later, Bading, Hoenecke, Koehler, and two other pastors were meetings with Walther and other Missouri Synod leaders in Milwaukee. Doctrinal discussions "revealed that there was full unity of faith. President Walther, previously the stern critic, was overjoyed. He included in the November 1 *Lutheraner* the declaration: 'All our reservations about . . . Wisconsin . . . have been put to shame.' "<sup>32</sup> Thus began a treasured fellowship that lasted more than 90 years, a fellowship based on a true united confession of all the doctrines of Scripture.

What this also meant was that the Wisconsin Synod was one of the founding members of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America in 1872. By God's grace, we were part of the largest and most confessional Lutheran grouping in America. Preaching for the opening service of the inaugural convention at Bading's St. John's church in Milwaukee, Walther declared, "Oh blessed, happy day! Our children and children's children will speak of it and rejoice."<sup>33</sup> Armin Schuetze described the ultimate purpose of this new fellowship. "The orthodox Synodical Conference and its synods were above all to be a mission-minded Conference and mission-minded synods. Doctrinal integrity and mission work must go hand in hand."<sup>34</sup> The Synodical Conference was all about "Christ for us" and "Christ through us." Again, God's grace blessed the Wisconsin Synod during its 90-year membership in the Synodical Conference. The Lord graciously moved the Wisconsin Synod to a doctrinal position that confessed the teachings of Scripture and aligned with the Lutheran Confessions. By God's grace and working, the synod made a "turn to the right."

It didn't take long, however, for doctrinal controversy to cause a rift in the Synodical Conference. Over the doctrine of election, the Ohio Synod and the Norwegian Synod withdrew. Their false teaching on election that God chose some to be saved "in view of the faith" they would someday have led to false teachings about humans' involvement in their salvation.<sup>35</sup> Their departure represented a significant part of the Synodical Conference. Only the Missouri, Wisconsin, and Minnesota Synods were left. By God's surprising grace—especially providing a gifted and capable theologian in Hoenecke—the Wisconsin Synod stood with Walther and Missouri on the truth of God's Word that

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<sup>30</sup> Among Iowa's representatives were its synod president, Georg Grossmann; two key professors of its Wartburg Seminary, Sigmund and Gottfried Fritschel; and a pastor, Georg Schieferdecker, who had been ousted from the Missouri Synod for teaching millennialism. His story is told in J. F. Koesting, *The Emigration of the Saxon Lutherans in the Year 1838 and Their Settlement in Perry County, Missouri* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2022), 125-182.

<sup>31</sup> Sieker grew up at St. John's, Newtonburg, and was the lone Wisconsin Synod student to attend Gettysburg Seminary. After serving at Salem, Milwaukee, 1861-1867, he accepted a call to Trinity, St. Paul. Eventually, he served at St. Matthew's, New York City, one of the oldest Lutheran congregations in America, brought that congregation into the Missouri Synod, and was instrumental in starting Concordia College in Bronxville, N.Y.

<sup>32</sup> Edward Fredrich and John Brenner, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans: A History of the Single Synod, Federation, and Merger, Second Edition* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2025), 54.

<sup>33</sup> C. F. W. Walther, "On Pure Doctrine for the Salvation of Souls: Opening Sermon for the Synodical Conference," in Matthew Harrison, *At Home in the House of My Fathers: Presidential Sermons, Essays, Letter, and Addresses from the Missouri Synod's Great Era of Unity and Growth* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 195.

<sup>34</sup> Armin Schuetze, *The Synodical Conference: Ecumenical Endeavor* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2000), 59.

<sup>35</sup> For a comprehensive look at the election controversy, see John M. Brenner, *The Election Controversy Among Lutherans in the Twentieth Century* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017), 1-107. See also Schuetze, *The Synodical Conference*, 91-112; Fredrich and Brenner, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 2nd Edition, 61-63; Braun and Otto, *Christ Through Us*, 52,53; Peter M. Prange, *Wielding the Sword of the Spirit, Volume Three: The Doctrine & Practice of Church Fellowship in the Synodical Conference (1877-1882)* (Wauwatosa: Joh. Ph. Koehler, 2023).

our salvation from beginning to end is entirely because of God's pure grace, even though it cost the synod nine pastors and several congregations. Eventually, most of the Ohio Synod and most of the Norwegian Synod were swallowed up in the ELCA merger.<sup>36</sup> Again, God's grace spared the Wisconsin Synod and kept us faithful to his Word.

## The mission spirit of WELS: The Apache mission

The early Wisconsin Synod pastors had a heart for missions. That's why many of them came to Wisconsin. They wanted to serve scattered German immigrants, who were truly sheep without shepherds, and gather them into congregations. This wasn't always easy work, since many of those immigrants had been nominal Christians back in the fatherland. And life on the American frontier didn't always leave time for anything but work. Slowly but surely, however, congregations were formed and grew. By 1892, the Wisconsin Synod had grown to 145 pastors serving 239 congregations.<sup>37</sup>

Many of the early Wisconsin Synod pastors studied in mission houses with the dream of going to India or Africa. The idea of bringing Christ to those who had not heard it and those who were not like them remained. Through the Synodical Conference, the synod supported mission work among the recently freed slaves in the South beginning in the late 1870s.<sup>38</sup> But there was a desire to do more direct work. Three Northwestern students volunteered to be considered for this mission work. They were not given any special training, but their school fees were paid by the synod. The goal was finally realized in 1893 when the decision was made to send two seminary graduates to the Apache reservations in Arizona, to a place and a group of people where no mission work had been done. Not a lot of thought went into this. Johannes Plocher and George Adascheck didn't have language training. In fact, they barely knew English. They didn't have training in missiology. They didn't have a home to live in, just glorified tents. They didn't know where to start or even how to start. The climate was unexpected. They were going to the Apache who were suspicious of white people. But God's surprising grace was at work again. Perseverance and patience eventually produced a small beginning.

And God's surprising grace provided the workers and the gifts for that small beginning to take off. Gustav Harders, who had served in Milwaukee but had health problems that forced him to move to Arizona, provided leadership and an ability to promote the work through novels that he wrote about life on the reservations. He arrived in 1906 and served until his death in 1917. Edgar and Minnie Guenther arrived in 1911 straight out of the seminary and right after their wedding. They also spent the rest of their lives on the reservations, as did their son, Arthur. Edgar became known as "the tall missionary." He was tireless in serving the Apache, putting together desks for the school, visiting people out in the countryside when they were sick, and helping construct a new church building for Open Bible in Whiteriver. He and Minnie were also instrumental in starting the nursery to take care of Apache babies who were orphaned. Minnie's brother and sister-in-law even moved from Wisconsin to work in the orphanage.

Speaking of family connections, here's further evidence of God's surprising grace. During the years of the Great Depression, most seminary graduates did not receive assignments right away. There were no available calls. In 1934, Rudolph Otto graduated. Minnie Guenther was his aunt, his mother's sister. Since he didn't receive an assignment, Edgar and Minnie invited him to live with them on the reservation. They promised to put him to work. Meanwhile, Edna Stuebs, the great-granddaughter of Ludwig Nietmann, grew up wanting to take care of babies who didn't look like her. She received some training as a deaconess and then volunteered to serve in the nursery at the Apache mission. Who should pick her up when she arrived in Arizona? The dashing young Rudolph Otto. The rest, as they say, is history. Again, God's surprising grace was at work.

In 1917, two seminary classmates arrived to work at the Apache mission: Alfred Uplegger and Henry Rosin. Both would serve their entire ministries at the mission. Henry married one of Alfred's sisters. Two years later, Alfred's father, Francis, accepted a call to the mission. He had been teaching at Lutheran High School in Milwaukee.

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<sup>36</sup> A notable exception would be our brothers and sisters of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS).

<sup>37</sup> *Proceedings of the Forty-second Convention of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Other States*, tr. by James Langebartels (self-published, 2024), 320. Many thanks to Pastor Langebartels for his labor of love in translating and publishing the Proceedings of synod conventions. He is continuing the work of the sainted Prof. Arnold O. Lehmann whose translations were published in issues of the WELS Historical Institute Journal.

<sup>38</sup> See Schuetze, *The Synodical Conference*, 129-158.

He proved to be a linguistic genius. By talking to and listening to Apache, he put the Apache language into written form and translated Luther's Small Catechism, the liturgy, portions of the Bible, and other religious resources into Apache. Even though his wife died in 1925, Francis kept living and serving on the San Carlos reservation until his death in 1964 at the age of 97.

For more than 50 years, the Apache mission was the primary focus of the Wisconsin Synod's "foreign" mission work. In addition to offerings and prayers, members of the synod donated blankets, children's clothes, and toys for the mission. Lay members served in the nursery. Teachers were called to the schools on the reservation. God's surprising grace has allowed Christ to be proclaimed through us to thousands of Apache since 1893. Today, nine WELS congregations and two Lutheran elementary schools serve the Native Americans of the Apache reservations.<sup>39</sup>

## The mission spirit of WELS: The first overseas missions

The first decades of the 20th century were trying times for the Wisconsin Synod. The involvement of the United States in World War I placed suspicion on Americans of German heritage.<sup>40</sup> The synod struggled to transition from German to English. I admire the many pastors in the 1910s and 1920s who were basically carrying out bilingual ministries, preaching in both German and English every Sunday. In 1917, the Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Nebraska District Synods formally merged to become the Joint Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Other States. This merger required new policies and procedures. Life in the synod didn't always run smoothly, as evidenced by the Protes'tant Controversy that broke out in 1924. This controversy over matters of church life, preaching, and personality conflicts led to the loss of more than 30 congregations and pastors as well as three professors at Northwestern and two professors at the seminary, including the venerable J. P. Koehler, the director<sup>41</sup> of the seminary and the architectural influence of the new building in Mequon. This tore at the fabric of the synod. But God's grace preserved us once again.<sup>42</sup>

Then the Great Depression hit, bringing economic hardship to the country and to the synod. Budget deficits, failures of congregations to repay building loans, and building projects in New Ulm and Mobridge led to a synod debt that exceeded \$700,000 in 1933.<sup>43</sup> This hampered mission efforts and created difficult decisions for President John W. O. Brenner and the synod treasurer. Who do you pay when the synod doesn't have enough money to pay both missionaries and professors? Usually, President Brenner would pay the missionaries. He reasoned that the professors and their families could eat in the cafeteria. World War II then brought disruptions and sacrifices to both life in America and church life. If all that weren't enough, trouble was brewing in the ranks of the Synodical Conference beginning in the late 1930s.

But as the synod bore these various crosses, its mission zeal did not diminish. In his surprising grace, the Lord raised up men who had the vision to see what was possible and the willingness to push the synod forward to bring Christ to people overseas. Edgar Hoenecke, a pastor in Plymouth, Mich., and a member of the Apache mission board, was such a man. At the 1935 synod convention, his "Michigan Plan" of sending "bulletins" to synod members informing them about the synod's work and encouraging them to make offerings to pay down the synod debt became a synodwide program. He was on the cutting edge in using photos, graphs, and drawings to get his points across. It took ten years, but by 1945, there was a surplus of nearly \$350,000 in the synod coffers.

Still, there were delays and disagreements about how to proceed. Should the synod wait for a "Macedonian call" (Acts 16:6-10) or seek a place for mission work? Was this the right time for such a venture? There was a shortage

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<sup>39</sup> For more fascinating stories about the Apache mission work, see Eric Hartzell, Inashood: *The Story of the Arizona Apache Lutheran Missions and Their Pastors* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2022).

<sup>40</sup> For an in-depth treatment of this issue, see Stephen Gurgel, "The War to End All Germans: Wisconsin Synod Lutherans and the First World War," *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 33, no. 1 (2015): 1-36 and no. 2 (2015): 1-63.

<sup>41</sup> "Director" was the term used for what we would today call the "president" of seminary.

<sup>42</sup> For succinct summaries of the Protes'tant Controversy, see Fredrich and Brenner, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 2nd Edition, 159-168 and Braun and Otto, *Christ Through Us*, 106-108.

<sup>43</sup> To put this in perspective, \$700,000 in 1933 is equivalent to over \$16 million today. While the Missouri Synod had a debt of around \$1 million, the Wisconsin Synod was considerably smaller in size. The Wisconsin Synod debt amounted to \$3 per communicant member; the Missouri Synod's debt was about \$1 per member.

of workers again. Some leaders, including President Brenner, had concerns about the synod's ability to support such an endeavor. Who would go to find a suitable place? Finally, Hoenecke and Arthur Wacker, a pastor in Ann Arbor, Mich., agreed to make the exploratory trip. This was not an easy endeavor for either man. Both still had children at home. Both had busy congregations. But arrangements were finally made and Wacker and Hoenecke left in April 1949 for a four-month, 4,000-mile trek across southern and central Africa. The extraordinary trip was chronicled in photos and film by Hoenecke and turned into a filmstrip that was shown in congregations across the synod.<sup>44</sup> They finally found a field where no other churches were working in Northern Rhodesia (modern-day Zambia).<sup>45</sup>

The 1951 synod convention approved sending one missionary to Japan and two to Africa. The initial work in Japan was lost because of the doctrinal disputes that were ratcheting up between the Wisconsin Synod and the Missouri Synod. But after restarting the work in 1957, the mission in Japan was blessed with missionaries like Richard Poetter and Kermit Habben, who worked tirelessly to bring Christ to the Japanese.<sup>46</sup> The initial work in Africa was, at times, slow and, at times, hampered by internal struggles among the missionaries and disagreements with the mission board. But, again, God's grace was evident as men like Ernst H. Wendland, Theodore "Tate" Sauer, William Schweppe, John Janosek, Robert Sawall, Richard Mueller, and Raymond Cox strengthened the initial work, expanded into Malawi, and established a worker training system. Back home, Edgar Hoenecke became the first world mission executive secretary to oversee the work. By God's surprising grace, the midwestern-based, "German" Lutheran church body was reaching out with the gospel across oceans.<sup>47</sup>

## God's surprising grace in the break with Missouri

The suspension of the almost century-long fellowship with the Missouri Synod remains one of the most traumatic and far-reaching episodes in the history of WELS. Edward Fredrich summed it up well.

The struggle was long, stretching over a quarter century. The losses in cherished fellowships were large, touching personally most pastors, teachers, and laypeople of the synod. The results could have been tragic in the extreme, as dire prophecies of the time from without and within loudly and repeatedly proclaimed. The fact that they were not was because the Lord of the church once again did all things well.<sup>48</sup>

The details of the history can be found elsewhere.<sup>49</sup> Looking back with the perspective of over two generations, one can see God's surprising grace at work. It is not often that a smaller church body stands up to a larger church body and follows through, especially when so much was at stake. Prior to the break, WELS and the LCMS worked together on numerous ministry projects, like area Lutheran high schools,<sup>50</sup> the campus ministry at the University

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<sup>44</sup> The filmstrip, "Africa Still Calls," has been digitized and is available on YouTube at [youtube.com/watch?v=gMfzTHdm1Wc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMfzTHdm1Wc).

<sup>45</sup> Hoenecke himself relates the fascinating account of their exploratory journey in "The WELS Forty-Niners," *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 3, no. 1 (1985): 3-68. This issue has been reprinted by the WELS Historical Institute (WHI) for the 175th anniversary and will be given to anyone who joins the WHI during the convention.

<sup>46</sup> Poetter served as a WELS missionary in Japan, 1958-1991; Habben served there his entire ministry, 1967-2008.

<sup>47</sup> For a longer treatment of the mission spirit of WELS, see Joel Otto, "The Mission Spirit of the Wisconsin Synod," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 98, no. 2 (2025): 47-63.

<sup>48</sup> Fredrich and Brenner, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 2nd Edition, 203.

<sup>49</sup> The most comprehensive treatment of the break with the Missouri Synod was done by Mark Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods: Events That Led to the Split between Wisconsin and Missouri* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2003). Armin Schuetze also treats this extensively in *The Synodical Conference*, 241-395. More concise recounting of the break can be found in Fredrich and Brenner, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 2nd Edition, 203-213, and Braun and Otto, *Christ Through Us*, 160-168.

<sup>50</sup> Lutheran High School in Milwaukee, the oldest area Lutheran high school in America dating to 1903, was originally a joint effort of Wisconsin and Missouri Synod congregations in the Milwaukee area. That changed in 1955 when the high school federation split. The Missouri Synod congregations built Milwaukee Lutheran High School, while the Wisconsin Synod congregations constructed Wisconsin Lutheran High School. In addition, Racine Lutheran High School was also a joint effort of LCMS and WELS congregations in the Racine/Kenosha area.

of Wisconsin–Madison,<sup>51</sup> joint Reformation services, and the mission work in Nigeria.<sup>52</sup> WELS members supported Bethesda Lutheran Home in Watertown, Wis. WELS second-career men received training for the pastoral ministry at Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, Ill. LCMS families in Michigan sent their children to Michigan Lutheran Seminary. WELS congregations freely transferred members to LCMS congregations in places where there were no Wisconsin Synod churches within a thousand miles.

But then the tensions began. It became clearer to some WELS leaders sooner than others that the Missouri Synod had changed. The voices started as early as 1953, grew louder in 1955 and 1957, and led to the seminary president, Edmund Reim, resigning in 1957 and a new church body, the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC), forming in 1960. Among the early leaders of the CLC were two men who had been serving as district presidents, Paul Albrecht and M. J. Witt, and the former synod secretary, Winfred Schaller. Yet, it was clear that a majority of the synod just wasn't ready to break. The Northwestern Lutheran had only started publishing articles about the controversial issues in the late 1940s. Many parish pastors, teachers, and laypeople still did not understand the doctrines at the heart of the controversy. The resolution to break at the 1957 synod convention was defeated by a vote of 61 to 77. Many felt more time was needed.

By 1961, however, the scene had changed. More efforts had been made to heal the breach, including the involvement of theologians from overseas Lutheran churches. Turmoil was seizing more and more congregations, especially after the founding of the CLC in 1960. Meanwhile, two popular professors at Northwestern College, Ralph Gehrke and Richard Jungkuntz, were having an influence on men arriving at the seminary. Students began challenging seminary professors on the doctrine of Scripture, especially its divine authorship and inerrancy. Both men took calls to LCMS institutions in the summer of 1961. After leaving WELS, Gehrke wrote an article in which he advocated for a historical-critical approach to the interpretation of Genesis.<sup>53</sup>

The stage was set for high drama at the 1961 synod convention. Respected voices were heard on both sides of the issue. Werner Franzmann was at one microphone proclaiming that the time was now for the Wisconsin Synod to act with courage. His brother, Martin, a professor at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, was at another microphone pleading for patience. When the question was called and the vote was taken, the margin was nearly three-quarters in favor of suspending fellowship with the LCMS.<sup>54</sup> The little sister had spoken decisively. Many lamented the loss of a treasured fellowship. Many feared what this might mean for WELS.

We can see God's surprising grace in the timing of the break. If WELS had broken ties in 1955 or 1957, the synod might have split, with more congregations leaving for the Missouri Synod, or, at the very least, more congregations splitting apart. More college and seminary students might have left for the Missouri Synod. If WELS had not broken in 1961, the CLC might have become a much larger church body, with more WELS congregations splitting and more called workers and students leaving. And perhaps WELS would have just kept delaying a decision until no decision would have ever been made. When one sees where the LCMS went doctrinally during the rest of the 1960s, especially at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, which culminated in the Concordia Walkout and the establishment of Seminex in 1974, it is fair to ask, "Could that have been us, too?" The subsequent events in the LCMS after 1961 vindicated WELS' decision to suspend fellowship, although WELS looked on with dismay and sadness at what had become of its former sister in the Synodical Conference.<sup>55</sup> The fact that we were spared such anguish and tumult is a testament to God's surprising grace.

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<sup>51</sup> Most notably, Calvary Lutheran University Chapel in Madison was the only joint WELS-LCMS ministry at the synodical level that didn't involve the Synodical Conference. See Christopher Royce, "A Brief History of Calvary Lutheran University Chapel at the University of Wisconsin–Madison," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 93, no. 3 (2020), 9-30. This article is the first part of Royce's WLS senior thesis, *A "Lay Seminary" Develops, Grows, and Endures: A Century of WELS Campus Ministry at the University of Wisconsin–Madison* (2020).

<sup>52</sup> See Schuetze, *The Synodical Conference*, 159-177, for a good recounting of the Nigeria mission, which began in the 1930s. See also Theodore Sauer, Harold Johne, and Ernst Wendland, eds. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People: A Century of WELS World Missions* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992), 117-128.

<sup>53</sup> Ralph Gehrke, "Genesis Three in the Light of Key Hermeneutical Principles," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 36, no. 8 (1965), 534-560.

<sup>54</sup> Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods*, 264-270.

<sup>55</sup> See Mark Braun, "Seminex: Looking In from the Outside," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (2024): 291-321.

## The golden age of WELS growth: By grace alone

In contrast to those who predicted the demise of the Wisconsin Synod, the break with Missouri proved to be the catalyst for a quarter century of phenomenal growth, a “golden age,” if you will. Signs of an approaching explosion of growth were already evident in the 1950s. Besides the advent of overseas mission work, local congregations expanded ministries with new school and church construction; five new area Lutheran high schools were started in the 1950s; massive building projects were carried out on the campuses in Watertown, New Ulm, Saginaw, and Mobridge; new home missions were started in Florida and California; and the Arizona-California District was created in 1954. Northwestern Publishing House began publishing *Meditations* in 1957. In 1959, the synod convention voted to make the synod presidency a full-time position. All of this was going on while the synod’s energy and attention were also on the deteriorating developments within the Synodical Conference.

Then the break happened. In 1961, WELS had 840 congregations with 233,627 communicants located in 16 states. There were 729 active pastors in the ministerium. Eight missionaries were serving in two countries overseas. There were 228 Lutheran elementary schools, with an enrollment of 24,308 students served by 800 teachers, as well as 9 area Lutheran high schools.<sup>56</sup> The seminary had seven professors and 75 students.<sup>57</sup> A quarter century later, WELS had 1,190 congregations with 317,322 communicants located in all 50 states. Three new districts had been formed.<sup>58</sup> There were 1,280 active pastors serving in the ministry. Forty-two missionaries were serving in 9 countries overseas. There were 376 Lutheran elementary schools, with an enrollment of 31,087 students served by 1,640 teachers, as well as 19 area Lutheran high schools. The seminary had 16 professors and 218 students.<sup>59</sup>

Numbers don’t tell the whole story, but they tell a story. And that story is that following the break with the LCMS, WELS embarked on a period of growth that is nothing short of amazing. We became a truly nationwide and worldwide church body. The number of called workers nearly doubled with the growth of the seminary mirroring that. The number of local-level ministries increased by more than 40 percent and was spread across the country instead of more regionally. All of this from a church body that had made the courageous decision to stand on the truths of Scripture and break fellowship with a much larger church body that we had trusted to do the heavy lifting. Now the Lord was giving WELS the opportunity, the energy, and the resources to come into its own. What could this be but God’s surprising grace to WELS!

This was evident not just in the push for more home missions across the country. There was a focus on youth ministry beyond the structure of schools. Lutheran Pioneers and Lutheran Girl Pioneers were founded in the 1950s and exploded in growth during the 1960s and 1970s. With the LCMS taking over Calvary Lutheran Student Chapel in Madison, WELS established Wisconsin Lutheran Chapel in 1964. Additional campus ministry work was carried out on other campuses. The Lutheran Collegians–WELS held its first convention in 1965 to bring together WELS college students for spiritual growth and fellowship. The first WELS International Youth Rally was held in 1974 at St. Paul, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

Prior to the break, WELS relied on the LCMS to provide the infrastructure to serve people with special needs or people in challenging situations. But after the break, WELS had to begin focusing on these areas of specialized ministry. The synod called a full-time administrator for the Board for Special Ministries in 1973. This board coordinated ministry to military personnel scattered around the world; produced resources to serve the blind, deaf, and developmentally disabled; and assisted with ministry to those in prison or other institutions. On the local level, Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service (WLCFS) was founded in the Milwaukee area in 1965 to serve families and the elderly, while Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministries was established in 1968 to bring the gospel to those in Wisconsin prisons, county hospitals, and the Veterans’ Administration Hospital in Milwaukee.

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<sup>56</sup> Among the nine were East Fork Lutheran High School and the two joint LCMS-WELS high schools.

<sup>57</sup> *Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 1961.*

<sup>58</sup> The South Atlantic District was formed in 1973. The North Atlantic and South Central Districts were added in 1983. Prior to that, most of the South Atlantic and all the North Atlantic had been part of the Michigan District. The majority of the South Central was part of the Arizona-California District.

<sup>59</sup> *Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 1986.*

Lay support for the ministry of WELS grew in several ways beyond offerings directly to the synod. In 1964, the Lutheran Women's Missionary Society (LWMS) was founded with the goal of supporting WELS missions. About the same time, women's groups around the synod began supporting the work of the Central Africa Medical Mission (CAMM). The 1980s saw the establishment of WELS Kingdom Workers and Builders for Christ, which emphasized lay volunteers serving WELS missions. During the synod's 125th anniversary, Norman Berg reflected on where the synod had progressed since the early 1960s and emphasized the importance of the laity.

It perhaps also could be that the very necessary and intense concentration during the late 40's and 50's on the intersynodical doctrinal struggles with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod engaged our primary efforts and strength. From this struggle, however, arose a very strong sense of confessional identity which is essential both to a sound, but also a vigorously lay-supported mission program.<sup>60</sup>

Of course, called workers were needed to carry out such a vigorous program of mission and ministry. These decades saw changes and expansion in the WELS ministerial education system. During the 1960s, WELS operated a junior college for training teachers in the Milwaukee area. This essentially bought time for DMLC to carry out necessary building projects on its New Ulm campus to accommodate the necessary growing enrollment. The Northwestern campus added two dorms and a new gymnasium during the late 1960s and 1970s. Michigan Lutheran Seminary saw several building projects in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary added dorm space, the library, the cafeteria, and the auditorium-gymnasium during this era. The move of Martin Luther Academy—and the closure of Northwestern Lutheran Academy—to form Martin Luther Preparatory School in Prairie du Chien, Wis., occurred in 1979, partly to free up space on the New Ulm campus for the burgeoning college enrollment. Enrollments across the system remained at high levels throughout the 1970s and first half of the 1980s. One could argue this was a matter of demographics—the Baby Boomer generation. But one can also see God's surprising grace providing the workers at just the right time to meet the growing opportunities.

This was all happening at a time when mainline Christian churches that were abandoning and even denigrating the core tenets of the Christian faith, like the Methodists, the United Church of Christ, and many Presbyterians, were experiencing declines in membership. It was also happening at a time when other Lutheran church bodies were spiraling into a theology that was increasingly liberal, and even the LCMS was experiencing its "battle for the Bible." It's no wonder that the synod chose the theme "Grace 125" for its anniversary celebration in 1975. President Naumann summarized the attitude of the synod well at the 1975 synod convention.

Looking back over 125 years today, we are again made aware of two great facts: one is the reality of our own weaknesses, shortcomings, transgressions, and opportunities for service lost; the other is the amazing grace and merciful kindness of the Lord, our Triune God, whose chief concern it is and always has been, that all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.<sup>61</sup>

Even as the synod was experiencing phenomenal and unprecedented growth, the leaders of the synod acknowledged that it was all by God's grace alone.

## **Education, leadership, stewardship: More evidence of God's surprising grace**

I could continue to tell stories of God's surprising grace throughout our synod's history and up to the present. But I only have so much time and space in a synod convention essay and presentation. I'd encourage you to read the pictorial history book, *Christ Through Us*, and the updated edition of *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*. I would like to briefly highlight three areas that continue to stun me about God's surprising grace to our synod.

First, the education system of WELS is astounding, especially for a synod of our size. The history of schools in our synod goes back to the very first synod convention. "It was resolved that each preacher who is a member of our organization take an interest in working especially with the youth as well as in conducting day schools, Bible study

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<sup>60</sup> Norman Berg, "Home Mission Modes and Moods—125 Years in WELS," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (1976): 262. Berg was the Board for Home Missions administrator when he wrote the article.

<sup>61</sup> *Proceedings of the Forty-Third Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1975), 15.

classes, mission classes, etc.”<sup>62</sup> In some ways, this was following the pattern of other Lutheran church bodies in America. Because of the lack of public schools, most Lutheran congregations endeavored to provide schooling of some sort. There was also a desire to educate the children in the language of the fatherland. That started to decline in many Lutheran synods as public education became more readily available. But that wasn’t the case with church bodies that were intentionally confessional. I am convinced that the more confessional the Lutheran church body, the more interested it is in operating Lutheran schools. Even as the costs of education have risen and the demographics have fluctuated, the WELS school system, while it has endured some ups and downs over the years, has remained a flourishing system. We see “Christ through us” in our schools. We see God’s surprising grace at work to provide us with well-trained teachers and committed families.

Second, the Lord of the church has graciously provided us with gifted leaders throughout our synod’s seven generations of history. The writer to the Hebrews encourages us, “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7). In WELS, our first thoughts often gravitate to our theological leaders. The names roll off our lips: Hoenecke, Pieper, Koehler, Schaller, Meyer, Lawrenz, Schuetze, Becker, Brug, Brenner, Panning, Gawrisch, Deutschlander, Kuske, Valleskey, Koelpin, Fredrich, Wendland, Eickmann, Nass. The list could go on and on. And rightly we should remember those who taught us, our parents, our grandparents, our pastors, their pastors—the men who trained past and current generations.

But let’s not forget the gift of synod leaders. James P. Schaefer noted in a brief paper he gave during the 125th anniversary of WELS, “If we are to appreciate in its fullest dimensions the history of the Wisconsin Synod, we must recognize that God has graced the Wisconsin Synod not only with His gifts in our classrooms, but also with His gifts in our administration.”<sup>63</sup> Maybe other names should be in our memory as well. Muehlhaeuser and Bading immediately leap to mind.<sup>64</sup> But how about these names? Philipp von Rohr, the president who faithfully served for 20 years at the turn of the 20th century.<sup>65</sup> Gustav Bergemann, the president who served for 25 years and orchestrated the merger in 1917 and guided the synod through its transition from German to English.<sup>66</sup> John W. O. Brenner, the president who led the synod through the financially lean years of the Great Depression to a better financial footing and helped the synod voice its concern over the theological drift of the Missouri Synod.<sup>67</sup> Oscar J. Naumann, the president who led the synod through the break with Missouri and was a big cheerleader for both ministerial education and missions.<sup>68</sup> Carl Mischke and Karl Gurgel, faithful presidents who had to help the synod weather changes and financial challenges.<sup>69</sup> Mark Schroeder, the president who led WELS to refocus its identity and restructure its finances.<sup>70</sup>

And don’t forget about leaders who weren’t synod presidents. Men like Carl Gausewitz, who was president of the federation, president of the Synodical Conference, and writer of a catechism that was used in our synod for several generations. Or Edgar Hoenecke, the man of small stature who was a big voice for missions. Or Ray Wiechman, the first administrator for the Board for Home Missions and the first district president of the South Atlantic District. Or Kurt Eggert, the Hymnal Project Director for the 1993 *Christian Worship*. Or men with the gift of writing, like William Schaefer, James P. Schaefer, Werner Franzmann, John Braun, and Richard Lauersdorf, among many others. Through the labors of such gifted people, WELS has been able to produce hymnals, catechisms, devotional writings, Bible commentaries, and a whole host of other publications. Or consider the countless district presidents, circuit pastors, board chairmen, overseers of financial matters, administrators. Or all the laypeople who have served on synod boards and committees or worked in synod administration. Or the women who have led the charge in the LWMS and the support of the Central Africa Medical Mission. That our church body should have such an array of gifted servants to his church and to our synod is a testimony to God’s surprising grace.

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<sup>62</sup> *Proceedings of the First Convention of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin*, tr. by Arnold O. Lehmann in WELS Historical Institute Journal 9, no. 1 and 2 (1991): 5.

<sup>63</sup> James P. Schaefer, “Some Reflections on the 125th Anniversary of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod,” (presented at the Metro-North Pastoral Conference, Milwaukee, Wis., 19 May 1975), 2.

<sup>64</sup> Muehlhaeuser served as president, 1850–60; Bading was president, 1860–63, 1867–89.

<sup>65</sup> Von Rohr served as president, 1889–1908.

<sup>66</sup> Bergemann served as president, 1908–33.

<sup>67</sup> Brenner served as president, 1933–53.

<sup>68</sup> Naumann served as president, 1953–79.

<sup>69</sup> Mischke served as president, 1979–93; Gurgel served as president, 1993–2007.

<sup>70</sup> For short biographies of each synod president, see the WELS Historical Institute website: [welshistoricalinstitute.org/histories/personal/synod-presidents](http://welshistoricalinstitute.org/histories/personal/synod-presidents).

Such ministry requires financial support. Christian stewardship of giving has grown over the decades of the synod's history. It was especially a challenge in the earliest years when most Wisconsin Synod members were fresh immigrants just trying to eke out a living on the frontier of Wisconsin. In addition, the concept of freewill offerings was foreign to their way of thinking. In Germany, the church was supported by taxes. It took patient and constant instruction to train people to "excel in the grace of giving" (2 Corinthians 8:7). God's people often responded to needs. For example, when the "Kaffeemühle"<sup>71</sup> burned down in July 1894, the people of the synod responded with sufficient gifts to construct a replacement building within a year. Edgar Hoenecke's "bulletins" were instrumental in helping the members of the synod understand the importance of supporting the ministry of the synod. The members of the synod continued to respond to the need for buildings on the synod campuses during the ensuing decades. In an essay presented in 1976, James P. Schaefer pointed out that in the 15 years after the break with the Missouri Synod, the amount per communicant given by members of the synod for the work of the synod almost tripled.<sup>72</sup> He underscored that this allowed the synod to open 26 new missions in the last year. This compared to 32 opened by the Lutheran Church of America, which was about 6 times larger than WELS at the time.<sup>73</sup> The "Reaching Out" offering in the early 1980s had the goal of raising \$10 million for the synod's work. Over \$23 million was given. The synod debt of the 2000s and 2010s was paid off ahead of schedule. More recently, Congregation Mission Offerings have set records for several years running. Congregations and high school federations have been raising significant sums for ministry programs and building projects. God's people have included the church's work in their estate plans. Such stewardship of God's gifts is also evidence of God's surprising grace to WELS. His surpassing grace has continued to provide what we need so that our generosity can overflow to others (2 Corinthians 9:6-15).

## God's surprising grace into the future

To describe God's grace as "surprising" is perhaps redundant. By its very nature, God's grace is surprising because everything that God does for us by his grace, his kindness, his favor, his steadfast love, is unexpected and undeserved.<sup>74</sup> In other words, his grace is surprising by its very nature because God always does the opposite of what our sinful human reason would expect God to do. Adam and Eve fall into sin. God should destroy them and start over. But he doesn't. He promises a Savior who will crush Satan (Genesis 3:15). We all inherit Adam and Eve's sinfulness (Romans 5:12). We're born enemies of God (Romans 8:7). We have fallen short of the perfection God demands (Romans 3:23). We are dead in sin, following the ways of the world, gratifying our sinful desires, deserving of God's wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3). But he doesn't crush us. He doesn't leave us to our own devices. "All are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24). "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9). This faith in Jesus is a gift of God's grace, worked by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace, the good news of God's grace in Christ given through Word and sacraments. Before we could do anything to earn anything from him, he chose us in eternity, to be his own dear children (Ephesians 1:4-6). From eternity to eternity, it is God's work, by God's grace. None of this is expected. It is always surprising.<sup>75</sup>

And so it is with God's work in history. Think of your own history. In what ways has God worked in your personal past, or in your family's past, so that the message of Christ came through others to you? In what ways has God used you to bring the message of Christ to someone else? How has Christ come through us in our daily lives, in our families, among our friends, through the service we give in our churches and through our support of the synod's ministry? In surprising ways, God graciously has brought us to this place, at this time, so that we are his forgiven, believing people. In surprising ways, God has graciously used us and worked through us, so that the gospel of Christ has come through us to others.

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<sup>71</sup> Literally, "coffee mill." This was the nickname for Northwestern's original building because of its resemblance to an old-fashioned coffee grinder.

<sup>72</sup> James P. Schaefer, "Stewards of the Mysteries of God in Today's World" (presented at the Arizona-California District Convention, Phoenix, Ariz., 22–24 June 1976), 12.

<sup>73</sup> Schaefer, "Stewards of the Mysteries of God," 13.

<sup>74</sup> Or, as Jaroslav Vajda put it in his hymn, "Where Shepherds Lately Knelt," "unasked, unforced, unearned." *Christian Worship* 345:4.

<sup>75</sup> This is at the heart of the Lutheran Confessions. For succinct examples, see the Augsburg Confession II–V; the Smalcald Articles Part II Article 1; the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration Article III:9–11, Article XI:15–23.

Writing two generations ago, James P. Schaefer commented on the synod's handling of the gospel.

Stewards of the mysteries of God. As to our conservation of those mysteries, our record under God's grace has been remarkable—flying, in fact, in the face of history. As to our sharing of the mysteries of God, His Οἰκονομία, His plan of salvation for the world through Jesus Christ, we have faltered at times. In more recent times history will record that we passed through an unparalleled period of expansion measured by any standard available to any historian. We do not know what the future holds. But we do know that God holds the future. For us that is *satis superque!*<sup>76</sup>

May we have a similar attitude of faith as we consider the future of WELS, continuing to hold on to his Word, continuing to confess our shortcomings and failures, and continuing to trust the blessings of our gracious God.

How might God continue to carry out his gospel work through WELS in the future? Like Schaefer said 50 years ago, we have to admit that only God knows. We have a long-range strategic plan before us at this convention. The plan is centered in God's surprising grace as expressed in 2 Corinthians 5:17-21. "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them" (v. 19). He did that for a world of people who oppose his will at every turn? How did he do that? "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (v. 21). The holy Son of God took on flesh and suffered the punishment sinful humanity deserves in our place? Why would he do that? The answer is "grace." This message of reconciliation has been proclaimed to us so that we are now his people, a new creation (v. 17). And grace upon grace, "he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" (vv. 19,20). Who are we that God should use us to be his messengers, to have a part in his kingdom work? Yet, he does use us, purely by grace alone, his surprising grace.

The plan speaks to maintaining our identity as a confessional Lutheran church body in a world where standing for something objective and true is a rare thing. This is an identity that we can trace to the late 1860s, an identity forged through several controversies. May God graciously help us keep that identity.

The plan continues to build on the mission spirit that has permeated our church body throughout its seven generations of existence, continuing the "100 in 10" home missions program and continuing efforts to bring the gospel to more and more people throughout the world. May God graciously cultivate a mission zeal in the next generation.

The plan remains committed to sustaining the three-tiered ministerial education system that has served our synod well since its inception more than 160 years ago, while also seeking new ways to recruit and train more people for public ministry. May God graciously help us value the treasure of our seminary, college, and prep schools for future generations.

The plan recognizes the importance of strong congregations at the local level. This is where God's people are shepherded with the gospel. May God graciously lead us to recognize the critical importance of the means of grace at the local level so that the faith of God's people is nurtured and strengthened, so that God's people receive the only comfort in a trying world, so that God's people are led to fear, love, and trust in him above all things as the Word is proclaimed in its truth and purity and the sacraments are faithfully administered among us, and so that God's people are brought to see themselves—and act—as Christ's ambassadors to bring the message of reconciliation through Christ to the people around them.

Finally, the plan underscores the need for adequate financial resources to carry out the ministry of the synod. May God continue to graciously provide us with wise leaders who manage the financial gifts of God's people and encourage continued support of the synod's work.

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<sup>76</sup> Schaefer, "Stewards of the Mysteries of God," 14. Οἰκονομία literally means "administration" or "management." "Satis superque" has the idea of "more than enough."

Fifty years ago, James P. Schaefer expressed a concern about the mission and ministry of WELS.

That is what I most fear—boredom. Getting sick and tired of our bread and butter: educating pastors and teachers and sharing the Gospel with those who do not have it. It is a simple program, uncomplicated and—compared with many programs—unglamorous. It is, up to now, what we have done best. There are many other desirable things that we can do together as a gathering of Christians. As we become bored with bread and butter, we reach for other goodies. Before you know it, all our priorities are mixed up and nobody knows where we are going.<sup>77</sup>

Let us not lose sight of the “bread and butter” of our work together as people who are committed to the precious gospel of Christ. Let us not grow tired of it. Instead, let Paul’s words encourage us. “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58). The ten-year plan concludes with these fitting words: “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.”<sup>78</sup> No doubt, his grace to us will continue to surprise us in ways that we couldn’t even imagine. The prayer “For my synod” in the “Personal Prayers” of *Christian Worship* is appropriate.

Lord Jesus, your Spirit calls and gathers the whole Church on earth and empowers it for service. Guide and preserve the work we do with other congregations in our synod. Keep us loyal to your Word, and give us courage to confess your truth boldly. Bestow on our leaders pure hearts, clear vision, and patient faith. Raise up new generations of faithful witnesses who will join us to proclaim the gospel to every creature.<sup>79</sup>

## Conclusion

There has always been some confusion surrounding the founding date and place of the Wisconsin Synod. I know First Vice President Huebner likes to make the case for Dec. 8, 1849, at Grace, Milwaukee. That was the date and place of the initial meeting to discuss founding a new Lutheran synod. But the synod wasn’t really in existence yet. The little founding group had agreed to meet again at Salem in Granville (northwest of Milwaukee) on Trinity Sunday, which was May 26, 1850. The original minutes say that the founding convention kicked off on that Sunday. Besides, Muehlhaeuser reflected at the 1860 convention that it was the tenth anniversary. If anyone would have known, he would have. And all our synod’s anniversaries date to 1850 as the starting point.

I mention this because last year there was a perfect confluence of date and place. Last year, May 26 landed on a Sunday. Even better, it landed on Trinity Sunday. It was also the day that Salem on the northwest side of Milwaukee (formerly Granville) dedicated the refurbished pipe organ that the church had purchased and installed. While I was sitting in Salem a year ago, it dawned on me. I wonder if Muehlhaeuser and those other pastors could have imagined that 174 years later—to the day—Salem would be dedicating a new pipe organ to the glory of God maybe a hundred yards from where they were meeting to establish the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin. I wonder if they could have imagined that their little group would have still been in existence all these years later.

At the tenth anniversary of the synod in 1860, Muehlhaeuser reviewed the synod’s history and commented, “Just as the kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, so also was the very small beginning of our Synod.”<sup>80</sup> That little group represented a handful of fledgling congregations in and around Milwaukee. Very small, very humble beginnings. One hundred seventy-five years later, we can look back and see the tree that God’s surprising grace has produced

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<sup>77</sup> Schaefer, “Stewards of the Mysteries of God,” 13.

<sup>78</sup> *Book of Reports and Memorials for the Sixty-Eighth Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (Waukesha: Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 2025), 68.

<sup>79</sup> *Christian Worship*, 255.

<sup>80</sup> Johannes Muehlhaeuser, “The Founding and History of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Neighboring States” (presented at the Eleventh Synod Convention, Fond du Lac, Wis., 31 May–7 June 1860), tr. by Arnold O. Lehmann in “The First History of the Wisconsin Synod,” *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 17, no. 1 (1999): 31.

for us and through us. That mustard-seed-like beginning has become a nationwide and worldwide church body, entirely by God's surprising grace.

I could go on. There are so many more examples from our synod's history of God's surprising grace at work, often despite our efforts, often despite our mistakes. God has certainly worked through the faithful labors of "jars of clay" (2 Corinthians 4:7). I'd encourage you to read up on our history in the books and other resources that have been assembled for this anniversary.<sup>81</sup> The story of our synod is one worth remembering and telling, which is why we have a synod archivist and why the WELS Historical Institute exists. There are more stories from our synod's history worth researching that give opportunity to marvel at God's grace, and maybe even inspire our efforts in the present and future. Each of us has our own story. The fact that we're here today testifies to the fact that our stories are somehow, in some way, connected to the story of God's surprising grace to the Wisconsin Synod as the message of Christ for us has come to us and goes out through us. And for that we just have to give thanks to our gracious and merciful God and sing:

Not unto us but to your name be glory, Lord,  
for grace so rich, so wide, so high, so free.  
Abide with us till trav'ling days are over and done,  
and pilgrim feet lead us home, Lord, to you.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Fredrich and Brenner, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 2nd Edition; Braun and Otto, *Christ Through Us*; [welshistoricalinstitute.org/175th-resources](http://welshistoricalinstitute.org/175th-resources); [youtube.com/@welshistory](https://www.youtube.com/@welshistory).

<sup>82</sup> *Christian Worship* 582:4.

# Closing service sermon: "Come!"

July 24, 2025

Chapel of the Christ, Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.

Rev. Douglas Free

Joshua 4:1-9

It happened twice. But do we really remember each time? Twice, God led his people through waters that blocked their travel to the promised land of Canaan. Most people remember the first time, crossing the Red Sea. Moses extends his staff over the Red Sea. The waters separate. The seabed is dry. The people walk between those walls of water to safety. We remember that one. How about the second, when the nation of Israel walks through the separated waters of the Jordan River. Most aren't so familiar with that one. The priests who are carrying the Ark of the Covenant lead the people to the bank of the Jordan River, which is at flood stage. But as soon as the priest's feet touched the water, the water upstream piled up in a heap. The ground where the river had just flowed is dry. The priests, holding the Ark, stand in the middle of the dried up riverbed until all the people have crossed. Then the priests leave the riverbed. As soon as their feet touched dry ground the river started to flow again. Remember?

That crossing isn't as familiar. And maybe what God had one man from each of the 12 tribes do isn't either. Each carried a stone from where the priests stood and put them in a pile. Joshua told them the purpose of that pile of stones: "To serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, what do these stones mean tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever." Those stones were to remind future generations of the power, the love, the goodness of God. Every time the people looked back on that pile of stones it would do two things for them—lead to thanksgiving and lead to confidence.

Who knows how long that pile of stones was there. Who knows how long people looked at them and remembered. But for a time they did. A child saw those stones piled up and would ask Mom or Dad why. Mom or Dad would tell them the story, how they walked across the dried-up Jordan River, maybe carrying that child in their arms. Grandparents told their grandchildren. They looked back at that pile of stones and remembered the power, the love, the goodness of God. They gave thanks for the miracle of God's grace.

Some could look back at even more. The crossing of the Red Sea. The difficult, dangerous, deadly trek through the wilderness. The water from a rock—twice. The bitter water made sweet. The bronze snake on a pole that saved those bitten by poisonous snakes when they simply trusted God's promise. The manna and the quail. The pillar of fire, the pillar of cloud. The tabernacle and the Ark. They could look back and see so many reasons to give thanks as they experienced and were blessed and protected because of the power, the love, and the goodness of God. As they looked back, they had reason to give thanks.

Can we do that for a moment? Look back, WELS members. What do you see? So many reasons to give thanks. Missteps, mistakes, no doubt. But look back and what you do see, not one set of memorial stones, but so many, each giving us a reason to give thanks to God. Humble beginnings. Controversies. Splits in congregations and families. Funding issues. Missionaries recalled. Schools closed. There have been challenges. There have been struggles. But here we are. Celebrating God's power, his love, and his goodness for giving us the opportunity as a church body to share with so many in so many ways, in so many places, for so many years a very simple truth: God loves you. Here we are, giving thanks as we look back for one simple reason—God's grace, which we've enjoyed and been blessed by, for 175 years.

Can we look back at just one more other memorial stone? It's a bit bigger. It sealed a tomb that held the body of Jesus "who became flesh and dwelt among us." Jesus was dead. We know why. Because I doubt and I'm afraid and I don't have confidence. And I worry. And I'm not going to tell you my other sins. But those sins are a stench to God. They pile up at the door of death and don't let us escape. And we're going to be contained in death

because that's the wage for sin. Our sins pile up in front of the door of heaven and don't let us enter it because our iniquities have separated us from God forever. Which means, guess where I'm going to go. And you know what's going to happen to me when I'm there, and you know how long I'm going to be there.

But what's our message? Just this—God loves you. So, he turned to his Son and said, "Live among them. And by the way, when you become flesh and live among them this is what I'm going to ask you to do. I'm going to ask you to become sin for them. To be held responsible for and blamed for every one of their sins—the whole human race. And then I'm going to do this to you, Jesus. I'm going to hold you accountable and treat you as if you were the sinner. That means, Jesus, I'm going to have you nailed to a cross so that you can be pierced for their transgressions and crushed for their iniquities. I'm going to have you nailed to a cross so that your blood can purify them from all of their sins. And then this is what's going to happen to you. I'm going to have you suffer eternal hell for their doubt and their worry and their lack of trust. And then you're going to die so that you can offer your life as a ransom for the sins for whole world." And Jesus said, "Okay." That's how much Jesus loves you.

But look at that great big memorial stone. It's not closing the tomb. It's rolled away. The disciples saw that. The women saw that. The angels said, "He's not here; he's risen just as he said." And the disciples wondered, "What does this mean?" The apostle Paul tells us, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17). Put it another way, since Christ has been raised, your faith is valuable, because your sins are gone. Look back not just at the memorial stones of our synod's history but at the greatest memorial stone in the history of the church and you know what you do. You give thanks. You look back and give thanks for God's amazing goodness, power, and his love for us.

That changes our view of the future. Can you imagine the children of Israel as they thought about the Jordan River crossing and gave thanks to God for his goodness, his power, and his love. They looked forward with confidence. What did they face next—Jericho (Joshua 6). A walled city. High walls. Thick walls. "God, what's our battle plan?" God said, "For six days march around the city once. On the seventh day, march around it seven times. Then shout and the walls will collapse." The people were happy to do that because as they looked back and gave thanks for what God had done for them, they looked forward with confidence in what God would do for them. The people did what God said, and the walls collapsed.

And then the Midianites come with this massive army (Judges 6). God tells Gideon to get an army to fight the Midianites. Gideon says, "Okay." He gathers thousands, tens of thousands of guys. God says, "Too many, pare it down." They pare it down. God says, "Still too many." They pare it down to 300. "How about that, God?" God says, "Good." Now what weapons do we give them? Well, let's give them a pitcher, a torch, and a trumpet. Wait, no spear or sword or bow and arrow? Nope. You remember what I did for you at the Jordan River. Yep. Go. They did, and God's people won.

When you look back at the memorial stones of the past and see God's goodness, power, and love, you look forward with confidence and realize that if God be for us who can be against us. That's us. What are we facing as a church body? What are we facing as individual Christians? Again, we've heard about it for two and a half days, and thank you for sharing the statistics with us because it does tell us there are challenges. Declining birth rate. Young people leaving the church. A society that's just so godless. But above all the devil. And maybe we look at the future just a bit pessimistically. As a synod we're here clapping it's all going to work. But then we go home and wonder how.

So, look back at what God has done for us in the past and we can look forward with confidence. Especially when we look back at the promises that God has made to us, "Give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" and "Do not be discouraged for the Lord your God is with you." God said, "My Word will not return to me empty." God said, "The Lord will fight for you, you need only to be still." God said, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name. You are mine."

Look back at the goodness and power and love and then look forward with confidence. God's on my side. Oh, yes, there's the devil, pesky, powerful. But what happened to him on Calvary's cross. Exactly what God said in the Garden of Eden would happen to him. He was crushed. Oh, he can still tempt me and is pretty successful. But he can't tattle on me because thanks to Jesus I'm covered by the robes of Christ's righteousness and washed clean by Jesus' blood. As a result, I stand perfect before God and so do you. And you know what Jesus said—not even the gates of hell can prevail against it—the church.

That's our confidence. God is with us. God loves us. God will bless us. Look back at all the memorial stones. Look back at that really cool memorial stone, the stone that closed the tomb but is rolled away, and thank God for his goodness and power and love. And then look forward. Trust God to continue to display that goodness, power, and love in your life and in the life of his church. And then you know that it's going to be okay. And you know why—because God loves you. Amen.