

EMBRACE THE
CROSS ANTICIPATE THE
CROWN
SYNOD CONVENTION 2023



REPORT OF THE **PRESIDENT**

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67TH BIENNIAL CONVENTION OF THE
WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD

When people are asked what they would like to study in Bible class, many pastors will tell you that the most frequent request is the book of Revelation. That's understandable, I suppose, for a number of reasons.

First, this inspired letter from the apostle John to the seven congregations in Asia Minor is filled with images and pictures that can be confusing and hard to understand. Lutherans do not want to be confused when they read their Bibles.

Second, some of the images themselves at first glance can be frightening and disturbing. Lutherans do not want to be frightened and disturbed when they read their Bibles. Yes, they want to see the reality and results of their own sin, but they also want to know the comfort and assurance of God's grace and to know that when God tells us not to let our hearts be troubled, he means it.

Third, they know that the book of Revelation deals with things that are still to come. Who doesn't want at least a basic understanding of what they can expect the future of God's world to hold?

And finally, Lutherans are aware that many Christians have misread and misinterpreted parts of the book of Revelation, and they want to know how to respond when they run into people who hold beliefs that do not align with the scriptures.

What do all those reasons for wanting to study Revelation have in common? All of them are rooted in the perception that the book of Revelation is hard to understand and can be disturbing, unsettling, and even frightening.

But is it? I believe that, while there are some details that can be difficult to interpret, John's letter to the churches in Asia Minor is one of the easiest books of the Bible to understand. And far from being frightening and disturbing, I believe the message in Revelation is one of the most comforting, encouraging, and uplifting in all of God's Word. *Why?* Because the main message and theme of Revelation is simple: Yes, the world we

live in has been terribly damaged by sin. Yes, Christians living in this sin-damaged world will experience the effects of sin in their own lives and in the culture around them. Yes, Christians will be persecuted and suffer for their faith. Yes, as long as this world stands, Satan will be attacking God's people and God's church. Yes, at times it will look to us like Satan and his forces are winning that war and that the church is losing it. But then comes the beautiful truth and the message of incredible comfort: Yes, all of that may be true now, but don't be afraid, don't be discouraged, don't despair, don't give up. Because Jesus is coming. And in the end, he wins. And so do we.

That is a message of comfort, of hope, of encouragement, of *certainty*. God's church can be filled with comfort, hope, encouragement, and certainty when we hear the voice from heaven say, "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ, because the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, the one who accuses them before our God day and night. They conquered him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony. . . . For this reason, rejoice, you heavens and those who dwell in them" (Revelation 12:10-12). How can we not be filled with comfort, hope, encouragement, and certainty when we hear Jesus himself say to us, "Yes, I am coming soon!" (Revelation 22:20). And even as we embrace the cross in our lives, we are filled with comfort, hope, encouragement, and certainty, and in faith we respond, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20). Because he *is* coming. And in the end, he wins. His victory is our victory.

Even as we struggle against the attacks of Satan and the effects of sin in this world, we already see the indescribable blessings of God's grace for us as individuals and for our synod. They are too many to list, but here are just a few:

- By his grace God has preserved the truth of his Word among us and has maintained our commitment to standing on and proclaiming

that truth. Every pastor, teacher, and staff minister in our synod believes and teaches that the scriptures are God's inspired and inerrant Word. The lay members of our congregations are happy to belong to a synod in which there is no doubt or uncertainty about the truth proclaimed in the Scriptures. There is no debate about the reliability of the Bible in all that it says, and there is no one posing the question that Satan first raised: "Did God really say?" While we may sometimes take this for granted, we should never underestimate how blessed we are. While many, if not most, Christian churches have abandoned their belief that the Bible is fully and completely the Word of God, it is no small thing to rejoice that we have been led to believe, teach, and confess that the Scriptures are true in all they say. God's Word has been and remains our great heritage.

- By his grace God has preserved our commitment to preaching and teaching that properly presents both law and gospel and that focuses on Christ and his saving work. "Christ for us"—what he did to save sinners through his perfect life and innocent death remains the central theme of sermons heard in our churches and classrooms. God has enabled us to avoid the trend in so many Christian churches today where preaching and teaching focuses on social issues, gives advice on how to cope with life in a difficult world, or promotes a theology of glory rather than the theology of the cross. It is no small thing that God has kept his message of salvation in Christ as the central focus of our proclamation.

- By his grace, God has helped us to remain focused on our mission to share the gospel with more and more people. Our world mission efforts have focused not only on strengthening the confessional stance of our partner churches and mission churches around the world. We have also been committed to looking for new opportunities to expand the reach of the gospel in places where we have not been. Sometimes those opportunities come about because of careful exploration and planning. At other times God drops those opportunities into our laps when we

could not have anticipated it. Who could have imagined that we would be invited to Vietnam, where a church body of 140,000 members has asked us to teach and train their pastors to be confessional Lutherans? Added to that, God has blessed our efforts to expand our worldwide fellowship with Lutheran church bodies that desire to unite with other confessional Lutheran synods. In recent years, our synod has declared fellowship with the Lutheran Church of Ethiopia and the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ—Kenya. At this convention, we will declare fellowship with the Obadiah Lutheran Synod of Uganda and affirm our fellowship with the *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional* in Latin America. WELS missionaries and representatives of other sister church bodies are in discussions with several other church bodies seeking fellowship with our synod.

- By his grace, in our own country, we have embarked on an effort to plant 100 new home missions in ten years. This project is not simply designed to meet an arbitrary numerical goal. Rather it is an effort to take the gospel to more places and to more people than we are currently doing. The first nine mission starts have been approved; some have already been blessed with pastors, while others are calling. A tenth new mission may be approved this fall. And, on a congregational level, we see a renewed commitment to finding ways to connect with communities and with people, all in an effort to share the gospel on a person-to-person basis with as many people as possible.

- By his grace God has continued to unite us in the value that we place in liturgical worship, while at the same time rejoicing in the rich variety of form and music that liturgical worship provides. To underscore the importance of liturgical worship, we've produced a new hymnal that is finding widespread use in our congregations and homes.

- By his grace, our synod has not given in to the pressure of an increasingly hostile culture to abandon biblical values. We have clearly

stated our belief that God created human beings as distinctly male and female and that these God-created genders cannot be abandoned or changed on the basis of personal choice. We have maintained that God established marriage as a union between one man and one woman, and that his gift of sex is intended by him to be used only with the lifelong bond of marriage. We have clearly taught and confessed that human life begins at conception and that any effort to end that life before birth is sinful and is an act of rebellion against the One who alone creates and ends human life. We have publicly stated our thanks and appreciation for the freedom to worship, to preach, and to teach biblical truths, and that if the government or anyone else seeks to silence or restrict us in those activities, we will obey God rather than man. We have resisted the culture's message of racial hatred and division and have continued to be committed not only to sharing the gospel with people of every nation, tribe, and language, but also to emphasize that "there is not Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for you are all one and the same in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

- By his grace, we have remained committed to bringing up our children in the training and instruction of the Lord. Our WELS schools are enjoying their highest levels of enrollment ever. Our early childhood education programs are increasing at a rapid pace, and in those programs congregations are making increased efforts and focus to connect non-WELS families with the life and worship of those congregations.
- By his grace, God has moved his people to support the work we do together as a synod with great generosity. Even during the COVID pandemic, offerings for the synod's mission and ministry increased. The financial reports that you will hear at this convention will illustrate that once again, God gives more than we can ask or imagine.
- By his grace, in 2025 WELS will celebrate its 175th anniversary. A committee, chaired by Prof. Joel Otto, has been appointed to oversee the

planning and implementation of our synodwide celebration.

The list of God's gracious blessings on our synod could go on. We thank and praise him for these undeserved blessings. But as we celebrate those blessings, we cannot be blind to the challenges that we face as individuals and as a synod in this sin-infected world.

What are some of those challenges?

Over the span of more than three decades, our synod has experienced a steady decline in members. Synod membership peaked in 1990 and has fallen in nearly every year since. That decline has not been caused by a growing number of people leaving our synod or because of a decrease in the number of people who join our synod by way of adult confirmation or profession of faith. The primary cause of the decline is demographics. The average age of our members is increasing while the numbers of births and infant baptisms are only a fraction of what they were only a few years ago.

That decline in membership, especially among the younger generations, has had a marked impact in a number of ways. Many congregations—both in rural and urban settings—have seen a decline in membership to levels that threaten their viability. These congregations are being encouraged, when feasible, to consider merging with other WELS congregations nearby. While enrollment in our Lutheran schools has grown, most of that growth has been a result of the increased enrollment of non-WELS mission prospects; the percentage of WELS students in our schools has been decreasing. Perhaps one of the biggest impacts of fewer WELS children can be seen in the called worker shortage that has been growing more acute by the year.

The number of souls in our synod is something that is determined only by God. We plant and water the seed of the gospel, but he is the One who makes it grow. We gladly leave the results

to him. But while the results of gospel ministry are in God's hands, the faithful stewardship of that gospel ministry is a responsibility that God has given to us. A desire to be faithful in our stewardship of his gospel has led us prayerfully to embark on an effort to plant 100 new missions in ten years—to establish new sites for gospel ministry so that more people can hear the good news and be touched by the work of the Holy Spirit. A desire to be faithful in our stewardship of the gospel has compelled us to expand our fellowship beyond our borders by looking for new mission fields abroad. And a desire to be faithful in our stewardship of the gospel will lead individual members and congregations to focus on the importance of evangelism and outreach in their communities. We do this not through gimmicks or trendy programs that attempt to draw people to the church for all the wrong reasons, but by faithfully and consistently doing as Philip did with Nathanael, telling him, "Come and see!" (John 1:46).

Another challenge we face—and it is really nothing new for the church militant—is the fierce opposition of a godless culture. What perhaps is new, at least in our experience, is that the attack on biblical values has become so open and widespread that these godless philosophies and lifestyles have become mainstream when they were previously held by a small minority. Now they are being accepted by an increasing segment of our society. These views and philosophies are not only defended, but those who hold these views increasingly demand their acceptance and support by all. They portray Christians and churches that hold to biblical values as closed-minded, bigoted, and hateful. And we Christians are not immune to the temptation to conform and surrender to the strong cultural currents swirling around us.

It goes without saying that, as a synod that stands on the scriptures and holds to biblical truths and values, we will continue to be bold in stating our beliefs and ready to articulate those beliefs in our preaching and in our personal witness.

We need to ask God to give us the courage at all times to speak the things that we have seen and heard, regardless of the consequences. At the same time, as a synod we need to be very careful in our preaching and teaching not to venture into the realm of politics or give the impression that the mission of the church is to reform society through political means. We preach Christ crucified and risen. We proclaim the truth of God's Word. We acknowledge the clear Lutheran distinction between the kingdom of God's left hand (the secular and political world) and the kingdom of his right hand (the spiritual kingdom in which God rules by the working of the gospel). We teach God's people the truths of God's Word, and we encourage them as individual citizens to participate in the political realm as the salt and light that God intends them to be.

One of the greatest and most obvious challenges is our shortage of called workers. As mentioned before, one of the reasons for this shortage is simple demographics. There are fewer WELS young people who are available to train for the public ministry. The increasing cost of tuition in our ministerial education schools is another factor. Perhaps we have become less faithful in encouraging our children and young people to consider preparing for the public ministry.

Could now be the time for us to commit ourselves to a concerted and wide-ranging synodwide effort to encourage more people to serve in the public ministry and to provide as much assistance as possible to make that choice more affordable? The harvest is indeed plentiful. The workers are few. Should we fervently ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers into his harvest field and then do all we can to be his instruments in bringing that about? I believe that the answer to those questions is, "Yes, now is the time."

As we embrace the cross and anticipate the crown, it's certainly fitting for us to keep in mind our Lord's messages of both warning and encouragement to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Revelation 2 and 3).

As he said to the church in Ephesus, he commends Christians who faithfully endure hardship and who hold to the truth of God's Word. But he warns us not to forsake our first love—the love for the gospel and the mission to proclaim it.

As he said to the church in Smyrna, he reminds us that while we may experience suffering and poverty, we are rich in God's grace and need not fear any suffering that may come to us.

As he said to the church in Pergamum, he recognizes that we live where Satan has his throne, but even there, God has enabled us to hold fast to his name.

As he said to the church in Thyatira, God acknowledges our works of faith and love and commends us for them. At the same time, he warns us not to allow false teachings to creep unnoticed into our midst, but rather to hold fast to what we have until he comes.

As he said to the church in Philadelphia, God promises to continue to place before us the door that has been opened by his saving message so we can seize the opportunities he gives us to share that message.

As he said to the church in Sardis, he calls us to repentance for at times resting on a reputation of faithfulness when, in reality, there are times when our faith grows listless and our actions are hollow.

And as he said to the church in Laodicea, he lovingly warns us against becoming lukewarm and complacent in our faith and in commitment to his Word and his mission.

Those churches in Asia Minor are a perfectly accurate picture of the Christian church in this world. The church on earth is a gathering of people whom God has redeemed and made his own through the work of his Son. It is a group of people who have been blessed by God with saving faith and who often display that faith in works of Christian love, service, and faithfulness. But the church on earth is also comprised of people

who need our Savior's loving call to repentance and his fervent warnings of the consequences of spiritual apathy and complacency.

There is much about the future we don't know. But God has told us important things that we do know. In the days and years ahead, God will continue to call us to repentance and to strengthen our faith through the trials and crosses that we face in a sinful broken world. So, God's people first embrace the cross of Jesus, where he brought about the healing and forgiveness we so desperately need. And we embrace the cross of suffering, which God allows for the strengthening and spiritual good of his people. And as we embrace the cross, we know something else. We look ahead and anticipate the crown in keeping with the promise Jesus himself gave: "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10).

Embracing the cross and anticipating the crown, we do well to remember again the message of the book of Revelation: Yes, the world we live in has been terribly damaged by sin. Yes, Christians living in this sin-damaged world will experience the effects of sin in their own lives and in the culture around them. Yes, Christians will be persecuted and suffer for their faith. Yes, as long as this world stands, Satan will be attacking God's people and God's church. Yes, at times it will look to us like Satan and his forces are winning that war and that the church is losing it. But then comes the beautiful truth and the message of incredible comfort: Yes, all of that may be true now, but don't be afraid, don't be discouraged, don't despair, don't give up. Because Jesus is coming. And in the end, he wins. And so do we.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Respectfully submitted,



WELS President Mark Schroeder

