



Report of the President

WELS 68TH BIENNIAL CONVENTION

July 21–24, 2025

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."

Those 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.

Respectfully submitted,



Rev. Mark Schroeder
WELS President

Soli Deo gloria!