

# LUTHERAN LIFE

**Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod  
Florida-Georgia District  
January/February, 2024**



# LUTHERAN LIFE

*Lutheran LIFE* is the official newsmagazine of the Florida-Georgia (FLGA) District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The Mission of the FLGA District is to serve, assist, and encourage congregations in the ministry of Jesus Christ. People of the FLGA District are equipped, empowered, engaged in the Master's business ... connecting people to Jesus. *Lutheran LIFE* is designed to inform LCMS church and school members of the activities, personalities and resources offered by the Synod and the District. *Lutheran LIFE* may also provide a forum for readers to express their views and ideas on a wide range of topics. *Lutheran LIFE* is published bi-monthly. News items and photos are encouraged. Please send scanned photos as a .jpg, .png or .pdf attachment rather than embedded in emails.

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*Lutheran LIFE*

# DISTRICT CAPSULES

## Transferred Into FLGA from Other Districts

10/06/23..... Rev. Tim Eichberger from Michigan  
10/16/23..... Ms. Carol Eichert from N Illinois  
10/18/23..... Rev. John Vaughn, Jr. from MN South  
10/24/23..... Ms. Lydia Landes from Southern  
10/30/23..... Ms. Cynthia Major from Michigan  
11/01/23..... Rev. John Ramey from Southeastern  
11/06/23..... Rev. Scott Jensen from N Wisconsin  
12/02/23..... Rev. Steven Massey from Kansas

## Transferred Out of FLGA to Other Districts

10/01/23..... Dcs. Marissa Kroenke to Missouri

## Ordinations & Installations

10/22/23..... Rev. Timothy Faile, Sole Pastor  
Prince of Peace/Douglasville, GA  
10/29/23..... Rev. Seth DeBartolo, Sole Pastor  
Faith/Clewiston, FL  
11/12/23..... Rev. John Ramey, Sole Pastor IIP  
Trinity/Cape Coral, FL  
11/19/23..... Rev. Scott Jensen, Sole Pastor  
Bethel/Hobe Sound, FL

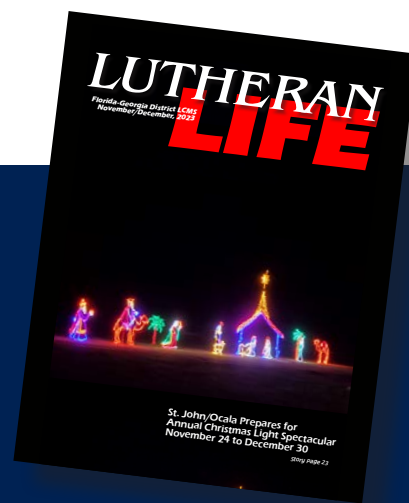
## Called to Glory

10/09/23..... Rev. Norman Barnette  
11/07/23..... Rev. Robert Besalski

## Status Change

10/29/23..... Faith/Clewiston, FL as dual  
parish with Christ The King/  
Labelle, FL  
0/29/23..... Christ The King/Labelle, FL  
as dual parish with Faith/  
Clewiston, FL.

Note: (O) = Ordained; (C) = Commissioned  
(IIM) = Intentional Interim Pastor



*Lutheran LIFE is mailed free to all congregation members of the FLGA District. Send us your news! Attach photos of at least 300 pixels in .jpg or .png or .pdf formats.*

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## Michelle Pitts Joins District Board of Directors

Michelle Pitts has joined the Board of Directors of the Florida-Georgia District as one of the Commissioned Ministers.

Michelle is a Director of Christian Education who graduated from Concordia/St. Paul, MN in 2006.

She worked at congregations in Las Vegas, Nevada and Milwaukee, Wisconsin from 1997-2006. She worked in children's and youth ministry, outreach and education in those congregations. In 2006 she took a call to Trinity/Savannah, GA. Her responsibilities there included youth ministry, small group leader, confirmation instruction and more. She was at Trinity until 2012.

Michelle went on to work in public schools as a para-professional. She received her MA in Professional Counseling in 2011.

Last year she accepted a call to **Our Savior/Plantation, FL** where she serves as the Director of Christian Outreach with Pastor Tony Durante. 



I can't imagine. I can't imagine living without light. I may not be a little child anymore, but there's still something about "the dark." Maybe it's the realities of the world around us — the hate, the disregard for others or even life itself, and of those with intentions that seem to be from the "dark side." Jesus in JOHN 12, warns us of the darkness saying, "Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you." When I consider this reality, it makes sense to me that I hunger to sit in the presence of the One who is the "Light of the World." The One whose light illuminated the way and "called us out of the darkness into His marvelous light" (1 PETER 2:9).

This Epiphany season is a gift that calls us to again recognize how easily we can begin to find ourselves wandering from the Light.

A few summers ago, my daughter and I explored the Florida Caverns in the panhandle. At one point during the tour, our guide turned off all the lights. It was pitch black! We couldn't even see our hands in front of our faces. I once read that if you remain in such utter darkness — even after only a couple days — permanent eye damage can result. That fact made me think how oppressive and damaging darkness can be and how we truly need light.

We live in a world made dark by sin — a world that has turned against its Creator and the One who is the Light of life. We need the Light. My prayer for each of us as we begin this New Year is that we will again hunger to be in the presence of the *One True Light*.

I further pray that we will bathe in His light's warmth and protection as we come to Him in His Word that is the "light unto our path." Yes, Jesus, "the Light of the world" came to restore all of creation —


## You Are The Light of the World

<sup>35</sup> Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going."<sup>36</sup> Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light." —JOHN 12:35-36

including you and me — to Himself. So let us rejoice for as He said further in JOHN 8, "Whoever follows me will

As we journey through this season of Epiphany and the year ahead, we are again reminded, that we are vessels through whom the Lord has chosen to do His work. In MATTHEW, our Lord tells us that we, like salt, make a difference in the situations we are in. Just as a little salt can either improve or worsen the flavor of something. A little influence can go a long way. The Light of Christ that shines forth from your words and deeds truly can be a beacon of hope and life!

You might be the only one in your family whose faith is more than an occasional passing thought or activity. Or you may be the only open Christian in your workplace . . . your school . . . or your neighborhood. But you

may have been put there by the Lord to be His Light, an influence and, in a loving way, to move people in the right direction. You may think that your "only one," but God can do a lot with a little! 

# Hungering for the Light

never walk in darkness but will have the light of life!" In Him, we not only have the light of salvation but the only light by which we can find our way — His way — through our world's spiritual darkness.

I have heard it said, "I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something..." My dear friends in Christ, you and me . . . we are each only one, but we can make an eternal difference, even in the darkest of circumstances. Jesus put it this way: "You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it useful again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless. You are the light of the world-like a city on a mountain, glowing in the night for all to see. Don't hide your light under a basket! Instead, put it on a stand and let it shine for all. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father." (MATTHEW 5:13 NLT).

*Walking Along-side  
Others to Share  
The Light of Christ!*



*James  
Rockey*

PRESIDENT  
FLORIDA-GEORGIA DISTRICT  
LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD



# VOC Gathering Registration

Plans are moving along for the annual Veterans of the Cross Gathering — the event geared toward retired church workers and lay leaders their spouses. Held at the St. Stephen Retreat Center in Titusville, Florida. It will begin on Monday, March 4th and conclude on Wednesday, March 6, 2024.

The retreat was established in 1979 by the late Florida-Georgia District President Dr. L. Lloyd Behnken to stimulate retired professional church workers with relevant ministry and senior presentations in addition to helping people connect with friends from years past.

"This year's theme is 'Pace for the Race,'" said event chairperson Ruth Wiedenmann. "As people enter retirement, a major question one might ask is 'What does God want me to do with my remaining time in this world? This is critically important!'"

The writer of the book of Hebrews explains that, for followers of Jesus, life

is primarily a matter of running "with endurance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1). For Paul, the goal of that race was to finish strong (2 Timothy 4:7).

In order to reach that goal, Paul set everything else aside, keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the prize. (Philippians 3:14).


"No matter who we are, what our age or how far we've traveled on our pilgrimage, the Lord still has a job for us to do," Wiedenmann continued. "There is an urgent need to persevere to serve the Lord. Let us find the pace that will see us over the finish line. Come to the 2024 Veterans of the Cross Gathering and rediscover God's purpose for your life and advancing the cause of His Kingdom."

Keynote speakers are Ron & Barb Pennekamp; Bible study leader is Craig Mathews and Vic Belton will serve as proclaimer at the divine worship.

Retreat registration is

open and available online through the FLGA District website ([flgadistrict.org](http://flgadistrict.org)) Newly retired workers are encouraged to contact the FLGA District office at 407-857-5556 x8 with any questions.

Register now to ensure participation. There will be no onsite registration — all registration must take place prior to the event.

**Registration closes** 



Ruth Wiedenmann  
VOC Retreat Chairperson



February 15, 2024.

## VETERANS *of the* CROSS



*"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."*

**March 4- 6 2024 • St Stephen Retreat Center • Titusville, Florida**  
**Registration opens in December**

# Closes February 15th!



## Keynote Speakers Ron & Barb Pennekamp

The Rev. Ron and Barb Pennekamp have been married for 51 years and have been blessed with 7 children and 19 grandchildren. They have served congregations in Indiana, Kentucky, Illinois and Florida — Ron as a Lutheran pastor and Barb as a Lutheran school teacher. While they are now officially retired, They remain active in ministry — accurately retired and repositioned to advance the Kingdom of God.

The Pennekamps have served as short term missionaries in Russia, China, Panama, Guatemala, and Mexico. Their passion is to seek and save the lost and disciple others who will do the same.

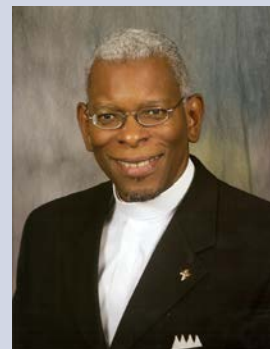
"After praying for three years, asking God 'What do you want us to do together now to advance your Kingdom?,' His answer is 'Reach your neighbors, encourage the pastors and their wives and families in your circuit, and help a dying congregation, by becoming 'Alongsiders' who encourage, help and serve.'" Pastor Pennekamp offers.

They continue to learn how to disciple others, and their newest discovery is "Information without relationship leads to knowledge, but information with relationship leads to transformation." The key to healthy relationships is shared joy which is the fertile soil for the knowledge of Christ to develop in.

"To continue strong in life's journey we need to fuel our brains with joy. Joy is the second fruit of the Spirit after love. What is Joy's source? What is Joy's outcome? We will discover "Joy for the journey," in our Veterans of the Cross gathering," he concluded. ∞

## Divine Service Proclaimer Vic Belton

The Rev. Dr. Victor J. Belton serves as 1st Vice President of the Florida-Georgia District and the Manager of REV7:9. He has been a Mission Facilitator for the Florida-Georgia District, served his alma mater, Concordia/New York, as campus pastor and Founding Director of the Center for Contextual Leadership. Belton served 27 years as pastor of **Peace/Decatur, GA**. He served 12 years on the LCMS Board of Directors and as a proclaimer for three LWML conventions. Belton has also worked extensively in youth ministry and LCMS Youth Gatherings. Belton wrote daily devotions for Portals of Prayer in conjunction with Concordia Publishing House and has commentary to be included in The Great Sending II. He is married to Wenona and has one foster son Michael. He enjoys time on the beach, bike riding and spending time with family and friends. ∞



## Bible Study Leader Craig Mathews

The Rev. Craig Mathews is a graduate of Concordia/St. Paul, MN as a Director of Christian Education. He served as a DCE for 20+ years at St. John's/Port Washington, WI, Peace/Neenah, WI and Beautiful Savior/Omaha NE. After attending Concordia Seminary/St. Louis, MO in the Alternate Route Program, he served for more than 20 years as a Pastor at Faith/Chippewa Falls, WI and ultimately at Hope/Bradenton, FL.

"While serving in Chippewa Falls, I became more serious about maintaining and improving my physical fitness," Mathews offers. "I competed in several Sprint Triathlons. After moving to Florida, my focus turned to competing in the annual Fight for Air Climb in Tampa, which was a race up 46 flights of stairs at a bank in downtown Tampa. Wanting to help others in the fitness journey, I became certified with the American Council on Exercise in 2016 and began working part-time at the Bradenton YMCA as a Fitness Coach and Personal Trainer."

Mathews retired from full-time pastoral ministry in May of 2020, but his work for the Lord still continues as he has served as a vacancy pastor and in April of 2023 have completed training as an Intentional Interim Pastor. Pastor Mathews is presently serving **Redeemer/Englewood, FL** in that capacity. ∞







## All Nations Cultural Commission Plans 2024

The Florida-Georgia District's Multi-Cultural and Diversity Task Force has a new name — "All Nations Cultural Commission."

"While the name is new, make no mistake about the purpose and mission for ministry as we connect people to Jesus remains the same," explains The Rev. Dean Pfeffer, pastor at Hope/Plant City, FL. "Our purpose is to reach out to the many cultures in our District with the life saving, life changing message of the Gospel."

"May I be so bold to ask if you have ever looked around while you are in worship and do you notice much diversity in your congregation? Now multiply that by the nearly 200 congregations in our District and you will see why we need this Commission," Pfeffer continues. "In the vast majority of our congregations, you will notice very little diversity. In Revelation 7:9 John tells us *'After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands.'*"


"Right there you see that there is diversity in heaven. John tells us it will be people

of every nation, tribes, peoples and languages therefore the Church Triumphant is going to a church that is truly multicultural and diverse.

"Add to this our Lord's desire for 'all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:4). With that said, let's take this next step together, if the local church is a picture of the Church Triumphant, we have a lot of work to do."

So, what exactly is the purpose of our All Nations Cultural Commission? Simply put, the Commission is a dynamic initiative committed to fostering awareness of our multicultural ministries across the LCMS and in particular right here in our Florida-Georgia District. We are here to celebrate the invaluable contributions of those who faithfully serve in our community, fostering a spirit of unity and inclusion.

"The Commission is dedicated to inspiring and encouraging congregations to extend their outreach beyond their walls and reach out to neighbors on the street and connect them to Jesus," Pfeffer emphasizes.

"Our Commission expresses its deepest thanks and thanks God for the leadership, unwavering commitment, and dedication of Rev. Tony Durante who faithfully led this Task Force since its inception." 


### All Nations Cultural Commission Membership

Rev. Dean Pfeffer, Chair  
Verushka Garcia, Vice Chair  
Rev. Dr. Victor Belton  
Dr. Haroldo Camacho  
Rev. Tony Durante  
Rev. Frank & Rebecca Marshall  
Deaconess Ligia Morales  
Naomi Mungin  
District President James Rockey



Rev. Dean Pfeffer

The focus on this Commission can be looked at in these three areas:

- + AWARENESS: Of multicultural ministry and servants actively working to have an impact.
- + CELEBRATE: Those faithfully and fruitfully serving in our ever changing and more diverse communities and, the Commission would identify and honor those faithful and fruitful servants who are living as "along-siders" with their diverse and changing community.
- + ENCOURAGE & INSPIRE: Congregations to reach across the street to their neighbors, pray and encourage that our congregations will look like our communities and be a reflection of the Church Triumphant and work together with our Revelation 7:9 congregations in creating an atmosphere of diversity and inclusion in our District. 




Members of the All Nations Cultural Commission task force met via zoom recently



The Ministry Wives Wellness Team has been formed by FLGA District President James Rockey to foster connection, support, and encouragement for pastors' wives in their unique role as the women who come alongside their husbands in ministry. The group has been given the task of organizing an event specifically designed for the pastor's wife.

A weekend retreat themed "Be Still and Know — A Study of Rest and Refuge" is planned for Ministry Wives, the wives of pastors, SMP pastors, or vicars in the Florida-Georgia District on April 5-7, 2024, at Canterbury Conference Center in Oviedo, FL. The retreat will be led by Deb Burma, who spoke to the wives at the President's Equip Conference in September of 2023. Burma will focus her teaching on Psalm 46. Participants will be reminded that in Jesus, we find rescue and renewal.

There will be time for rest, private devotions, praise, and relationship-building activities. Members of the Ministry Wives Wellness Team are Kathy Meier (Chair), Sally Wesche, Anette Shanks, Martha Rockey, Barb Pennekamp, and Elaine Stier. The team's purpose is to connect Ministry Wives, whether their husbands are actively serving, Emeritus, or have been called home to Jesus. For more information and to register for the event: <https://flgadistrict.org/ministrywivesretreat/> 



## Disciples Making Disciple Makers


During last year's 75th Anniversary, the FLGA District's theme was *Living as Along-Siders!* This was chosen because it conveys the way the Lord has called each of us to live as "Disciples who Make Disciple Makers." Remember, that was His command: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them..." Therefore, we are to live as followers of Christ who "come alongside" of others and walk with them through life!

"What a great year of celebration it was culminating at our Fall President's Equip Conference with more than 1,000 attendees. Yet, our focus on Living as Along-Siders remains! We pray that each congregation, school and individual connected to the FLGA District will continue to discover and live out this calling daily," emphasizes FLGA District President, James Rockey.

"We are also still in the process of raising \$1.5 million to plant 10 new congregations. We have received more than \$230,000 to date and thank the Lord for all those who have responded. We remind you that with the growth of our two states, the vast majority of our neighbors having no connection to the Lord! Now is the time."

Rockey has underscored the importance of establishing new ministries to serve as bridges to reach these new neighbors. "It is time for us to start new congregations that will be chartered but will be of various approaches to being Christ's presence and witnesses," he says. "They may be store front, they may be multi-national in an existing church, and they may look different than our existing congregations. But the mission is the same —to Connect People to Jesus!"

The District is asking individuals and congregations to join in making a sacrificial gift. The District has established resources that can be used to share this vision and prepare people to bring their gifts on a set day.

"Working together I am confident we can make an eternal difference in our future ministry goals," Rockey concluded. "Please contact me to learn more about how you can help." 





*This month The Coaching Leader (TCL) interviews Florida-Georgia District Pastor, The Rev. Dr. Dan Prugh (PDP) from Holy Trinity/Tampa FL. We often hear how churches should be a partner with their school ministry to share Jesus and today we learn what they are actually doing. You can listen to the complete interview at The Coaching Leader Podcast or Scott Gress's YouTube channel.*

**TCL: Pastor thanks for talking with us. You said that over the past three years the Lord has brought 63 people to Himself through Holy Baptism. That's fantastic! Praise God.**

PDP: Yes, all ages and situations including the elderly, children and parents.

**TCL: How do you even meet that many people so that they come to the Lord in Baptism?**

PDP: It really began with my call here at Trinity/Tampa. They wanted someone to love the community and bring the church and school community together. The previous pastor really set the table for that.

**TCL: That's not a lot of time but it is a promise to be consistently present.**

PDP: Yes, it doesn't sound like much but over three years every student knows me and I know them and I am a part of the school family. Strategically I am also communicating clearly with the principal and the teachers about the mission of God and that what God is doing and that His church is important.

**TCL: What else happens because you are consistently present?**

PDP: Along with the staff and members, I am visible and talk to people. We get to know them and introduce them to Jesus by how we carry ourselves.

**TCL: So what is the pathway that brings them closer to Jesus and even baptism?**

PDP: I emphasize that we are very direct. We actually follow up and begin a conversation. For those who have been baptized we have monthly chapel celebrations where I also teach about baptism. We

## **Community Connections & Ministry Moments**

have numerous activities where both church and school folks can be together and create event Sundays throughout the year that we promote. So we actually say, "We want to encourage you to come to church this day." They are a part of this community. We do a back to school bash, a baptismal Sunday church picnic, then there's Christmas, Palm Sunday, Easter

# Dan Prugh **MAXIMIZES** School

**TCL: So what specifically did you start to do when you arrived?**

PDP: The first thing was to meet with the principal. I believed if the mission was aligned I would not need to do a lot of supervision but commit to a few things to be consistently present: be at the morning car line two days, at the chapel every day, leading 50% of the time. Then finally lead the weekly teacher devotion.

PDP: We brainstormed and have implemented a number of things to help people. First, we are very direct in our interactions with people. It is not an insider culture where we assume people know and understand the value of church or baptism or anything.

We have an orientation video for new school parents. We tell them they are a part of our church community. On the forms for our registration we have a place asking them to write down baptism birthdays for all family members or indicate if they are seeking baptism or want to know more about Lutheran church.

**TCL: That seems pretty standard, what's the difference for you and Holy Trinity?**

and so on. All of those times we have month long communication plans encouraging people to come to that event Sunday.

**TCL: You don't leave anything to chance!**

PDP: Right! The church sometimes forgets that if people bring their children to you for school then they want to hear from you. So we intentionally create spaces where they can be exposed to the faith. What makes it all work is the Spirit among the people here.

**TCL: Tell us more about that.**

PDP: In this time and place in our society, a congregation is a great place to be because it is the rare inter-generational space where they can hear about a God who





came to die for His enemies. It can be the center of their ecosystem. We instruct people that church and this community of faith are important. All these baptisms happen in church on Sundays. It is a good place to be and people need good places.

**TCL: How are you encouraging the congregation to be that good place when they come?**

PDP: That was one of the strengths before I got here. Bob Reed, Eric Borestead and so many others meet people and encourage new people to become a part of the congregation. It is that kind of place. Kids are welcome and it is loud and that's ok.

**TCL: So there is a culture that we are here to love on people.**

PDP: Yes. It is really rare if you do not meet people while you are here. We really encourage that. Also one of our services is done around tables with questions built into the sermon so folks often make friends even during the worship service.

## Outreach


**TCL: So how do you provide pastoral care for all of those people and new people?**

PDP: That's the big question in general for the church. What I continue to try to do here is to lift up people who help in meaningful ministry to care for one another: guests, new members, believers and shut ins too. So while we have great people and leaders we will need to be more intentional going forward.

**TCL: Anything else you would like to share?**

PDP: Keep fighting the good fight. Let God surprise you as you lift up the important things like a consistent presence and are consistently connecting with people in meaningful ways.

**TCL: Thank you Pastor Dan. How can people get in touch with you?**

PDP: Best method is by my email, [pastor@holyltrinitytampa.org](mailto:pastor@holyltrinitytampa.org). I promise to write you back! 



Pastor Dan Prugh with Anna (7), wife Jennifer, and Aaron (9). Prugh earned his Master of Divinity at Concordia Seminary in 2008 and his Doctor of Ministry in March, 2023. He was raised in a Lutheran family. His father was a dentist — descended from a line of medical practitioners; his mother was a homemaker whose family had a history of military service. They faithfully attended church but Prugh never thought of being a pastor until he was a freshman at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia. Prugh served a year-long assignment through The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as a missionary in Tisovec, Slovakia. His assignment included teaching religion and English to middle school and high school students, all while preparing to enter the Seminary. He met his wife, Jennifer, in church as a seminarian while studying at Westfield House in Cambridge, England as part of Concordia Seminary's International Seminary Exchange Program. Jennifer was in Cambridge as part of her own study abroad program with Valparaiso University.



**Scott Gress**  
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Rev. Scott Gress is a Professional Certified Coach and believes in Growing People for Ministry by focussing on leadership, discipleship and teamwork. You can learn more at [scottgress.com](http://scottgress.com), The Coaching Leader Podcast and his YouTube page. Contact Scott if you or your church are interested in working with him at [scottgress@me.com](mailto:scottgress@me.com), 561-542-4472 or his blog page [scottgress.com](http://scottgress.com)



# Have You Heard About Andy Wrasman's

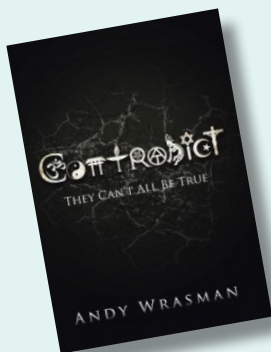


## About the Author

The Rev. Andy Wrasman is pastor at **Oak Road/Lilburn, GA**. Prior to becoming Oak Road's pastor in 2021, he taught Christian Doctrine and World Religions/Christian Apologetics courses at Crean Lutheran High School in Irvine, CA, for nine years. Before that he taught English in Hangzhou, Zhejiang, China, for three years. Wrasman has created the website [www.contradictmovement.org](http://www.contradictmovement.org) as a resource for equipping Christians to share the good news of Jesus Christ in our pluralistic age.

Andy is married to Jessica Wrasman and they have two young children.

Wrasman self-published the book **CONTRADICT** (available on Amazon). If you'd like more information about **CONTRADICT** or would like to start an evangelism table in your community, Wrasman would love to help you. Contact him at [Andy@contradictmovement.org](mailto:Andy@contradictmovement.org).



*His book is available on Amazon*

"Tolerance and co-existence are both great! In fact, they are necessary. If we are to live together in peace without hating each other, or physically harming each other, over differences in race, culture, sexual orientation, political views, and religious beliefs, we must have tolerance." Those are the words of Pastor Andy Wrasman of Oak Road Lutheran in Lilburn, Georgia.

However, we must also recognize that every belief can't be equally valid. If two beliefs directly contradict each other, both of them cannot be true, no matter how "tolerant" we become. This means it is false to say that every religion is true, or that every religion leads to God. When people make such claims they are showing that they have not taken the time to study the world's religions, because a brief reading of the sacred texts of only a handful of religions quickly reveals contradictions on the most fundamental levels.

Religious Contradictions Reincarnation (Hinduism and Buddhism) contradicts the belief that this life is the only life before eternity (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam). Pantheism (Hinduism) contradicts the belief that there is only one transcendent God (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), and both of these beliefs contradict the belief that there is no God (Theravada Buddhism and Atheism). Salvation from sin (Christianity) contradicts the belief that there is no sin to be saved from but simply pain that can be escaped through enlightenment (Buddhism).

Jesus Christ being the incarnate, Son of God (Christianity), contradicts the teaching that he is just a prophet (Islam) or that he was a false prophet (Judaism). Jesus dying as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world and rose from the grave contradicts the belief that Jesus ascended into heaven

while never dying on a cross, or facing death of any kind (Islam).

All religions that suggest that the merits of an individual can free a person from humanity's ultimate problem of death contradict Christianity's teaching that "we are saved by grace through faith in Christ, which is a gift, so that no one may boast" (EPHESIANS 2:8). In light of these contradictions, all religions can't be true. They could all be false, but they can't all be true.

## How can one know which religion is true, if any?

To discern if a belief is true, it needs to be testable. The scientific method can't test most of the claims found in the world's religions, but science is not our only means of verifying the legitimacy of truth claims. In the case of judging religious truth claims, historical-

forensic evidence needs to be utilized. Christianity is the **ONLY** religion that

has at its center, a historical event that can be evaluated in such a manner to prove or disprove its religious truth claims. Paul says in 1 CORINTHIANS 15 that if Christ did not rise from the grave that his faith is futile and his testimony about Jesus would be a lie. If someone could prove that Jesus did not rise from the grave, then the resurrection would be considered a false claim and the Christian faith should be rejected. On the flip side, if Jesus DID rise from the grave, it confirms that Jesus' claim to be "the way, the truth, and the life, the only way to Father" (JOHN 14:6) is true! If he did not rise from the grave, then Jesus was a liar and Christians ought to be pitied above all men.

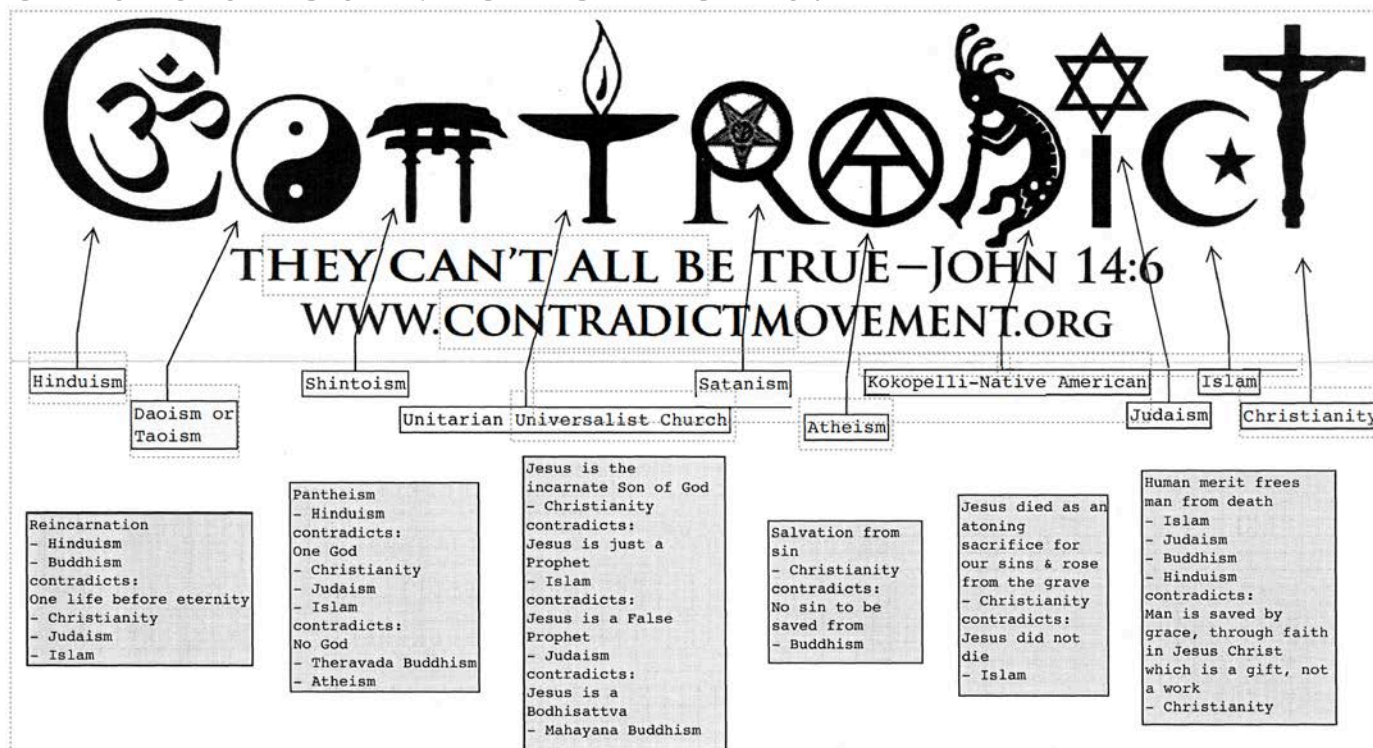
## Is there evidence that Jesus rose from the grave?

The good news for Christians and all of humanity is that the New





# Contradict Movement?



Testament is the best attested ancient manuscript in terms of the number of copies it has, the dates of the copies to their original writings, as well as the accuracy of those copies. In addition to this, the original Gospels were written by eyewitnesses, or written by people who wrote using eyewitness testimony. This also means the authors were writing too close to the death and resurrection of Jesus for myths to have crept into the accounts.

Other witnesses, both friend and foe, would have known if the Gospel writers were telling lies and they would have revealed the Gospels to be false. However, we have no such competing accounts from contemporaries. We do on the other hand have non-Christian authors writing in the first and second centuries who affirm the claims of the Gospels, and no one in the first century was ever able to produce the bones of Jesus to disprove the empty tomb that Sunday morning.

The Jewish and Roman leaders and authorities had the motive and the means to disprove the resurrection, but they could not. The best they could do was to

persecute Christians as an attempt to stop the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They continued to proclaim the risen Christ all the way to their martyrdom. If the account of Jesus' resurrection that originated with the apostles is a LIE, it would mean that they chose to die gruesome deaths instead of exposing the hoax that they created. Many might die for that they THINK is true, but who would die for what they KNOW is a lie?

## Exclusive Claims and Teachings Concerning Salvation within the Bible

JOHN 3:36 "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."

JOHN 14:6 "Jesus answered, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'"


ACTS 4:12 "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

EPHESIANS 2:8-10 "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of

God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

JOHN 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

ACTS 2:37-39 "When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers what shall we do?' Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.'"

Jesus is the Savior of all people groups. He is the Savior of the Buddhist, the Hindu, the Muslim, the Jew, the Satanist, the Atheist, the homosexual, the heterosexual, the republican, and the democrat — **all people**. Everyone has fallen short of the glory of God and deserve God's wrath, yet ... to all who have received him, to all who have called upon his name, he has given the right to be called children of God! (JOHN 1:12). 




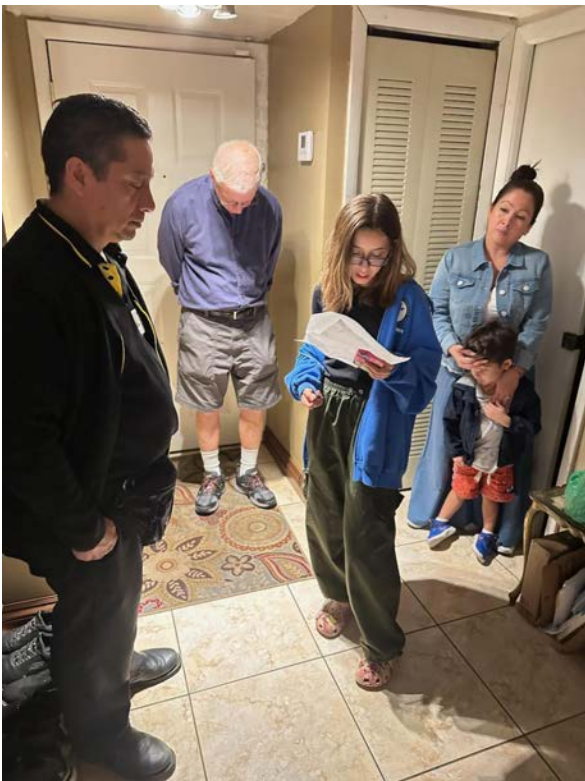
# FLORIDA GEORGIA

## *Out and About in the District*

### Our Savior/Plantation Makes House Calls for the Holidays

Thanksgiving and Christmas provided opportunities to show God's love to people in the community around Plantation, Florida. November 20, a group of 25 people participated in a Thanksgiving meal delivery effort. **Our Savior/Plantation, FL** members took donated frozen turkeys, non-perishables and paper goods to more than 20 homes of families in need in the surrounding area.

Then on December 9, caravans of about 20 singers departed from the church to visit senior home bound members and local assisted living and rehabilitation facilities. The group sang Christmas carols, read Bible verses and prayed at each stop. 







**Our Savior/Lake Worth, FL** celebrated Christmas with and for Lake Worth Community High School students. The congregation brought gifts and a heartfelt message to the young mother's group. Pastor Jacob Roedsens is shown upper left. ☿



Hundreds of customers turned out to shop at the 18th Annual Holiday Bazaar on Nov. 11, 2023, at **First/Clearwater, FL**. Sponsored by the congregation's LWML, this event was host to 80 vendors. The proceeds go to give extra financial help to about a dozen school, congregation, and community families at Christmas, as well as to various other charities throughout the year. School students and alumni help the vendors load and unload their goods, which makes the Holiday Bazaar a favorite event with vendors. ☿




**First/Clearwater, FL** Elementary and Middle School students presented the Christmas Musical "We Three Spies" on December 14th. The musical told the story of a covert group of ordinary kids who go undercover every Christmas season to secretly bring holiday cheer to those around them. Hired under false pretenses, the spies and a group presenting a Nativity play, present the truth of God's greatest gift — the Gift who was born in a manger — is for all people, even those who are a little "less than perfect." ☿



**King of Kings/Talking Rock, GA** held a Christmas Organ Concert to celebrate Advent with their new Allen Organ — inviting the community to visit their church and hear renowned organist Nicholas Bowden. Mr. Bowden, who has performed around the world, showcased Advent music that highlights our Lutheran musical heritage and the capabilities of the organ that had been installed earlier in the year.

More than 90 members and guests attended even though the concert ended up being scheduled during the SEC Championship game! Pastor Jeffrey Jensen opened the concert with a welcome message and prayer. The audience was treated to Mr. Bowden's interesting introduction to each piece, and to his amazing talent on the organ.

A free will offering benefited two local children's charities: ACES Youth Home in Jasper, GA, and The Joy House near Jasper, which provides Christ-centered restorative care for struggling teens, families, and individuals.


All attending were treated to a reception of sweets and refreshments after the concert, where they were given the opportunity to meet the artist and have their programs signed by Mr. Bowden. The success of this concert has King of Kings' leadership considering making this gift to the community an annual event! 



*Pastor Jeffrey Jensen introduces the concert and opens with prayer.*



*Guest organist, Nicholas Bowden, introduces on the the many pieces he performed. Here he is describing Bach's "Adagio from Concerto in d."*

The Rev. Scott Jensen was installed on November 19, 2023 at **Bethel/Hobe Sound, FL** as sole pastor. Shown at the celebratory service are (from left) Rev. Dave Dahlke, President James Rockey, Rev. Ted Andrade, Rev. Scott Jensen, Rev. Ed Scott, Rev. Craig Bode, Rev. Stanley Allen, Rev. Scott Gress, Rev. Ken Larsen, Rev. Kyle Will, Rev. Chris Escher, Rev. Dave Albers, and Rev. Mark Stillman. 








On Saturday, December 2nd the Christian Growth Ministry Team of **Hope/Plant City, FL** joined for their Annual Ladies Christmas Tea. The time together is open to ladies of all ages and many brought their young daughters and granddaughters to the event. The morning began with a devotional time in Hope's sanctuary and then moved to the Fellowship Hall for Tea Time. The guest speaker was Sheryl DeWitt, Executive Director of Redeeming Life Ministries, who shared the mission and ministry of Redeeming Life. Approximately 100 ladies attended. As a love offering,

donated bags of diapers in various sizes for use at Redeeming Life were presented to DeWitt. According to ministry team leader, Nora Trivunovich, our team looks forward to this event every year and it has become a great outreach for us in addition to leading us through our Revelation 7:9 outreach to become intentional in all of our efforts to reflect diversity."

Hope's Elders Ministry Team served as "waiters" for the fellowship time. The Elders were ably directed by the ladies Hope's Fellowship Ministry Team.

Pictured at left are the ladies in Hope's Sanctuary. DeWitt is on the far right in the photo. Hope's "waiters" below right are Alex Attalla, Pastor Dean Pfeffer, Todd Warner, Jeff McClure, Lonnie Bertsch, Rev. John Cobos and Nick Trivunovich. 



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On Sunday, December 17, the members of **Hope/Plant City, FL** along with the members of Iglesia Esperanza (Hope's Hispanic Congregation), joined together for their annual Christmas program this year joining hands with the children of the Lots of Hugs summer reading camp hosted at Hope each summer. The theme of this one night only limited engagement was "A Night Full of Stars." Attendees to the event were greeted with a "red carpet" upon their entry to the church. In addition a number of members also pulled out their "glam" for the big premier event!

The program was under the leadership of Hope's Christian Growth Ministry Team who partnered with Hope's Revelation 7:9 leadership. The cast and crew also welcomed Rev. Dr. Peter Meier who joined with Hope Pastor Rev. Dean Pfeffer and Spanish Pastor, Rev. John Cobos to lead the program.



Pictured above are the Rev. 7:9 leadership team of Hope, Sr. Pastor, Rev. Dean Pfeffer; Rev. John Cobos who leads Hope's Spanish ministry, Sharon Moody, Nora Trivunovich (igniter) and Rev. Dr. Peter Meier.

After the program concluded, the members of the congregation's Revelation 7:9 leadership team gathered for a photo. Their program was a reflection of the congregation's 7:9 efforts as the program was conducted in both English and Spanish.

The participants were the youth of Hope and the congregation's Spanish ministry as well as participants from the Lots of Hugs summer reading program. Songs were sung and scripture read in both English and Spanish.

Hope's vicar from last year, Owen Duncan, was also a part of the leadership team during his time at Hope. ☯



**Epiphany/Tallahassee, FL** Lutheran Quilters teamed up with Scarlet Holcombe, (member of University Lutheran) to begin a pillowcase dress ministry. Over a period of a few months the team created more 40 dresses for the girls of Point of Grace Academy in Kenya. Scarlet took the dresses with her on a medical mission trip. The Epiphany Quilters look forward to continuing this new mission project! ☯







Open Arms Child Development Center, the mission school at **First/Gainesville, FL**, gave the Wednesday night Advent Service a visual depiction of the Christmas story complete with cutout lambs, period costumes, songs and sign language.

At left — the actors were the 4-year-olds in the VPK classes. Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus were joined by shepherds, wise men and angels. The congregation joined in the singing.

The Sunday School teachers joined with some of the preschool teachers to offer a date night to parents from the school and the church. Above photos — the children had dinner, did crafts, heard stories, sang and generally had a great time. This was the first date night in quite awhile and 12 children participated. The plan is to make this a regular offer.



Some of the altar guild at **First/Gainesville, FL** met for a lunch/planning meeting in the Besalski Fellowship Hall to get ready for 2024. Pictured left to right Jean Halabrin, Marge Polkowski, Sheila Ebert, Christine Dietrich, Marina Rojas, Gail Mahnken, Barb Hughes, Roberta Partridge. Not pictured Judy Varady, Laura Hoyer, Debbie Jones, Mary Brabham and Leeann Lee. ☩

The Reverend Dr. John M. (Mike) Ramey was installed as the Intentional Interim Pastor (IIP) at **Trinity/Cape Coral FL** on Sunday, November 5, 2023 by The Rev. Richard Browning, Circuit Visitor. The Rev. Jon Zehnder preached. Other attending pastors included the Reverends Mark Gaertner (Em), Hank Simon (Em), Mark Eisold, and Robert Davis. A pot-luck reception followed the service. This is the second congregation in the FLGA District where Dr. Ramey has served as an IIP, having served previously at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer/Columbus, GA in 2021-2022. ☩







**First/Gainesville, FL** Altar Guild, with a couple of dedicated spouses, decorated the sanctuary for the Advent/Christmas season. The red tree is decorated with apples and the white tree is the Chrismon tree. The Advent panels were designed by the late Barbara Schmidt. Pictured are Barbara Hughes, Chuck Ebert, Judy Varady, Mark Hoyer, Sheila Ebert, Laura Hoyer. Debbie Jones, David Jones. Members bought 99 presents for 33 children in the Guardian Ad Litum system in Alachua County. These are children who have been taken out of their family situation for various reasons. Each child has three stars on the Angel Tree for members to take. This has been an ongoing mission outreach at First for many years. In photo below, Christine Dietrich is arranging the animals in the nativity she painted. ☿



**F First/Gainesville, FL** Open Arms Child Development Center gets their own Nativity scene (right) in the lobby of the school. The children presented an Advent program during the first midweek service. Shown at right are Assistant Director, Angie Burr, and Brittany Turinsky setting up the display. ☿



Members of **First/Gainesville, FL** collected 165 pounds of food for the Bread of the Mighty Food Bank. Members were honoring Judy Helling who recently passed away, as food drives were her personal mission focus. Christine Dietrich and Sheila Ebert made the delivery. ☿



**First/Gainesville, FL** "The Godwink Team" collected both adult and children's items for a school Christmas store at Lake Forest Elementary. The students have been earning tokens that they can use in the store to buy parents and siblings Christmas gifts. More than 700 items were donated. Judy Varady and Barbara Hughes are shown organizing the items. ☿









As the congregation celebrated with joy on the 3rd Sunday in Advent, the members of **Hope/Plant City, FL** welcomed to the family new members during their worship. As a part of their welcome, each member was presented with a Christmas ornament with their name on it to hang on the Hope "family tree" in the sanctuary. This tree holds an ornament bearing the name of each family in the congregation.

Pictured with Hope's Sr. Pastor, Dean Pfeffer, are (back row) Wyatt Schibler; John Bessey; and Terry Miller and (front row) Joanne Roberson; Sandy Bessey and Mary & Harmon Van Horn. (Missing from photo – Kari Clark)



Five retired teachers from **St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL** posed for a photo when Reta & Mark Sollenberger visited St. Paul, their former congregation. The Sollenbergers live in Vancouver, Washington now. The five taught for more than 30 years in the 80's, 90's, and 00's. From left, Barbara Dorlac, Carl Schiefer, Reta, Barbara Wegener and Sharlene Friederichs. 



The Rev. Simeon Raddatz has accepted the call to Concorida University/Chicago, IL as chaplain. In this role, Raddatz will oversee all campus worship; shepherd students, faculty and staff with pastoral care and counseling; facilitate all spiritual life activities; and serve as dean of the chapel and director of the pre-seminary program. 





## “Little Children, Can You Tell?”



**First/Clearwater, FL** Early Childhood students presented the mini-musical “Little Children, Can You Tell?” written by First Lutheran’s artist-in-residence, Tim Jacobsmeyer. The musical told the story of our Savior’s birth with original songs by Mr. Jacobsmeyer. The presentation also included a video produced by Mr. Jacobsmeyer and Pastor Andrew Apple, beautifully portraying the Nativity story.







# The Day the Derecho Struck

Before 2020, many people had never heard the term derecho. Pronounced “der-AY-cho,” one of these mega storms ripped through dozens of Iowa communities in August 2020. It left the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod churches and schools in ruins.

“It’s one of those events in life that just kind of sears in your mind,” said Rev. Andy Wright, pastor of St. John Lutheran Church in Keystone, Iowa. Keystone, Iowa, when the derecho struck. In 2022, Wright became senior pastor of St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kan.”

Three years later, the memory of the event is still fresh in the minds of those who lived through it.

## All of a sudden

Wright and his wife were huddled with their family in the basement as the derecho approached the parsonage at St. John. They knew there would be damage—but how much?

“It ended up probably being about 20 or 30 minutes,” Wright said. “I went up to check the damage and I noticed in our living room that we didn’t have any broken windows, but yet there was water just coming right into our living room that had just gone through the windows. So, I opened up the back door to the parsonage and that’s when my mouth dropped open.”

The damage was unimaginable.

## Love for the neighbor

Within hours, the Iowans’ love for their neighbors became evident. The community started to rally together, helping those most in need even when they themselves had much to do at their own houses.

Neighbors were helping neighbors clear and pick up debris, checking on each other. One can’t help but ask—why all the kindness?

“Christ loves them and they love one another and they help,” Wright said. “It’s just part of who they are. As a baptized child of God, my neighbor, his house is destroyed, I’m going over to help. That’s what they do. And so that was wonderful to see in the initial aftermath.”

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# District Icon Bob Besalski

## PASSAGERS

The Rev. Robert Conrad Herman Besalski passed peacefully into the arms of his Lord and Savior November 7, 2023 after a long and valiant battle with cancer. He was born in Jackson, Mississippi, the son of Rev. Albert Besalski and Wilma Pauline Mueller. Bob's childhood was spent in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and New Orleans, Louisiana. While his family was in New Orleans, Bob matriculated as a boarding student to Concordia Academy in Austin, Texas, where he studied until his senior year while competing in multiple sports. He then transferred to and graduated from Orlando High School in 1950 where his family had moved.

It was during his senior year of high school that Bob considered his future as a minister. He spent one year at Orlando Junior College before returning to Austin to continue his junior college studies at Concordia/Texas. He actively participated in many sports and graduated there in 1953.

Bob attended Concordia Seminary/St. Louis, Missouri, from 1953-1958, working his way through school with jobs as custodians, salespersons, professional pallbearer, and busboy and waiter at Missouri Athletic Club and Chase Park Plaza. He did a summer internship in 1955 at Holy Cross/North Miami, FL and spent the year between his third and fourth year at the seminary as an intern at Emmanuel/Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

Bob's first call following seminary graduation was to organize a new church in West Mobile, Alabama. On a visit to Orlando to assist his father in performing his sister's wedding, he met his future wife, Elaine Brewton and they were married seven months later. Their first daughter, Carolyn Elaine, was born while he served in Mobile. While building the membership for

the new congregation, Bob worked diligently toward acquiring property and completing the new Holy Cross sanctuary. As the congregation became self-supporting, the family moved to Gainesville, Florida, where Bob had been called to serve as pastor of First Lutheran Church and campus pastor to Lutheran students at the University of Florida. It was here he became known as "Pastor B." Very soon after the move to Gainesville, their second daughter, Betsy Lynn, was born. Bob served First/Gainesville, FL for 34 years. He was active in many organizations including YMCA, Boys' Club, Habitat for Humanity, Elder Care, University City Kiwanis Club, Parent-Teacher Organization at Terwilliger Elementary School, and Troop Leader of a Girl Scout Cadette Troop (a father-daughter troop). He was also active in the Gainesville Ministerial Association, and the UF Campus Pastors Association. Bob served as a chaplain at the VA Hospital and was a member of the Gator Tip-off Club and the Florida Track Club, for which he served as an official at numerous track meets. Bob was a dedicated runner for more than 30 years, and a long-suffering golfer for more than that.

During his 34 years at First, he organized several new congregations in North Central Florida including Our Redeemer/Lake City, a congregation in Keystone Heights which later closed, and Good Shepherd/Chiefland. He was instrumental in the development of Abiding Savior/Gainesville. He supervised 30 vicar/interns and inspired numerous sons of the congregation and UF students to enter full-time ministry. Bob earned a Master's degree in Guidance and Counseling at University of Florida. For several years he enjoyed teaching Adult Education classes in Family Finance for the School Board of Alachua County.

Upon retirement in 1996, Bob immediately became involved in interim ministry, serving congregations in Warner Robins

and Savannah, Georgia; Chiefland, Ocala, Middleburg, Ocala National Forest, and Lake City, Florida.

Often concurrently, he traveled as a fundraiser/counselor for the FLGA District — visiting nearly every District congregation.

During his 65 years of active and retired ministry, Bob held many posts in the District, such as Circuit Counselor and member of the Mission Board (20 years as chairman). Under his supervision many congregations were organized. He was awarded the distinguished Servant of Christ Award by the Florida-Georgia District, and the Behnken Medallion by the Veterans of the Cross gathering.

According to Pastor Jonathan Thomas of St. John/Mansfield, TX (a former vicar), "Pastor Besalski always emphasized to me that we had to 'let them see our heart! I remember following Hurricane Andrew in August of 1992, he quickly organized a large team to immediately head to the Homestead/Miami area of South Florida. He wanted everyone to have that personal relationship with Jesus and we brought food and water and clothing and prayed with the people.'"

Bob will be remembered for his big heart, easy smile, generous nature, sage advice, and his unwavering faith in the Good News and God's promise. He loved the beach, he loved shrimp, he loved the color purple and was passionate about celebrating the Lord's Supper. He also loved history, homemade baked goods, old movies, reminiscing about days gone by, traveling to his favorite places, communing with those he held dear, and life's little miracles. Bob never met a stranger, and never turned his back on someone in need. A devoted husband and father, he enjoyed a special relationship with each of his four grandchildren, considering the time spent with them the best part of life. He loved his church, he befriended many neighbors, and his friendships were deep and long lasting.



# i Receives Crown of Life

"His philosophy was always that 'it's not about me — it's about Jesus Christ!'" emphasized First/Gainesville's Vacancy Pastor, Jonathan Rockey. "His confirmation verse was Revelation: 2:10b — *Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown.* Some might ask where is the Good News in this verse? It's the verb 'GIVE!' It's a gift — something that cannot be earned."

"Bob was truly a pastor's pastor. He showed great encouragement and wisdom in all my talks with him during the ten years I was at First Lutheran," said The Rev. John Roth, now at Thrive/Estero, FL. "I came about seven years after he retired, so I missed his greatest hits and greatest hurts — but I did benefit from some of his great wisdom. I cherished him as a mentor, someone I could get a clear-eyed read on any situation I'd share with him."

"The stories I heard through First/Gainesville and surrounding congregations about Bob were truly what I would want to aspire to be as a pastor. He was one of the strongest voices in the FLGA District about missions and outreach," Roth emphasized. "I still hope to be like Bob. My last conversation with Bob and Elaine was in May, 2023, after he had entered hospice care. Once again he was an encourager and didn't focus on himself. I'm glad I got to thank him for his support and share with him my love and appreciation for his ministry to me. Yet, he was self-effacing throughout and wonderfully Christ-centered in his answers — totally at peace, accepting, and even facing cancer with no options for continued treatment, he modeled the way to live, to believe and to rest in the arms of Jesus."

"Go and make disciples!" was most certainly Bob's call and commission," stated FLGA District President James Rockey. "For 58 years Pastor Besalski has been an important part of my life. I am a son of First/Gainesville where initially I served as janitor, painter,



handyman and student — where I watched and listened as he taught confirmation and Bible classes. I watched him raise up vicars and youth workers, Vietnamese refugees and others. He was truly the 'hands of Jesus' and if there is one thing I would want to emphasize as I remember Bob is to 'Pass It On!' as the song says. 'It only takes a spark to get a fire going and soon all those around can warm up in its glowing. That's how it is with God's love. You want to pass it on!'"

"Bob came to Gainesville, Florida when our Florida-Georgia District was a 14 year old teenager," emphasizes The Rev. James Guelzow. "His mission outreach emphasis provided a blueprint for District ministry that lives on even as we

celebrate our 75th anniversary. Such was his influence as FLGA grew. Bob was an original Along-sider, guiding family, mentoring vicars, inspiring congregants, encouraging friends — all with the gracious love and care of our Savior. When I think with thankfulness to God for Bob, I settle on these words from John 1: "*There came a man sent from God. He came as a witness to testify concerning that Light, so that through him all might believe.*" May we follow where this saint has trod! Bob will be forever missed by all those who knew and loved him," Guelzow concluded. ☩

## **Remembering Carl and Ruth Sammetinger: Spreading the Gospel i**

*By Lisa Sammetinger Schillinger*

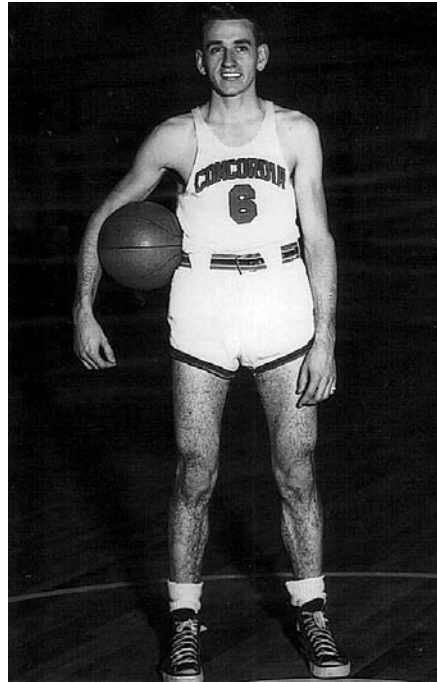
The Rev. Carl Sammetinger lived his life with **JOY**. He often used this acronym which stood for Jesus, Others, and You to illustrate that as a Christian you should put Jesus first, others next, and yourself last. The joy derived from his faith was evident in everything he did. His true joy was planting mission congregations for the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.



Sammetinger was born the fifth of seven children on May 23, 1926, in Fort Wayne, Indiana during the Great Depression. His mother Frieda was a teacher, and after she married, she continued to emphasize the importance of education to her own children. Sammetinger attended Concordia Elementary, Concordia High School, and Concordia Junior College in Fort Wayne before going to Concordia Lutheran Seminary in St. Louis in 1945.

Sammetinger was an athlete. He played basketball growing up in Indiana and continued to play at Concordia Seminary. At only 5'10" he was not tall for basketball, but a newspaper article once referred to him as having "arms like an octopus" due to his long arms and defensive prowess. They also called him a "sparkplug" for the team, a

high scorer, and "lightning fast." The seminary team, and Sammetinger in particular, were often featured in the St. Louis sports pages.

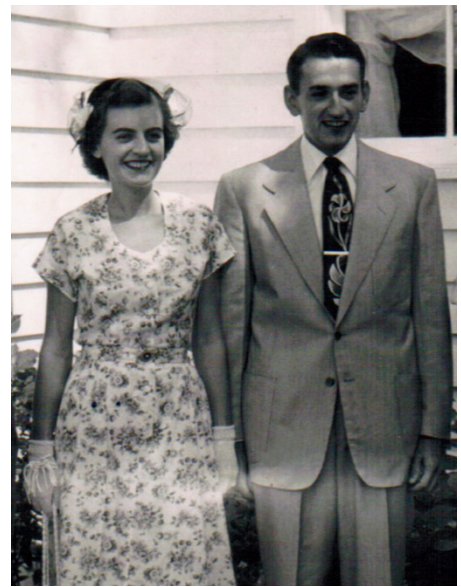


*The Sammetinger Octopus*

In 1948, he was sent to St. Mark's Lutheran Church and School in Steeleville, Illinois for his vicarage. His supervising pastor was The Rev. L. Lloyd Behnken who would later become the first full-time president of the Florida-Georgia District. When his vicarage year was up, he requested to stay in Steelville another year — he had fallen in love. Ruth Ann Kueker was a farmer's daughter. She sang in the choir, and they met while performing in a Walther League play. Carl asked to walk her home. At the end of the second year, they were engaged. He went back to St. Louis for his final year, and on June 1, 1951, Sammetinger graduated from Concordia Seminary. He and Ruth were married by Pastor Behnken the next day.

Although he hoped to be sent to the Pacific Northwest after graduation, he was sent to Key West, Florida.

Sammetinger was eager to grow the small congregation of Grace/



*Newlyweds Heading to Grace/Key West*

Key West. He had been called to Key West as missionary-at-large and was a mission pastor in every sense of the word. Key West was a vibrant Navy town in the 1950s, and many of the members of Grace were young Navy families.

In 1952, Grace started a school. Sammetinger was an advocate for Lutheran schools during these early years and helped create a school development plan for the District. He was tireless. He started a new mission in Islamorada/Tavernier in 1952 and a third mission in Marathon in 1956. Sammetinger would preach at early service in Key West and then drive to the upper Keys for late service. "He was so driven to grow the church, but he always knew how to approach people and wanted to talk to everyone about Jesus" said Verdell Hines Koch, one of the original members of Grace.

Over the course of 10 years in Key West, the Sammetingers welcomed five children — Miriam, Lois, Janice, Kathryn, and Timothy. Ruth stayed very busy caring for her young family which allowed Sammetinger to spend countless hours working as a mission pastor. But Sammetinger was a wonderful father and dedicated family man as well. After 10 years in Key West, he accepted a call to Lewiston, New



## 1 in the Florida Keys, Cape Canaveral and Beyond

York. He packed up his young family, said goodbye to all the wonderful friends they had met and moved to the escarpment of the Niagra River. In June, 1964, Sammetinger accepted a call to move back to Florida and start another mission church, Faith/Merritt Island.

The space race was in full swing in August 1964, and Merritt Island was right next door to Cape Canaveral.

"Pastor Sammetinger was a great leader to get Faith/Merritt Island off the ground," said Elsa Kruse, a longtime member. "Coming here with a family, not knowing about this quickly growing area had to be an adventure. He was fun but also a great Christian example and leader. Ruth was one of the best examples of a mother and pastor's wife. And Faith is still here after 59 years thanks to his and Ruth's leadership. Quite a few of the original congregation are still here."

By 1965 Faith's house of worship was complete, and Sammetinger was formally installed as pastor on June 26, 1966, by his friend Rev. August Bernthal, then President of the Florida-Georgia District.

In *The History of Faith/Merritt Island 1964-1989*, Sherry Sieburn, a charter member (now deceased) wrote, "Words are hard to find to describe the leadership, friendship and sacrifices this man put forth during his ministry at Faith. He and his family are remembered with great admiration for they were examples in every area of life. Pastor Sammetinger was usually the first to arrive, tools in hand for whatever work was to be done. His dedication, enthusiasm and great sense of humor spurred everyone on. He and his family were evident in all phases of work and activities that occurred. He was a special gift to Faith."

In August of 1967, the Sammetingers welcomed their sixth and final child, a daughter named Lisa. Although they had made wonderful friends in Merritt Island, Sammetinger felt called to move to Miami in December of 1967.

Concordia/Miami was already an established church, but Sammetinger once again committed

himself to growing the congregation.

Since he had a houseful of teenagers by this time, Sammetinger found himself chaperoning youth group camping trips to John Pennekamp State Park in Key Largo. During this time, he sent his two oldest daughters off to college at

Valparaiso University. His oldest daughter, Miriam, later became a lifelong Lutheran school teacher, serving in Lake Worth, Plant City, Temple Terrace, and Tampa.

After seven years, Sammetinger took another call to start a new church — Bethel/Clearwater was founded in January, 1975. In 1991, after 40 years of ministry, Sammetinger retired and moved to Etowah, North Carolina. Even in retirement, he continued to serve. He was interim pastor in both Tryon and Otto, North Carolina and in Naples, Florida. He once again served at Faith/Merritt Island. He also filled in for pastors all over the southeastern United States for more than 10 years.

Eventually the Sammetingers moved back to Florida, residing in St. Petersburg and Seminole so they could be close to their six children and 13 grandchildren. Rev.

Carl Sammetinger was called to his heavenly home on November 15, 2012. He was 86. He made it his life's work to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all that he met. Ruth is still living at St. Marks Village in Palm Harbor. She is 94 and has nine great-grandchildren. "Well done, thou good and faithful servants!"



*The Sammetinger Family*



*Grace/Key West, FL circa early 1950s*





## William Jones — Pioneer in Black Ministry

Missionary-at-Large William Jones explored the fertile fields of the Deep South and the foreign soil of Nassau in order to spread the seeds of the Gospel and plant congregations. Born on Petit Jean Mountain, Arkansas, August 8, 1916, he attended Concordia Seminary/St. Louis, MO and after graduation served two congregations in Alabama.



predominantly black sections of Jacksonville. Jones began his work in the East Springfield area of Jacksonville. These efforts culminated in the formation of **St. Paul/Amelia City, FL** in 1956. Amelia City today remains as an unincorporated community in Nassau County, Florida. It is located in the southern half of Amelia Island, on A1A near the Amelia River.

Missionary-at-Large William Jones reported to the Mission Board of the Synodical Conference in 1955 that a populous community west of Orlando called Washington Shores was growing rapidly. He was immediately commissioned to begin building a house of worship for the group, which took the name **Our Savior/Orlando, FL**.

Jones moved to Georgia to establish new work. He served **Peace/Decatur, FL** in 1958. In the fall of 1959 a new Atlanta, Georgia mission opened as **Atonement/Atlanta**. Today Atonement is an ELCA congregation.

By 1960 he was back in Florida, organizing yet another mission: **Our Redeemer/Jacksonville**. In 1967 Jones,

now a veteran of many mission endeavors, continued to conduct worship services and cultivate the mission station at **Marsh Harbour, Abaco, in the Bahamas**. Rev. Jones served Atonement/Atlanta until the summer of 1968, when he accepted a call to the **Lutheran Church of Nassau, Bahamas**. He eagerly looked forward to cultivating the tender shoots of a mission already established on foreign soil.

While at the Nassau parish Jones and his wife, Lillian, served the growing congregation of 50 communicant members. Only a few of the original 1962 worshipers were left. When Jones arrived, the congregation was about half expatriate and half Bahamian with a core of members native to Nassau. As Jones reached out increasingly to the island people, the trend included more and more Nassau natives year by year.

On May 10, 1970, a new facet of the church's social ministry was inaugurated. Jones established Pastor's Pantry, an outreach ministry that distributed food to needy families. This effort drew added respect and increased involvement from the community, which in turn steadily increased

Though he was caucasian, during the 1950s Jones was assigned by the LCMS Synodical Conference to plant mission churches in various African-American and Caribbean communities. The sower went forth. He was sent to explore the possibilities of opening missions in the Atlanta, Columbus, Tampa and Miami areas. By 1954, **Good Shepherd/Fort Lauderdale, FL** was one of the congregations founded with the help of missionary Jones.

In April 1955 the Missionary Board of the Synodical Conference authorized Jones to survey possible locations for new mission stations in north Florida. He was called as the first Missionary-at-Large to establish mission congregations in the



*Jones inside St. Paul/Amelia City, Florida*



## for Florida-Georgia District



*Interior of St. Paul Lutheran School/Amelia City, FL*

church membership. Once again Jones was disseminating God's Word to those in need. Jones laid the cornerstone of the Nassau church on September 13, 1970. The building design took the form of a cross, which allowed the congregation to gather closely around the altar, pulpit and baptismal font. The congregation faced the altar from all four sides and focused on the Word and Sacraments.

Two months later, Jones suffered a major heart attack, which plagued him with health problems for many years. His work took on different dimensions. In 1972 Jones recommended the District form another congregation on Grand Bahama Island and also took on a creative, more far-reaching means of spreading the Word.

Health concerns did not limit Bill Jones' zeal to broadcast the good news of the Gospel.

He began spreading God's Word through electronic means. In May of 1973 and for many years thereafter,




Jones was known as "the religious disc jockey of the Bahamas." Every Friday night he sat down in front of a donated record player and amplifier to broadcast a program of worship and prayer for the patients of Geriatrics Hospital at the Sandilands

Rehabilitation Center. Sandilands is a national resource for psychiatric, geriatric and substance abuse services. The center is located in the eastern district of New Providence/ Nassau and consists primarily of two hospitals — Geriatric Hospital which cares for the elderly with medical, social and psychiatric problems; and the Sandilands Hospital that cares for the mentally and physically challenged children, adolescent and adult clients.

Speakers in each ward enables Jones' Gospel message paired

with religious island music to be heard in every room.

As broadcaster in this unique mission field, Jones continued to announce God's word over the wires, spreading the Gospel and planting seeds of hope and faith. Several news articles lauded this "disc jockey missionary" for his efforts, and Jones became a well-respected local celebrity. His appeal to the imagination of the Bahamian community increased again in 1974 when Jones created a colorful sermon series of dramatic monologues for Lenten worship using Bible characters associated with Holy Week to share their experiences in the local dialect.

Jones passed away suddenly on March 4, 1980, after 12 years of dedicated ministry to the Nassau church. Jones had become a prominent figure in community service and affairs and was well loved as the lively religious disc jockey of the Bahamas. His loving concern and missionary zeal had planted missions in numerous black communities and had cultivated seeds in fertile foreign soil. Indeed, the sower went forth to broadcast seed. 

*Editor's note — as the Florida-Georgia District celebrates our 75th Anniversary, **Lutheran LIFE** will be profiling some of the "Pioneers of the District." Special thanks and credit to President Emeritus Gerhard C. Michael, Jr., Charles Hofman and Eileen Bishop-List for past research. Biographies have been edited for space.*

ANNIVERSARY ARCHIVE





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## Lakeside Lutheran Partners With World Renew for Sarasota County Recovery

**Lakeside/Venice, FL** has been a vibrant part of the Venice community since 1954. Two Lutheran congregations in Venice and Englewood launched Lakeside as a “drive-in” church on Sunday, July 18, 1954, with 48 people in attendance. Members would remain in their cars and listen to the service through a public address system. The name Lakeside was selected because of a small body of water located on the property near South Tamiami Trail – which was later filled in with the expansion of Highway 41 in 1969. The name Lakeside, however, remains.

The first Sunday School session was held on August 1, 1954, with seven pupils in attendance. The students and their teacher met under the trees following the drive-in service. The first communion service was held on August 8, with 10 persons communing. A Ladies Aid group was organized in 1955, which later became the Women’s Guild. Women were able to vote starting in December 1965.

By the late 1970s, the congregation had doubled in size and was able to establish a daughter congregation in Englewood, Redeemer. Ground breaking for the present sanctuary, which can accommodate 500 worshipers, was held in 1981. Throughout the years, additional buildings were added to Lakeside’s campus, including the preschool building, Meyer Hall and the children and youth building.

Most recently the congregation had the opportunity to partner with World Renew – a mission team of Christians who have extended their skills and

time to help others recover from Hurricane Ian’s destruction to their homes.

“There are many people that still have uninhabitable homes through problems with insurance, lack of repair funds, age of the home or the owners or occupants,” explained Pastor David Dahlke. “World Renew’s volunteers come from many parts of the USA and Canada and reach out in Christian charity to help neighbors. They have currently assessed and planned work on more than 100 homes in South Sarasota County.”

Lakeside Lutheran members have joined with World Renew – offering some of their campus buildings and willing members to house, provide services and fellowship and our heartfelt thanks for all the willing hands as we join in Loving our Neighbors as Ourselves.

“The Holy Spirit offered us this opportunity and we had to respond – We could do no other! We have committed to this Partnership until at Least April 2024 and

possibly beyond. The outreach to others in need has also opened up new avenues of discipleship opportunities to share the Joy that we have found in our faith – particularly this time of year. Our Lord Jesus is so good and fills us with such joy that sharing the Gospel through loving our neighbors and extending a Christian welcome cannot help but bear fruit” Dahlke said. ✝



Some of the members of Lakeside/Venice  
Volunteering with World Renew

