

LUTHERAN LIFE

**Lutheran Church-
Missouri Synod
Florida-Georgia District
March/April 2025**



Built on a rock the church shall stand
St. Peter Dedicates New Ministry Center

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.



Florida Georgia-District LCMS
Lutheran Ministries Center
5850 T.G. Lee Blvd, Suite 500
Orlando, FL 32822
Toll-Free: (877) 457-5556

flgadistrict.org/lutheranlife

Lutheran Life Publishing:
971 SW Pepperidge Terrace
Boca Raton, Florida 33486

email: LutheranLife@aol.com

James Rockey,
District President
Kathy Keene,
Exec. Asst. to President
Jennifer Tanner,
School & Youth Ministries
Cindy Hammerstrom,
Exec. Asst.
School & Youth Ministries
Peter Meier,
Missions & Outreach
Debra Arrington,
Exec. Asst.
Missions & Finance
Laura Zirbel,
Finance/Administration
Meridith Swanson
Communications Specialist
Jay Wendland,
LCEF District VP
Rusty Huseman,
District Legal Counsel
John List, *Publisher & Communications Director*

DISTRICT CAPSULES

Transferred Out of FLGA to Other Districts

03/17/25 Rev. Keith Enko (O) to Mid-South

Installations

02/23/25 Rev. Michael Mast (O) as Sole
Pastor Christ the King/Largo, FL
03/30/25 Mrs. Katy Bass (C) as DCE St.
Michael/Fort Myers, FL

Status Change

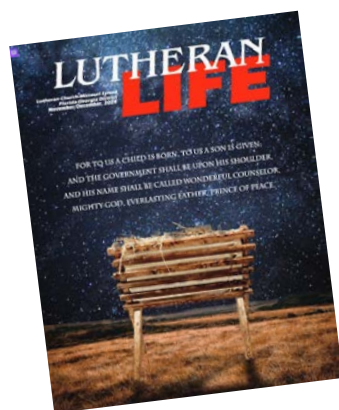
02/23/25 Rev. Michael Mast (O) from
Emeritus to Active
03/10/25 Rev. John Blair Clark (O) from
Active to Emeritus

Emeritus

03/10/25 Rev. John Blair Clark (O) from
Active to Emeritus

Called To Glory

03/01/25 Rev. Roger Schoolcraft (O)
03/10/25 Rev. Walter Volz (O)



freepress

Lutheran LIFE, the bi-monthly magazine of the Florida-Georgia District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, is mailed free to all congregation members of the District. Send us your news! Attach photos of at least 300 pixels in .jpg or .png or .pdf formats and email to LutheranLife@aol.com. Want to subscribe? It's **FREE!** Send your name and address to LutheranLife@aol.com. Want your entire congregation to receive LIFE? Send your mailing list in any format supported by Excel. Please send address corrections or deletions, to LutheranLife@aol.com.

When I was growing up, I was an "active boy"! That is, I did all the things boys love to do. That included fishing and exploring the woods, ponds and swamp surrounding our neighborhood. We built and destroyed things. We played with army men. We had our "forts" and battles and more.

There are phrases that come to mind that quickly take me back to those days. One of those that has recently come to mind is "Man Your Battle Stations!"

I was never in the military, but my father was in the Navy. Like many serving in WWII, he knew that if you heard the phrase "General Quarters, General Quarters, all hands man your battle stations" there was a possibility of something big or life-threatening. When this announcement was made, sailors quickly grabbed their survival gear and headed to a defined location where they would await instructions. Such situations could be catastrophic and needed to be managed, or the ship and lives were at risk. Be prepared! Be ready!

It is interesting how such phrases, whether we personally experienced them or learned them from movies and role playing, can teach us. In my life, when I see a disastrous situation in front of me, I think or act like one hearing those general quarters order and try to alert people who can assist.

Some are prepared and come running, seeking to help. There are occasions when people I'd expect to be present are MIA. It is disappointing when attempts to motivate people to assist are disregarded with no real response.

I believe the "General Quarters... man your battle stations" concept also applies to our lives as God's servants and witnesses. We all know or come across people in need whether in temporal matters or faith.

And, unless assistance is provided, disaster may occur. EPHESIANS 2:10 teaches us that “we are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which He has prepared for us to do.” HEBREWS 13:16 also tells us to not forget to do good and share with others, for with such

however is one that comes to life through His Spirit working in and through His people, you and me.

Our daughter is soon to be married and is looking forward to one day being a parent. Her engagement has led me to consider further my/our responsibility toward

Do you get it? Really? I believe today like maybe never before, we are hearing a “General Quarters” call loudly urging us to “Man your Battle Stations”. ■

LIFELINES



MAN YOUR BATTLE STATIONS!

sacrifices, God is pleased. Helping others involves the work God has prepared for us to do.

Over the years, you may have heard me say “It’s not all about you!” I’ve said that to the congregations where I served and I have to admit that I have to say it to myself regularly. So, why do I say, “It’s not all about you”? Because after more than 60 years of life, I am struck by the reality of the urgency of our calling! ROMANS 13: 11 addresses this. “Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to awaken from your sleep. For salvation is nearer than when we first believed.”

Too often we have acted as though we’ll always have tomorrow and as though there’s no urgency to sharing the saving message of life through Christ by faith. So, we go about our lives and hope that somehow others will “come to church” and believe. God’s plan

the generations to come. David writes in PSALM 78, “He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands.”

Dear friends, I pray that we will be a generation that lives this out! I want to encourage, equip and help as many as possible live out this task! Why? “So, the next generation would know them...then they would put their trust in God...”



*Walking Along-side others...
Sharing Life through Christ!* **James Rocky**

PRESIDENT FLORIDA-GEORGIA DISTRICT
LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

District Convention Ingathering & Offering

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) has been doing work in Uganda since the early 1990's. The Lutheran Hour Ministries began a broadcast and a few pastors were trained, some at the Lutheran Church in Ghana, a daughter church of the LCMS. The LCMS financially supported a Ghanaian evangelist to work in developing the church in Uganda beginning in 2001. Congregations began to be developed and more pastors were trained at the seminaries in Ghana, South Africa and Kenya, all seminaries with which the LCMS supported, including sending some of our seminaries' professors to teach there.

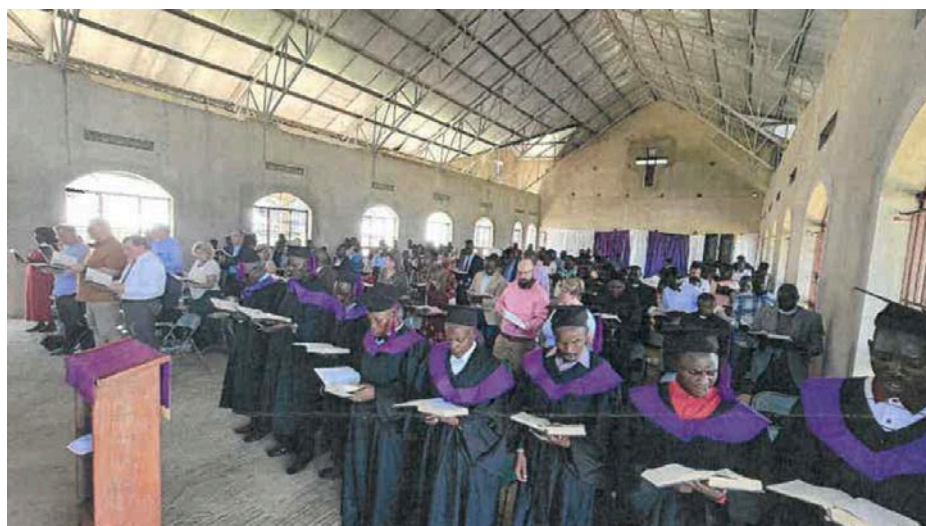
A number of individual LCMS congregations began working in different areas of the country, supporting the training of congregational leadership, the building of churches and schools, providing worship and catechetical materials and some social ministry work in the building of wells or the distribution of mosquito nets.

The Lutheran Women's Missionary League (LWML) has supported mission projects in

Uganda almost every two years since 2015, including the bus that now carries mission trip teams from the USA. From the first seeds of the gospel, planted in 1993, a Lutheran mission was initiated by five lay persons. Through regular Bible studies, the ground was prepared by missionaries from Ghana for the first Lutheran worship service on October 30, 1994. From these humble beginnings the God's Kingdom work in Uganda continued to grow. Since 1997, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has sent

10 missionaries to serve in Uganda. Over time the congregations grew from a couple of congregations to now more than 150 congregations serving more than 50,000 members. Ordained pastors grew from the first few to now 60. The building of the seminary in Jinja accelerated the number of ordained pastors quickly, thanks to the support of the LCMS and Our Savior/McKinney, TX, along with a number of other congregations.

There are 48 tribes and 52 spoken languages in Uganda, and the Lutheran Church of Uganda (LCU) currently serves among 11 tribes and 14 language areas. English is the national language used in schools, but most worship is in their tribal language. There is a need for translations of Bibles, hymnals, catechisms and other materials. Mission Training Centers are local



A recent graduation service at the LCU seminary in Magamaga, near Jinja, Uganda. The roof was funded by The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod



places of learning for new men to be trained to lead new gatherings of believers in Bible Study, doctrinal instruction, and in worship.

There are nine Mission Training Centers spread throughout the seven regions of the LCU. The Lutheran Church Uganda meets regularly with Rev. Shauen Trump who serves as the LCMS' regional director for Africa for the LCMS. Rev. Trump served his vicarage in Uganda, working with the LCU Mission before it became an official church body.

Will Support Lutheran Church of Uganda

“The Lutheran Church of Uganda (<https://lcu.ug/>) is in full fellowship with the LCMS as of the 2023 Convention in Milwaukee,” explains The Rev. Dr. Peter Meier, FLGA Executive Director for Missions & Outreach. “The LCU has been working in partnership with the LCMS since its beginning in 1994. The first Lutheran worship service was conducted on Reformation Sunday, October 30, 1994.

The LCU is led by Presiding Bishop Charles Bameka. Christian Education through primary and secondary schools for children and seminary level is a major part of their mission.

To learn more about our church body and the work that we are doing in God's Kingdom, <https://lcu.ug/> or search for on Facebook: Lutheran Church Uganda.

“The LCU is truly enthusiastic and eager to be working with our District as we partner to help their pastors and congregations secure the items on the donation list on this page. The intent of the list is to gather used items which are “excess” to our congregations, pastors, and congregation members — items which are in *good shape* and can be used by these LCU mission congregations.”

GraceUganda (<https://graceuganda.org/>) is a 501(c)3 mission RSO which provides support from the United States, LCMS congregations, to help meet the needs of the LCU. GraceUganda supports through Education, Health, Church & Community projects.

“The ingathering at our June Convention will be shipped to LCU with the help of the Rafiki Foundation (<https://www.rafikifoundation.org/>) located in Eustis, FL. Rafiki means ‘friend’ in Swahili and depicts the purpose of the Foundation — to help people know God and raise their standard of living with excellence and integrity.

Rafiki focuses on education of children and youth and livelihood projects for village women,” Meier continues.

“The cost of shipping the items gathered is approximately \$0.52/lb. Congregations are encouraged to provide shipping funds in addition to items they gather, or if individuals and congregations do not bring items for the ingathering, they are encouraged to provide funds for shipping. The Convention Offering is designated for the LCU, and will also be used to cover costs of shipping ingathering items to Uganda. ■



Peter Meier
Florida-Georgia District
Executive Director
Missions & Outreach
pmeier@flgadistrict.org
952-221-0362

Donation List of Items Sought

Can You or Someone You Know Contribute These Items?

Books

- Lutheran Hymnal (TLH)
- Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW)
- Lutheran Worship (LW)
- Lutheran Service Book (LSB)
- NIV Bibles
- ESV Bibles
- Pastoral Care Companion
- Luther's Small Catechism
- Luther's Large Catechism
- Book of Concord
- Bible Commentaries
- Devotional Materials
- Theology Books

Pastoral Items

- Robes
- Communion Ware
- Paraments (All Colors)



When their new Ministry Center was dedicated on February 23, 2025, **St. Peter/Dahlonega, GA** pulled out all the stops with a festival service of Word, song, and prayer. The congregation's 50-plus members rejoiced to welcome approximately 160 worshipers who gathered for the service — including those from the community and neighboring congregations. This was clearly a sign of what they had planned the facility for — expansive worship as they continued to grow in faith, service, and numbers.

Under the able guidance of Frederick Wiedenmann, St. Peter's building committee chairperson, the new facility is called a "Ministry Center," designed by him to undergird the congregation's wholistic approach to the Christian faith, as a place for worship, education, service, fostering community, and equipping people for their life and witness in the world.

"It's meant to be used throughout the week. The challenge was to construct such a facility while staying within our means," explains The Rev. Dr. Gerhard Michael, St. Peter's Pastor Emeritus and President Emeritus of the Florida-Georgia District.

"The central gathering space especially highlights the worship our congregation will be doing," emphasizes The Rev. Charles J. Kanefke ("Pastor K"), St. Peter's pastor. "Drawing on the symbolism

suggested by the church's name, St. Peter, the altar table rests on a massive one-and-one-half-ton rock to emphasize two important truths: 1) at the heart of our faith is that Jesus Christ is the "living stone rejected by men, but in the sight of God chosen and precious," the sure foundation of our faith, and, 2) that we, "like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (I PETER 2:4,5).

Dahlonega Dedicates New Ministry Center

Rising above the altar in the wall behind it is a beautiful faceted glass cross window proclaiming that on the cross the Lord Jesus made the perfect sacrifice that atoned for our sin, indeed the world's sin, that we might be freed from its bondage to live for Christ, with both our deeds and words.

According to Wiedenmann, the trusses and wooden ceiling inspire both hope and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. "In a world filled with fear and anxiety, our worship calls us to be people who have the forward, confident look," Wiedenmann says.

The pastors participating in the dedication rite underscores the collaborative effort that stands behind this mission endeavor. The Rev. Tim Droegemueller from Living Faith/Cumming, GA led Elder Wayne Kuhlmann and his wife Nancy to start the outreach in Dahlonega in 2008; in 2013 The Rev. Gerhard Michael assumed the pastoral leadership from Aaron Sims, an SMP vicar, to enable Sims to focus on the mission in Buford, GA. The Rev. David Kruger came in the fall of 2020 to assist Pastor Michael when health issues kept him from serving

full-time, and Pastor Kanefke was installed as pastor in June, 2023.

District President James Rockey and The Rev. David Wesche were both present to emphasize the importance of the District's role in planting mission congregations.

Pastor Kanefke's message helped worshipers realize that we have good reason for erecting another "church," for it's as we gather to be forgiven, taught, and encouraged, that we are empowered to live as God's people in the world, witnessing to His love and sharing it with others.

Important for Lutheran worship is participating — hearing the Word, singing the hymns, praying the prayers, receiving the Lord's Supper. A "state of the art" sound system with screens facilitates both hearing and seeing. The gift of a baby grand piano enhances the music for the congregation's worship. The wide chancel makes space for dramatic presentations possible.

Noteworthy about the seating in the main gathering area is that the chairs are movable, so that this space can also be used for workshops and conference type events — even meals — that would require more space than the Fellowship Hall can accommodate.

The 7,000-square-foot Ministry Center naturally includes office space for administration, classroom space for education, a serving kitchen, the Fellowship Hall, and a spacious foyer for welcoming people as they come.

St. Peter's Ministry Center is located on 2.5 acres directly on Highway 60 — a major artery leading into Dahlonega. The faceted lighted and faceted glass cross sends a striking witness to the Christ who gave His all for us, notably to travelers as they pass by, especially in the dark of night.

"What has made this building financially possible has been the generosity of members and friends of



Clergy attending the dedication service are (from left), The Revs. Tim Droegemueller, Dave Wesche, President James Rockey, Charles Kanefke, Gerhard Michael, and Dave Kruger



The building committee for the new Ministry Center (above) appear at right and include (from left), The Rev. Dr. Gerhard Michael (an advisory member until his retirement) with Chuck Lewis, Ron Mixon, Linda Larson, and Fred Wiedenmann,



the congregation,” President Emeritus Michael expresses. “The land was purchased for \$223,000 with funds that had been accumulated. Knowing the costs of construction, a three year capital campaign was undertaken — *Growing Together in Christ* — in 2021, which resulted in pledges of roughly \$750,000. When complications led to delays in beginning and rising costs, a three year extension to the campaign was added — *Extending our Endeavor* — adding another \$330,000 in pledges. In addition to gifts from members, approximately \$150,000 has been received from friends outside the congregation for which the congregation is exceedingly thankful.”

In keeping with the title of the campaign, members have contributed volunteer service to make the Ministry Center a reality. “Fred Wiedenmann was present more or less every day that the project was under construction, overseeing the endeavor with the contractor,” Michael stresses. “We estimated that all the volunteer labor amounts to a savings of nearly \$225,000!”

Several illustrations will show how members of the congregation pulled together to make the Ministry Center a reality.

Scott Richardson contributed significant hours of expertise to design and install an exceptional sound system. Linda Larson recovered more than 30 chairs the congregation received from a mission in Demorest, GA when they closed. She also recovered an additional 30 similar pre-owned chairs which were purchased for \$2 each, and another 20 chairs that Anne and David Sears had donated several years earlier. This enables all 80

chairs to match. Each chair required approximately four hours of labor.

Volunteers were instrumental in laying carpet, installing shelving, cabinets, painting and other tasks. Van Bareither masterfully designed the outside of the property so that its lawn, plants, shrubs, and even rocks would be most eye-pleasing and that St. Peter’s has a beautiful curb appeal.

Catherine Szilagyi — who always made sure the congregation’s previous rented quarters were appointed with flowers and plants throughout the year, donated the baby grand piano.

Not to be overlooked is the massive church sign that stands beneath the Ministry Center on Highway 60, carefully mounted in a handsome setting of concrete and stone with great expense of time and energy by willing volunteers led by Fred Wiedenmann.

“Now that the Ministry Center has been constructed, the congregation is thankful for all the donations which have made it possible. Those commitments have reinforced its desire to reach out to use this new facility to reach more people with the love of Christ, drawing them into the rhythm that gathers us to be built up by His Word and the community of His people and then sent into the world as His ambassadors to represent Him in word and deed with His love and grace,” Pastor Kanefke concludes.



The Rev. Charles J. Kanefke, St. Peter’s pastor, preaches in front of the the altar table resting on the one-and-a-half-ton rock Frederick Wiedenmann searched and found in North Carolina. Fred then recruited another member, Chuck Young, and together with a truck and trailer they retrieved it. After they got it to the building site— some months before site preparation and construction began — they carefully covered it from the weather so they might have a good, solid altar. To appreciate the size of the rock see front cover photo of this issue of LIFE.

Habitat For Children Ministries Celebrates Twenty Year Anniversary

The year of 2025 marks Habitat For Children Ministries' 20th year of providing services to children and families! "We praise God from Whom all blessings flow for our 20th Anniversary," exclaims Meschac St. Amour, President. "First and foremost, we thank God for His faithfulness in making this possible by providing the resources, opening the doors, and guiding our organization each step of the way."

For the past 20 years, Habitat For Children Ministries has been a beacon of hope and transformation, dedicated to nurturing and empowering the lives of vulnerable children and families. Through their unwavering commitment to providing safe housing, educational opportunities, and essential resources, they have witnessed countless lives changed and communities strengthened.

"As we celebrate two decades of service, we remain steadfast in our mission to create a brighter future for every child, fostering a world where love, support, and opportunity abound," St. Amour continues. "We are so thankful to our supporters, partners, and volunteers who have joined us on this incredible journey; together, we are building a legacy of hope and resilience."

Members of Grace/Port St. Lucie, FL funded a bathroom project



for the Haitin community. In photos below the new bathroom facilities enjoy a roof, providing accessibility and comfort to the community and guests. Grace also contributed more than 100 Christmas boxes (below right) filled with toys and hygiene essential for boys and girls between 5 and 13.

Habitat For Children Ministries enjoys the benefit of medical consultations and, in collaboration with a technical team, they take care of many emergency cases. They are able to provide health care to people who really need it. By creating a health clinic they bring good results to the surrounding community.

Fabiola Victor (above right) works as a nurse providing

comprehensive services in collaboration with the medical and technical staff on emergency cases. Above left, HCM President Meschac St. Amour is shown with one of the newborns. Pregnant women in Haiti face a multitude of significant challenges that severely impact the health and the well-being of their babies. Limited access to quality healthcare facilities, particularly in rural areas, often leads to inadequate prenatal care and a lack of essential medical support during pregnancy and childbirth. There are no financial barriers for care at the HMC clinic, ensuring that essential services are accessible to those most in need.



Deferred Convertible Vicar Tim Handrick has been assigned to **All Saints/Blairsville, GA**. Handrick is enrolled in Concordia's Residential Alternate Route [RAR] program. Students in this program study alongside those in the M.Div. Program, including the study of the New Testament on the basis of its original language, Greek. The key differences from the M.Div. Program are a reduced number of courses and Old Testament studies are carried out on the basis of the English language.

Handrick grew up in Wichita Falls, TX and graduated from Concordia/Austin, TX in 2004 as a Director of Christian Education [DCE]. He served congregations in Harlingen, TX; Tampa, FL; Loveland, CO and Ocala, FL as a DCE in a wide range of capacities.

"I am enthusiastic about the seminary's Alternate Route program and our plan is to stay at All Saints/Blairsville, GA and be called as their pastor after this year of vicarage," Handrick explains. "I received my Masters in Theology while at Concordia Seminary/Saint Louis, MO. I was able to do this while going through the RAR program.

"My dad is a retired LCMS pastor and my mom has served in various leadership positions with LWML. I have been married to my wife Ashley for 11 years and we have four children. Melody is 7, Leah is 5, Joshua is 3 and Everett is 9 months."

When not working and studying, Tim enjoys getting out on the golf course. "I played high school and college golf, and still love getting out — especially when a member of the congregation invites me," he continues. "I love to BBQ and smoke all kinds of meat in our backyard. No matter what the weather is, I will find a way to make it happen."

As a family, the Handricks love to explore the community, tucked in the Chattahoochee National Forest and the Blue Ridge Mountains, making it a natural wonderland with lakes Nottely and Winfield Scott nearby. The Appalachian Trail also passes through the area. "There is always a new trail to discover or a waterfall to chase out here," he emphasizes. "I enjoy playing guitar and making up goofy songs that make my kids laugh."

Handrick is passionate about providing opportunities for people to serve the community and really appreciates seeing all ages within

Each issue of **Lutheran LIFE** will profile the young men serving their vicarage internships in the FLGA District

Meet the Vicar

Tim Handrick Serving All Saints/Blairsville, GA

the body of Christ join together for a common purpose.

"Tim Handrick was placed by our St. Louis Seminary as our Vicar with the prayerful intention that it would become a Call to serve All Saints upon my retirement," states The Rev. Dave Wesche. "We were made aware of Tim by FLGA District President James Rockey since he was aware of my impending retirement and that Tim's route toward Ordination mirrored my own — a former Commissioned Minister/DCE with a solid background in a 'Cradle-to-Grave' ministry mindset.

"We have marveled throughout the year of the similarities as well as the change that God has unlocked for the future of His mission in these beautiful Northeast Georgia mountains. Upon the Congregation's Call and the completion of Tim's Seminary formation, Tim will be Ordained this coming July, 2025, as is tentatively planned" Wesche said.

"We have been engaging children in our community through an initiative called 'Kids on a Mission.' Each month a group of adult leaders from our congregation meet at the local public library to read, sing and play through a story from the Bible. We identify a different local mission each month to support in some way. This month we have purchased food items to fill bags for an organization in Blairsville called 'Goodies From the Heart.' They distribute them to school children who need a little extra food to take home on the weekends. I love witnessing to people who experience God's word come alive through tangible acts of service," Handrick concludes.

The Rev. Joel Fritsche (at right with Tim) is director of Vicarage and Deaconess Internships for Concordia Seminary and he stopped by Blairsville last summer after Tim had settled in Blairsville. "It was good to see him. Concordia Seminary serves our church and world by providing

theological education and leadership centered in the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ for the formation of pastors, missionaries, deaconesses, scholars and leaders in the name of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. I'm blessed to be a part of that," Fritsche offers. ■



Tim and Ashley Handrick with their four children — Melody is 7, Leah is 5, Joshua is 3 and Everett is 9 months.



HE Restores My Soul

Annual

The 2025 annual Veterans of the Cross Gathering — a retreat designed for all retired lay and rostered servants of Christ — was held at the St. Stephen Retreat & Conference Center in Titusville, FL, March 10-12.

“This event is sponsored annually by the Florida-Georgia District in appreciation of the spiritual leaders throughout the District and Synod,” explains Miss Ruth Wiedenmann, chairperson of the event. “We come together to celebrate the grace of God expressed in the lives and ministry of retired Lutheran pastors, educators, commissioned workers and laypersons and their spouses.”

Exhibitors were introduced to participants and had the opportunity to visit with them at their individual tables in the grand hall before and after sessions as well as during breaks in the schedule. This year’s participants included **Grace Place Wellness**, Greg Walton; **Lutheran Church Charities K-9 Comfort Dog Ministry**, Karen Arnett and Dave & Judy Green; **Lutheran Church Extension Fund**, Jay Wendland; **LCMS Foundation**, Tony Hunt; **Lutheran Haven Retirement Center**,

Stephanie Story Gonzalez and Raleigh Sims; **Lutheran Legal League**, Rusty & Kris Huseman; **Mission: Haiti**, Shawn Dobbins; **Rebecca’s Garden of Hope**, Larry & Carol Schaefer; and **Redeeming Life Outreach Ministry**, Sheryl DeWitt.

Monday’s opening devotion was led by The Rev. Dr. Peter Meier, Executive Director for Missions & Outreach for the FLGA District. The Rev. Dana Brones, Senior Pastor at Bethlehem/Jacksonville, FL, served as the Bible study leader. Other devotions were given by The Rev. Ron Engel, pastor emeritus at Trintiy/Fort Pierce, FL; Deaconess Liz Borth, President of the FLGA District LWML; and two President Emeriti of the District — The Rev. Dr. Gerhard Michael and The Rev. Dr. Thomas Zehnder. A youth choir, led by Ms. Rebecca Schaffer, closed worship at the culmination of the event. They came from St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL.

The gathering’s keynote speaker was The Rev. Dr. Dale Meyer, former *The Lutheran Hour* speaker for 12 years and Concordia Seminary/St. Louis, MO’s



Friends catching up — Mark Brink (from left), Tom Zehnder, Gerry and Marlyce Seaman



Peter Meier led opening devotion



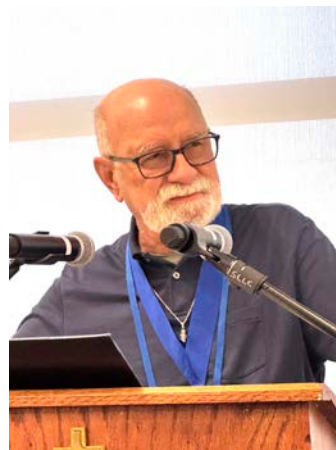
Tony Hunt brought a message from the LCMS Foundation



Sheryl DeWitt updated participants on Redeeming Life’s expansion into other markets



Jay Wendland brought greetings from LCEF



Jim Essig, VOC Planning Team Member, introduced the Behnken Medallion recipients



Scott Baumer is shown sounding the shofar — used throughout the gathering to announce sessions

Veterans of the Cross Retreat Huge Success!

former President. Meyer served the seminary for 22 years — the last 15 as president. Dr. Meyer talked a lot about retirement and his personal transition while emphasizing that God's call to Sabbath applies at all ages, from younger adults through middle age and into the retirement years.

"Sabbath affirms labor, it celebrates creation, celebrates redemption and sabbath times teach equality," Meyer underscored in his presentation. He humorously referred to Billy Graham's statement, "All my life I was taught how to die as a Christian, but no one ever taught me how I ought to live in the years before I die!"

"How do we prepare?" Meyer challenged, "we teach the next generation through our personal life experiences. We have a purpose, tomorrow needs us!"

Closing worship was held on site with The Rev. Dr. Jeffery Moore, Emeritus, Celebrant, Lisa Moore, Accompanist and Trinity/Holly Hill, FL congregation sponsor. Dale Meyer preached. The offering benefitd the FLGA President's Circle, a ministry of grace caring alongside church workers in time of need. ■



The Rev. Dr. Dale Meyer served as keynote speaker and preached at the Divine Worship evening service.



Dana Brones served as Bible Study Leader



Liz Borth, LWML President gave Tuesday's devotoion



A ladies trio, comprised of (from left) Ruth Wiedenmann, Paula Roberts and Julia Malenke, sang during Divine Worship.



Ron Engel provided the Monday evening devotion



Gerhard Michael led a devotion on Wednesday morning.



"Beside Still Water" was a string concert performed for VOC.



Four former District Presidents were called forward to a "line-up" — from left, Greg Walton, Gerhard Michael, Roy Maack (former Southeastern DP) and Tom Zehnder



Larry Schaefer updated VOC participants about Rebecca's Garden of Hope

Dennis Bartels Behnken Medallion Pastor

The Rev. Dennis Bartels has served as the Pastor at Holy Cross/ North Miami, FL since August of 1986. His family is very much a part of the life at Holy Cross and the North Miami community. His wife, the former Beth Krueger, grew up as a member of the Holy Cross congregation where her father was pastor. Dennis and Beth were married at Holy Cross on October 8, 1977. The Lord has blessed them with four children — Karl, Stefanie, Rachel and Kimberly.



Dennis Bartels (right) was introduced by Jeffery Moore



Kurt & Carole Bickel listen to Kurt's introduction for the Behnken "Church-at-Large" Medallion



Kathy Keene and Jim Essig applaud St. Paul/Boca Raton's youth choir



Polka partners, John List and Marge Freeman, grab a selfie during one of the breaks



Tom Zehnder quizzed the St. Paul students and they ended up reciting Luther's morning prayer to VOC (from memory)

Bartels was born in Iowa on October 12, 1953. He was raised in a farming community and was baptized and confirmed at Immanuel/Schleswig, IA. There he was nurtured in the love of Christ through dedicated Sunday School teachers and members of the congregation who encouraged him to go into the ministry. "My whole goal in life is to try to make the world a better place to live. I had every intention of becoming an agricultural engineer, until one day I realized that wasn't the answer. The only way is through Jesus Christ! If in my ministry I can bring one person to Christ I have, by God's grace, made this world a better place to live," Bartels offers. He has demonstrated this commitment time and again with a genuine servant attitude and love of people.

Dennis spent his first two years of training at St. Paul's College/

Concordia, MO and finished his degree at Concordia Senior College/Fort Wayne, IN. Following graduation he worked as a recruiter, where he met Beth. Soon afterward he entered Concordia Seminary/St. Louis, MO, and graduated in 1982. His first four years of ministry were at St. Paul/West Memphis, AR. In July 1986, he was called to serve as Pastor at Holy Cross where he has continued to serve faithfully.

His congregation has gone through many challenges and changes. Today it is an inner-city congregation composed of people from many different cultures.

Bartels has been active in the community, working with the North Miami Police Department, the Chamber of Commerce, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, His House Children's Home, A Caring Pregnancy Center, and many other community endeavors. He served on the FLGA District Board of Directors for nine years, served as the District Stewardship Advisory Committee Chairman and was a trained Consecrated Steward leader — leading congregations in Tennessee, North Carolina, Alabama, Georgia and Florida. He was the recipient of the District Barnabas "Son of Encouragement Award" at the District Educators Conference in 2015 and the LCEF Fred E. Lietz Award in November of 2017. He received the Doulos tou Christou Award for his service to his congregation, his circuit and the Florida-Georgia District in 2022. Dennis officially retired in June of 2023 but continues on as pastor emeritus for Holy Cross serving the school and congregation as they search for a new shepherd.

"In the almost 40 years I have known Pastor Dennis Bartels he has not only been a friend and mentor, but a true brother in Christ. We first met as fellow District Board of Director members. We spent hours talking about ministry, and as a mission pastor I learned so much from his experiences. Whenever I visit Holy Cross I am taken by how well Dennis knows his people, and how creative and celebratory the

worship is. He has always been kind and caring to those he has served. He has a servant heart as big as all outdoors. His dedication and compassion have blessed many over the years and I continue to marvel at his energy and how God uses him to touch others with the love of Jesus," remarks Florida-Georgia District President Emeritus, The Rev. Dr. Greg Walton.

John Westol Behnken Medallion Teacher

John Westol was born in Traverse City, MI, in February of 1945. He moved numerous times during his elementary years due to his father's career. During high school, he participated on the football, wrestling, and baseball teams and was also in the school musicals. His education continued at Lansing Community College. While there, he met an intern and graduate named Al Behnke from Concordia Teachers College/River Forest (RF), IL, who encouraged him to investigate Concordia. He visited on Call Night



John Westol (left) was introduced by Chris Rau

in 1966 and enrolled before he ever thought about teaching.

Westol graduated from RF in 1969 and earned his Master of Arts from University of Central Florida in 1986. His first call was to St. John's/Adrian, MI. During his ten years at Adrian, he was active in coaching and participated at the Croswell Opera House Community Theater. In 1979 John received a call

to St. John/Ocala, FL, to teach 6th grade. He also coached numerous sports. Recently he achieved his 1,250 basketball coaching win!

In 1985 John married Ruth Lund, a 1977 graduate of RF. She taught third grade at St. John's/Adrian. Ruth and he were blessed with four children, two girls and two boys. John credits Ruth for being his sounding board, counselor, dietician, assistant coach, financial advisor, home improvement consultant, best friend, and navigator on road trips.

While teaching at St. John's in Adrian, John performed the usual duties of a teacher by preparing lesson plans, quizzes, and tests and designing enriching bulletin board displays. He tutored students individually and in groups and supervised an average of 35 students in classrooms, halls, the cafeteria, the schoolyard — and on field trips.

At St. John/Ocala, he has served as teacher, coach and operating the Summer Camp Program, supervising roller skating, swimming, and bowling; he was also the bus driver when they visited Florida state parks, the Lowery Park Zoo in Tampa, and the Orlando Science Center. John continues to substitute teach, serve as the elementary school Athletic Director, and he coordinates the annual Central Florida Track Meet. As director of the St. John Basketball Camp, John organizes the registration and assignment of coaching duties; promotes the camp through the internet, newspapers, and flyers; and organizes sponsors for the camp so that children ages 8-14 can attend the camp by way of a scholarship if their family can't afford the registration fee.

Some important mentors in John's life have been his first principal, Dick Schempf, Dick Rath, Dennis Meunier, and Dick Stadler. He always advocates that people "Fight the Good Fight," finish the race, and keep the faith.

Marge Freeman Behnken Medallion Layperson

Marge Freeman was born in Cleveland, Ohio. She grew up in

a loving, caring, and supportive family. They were active in a small congregation in Willoughby, Ohio. Her interest in church music began in her teens when she played the organ for Sunday School openings. Later, in a small country church, she was hired to be the choir director — her first real position.

Marge married her high school sweetheart, Gordon, in 1952. Gordon enlisted in the Navy during the Korean War and was stationed in Key West. After their Navy years they returned to Ohio, and soon began raising a family. They were blessed with three children, David, Douglas, and Donna.

Marge and Gordon decided to move to Florida when the children were very young. They settled in Plantation and thanks to Orlyn Schlie they quickly found a church home — Our Savior. Marge joined the choir and many times when the organist couldn't be at rehearsal, Marge filled in. The organist was Orlyn's son, a high school senior. When he went off to college Marge was asked to be the organist — but her keyboard training was piano. She enrolled at Broward Community College and studied organ and theory and in September, 1965 was hired as full-time organist.

Marge took a job as secretary at Lutheran Central School in Ft. Lauderdale where her children attended and shortly became the chapel organist. In the 1970's the LBW hymnal was in the making and several of the pastors in Broward County were thinking about an all-Lutheran county-wide Reformation service. Pastor Lloyd Behnken steered the committee and Marge served on it. The service was held at 4 pm on Reformation Sunday — so big in attendance they had to use a Presbyterian church. Attendance reached to more than 1,400 and the mass choirs were comprised of more than 200 voices.

Later she and Gordon moved to Port St. Lucie and joined Redeemer/Stuart, FL where The Rev. Tom Zehnder was the pastor. There Marge served as the organist for the 4th Sunday of the month. Eventually she took the full-time position as



Marge Freeman (left) was introduced by Ruth Wiedenmann

organist/choir director at Prince of Peace/Stuart, FL.

Marge and Gordon traveled in their motor home and volunteered with the Cradle of Forestry in North Carolina. They planned to live at Lutheran Haven/Oviedo, FL for six months of the year and volunteer for the National Forests for six months. During that time she also substituted for many organists.

The Freeman's moved to Lutheran Haven in 1998 and Marge joined the choir. She was an organist and always willing to help out when needed. Marge played for many services during Advent and Lent. Then, the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Sanford was in need of an organist. Marge would play at Redeemer when she and Gordon weren't traveling.

It was sometime after they moved to Lutheran Haven that they got an invitation to Veterans of the Cross. Marge enjoyed the programs and also saw many folks she worked with in South Florida. After a few years they needed a piano player. Marge volunteered and played for the annual gathering for many years. Marge is almost retired, but still is working as Director of Worship and Music at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer/Sanford. Marge loves serving alongside Pastor DeWitt, the congregation members, and staff.

Kurt Bickel Behnken Medallion Church-at-Large

Kurt Bickel was born in Bay City, Michigan and he was baptized

at Trinity Lutheran Church. Kurt's father, Victor, was principal. Kurt's grandfather and five of his uncles were all Lutheran pastors.

Kurt met his soulmate and life partner, Carol, when he was in second grade. Carol was in first grade. Their friendship blossomed and when they reached their high school years they started seriously dating. Both of them graduated Bay City High School.

Both Kurt and Carol applied to Concordia/Ann Arbor, Michigan. Carol was accepted. Kurt was not but was accepted at Concordia/Seward, Nebraska and Carol eventually joined Kurt in Nebraska. They were married in 1972 — 53 years ago — while Kurt was a graduate assistant. Following their time in Nebraska, and despite Kurt graduating with a teaching degree, he was placed as a Director of Christian Education — before it was even considered a position in the LCMS. Kurt and Carol spent five years together at St. Paul/St. Joseph, MO (about 30 miles north of Kansas City) and three years at St. Mark's/Brunswick, OH (a suburb of Cleveland). In 1982 Kurt accepted a call to Prince of Peace/Orlando, FL to serve as DCE with The Rev. David Ludwig.

Carol served two Lutheran schools and ended her education career as the lead counselor for Orange County Schools in Orlando. Together they share three lovely daughters — two are educators and one is a county officer in New York. They have seven grandchildren.

In addition to Kurt's B.S. in Education from Concordia/Seward, NE (where he was the student citizen of the year in 1970), he holds a Masters of Arts Degree in Human Resource Development from Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri. He is certified as an organizational coach from the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland; a Certified Strategic Planner from The University Associates/San Diego, California and a Certified Facilitator for the 4Mat System — which is a structured approach to teaching that ensures all learners can be engaged and benefit from

the learning experience. It caters to different learning styles and consists of four distinct phases: experiencing, conceptualizing, applying, and refining.



Kurt Bickel (right) was introduced by John List

For the past 30 years Bickel has served such impressive clients as Orange County Public Schools, 16 of the LCMS Districts, Lutheran Church Extension Fund (as well as Michigan's Church Extension Fund) the Lutheran Church of Canada, Concordia University System and several of the Concordia Universities and the LCMS National Youth Gathering. According to Les Stroh, if your children or your grandchildren have attended an LCMS youth gathering in the last 30+ years, they have benefited from Kurt's ministry. He's been the leader of the mass events at those gatherings since the mid 1980s and has touched literally thousands of lives with the creative and dynamic programs he and his teams have produced. In addition to more than 100 Lutheran congregations and schools belonging to the LCMS, the ELCA and WELS, other clients of Kurt have included The American Automobile Association, Lockheed-Martin, The Pastoral Leadership Institute (PLI) and The Walt Disney organization.

Kurt is the former owner of a publishing company and has authored numerous articles for a variety of Christian publications — especially those oriented toward youth ministry. He holds

professional memberships in the Religious Conference Management Association, the American Society for Training and Development and most importantly — the Lutheran Education Association — where he received the Master Team Award. In 2018 Kurt received the Doulos tuo Christou Award from the Florida Georgia District.

"Kurt Bickel is insightful, empowering, skilled, creative, humorous, focused, caring and the list goes on. He is supremely committed to helping his clients move their organizations forward and to equipping others for greater use of their gifts. He has empowered hundreds of individuals and is deeply respected by his clients and those of us who consider him to be a partner for his faithfulness and thoroughness," Les Stroh contributes.

"Kurt Bickel taught me more about leadership and group dynamics than anyone or any book ever did. His keen understanding of interpersonal relationships and how they interact in group settings was invaluable to me in my career working with congregations and schools. It was truly life-changing for me in my ministry. His work with the Florida-Georgia District leadership transformed the way large group events and conferences were designed and produced — making them more intentional in meeting the needs of the people while challenging them to grow in their ministries and daily lives. His impact has been felt across the Synod. He has left an indelible mark in the Florida-Georgia District, the Synod and beyond. I am blessed to call him a good friend and brother in Christ and I thank Kurt for seeking excellence and truth, all in the name of Jesus Christ. I pray God will continue to bless he and Carol richly," says Mark Brink, FLGA Executive Director Emeritus for Schools and Youth Ministry.

And this from Florida-Georgia District President Emeritus, The Rev. Dr. Greg Walton, "My friendship with Kurt Bickel preceded my time as District President, but it was during this time that I recognized what a true blessing Kurt is. When I was a parish pastor he was a trusted advisor. It was with great confidence and joy that I sought his help in the District. Kurt's expertise in facilitating groups was instrumental in helping me adjust to working with the District Staff, and from that grew a trust and partnership that blessed the Florida-Georgia District throughout my terms.

"Kurt worked regularly with the District Board of Directors, facilitating our ongoing work with policy-based governance. He helped coordinate our first Lay Leadership Summit, developed Emergent Leaders at my request, helped coordinate and write for the District *My Spiritual Journey*, a self-led retreat for church workers, and was a valued ministry partner. He served as a trusted advisor and a wise sounding board for me personally."

Kurt & Carol Bickel are semi-retired and living on Lake Holden in Orlando. They attend Prince of Peace Lutheran Church. ■



The 2025 Veterans of the Cross Behnken Medallion recipients pose for a group photo. They are, from left, John Westol, Marge Freeman, Dennis Bartels and Kurt Bickel

Churches in the United States — including those within the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) — generally receive federal tax-exempt status under Internal Revenue Code (IRC) §501(c)(3). While the LCMS is a larger denominational body, each individual congregation must still follow the same IRS guidelines that apply to all 501(c)(3) organizations.

Falling out of compliance can jeopardize or even result in the loss of this status. Most LCMS churches qualify for tax-exempt status under the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's group ruling with the IRS. This means they do not have to apply for 501(c)(3) status individually, as they are covered under the Synod's umbrella. However, being part of the Synod's group exemption does not shield a church from losing its

Publicly backing or opposing a particular political candidate is prohibited. Even a statement from the pulpit, bulletin, or official church communication can be considered a violation if it favors or opposes someone running for office. Churches cannot make financial contributions or offer in-kind resources (such as staff time, church property, or equipment) to a candidate's campaign. While pastors and leaders may express personal views on political matters, they must avoid doing so in an official church capacity or use church resources to advance a political campaign. Violations in any of these areas can draw IRS scrutiny. Repeated or severe infractions may lead to an IRS investigation, possibly ending in the revocation of the church's tax-exempt status.

lobbying within the LCMS structure is the Lutheran Center for Religious Liberty (LCRL), an organization dedicated to advocating for religious freedom, pro-life policies, and other issues aligned with LCMS teachings. The LCRL operates within legal limits for lobbying by focusing on education, outreach, and public policy advocacy while ensuring that its efforts do not become a substantial part of the overall church's activities.

LCMS congregations should be aware that while they may support and engage with organizations like the LCRL, their own lobbying efforts must remain limited to avoid risking tax-exempt status. Tax-exempt organizations must serve a public good rather than private interests. Churches that run afoul

of these rules can endanger their exempt status. Church resources should not primarily benefit private individuals or groups outside of the church's charitable or religious purpose. Leaders or insiders (such as pastors or board members) cannot receive a portion of church earnings beyond reasonable compensation for services. Examples of problematic behavior include paying personal expenses or granting benefits unrelated to ministry, unreasonably high compensation without proper documentation or justification, and loaning church funds to insiders with favorable or no repayment terms. Repeated or glaring instances of private benefit or inurement can trigger an IRS investigation and possible revocation of the church's

Could Your Congregation Lose Its Tax-Exempt Status?



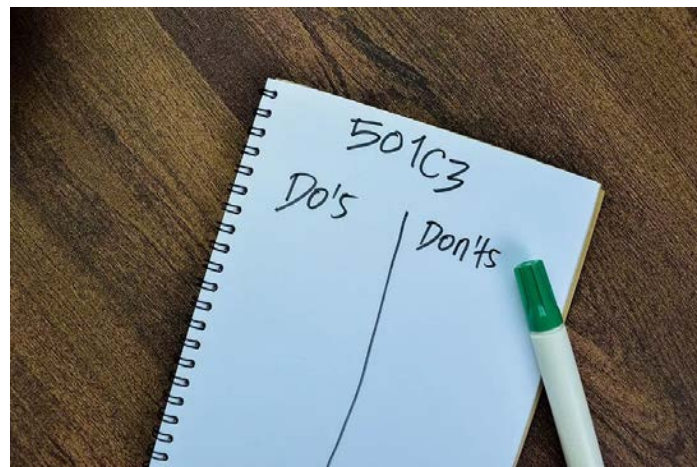
tax-exempt status if it violates IRS regulations.

If an individual congregation engages in prohibited activities — such as endorsing political candidates, excessive lobbying, private inurement (benefit), or operating primarily as a business — the IRS can still revoke that individual church's tax-exempt standing under IRC §501(c)(3) and Treasury Regulation §1.501(c)(3)-1, even if the Synod itself retains its exemption.

Additionally, some LCMS churches choose to apply separately for their own 501(c)(3) status to have direct IRS recognition, which may be useful when applying for grants, loans, or financial transactions that require independent proof of exemption. One of the most explicit prohibitions for 501(c)(3) organizations, including churches, is direct or indirect participation in political campaigns, as stated in IRC §501(c)(3).

Churches are permitted to engage in limited lobbying — attempting to influence legislation — but this activity cannot become a “substantial part” of their overall operations, as outlined in Treasury Regulation §1.501(c)(3)-1(b)(3). If a significant portion of a church's time, budget, and energy is spent on lobbying activities, it may exceed what the IRS allows for a 501(c)(3). While many churches do not file Form 990 (and thus do not formally report lobbying expenses), if the IRS determines that lobbying efforts are excessive in proportion to the church's religious work, the church may risk its tax-exempt status.

A notable example of



501(c)(3)

tax exemption under IRC §4958.

Losing tax-exempt status can also result in serious financial and legal consequences beyond federal income taxation. Churches that lose their exemption may also become subject to state property taxes, significantly increasing their financial burden. Additionally, the loss of tax-exempt status can weaken a church's ability to invoke protections under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), 42 U.S.C. §2000bb, in certain legal matters, as RFRA protections are often tied to a church's standing as a religious nonprofit organization. Maintaining tax-exempt status is therefore not just a financial concern but also a matter of preserving religious liberty rights.

Unrelated Business Income and the Misuse of Church Assets

A church must be both "organized" and "operated" exclusively for its exempt (religious) purpose under Treasury Regulation §1.501(c)(3)-1(a). If it strays significantly, the IRS can revoke its status. This can happen when the organization's foundational documents (constitution, bylaws) no longer indicate a religious or charitable purpose, or if the church devotes most of its activities to nonexempt, commercial enterprises or uses its resources in ways that do not further its religious mission.

If an LCMS church is found to be operated for something other than religious or charitable activities,

it could face loss of its tax-exempt designation. Churches sometimes engage in revenue-generating activities unrelated to their primary religious mission — such as operating a coffee shop open to the public. While this is allowed, the income from these activities may be subject to Unrelated Business Income Tax (UBIT) under IRC §511-514. Not reporting or paying taxes on unrelated business income can invite IRS penalties.

If a church's commercial undertakings become the main focus, the IRS may argue it functions more like a for-profit business than a church. While occasional or limited unrelated business activities are permissible, it is crucial to track and report earnings properly, ensuring the lion's share of time and resources remains devoted to religious or charitable purposes.

Leasing church space to others can also trigger UBIT, *depending on the nature of the lease*. If the space is rented to another 501(c)(3) nonprofit for a mission-aligned purpose

(such as a Christian daycare or another church), the income is generally exempt from UBIT. However, if the space is leased to a for-profit business or an entity unrelated to the church's mission, the income may be taxable.

Additionally, if the leased property is debt-financed, meaning the church has an outstanding mortgage or loan on it, rental income may be subject to UBIT under IRC §514. If the tenant is also a 501(c)(3) entity and the space is used for



William "Rusty" Huseman
Florida-Georgia District
Legal Counsel
RustyH@LutheranLegalLeague.com
904-591-4822

an exempt purpose, the rental income is generally not subject to UBIT. However, if the tenant's use does not align with the church's exempt purpose, the income may still be taxable. UBIT applies only if the total unrelated business income exceeds \$1,000 in a tax year, at which point the church must file IRS Form 990-T and pay taxes on the income. An LCMS church must remain aware of the legal limitations and requirements that accompany tax-exempt status. Staying within these boundaries ensures compliance with IRS regulations while maintaining the church's mission and financial stability. ■



75th Anniversary Capital Campaign Report

by James Rockey, FLGA District President



During the 75th Anniversary year, 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" others and walk with them through life. We are still in the Along-Siders process of raising \$1.5 million to plant 10 new ministry starts. We have received approximately \$325,000 to date and are working with various congregations and circuits for new church plants. The need for new ministries to reach our growing communities is only increasing.

During the past year we have seen two new starts — an Ethiopian congregation in Atlanta, Georgia and a New Spanish-chartered congregation in Naples, Florida. We have also celebrated a "restart" of Prince of Peace in Hollywood, Florida. It is critical to remember

that with the growth of our two states, the vast majority of our neighbors have no connection to the Lord! Now is the time to take action!

I am personally asking you as individuals, congregations, schools, or even small groups, to consider 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. Please contact me to learn more about how you can help.

Meet the LCMS National Mission Director



The LCMS (Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod) named Rev. Dan Galchutt as the new Executive Director of the LCMS Office of National Mission a little more than a year ago. The previous Managing Director of Church Planting, Renewal and Support, Rev. Dr. Mark Wood, is retiring from the position.

The LCMS Office of National Mission works within the borders of the United States to support the

programs and resources available to congregations, districts, schools, Recognized Service Organizations and other Lutheran organizations.

Role of the Office:

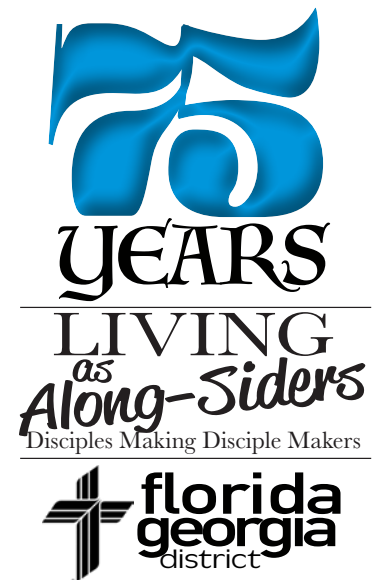
The LCMS Office of National Mission (ONM) focuses on various aspects of mission work within the United States, including church planting, renewal, and support.

Ongoing Work:

The ONM continues to work on various projects, including youth gatherings, reporting improvements, and grants from Lilly Endowment Inc. for youth and worship.

Mission Focus:

The LCMS, a mission-oriented denomination, works to make known the love of Jesus Christ through witness and mercy both nationally and internationally. ■



New congregations and ministries are vital to reaching new believers and growing Christ's Church! We are committed to continuing to make this a priority. Please join me by praying for the resources to start these new missions and then consider how you and your congregation can be a part of this call to start new and reach new believers! Please contact the District Office to learn more. ■

All Access Account

Great rates and full access to your funds—designed for your daily needs



SUPPORT LCMS
MINISTRIES



INTEREST COMPOUNDED
AND PAID MONTHLY



OPTIONAL VISA®
DEBIT CARD



ONLINE ACCESS
AND MOBILE APP*



LUTHERAN CHURCH
EXTENSION FUND
FINANCIAL SOLUTIONS. TOGETHER IN FAITH.

Scan the QR code, visit **lcef.org/AllAccess**
or call 800-843-5233 to view our rates.



*App access restricted to individual investors. Online access available for all others. LCEF is a nonprofit religious organization; therefore, LCEF investments are not FDIC-insured bank deposit accounts. This is not an offer to sell investments, nor a solicitation to buy. LCEF will offer and sell its securities only in states where authorized. The offer is made solely by LCEF's Offering Circular. Investors should carefully read the Offering Circular, which more fully describes associated risks. StewardAccount products are not available to investors in South Carolina. StewardAccount access features are offered through UMB Bank n.a. All Access Account is known as "StewardAccount" for investors in Washington.

Rostered Church Worker Loan Program

Lutheran Church Extension Fund-Missouri Synod, 10733 Sunset Office Drive, Suite 300, St. Louis, MO 63127-1020, 800-843-5233, lcef.org, NMLS# 3444; LCEF Mortgage Loan Originators: Pamela Macinski (NMLS# 16679), Michelle Porter (NMLS# 1675886), Tricia Galczynski (NMLS# 1896183), Tara Appleton (NMLS# 738203), Marissa Strayhorn (NMLS# 2560503), Illinois Residential Mortgage Licensee (MB.0006057), Loans made or arranged pursuant to a California Law License (6037619), Texas Complaint/Recovery Fund Notice - Figure: 7 TACs80.200(b): *CONSUMERS WISHING TO FILE A COMPLAINT AGAINST A COMPANY OR A RESIDENTIAL MORTGAGE LOAN ORIGINATOR SHOULD COMPLETE AND SEND A COMPLAINT FORM TO THE TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF SAVINGS AND MORTGAGE LENDING, 2601 NORTH LAMAR, SUITE 201, AUSTIN, TEXAS 78705. COMPLAINT FORMS AND INSTRUCTIONS MAY BE OBTAINED FROM THE DEPARTMENT'S WEBSITE AT WWW.SML.TEXAS.GOV. A TOLL-FREE CONSUMER HOTLINE IS AVAILABLE AT 1-877-276-5550. THE DEPARTMENT MAINTAINS A RECOVERY FUND TO MAKE PAYMENTS OF CERTAIN ACTUAL OUT OF POCKET DAMAGES SUSTAINED BY BORROWERS CAUSED BY ACTS OF LICENSED RESIDENTIAL MORTGAGE LOAN ORIGINATORS. A WRITTEN APPLICATION FOR REIMBURSEMENT FROM THE RECOVERY FUND MUST BE FILED WITH AND INVESTIGATED BY THE DEPARTMENT PRIOR TO THE PAYMENT OF A CLAIM. FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE RECOVERY FUND, PLEASE CONSULT THE DEPARTMENT'S WEBSITE AT WWW.SML.TEXAS.GOV. For more information on LCEF's lending license go to lcef.org/state-disclosures.

LCEF is properly licensed or exempt from such requirements in the states where loans are purchased or offered to LCMS rostered church workers. CA: (DFPI) Loans made or arranged pursuant to California Financing Law License (6037619); CO: Mortgage Company Registration (3444); FL: Mortgage Lender License (MLD625); GA: Mortgage Lender License/Registration (61615); ID: Regulated Lender License (RRL-651); IL: Illinois Residential Mortgage Licensee (MB.0006057) & Consumer Installment Loan License (CI.0002711-H); IN: (DFI) Mortgage Lending License (11015) IA: Mortgage Banker Registrant (2000-0057) & Consumer Credit Notification/Registration (200009695); KS: Mortgage Company License (MC.0025037) & Credit Notification/Registration (NOT.0026260); KY: Mortgage Loan Company License (MC418770); MD: Consumer Loan License (3444); MI: First Mortgage Broker/Lender/Service License (FL2194) & Second Mortgage Broker/Lender/Service Registrant (SR0016005) & Regulatory Loan License (RL-3037) (Effective Date of License: October 5, 2000, Regulatory Agency: State of Michigan Department of Insurance and Financial Services, Consumer Finance Section, 530 W. Allegan Street, 7th Floor, Lansing Michigan, 48933, www.michigan.gov/difs, TOLL FREE 877-999-6442); MN: Residential Mortgage Originator License (MN-MO-20211170); MS: Mortgage Lender License (3444); MO: Mortgage Company License (3444) & Consumer Credit (Small) Loan Certificate of Registration (367-24-8245); MT: Consumer Loan License (3444); ND: Money Broker License (MB100280); OH: Residential Mortgage Lending Act Certificate of Registration (RM.501020.000) & General Loan Law Certificate of Registration (GL.501020.000); OR: Consumer Finance License (0205-001-C); SD: Non-Profit Money Lender License (NMYL.2314); TX: SML Auxiliary Mortgage Loan Activity Company License (3444) Texas Complaint/Recovery Fund Notice - Figure: 7 TACs80.200(b) *CONSUMERS WISHING TO FILE A COMPLAINT AGAINST A COMPANY OR A RESIDENTIAL MORTGAGE LOAN ORIGINATOR SHOULD COMPLETE AND SEND A COMPLAINT FORM TO THE TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF SAVINGS AND MORTGAGE LENDING, 2601 NORTH LAMAR, SUITE 201, AUSTIN, TEXAS 78705. COMPLAINT FORMS AND INSTRUCTIONS MAY BE OBTAINED FROM THE DEPARTMENT'S WEBSITE AT WWW.SML.TEXAS.GOV. A TOLL-FREE CONSUMER HOTLINE IS AVAILABLE AT 1-877-276-5550. THE DEPARTMENT MAINTAINS A RECOVERY FUND TO MAKE PAYMENTS OF CERTAIN ACTUAL OUT OF POCKET DAMAGES SUSTAINED BY BORROWERS CAUSED BY ACTS OF LICENSED RESIDENTIAL MORTGAGE LOAN ORIGINATORS. A WRITTEN APPLICATION FOR REIMBURSEMENT FROM THE RECOVERY FUND MUST BE FILED WITH AND INVESTIGATED BY THE DEPARTMENT PRIOR TO THE PAYMENT OF A CLAIM. FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE RECOVERY FUND, PLEASE CONSULT THE DEPARTMENT'S WEBSITE AT WWW.SML.TEXAS.GOV.; UT: Consumer Credit Notification; WA: Consumer Loan Company License (CL- 3444); WI: Mortgage Banker License (374BA) and Consumer License; WY: Consumer Lender License (CL- 1538). NMLS Identifying Number: Lutheran Church Extension Fund-Missouri Synod (NMLS#: 3444) 10733 Sunset Office Drive, Suite 300 St. Louis, MO 63127-1020 (800) 843-5233 lcef.org. LCEF Loan Originators: Pamela Macinski (NMLS#: 16679) Michelle Porter (NMLS#: 1675886) Tricia Galczynski (NMLS#: 1896183) Tara Appleton (NMLS#: 738203) Marissa Strayhorn (NMLS#: 2560503)

Benefits of the LCEF Residential Loan Program

- Competitive interest rates.
- Lower down payment obligations.
- No private mortgage insurance (PMI) required.
- No prepayment penalties.
- Friendly, knowledgeable loan officers.
- Working with a lender who is empowering ministries.

Need support as you navigate
home ownership?

Visit **lcef.org/rew**.



Dr. Phillip and Sandy Johnson
LCEF Loan Customers

Is Your Congregation, Council, Board of Elders on the Same Page?

Pastor Tim and the head elder, Jack, were talking on the way to the parking lot after a particularly rough council meeting. They were quiet until they got to their cars.

Jack: Pastor that was rough. We were kind of arguing throughout the meeting.

Pastor: I noticed that too, especially with regard to the agenda item about the budget.

Jack: The church shouldn't be about arguing, but about prayer!

Pastor: You are so right. That's what the disciples did in the book of Acts when they were at odds. They prayed. I could have been more helpful to have us stop to pray.

Jack: We can certainly do that next time. We can pray that we will all pulled in the same direction.

Pastor: You know, the scriptures constantly talk about being of one mind. That's what we need to pray about and talk about as the starting line for our mutual ministry.

The Coaching Leader: Have you ever had that kind of meeting? "Being of the same mind" is referenced often in the Bible. Consider the

mutual devotion spoken in ROMANS 12:10; doing things with "one mind and voice" in ROMANS 15:5-6; agreeing, perfectly "united in mind and thought" from 1 CORINTHIANS 1:10; of "one mind, live in peace" in 1 CORINTHIANS 13:11 & PHILIPPIANS 2:2-4 and many others. If your board

of directors or church council is ready to revisit this and prayerfully pursue "being of one mind" consider a free resource to guide your prayers and dialogue. Go to scottgress.com/store and look for the free download of the same name. ■

Rev. Scott Gress is a Professional Certified Coach and believes in Growing People for Ministry with a focus on leadership, discipleship and teamwork. Contact Scott if you are interested in him working with you or your congregation or school. You can contact Scott through email scottgress@me.com or his blog page scottgress.com or at 561-542-4472.



Scott Gress
The Coaching Leader
Lutheran Counseling Network
Leadership Training
scottgress@me.com
561-542-4472

Jack: Yeah, it was like everyone had a different priority. We were not on the same page.

Pastor: As a council we are supposed to advocate for the whole ministry and not just our piece. That's hard to do! But we can't argue like that all the time. There must be a better way.



AS LIFE HAPPENS, WE'RE HERE TO HELP.

Personal Loans

Auto Loans

Credit Cards

Refinances



LCU LUTHERAN
FEDERAL CREDIT UNION

We are the credit union of The LCMS.



District Enters Into New Legal Partnership

The Florida-Georgia District is pleased to announce a member partnership with Church & Ministry Alliance, effective January 2025. FLGA District ministries can now enroll at a 20% discounted membership rate.

ADF Church & Ministry Alliance is a membership program that provides legal help so a congregation can freely operate their church and school in accordance with Christian principles. This membership program gives access to these key legal benefits and will help protect a congregation or school's religious identity through:

Document Review

A church or school's governing documents can be submitted to the CMA legal team, and their attorneys will review and consult on it to ensure the highest religious



liberty protections are in place — a cornerstone benefit of the program.

Access to our Attorneys

If there is a legal question, the legal team can be contacted directly. They can either directly provide pro bono assistance or, if questions are outside of their scope, refer to one of nearly 5,000 Christian attorneys in the Allied Attorney Network.

Legal & Ministerial Resources

With membership comes access to the website, which includes helpful legal guides, template governing documents, videos, and other

Christian worldview resources. They also have periodic webinars about issues impacting ministries.

Case Review

If a congregation or school faces a legal situation related to religious freedom, the CMA legal team will review it to determine the best way to help. If necessary, they will represent the client in court — all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court — at no cost. Additional information about this new partnership is available on the Florida-Georgia District website. ■



CHURCH & MINISTRY
ALLIANCE

LEGAL GUIDANCE FOR CHURCHES & MINISTRIES

The ADF Church & Ministry Alliance is an affordable membership program designed to ensure churches and ministries can operate, teach, and serve in accordance with God's call.

Through legal guidance and practical resources, we equip you to confidently pursue your mission:

- ✓ Legal Support
- ✓ Resources & Education
- ✓ News & Insights
- ✓ Community Building
- ✓ Constituent Support

We are excited to partner with the FLGA District. Through this partnership, we are offering a discounted membership rate to FLGA District churches and ministries. Use one of the codes below to receive 20% off.

Churches: **LCMSdistrict**
Ministries: **LCMSdistrictMA**

JoinADF.com/LCMS



FLORIDA GEORGIA

Out and About in the District



Chris Kollmann Returns to First/Gainesville

After 18 months without a senior pastor, **First/Gainesville, FL** called and welcomed The Rev. Christopher Kollmann and his family to shepherd the congregation. Pastor Kollmann was installed on February 16, 2025 with a host of active and retired pastors sharing in the day. A celebratory dinner was held in his honor afterwards in the Besalski Fellowship Hall.

Pastor Kollmann is no stranger to First as he served his vicarage there in 2010-2011. In photo at left — FLGA District President, James Rockey, welcomes Chris and Stephanie (and their three boys, Micah, Jacob and Zachary) Kollmann.

In above photo are The Revs. (front row) James Rockey (District President), Chris Kollmann, Jeff Shanks, Ken Schamens, Blair Clark. In back row are Dan Prugh, Jonathan Rockey, Graham Glover, Dan Howe, Joe Signore, Doug Bach, Stephen Lane and Andy Shermbeck. ■



St. Michael/Fort Myers Dedicates New Organ

by John List, Editor

St. Michael/Fort Myers, FL dedicated their new Allen Organ on January 26, 2025 in a celebratory afternoon organ concert by their Director of Worship and Music, Ben Ball.

"This is a hybrid instrument — a combination pipe and digital instrument containing much of the pipework of the original Klug and Schumacher instrument installed here in 1981," Ball explains. "This is actually the third Allen Organ that St. Michael has purchased — the first was an analog instrument of two manuals that served the congregation until the installation of the second pipe organ which now sits in our chapel."

Ball provided the audience with a short history lesson on the organs at St. Michael as well as introducing facts about the new instrument. "This new organ is predominantly

digital with 117 ranks spread over four manuals or keyboards and pedal with 100 speaking stops and seven ranks of 'speaking pipes.' These sounds can work independently or together providing a soft whisper or a thunderous roar," he continues.

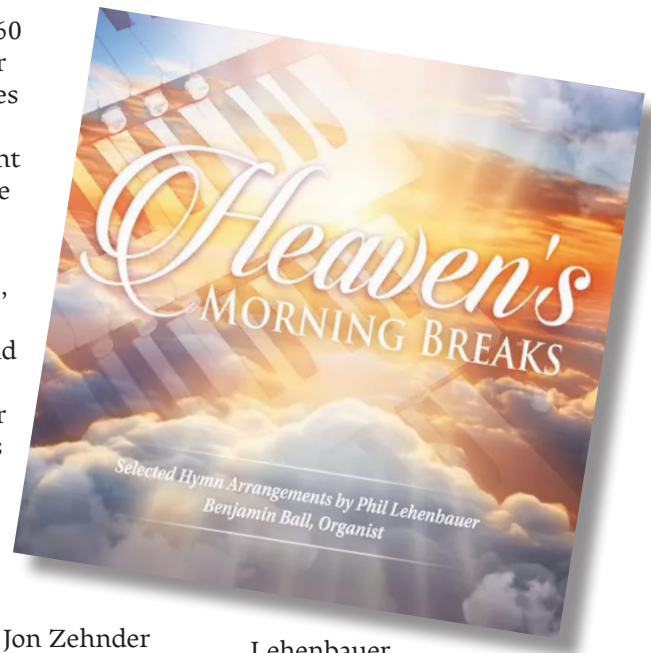
Many of the pipes in the sanctuary were originally owned by St. Michael. They have been brought into the sanctuary "visually" now. The organ can "speak" to different parts of the room — from the choir loft or to left or right sanctuary — conveying a warmth and authenticity of pipe sound as well as a commanding presence.

"The digital portion of the organ samples instruments from all over the United States, Europe and pretty much the world — digitally enhancing them so that you get the attack, the sustained, and the release of an actual pipe. There

are also 260 Genesis or midi voices on the instrument to emulate different sounds like piano, trumpet, strings and more."

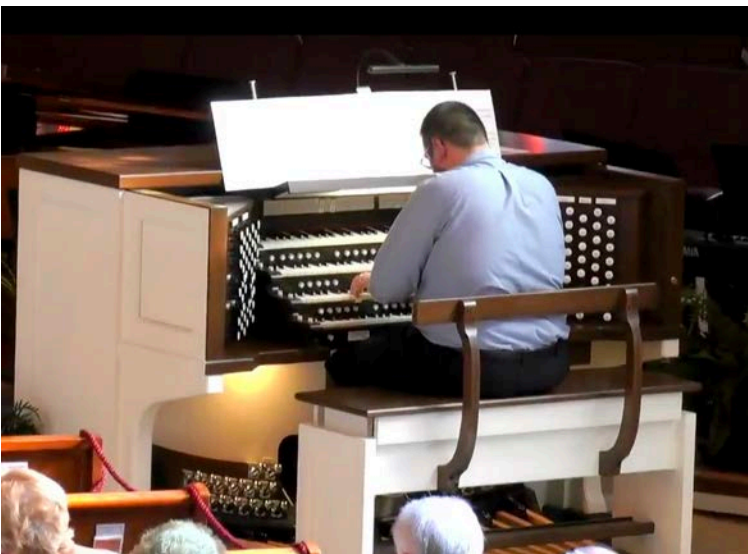
Pastor Dave Bass and Katie had to be out of town so Pastor Emeritus Jon Zehnder stepped in to lead the congregation through the official dedication and prayers. Zehnder's prayer thanked God for those who were moved to provide funding for the new instrument, enhancing worship. He also thanked God for Ben and the others who regularly lead worship for St. Michael.

Through a collaboration with **Shepherd of the Coast/ Fort Lauderdale, FL** and their organist, Phil



Lehenbauer, Ben Ball recorded a CD of Lehenbauer's compositions. The new CD, *Heaven's Morning Breaks*, was released at the January dedication service. Lehenbauer is a graduate of Ohio State University and is serving Shepherd of the Coast. He has written numerous works for organ.

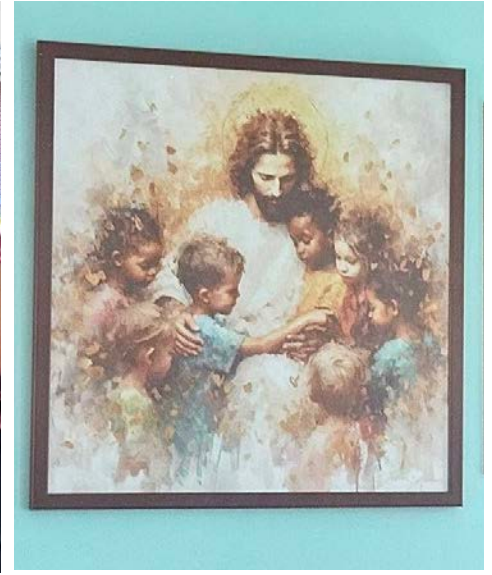
Information about the CD is available from Ben at ben.ball@gsmllcs.org



Ben Ball at St. Michael's dedication concert in January, 2025



Ben Ball is shown with members of St. Michael/Fort Myers, FL who led worship at the 2024 Fall Florida-Georgia District Educators Conference in Daytona Beach, FL



The Naomi Sunday School Class at **Thrive/Estero, FL** commissioned a piece of artwork for the new children's building on campus. The picture captures the love and care of Jesus for the next generation and will serve as a constant reminder of His heart for children. ■

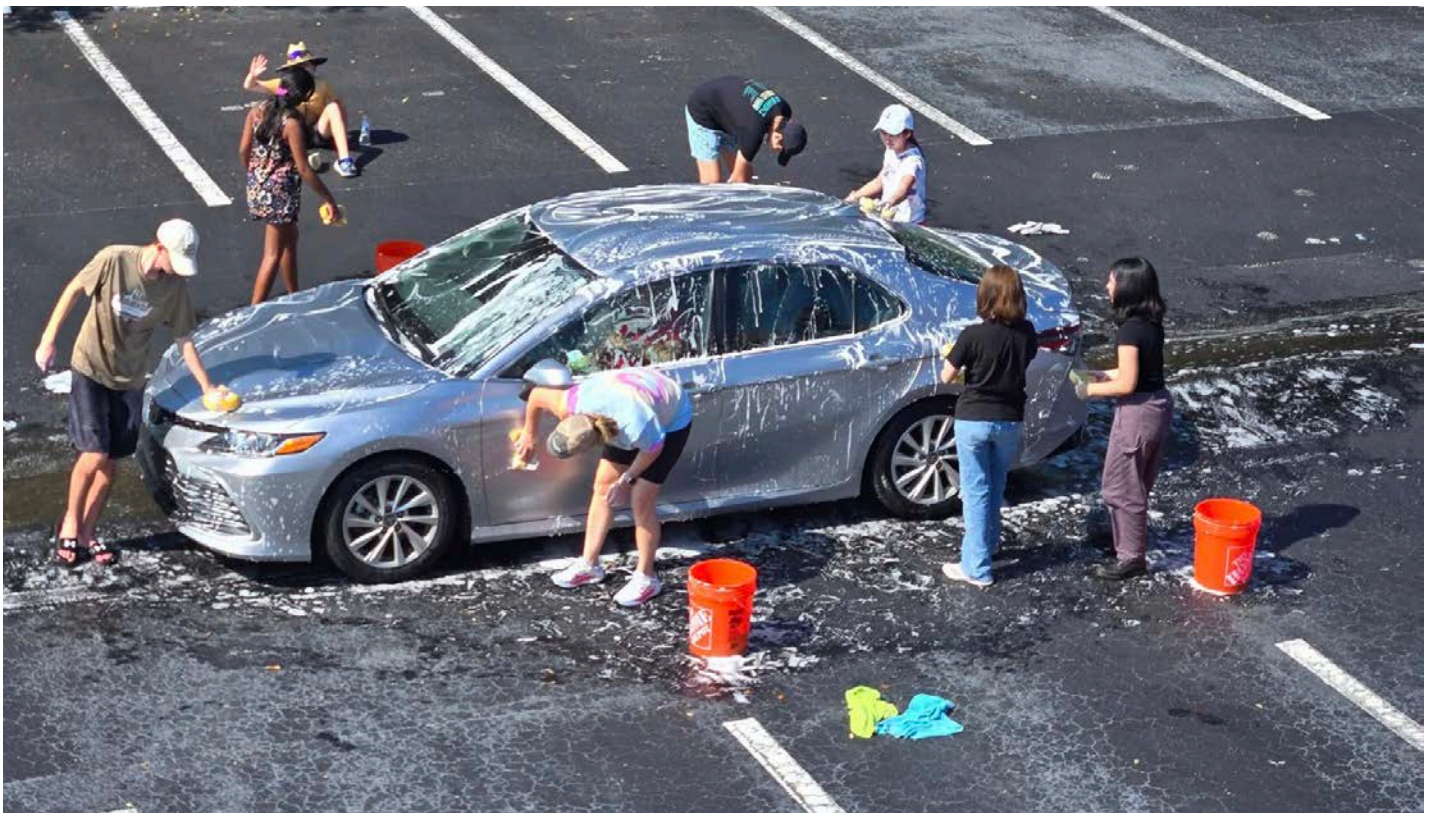
Redeemer/Stuart Presents Broadway's "Peter Pan"

In early March, **Redeemer/Stuart, FL** presented their 18th Annual All-School Musical. All students in grades K through 8th are involved in the show with a performance for preschoolers and then two performances for the community, family and friends — often with packed houses. This year they performed Broadway's "Peter Pan" Jr. The musical was directed by Joy Beach. ■





A group of students from **Thrive/Estero, FL** recently completed a day at Seamark Ranch in Green Cove Springs, FL. They received a tour of the property and learned how Seamark provides a loving, supportive home for more than 80 foster children and their dedicated foster parents. The Thrive students had a full day filled with tending the blueberry fields and feeding hungry cows. ■



St. Paul/Weston, FL youth group put more than \$5,000 in their coffers from a March 1st, 2025 car wash where members, family and friends pledged dollars toward their efforts. ■

Our Savior/St. Pete Celebrates 70th Anniversary



Celebrants included, from left, Pastor Chris Futch, Janice Pisieczko Andrew W. Pupke (Chair of Elders), President James Rockey, Diane Knoke and Pastor Dan Ritter

It was a monumental day earlier this year when **Our Savior/ St. Petersburg, FL** congregation celebrated their 70th Anniversary. “We were blessed to have FLGA District President, Pastor James Rockey, join Pastors Chris Futch and Dan Ritter to share in this milestone,” Marilyn Brownlee the congregations director of communications reports. “His inspiring sermon set the tone for a day filled with joy, gratitude, and fellowship.”

Following worship, participants gathered for a vibrant celebration brunch in Wegner Hall, where more than 300 people came together to honor seven decades of faith, love, and community. “The brunch was nothing less than amazing, with beautiful decorations and delicious food that made the occasion even more special,” Brownlee continues. “A slide show depicting 70 years of ministry was shown along with special tributes by our pastors from years past.” ■



Left — President Rockey brought the anniversary message.

Above — table decorations.

At right — Pastor Chris Futch with Deb Murray



Student Musicians Attend District Musical Festival



St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL handbell and choir students attended the annual Florida-Georgia District Music Festival held at St. Luke's/Oviedo, FL. The student musicians are directed by Rebecca Schaffer. ■

Pastor Sanabria Performs Baptism at NICU Unit

On a beautiful day in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at Tampa General Hospital, a special and heartfelt celebration took place — the baptism of little Matthew George Ramos Rivero. At just 12 days old, Matthew received the Holy Spirit through the sacrament of Baptism, marking a significant and beautiful moment in his life.

The service was led by Rev. Miguel Sanabria Jr., Associate Pastor of **Immanuel/Brandon, FL**, who shared words of faith, hope, and love. This baptism was made possible by a collaborative effort between partner ministries in Florida. The Rev. Mark Eisold from Pelican Community Center and Lutheran Church in Naples, and Rev. Miguel Sanabria working together in support of the family during this special time.

Matthew's parents, Jorge and Indira, are members of Pelican Lutheran Church in Naples. Due to a special circumstance with the pregnancy, Matthew's mother was transferred to Tampa, where the support of both Rev. Mark and Rev. Miguel was crucial. Through their prayers, guidance, and unity in Christ, the baptism was a powerful testament to the love and care of the faith community.

"This celebration was not only a moment of joy for the Ramos Rivero family but also a reflection of the Great Commission, as cited in MATTHEW 28:19, which says: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*" explains Pastor Miguel Sanabria. "As we rejoice in the baptism of little Matthew, we are reminded of God's love and faithfulness, and the incredible power of community working together in faith." ■



Pastor Miguel Sanabria, Jr. performs the sacred and essential act of baptism on Matthew George Ramos Rivero at the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at Tampa General Hospital,



Celebrating the Baptism of Matthew George Ramos Rivero at Tampa General Hospital on February 18, 2025 is Matthew's family with Pastor Miguel Sanabria, Jr.

LutheRun 2025: Running with Purpose



The 5th Annual LutheRun at **St. Paul/ Lakeland, FL**, was a day filled with energy, excitement, and incredible generosity! Each year, this much-anticipated event brings together students, teachers, families, and supporters to raise funds for a meaningful school improvement.

This year, students ran with a special goal in mind — funding a covered walkway to the Athletic Center. Thanks to the overwhelming generosity of their community, they exceeded their fundraising goal — *raising more than \$81,000!*

On LutheRun day, the campus buzzed with enthusiasm as 262 K-8 students hit the track, while PreK3 and PreK4 students joined in the fun. Together, these young runners logged an astonishing 1,885 laps —

covering an impressive 471.25 miles in just one day. Parents, friends, and families came out in full force to cheer on the runners, creating an atmosphere of support and tremendous excitement.

The energy was contagious as students pushed themselves to new limits, their perseverance evident with every lap. Volunteers lined the course, handing out water, offering encouragement, and ensuring every runner felt supported. The event wasn't just about fundraising — it was about celebrating the joy of movement, teamwork, and dedication. Watching the students give their best, united for a common purpose, was truly inspiring.

The success of LutheRun 2025 was made possible by the collective

efforts of students, families, faculty, volunteers, and generous sponsors who came together to support St. Paul Lutheran School. This year, the funds raised will directly contribute to the construction of a covered walkway to the Athletic Center, offering much-needed shelter from Florida's unpredictable weather. This will make transitions between buildings more comfortable for the students and staff.

In addition to the excitement of the run, they had food trucks — Kona Ice, PegLeg Ice Cream, and Asian Bros. Hibachi — to keep everyone energized. ■

Eight Baptisms Celebrated at Immanuel Brandon

In the first three months of 2025, **Immanuel/Brandon, FL**, has joyfully celebrated eight baptisms — including that of baby Matthew (story on facing page). “We have witnessed firsthand how the Holy Spirit is at work in the children of our school, their families, and other families in our community, calling them to receive the precious gift of baptism,” offers The Rev. Miguel Sanabria, Jr.

“This sacrament is a beautiful reminder of God’s grace, which is poured out upon us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, as we read in *TITUS 3:4-5: But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.*”

“We rejoice in seeing how God continues to work through baptism, bringing new life and sustaining faith in our Church and community. We are looking forward to several more baptisms which are scheduled for the next few months.” ■



The Rev. Ken Sherman was ordained and installed as the new Associate Pastor at **St. Paul/Lakeland, FL** on February 2, 2025. Pictured at right are (L-R Front Row) David Cheyne, Jason Harris, Rev. Ken Sherman, FLGA District President James Rockey, Chris Crawford, Rev. Zong Yang. (Middle Row) Rev. Ron Pennekamp, Rev. Danlias Howe, David Swartz, Rev. Charles Reich. (Back Row) The Revs. Andy Ritchie, Brian Kneser, Tom Block, Bill Whitehead, and Greg Sawyer ■



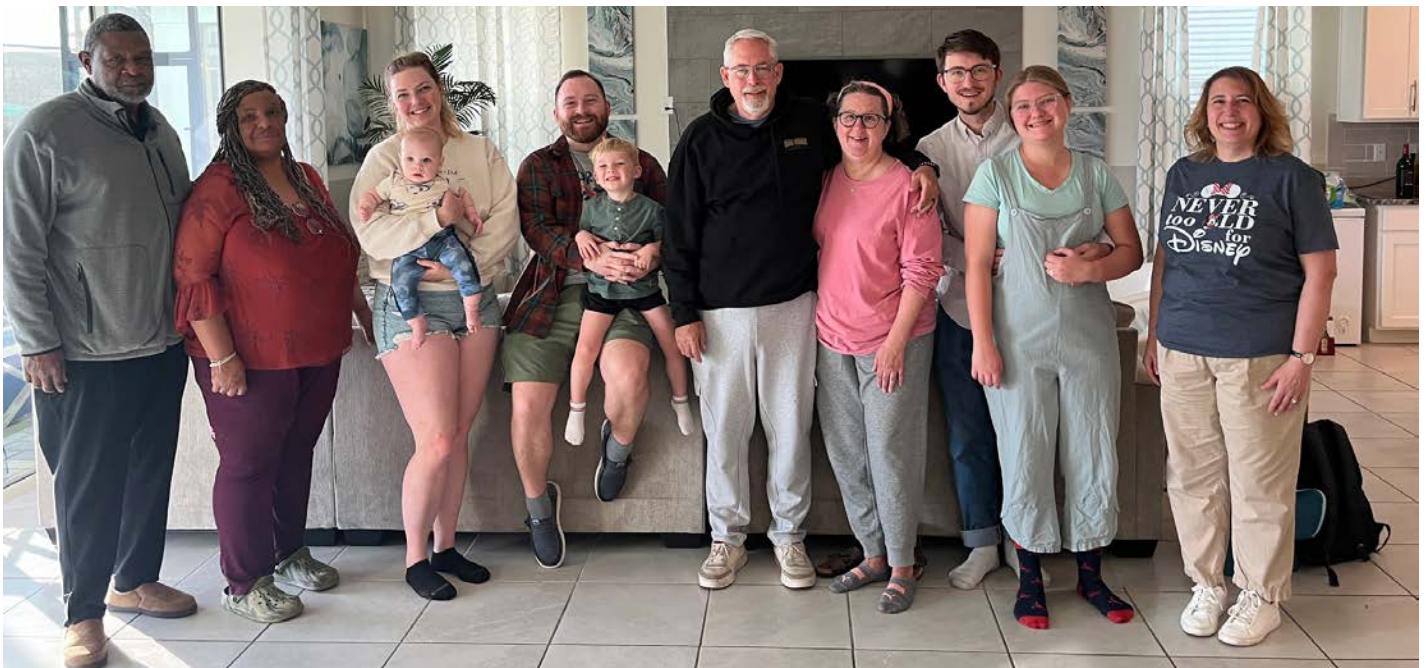
President James Rockey joined with Pastor Marc Nauman for the dedication of the new sanctuary at **Trinity/New Port Richey, Florida** at the 3pm celebration on Sunday, March 16, 2025 ■



Some say the Fountain of Youth is in St. Augustine, Florida but **Lutheran Haven/Oviedo, FL's** family and friends think it's at "The Haven!" Several residents and staff gathered on foot, on bikes and on golf carts to wish Lucy Lockman a happy 106th birthday! Lucy moved to Lutheran Haven with her husband Bill in 2001. She enjoyed working at the bi-annual Flea Markets and attending the pot luck dinners in the Fellowship Hall. She regularly attended exercise classes until early this year and enjoys reading and working puzzles. ■



Emmy Award-winning Meteorologist, Rob Duns, visited the students and families of **Grace Lutheran Academy/ Naples, FL** in February. They discovered the wonders of weather and explored the science behind storms, sunshine, and everything in between. ■



Pictured L-R: Rev. Terrell Davis and his wife Anjetta (Peace/Decatur), Hope (with Leo) and Rev. Timothy (with Levi) Mehl, Rev. Deon Hull and his wife Debra (Peace/Okeechobee), Rev. Owen and Evangeline Duncan, Bonnie Mueller, wife of Mark Mueller (Ascension/Casselberry).

In February, 2025, PALS (Post-Seminary Applied Learning Support) facilitators, Pastor Mark and Bonnie Mueller, gathered new pastors, wives and their families from the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Florida-Georgia District for a three-day winter retreat in Orlando, FL. PALS is a collaborative effort of the LCMS and the districts that

regularly brings together groups of recent graduates of our seminaries throughout the first three years of their ministries. In these meetings, the new pastors worship, study and discuss new ministry experiences in the company of an experienced pastor. Renewing old friendships and making new ones, the pastors and wives enjoyed relaxation,

study and fellowship time together. They enjoyed lively discussion as they worked through “A Lutheran Perspective on Well-Being”, sharing their blessings, challenges, and encouragement on a variety of aspects about wellness including intellectual, emotional, relations, physical, financial, and vocational. ■

A New Chapter of Faith, Community, and Growth for Downtown Trinity/Orlando

by Meridith Swanson, Communications Specialist

Trinity/ Orlando, FL is celebrating a fresh start with the arrival of The Rev. Eduardo Martinez. His dynamic leadership, compassionate heart, and commitment to the church and school have already begun to create waves of positive change on the downtown Orlando, FL campus. Eduardo was installed as the Associate Pastor on August 25, 2024, and it was evident to all that his mission was not just about preaching from the pulpit but about living out his faith in every aspect of life. With an infectious enthusiasm for the Gospel, he quickly became a beloved figure within the congregation.

One of the most striking aspects of Eduardo's leadership is his dedication to building a strong relationship with Trinity's Child Development Center. Recognizing the important role the CDC plays in shaping the next generation, he has worked tirelessly to create opportunities for collaboration. From offering prayers for teachers and students during special school events, he also sends weekly devotional emails to the staff, visits classrooms regularly, and delivers the chapel message on a regular basis. Eduardo is committed to ensuring that the church and school are pillars of support for one another. His commitment to youth ministry is evident in the vibrant programs he has introduced. On October 14, Eduardo baptized Elba and David, youth of the congregation. Trinity continues to provide a safe space where students can grow in faith while forming lasting friendships.

Beyond his role as pastor, Eduardo works very closely with senior pastor, The Rev. Doug Kalleson, as well as the elders and leaders of the church and the congregation, to embrace the mission of both the church and



The Rev. Eduardo Martinez with his wife, Leidy, and their daughter

preschool. Whether attending board meetings, offering counsel to families in need, or volunteering at community events, his presence is felt everywhere.

Eduardo's approach to ministry goes beyond Sunday services, as he is equally committed to making a difference in the everyday lives of those around him. He is passionate about his involvement in the community and on campus. He also

enjoys the work he can assist in rebuilding the websites for Trinity's church and CDC.

The congregation has welcomed his dedication, praising his fun and calming nature and willingness to listen and support anyone in need. The future looks bright at Trinity Downtown under the pastoral leadership of Rev. Kalleson and Rev. Martinez. ■



Clergy gathered for Martinez' installation at Downtown Trinity

Retired Serviceman Reflects On His Years in the Navy

by Alan F. E. Thiese, Member of Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity/Macon, GA

“Keeping the Faith” — while this sounds easy to accomplish, I desire to share how I was assisted in keeping the faith during my 21 Years in the U. S. Navy from 1961 through 1981. During my service I participated in two significant events which helped me appreciate my faith and beliefs.



Cathedral in London on April 14, 1969 as the People of British Empire remembered Dwight David Eisenhower, Commander of the Allies Europe during World War II. Shown below is the Queen Mum arriving for the Service. The Troops were facing us, the U. S. Navy Sailors and U. S. Air Force Airmen.



Alan F. E. Thiese in 1963 and today.

The first was a memorial service conducted in the forecandle of the USS Ranger (CVA-61) a few days after President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas on 22 November 1963. The forecandle on an aircraft carrier is where the anchor equipment is maintained.

The service was conducted there — which was also the location of chapel services every Sunday. Because it was an enclosed space it really was a “chapel” within a steel structure. I say this so you can appreciate the sound of more than 300 sailors energetically singing the Navy Hymn “Eternal Father!”

Our voices were magnified in this chapel of steel. Of course this was a very emotional experience for us young sailors. The second event was my participation as a member of the U. S. Navy Honor Guard on the Steps of Saint Paul



I suspect that shortly after I enlisted in 1961 that the pastor of my church submitted my name to the “Armed Forces Commission” of our Synod so throughout my U. S. Navy career I received a pamphlet every month with an appropriate worship service for me to read.

I do not recall receiving this while I was in boot camp, but I can report that I received this material each month during my 21 Years in the Navy.

I can also report that in my years since 1981 I have told my peers that the pamphlets I received every month were of great value to me. I was well blessed throughout my Navy service by the monthly reminders which were “gentle reminders” from the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod.

“Keeping the Faith” was a very appropriate goal while I served our nation in the Military as well as in all other periods of my life. ■





The Falcons — **St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL** Boys' Basketball Team — took first place at the states tournament held at St. Luke's Lutheran in Oviedo, FL. The St. Paul Girls' Basketball Team took third place in the state tournament. State champions are headed off to Fort Wayne, IN for the national competition March 26-31, 2025. ■





The Wildcats — **St. Luke's/Oviedo, FL** Girls' Basketball Team — capped off an undefeated season by taking first place at the states tournament held at St. Luke's. The Boys' Team battled fiercely, pushing their second game into overtime. Though they fell short, they bounced back with a good performance to clinch third place in the tournament. ■





Our Savior/St. Petersburg, FL Middle School students enjoyed a trip to Washington D.C. in March. Pictured above are the students along with their teachers and the parents who made the trip. ■



Though most often celebrated in October, The Rev. Scott Henze brought the traditional “blessing of the animals” to **St. Paul/Weston, FL** in February. The tradition is strongly linked to St. Francis of Assisi — who is known for his deep love and respect for animals and nature, as expressed in his “Canticle of the Creatures.” The blessing is a way to express gratitude for God’s creation and to recognize the special bond between humans and animals. Even Cuddles the snake got blessed by Pastor Henze. The congregation annually uses this service as an opportunity to collect items to donate to The Broward County Humane Society. ■



In 2024, **Faith/Sebring, FL** was blessed with a year of connecting, growing, and serving together in the name of Jesus. Through worship, service, and fellowship, the congregation saw God's faithfulness in a wide range of ways.

This past February, the congregation celebrated the first anniversary of their new Spanish Service — **Mision Fe Abundante**. The service is focused on how abundant life is eternal life, a life that begins the moment we come to Christ and receive Him as Savior, and goes on throughout all eternity.

The evening began with praise music and liturgical dance and ended with authentic Hispanic cuisine.

Croquetas, pastelitos, papas rellenos (filled potato balls), and a beautiful almond-flavored cake were enjoyed by more than 75 Anglos and Hispanics.

In attendance were The Revs. John Cabos (Tampa & Plant City) and Robert J. Maulella, who leads the Sebring service with the assistance of Faith's Preschool Director, Yvette Calderon. The Sermon is translated into English. Congratulation letters were read from both FLGA District President James Rocky and Vice President Stephen Carretto, in absentia. The service meets in Faith's Fellowship Hall at 1:00 PM each Sunday and is attended by approximately 30 people of all ages

and Nations, including Puerto Rico, Mexico, Columbia, Cuba, El Salvador, etc. Pastor Rob ends each service with the words his Italian grandmother taught him: *Let's Eat!* In Spanish of course, *¡Comemos!*

Miracles happen each week. Some have received Christ. Families have been healed. One young person mentioned how God used the service to bring her out of deep depression. "I feel the Love of God here!" said one woman. "This is one place I can bring my grandchildren, because it's the only bilingual service I know of in Highlands County!"

Currently baptisms are planned for April, 2025. ■





PASSAGES

Former Concordia/Bronxville President, Vijayasekaran “Viji” George, 74, Passes Mid-February



Dr. Vijayasekaran Daniel George of Chennai, India, and Bronxville, New York, was called home to rest on February 19, 2025. “Viji” earned both a Bachelor’s and Master’s Degree from Concordia University/River Forest, IL, and a Doctorate in Psychology from Northern Illinois University. He accepted a position

at Concordia College/Bronxville, NY, in 1979 where he would serve for more than 35 years, as a Professor of Psychology, Dean of Students, Assistant to the President, Director of the Good Shepherd Center for the Family, and finally, for 26 years, as President. At Concordia/Bronxville he met his wife, Janet, where together they founded a network of colleagues and students that would become lifelong friends. In retirement, Viji served on several boards, including Thrivent Financial and The Mary Hoch Center for Reconciliation.

Viji was an avid gardener, an Indian gourmet cook, a curator of diverse works of art, and an enthusiastic explorer of the far corners of the globe. He was a proud father, grandfather, and husband.

Viji was born on August 24th, 1951, in Chennai, India, to George and Salome Devaprasad. As the youngest of five siblings growing up in India, his childhood was filled with simple pleasures — playing marbles, flying

kites, and riding bikes until dark with friends in the streets of Chennai. In 1971, following in the footsteps of his older siblings, he emigrated to the United States. He was often fond of saying that while his heart was in America, his soul was in India. Viji adored his family. He was a proud and devoted father to his daughters, Sarah and Emilie, and a spirited companion to Janet in all parts of life, both big and small. He loved taking phone calls from his girls, attending soccer games and recitals, and hearing the assorted details of everyone’s day, even if mundane.

Viji cherished opportunities to be close with his siblings and to gather his extended family for any occasion that might merit a reunion. His fierce intellect, quick wit, and profound affection for those he leaves behind will be deeply missed. His celebration of life was held at The Village Lutheran Church/Bronxville, NY in March. ■

District Youth Leaders Engage in Mini-Conference

In February, the FLGA Youth Ministry Council hosted the inaugural Youth Ministry Mini-Conference, bringing together more than 25 Youth Leaders and Directors of Christian Education (DCEs) for two days of learning, fellowship, fun, and networking. The conference featured presentations from Julianna Shults, LCMS Youth Ministry. During her presentation, Julianna focused on three key practices that sparked insightful discussions and reflections among the attendees:

▲ Warmth, Challenge, and

Grace Creating a ministry environment that balances warmth and encouragement with the necessary challenges for growth, all underpinned by grace.

▲ Supportive Adults

The importance of surrounding youth with committed, supportive adults who invest in their spiritual and emotional well-being.

▲ Engaged Parents

Engaging and empowering parents to play an active role in the faith formation of their children.

The feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive. Many attendees expressed appreciation for the opportunity to connect with other leaders and for the valuable takeaways — indicating a strong consensus on the desire to see this mini-conference become an annual event.

The event served as a reminder of the powerful impact that intentional, supportive, and grace-filled ministry can have on the lives of young people in the Church. ■

Influential Lutheran Author and Leading Scholar of Religion, Martin Marty, Dies at 97

The Rev. Dr. Martin Emil Marty, a pre-eminent religious historian, prolific author, dependable exponent of mainstream Protestantism and staunch champion of pluralism died on February 25, 2025 in Minneapolis at a retirement home where he has lived since 2022.

He was 97.

A graduate of a Lutheran preparatory school in Milwaukee, WI, he attended Concordia College/Mequon, WI, and in St. Louis, MO he attended both Washington University and Concordia Seminary/LCMS, where he earned a bachelor's in divinity in 1949 and a master's in 1952. He received a Master of Sacred Theology degree from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in 1954 and a doctorate from the University of Chicago in 1956.

In 1963, he was hired as an associate professor of religious history at the University of Chicago Divinity School, where he taught until 1998. He was an ordained minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and served congregations in several Chicago suburbs, most notably at Lutheran Church of the Holy Spirit, a congregation he founded in Elk Grove Village, IL.

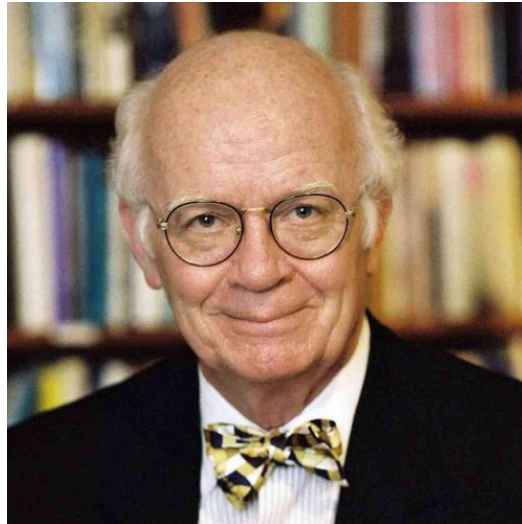
Marty was known for his pastoral heart and enthusiasm for ministry never disappeared, though in 1963 he transitioned out of the congregational setting to

accept an invitation to teach church history and modern Christianity in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. It was there that he anchored his teaching and intellectual life for the next 35 years and where, upon his retirement in 1998, the Martin Marty Center was founded, an institution committed to the understanding of public religion.

For five decades Marty traveled extensively, delivering thousands of lectures, sermons, and commencement addresses. He authored more than 60 books, hundreds of scholarly articles, and countless essays, columns, and forewords for other books. Considered by many to be the most influential interpreter of American religion during the second half of the 20th century, Marty may best be known for the study of public theology, a phrase he coined to describe the critical engagement of religious and cultural issues that can foster the common good. His rich interest in pluralism allowed him to be conversant in different genres and among diverse audiences.

For 50 years he served as an editor at *The Christian Century*, and for 41 years he authored the biweekly

newsletter *Context*. Time magazine once described him as “the most influential living interpreter of religion in the U.S.”



In 1985 he became the founding president and later scholar-in-residence of the Park Ridge Center for the Study of Health, Faith, and Ethics; from 1987 to 1995 he co-directed the Fundamentalism Project, an American Academy of Arts and Sciences-sponsored survey of world fundamentalisms that resulted in five encyclopedic volumes on the subject; and from 1996 to 1999 he directed the Public Religion Project, a program underwritten by the Pew Charitable Trust to delineate the importance of faith in a pluralistic society.

Marty received numerous awards in life, including more than 80 honorary degrees, the National Book Award (1972), the Medal of the

American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1995), and the National Medal for the Humanities (1997). He served on two presidential commissions, as president

of multiple scholarly societies, and on numerous boards, including as a regent, board chair, and interim president of St. Olaf College, the liberal arts Lutheran college that encourages students to examine faith and values, and explore meaningful vocation in an inclusive, globally engaged community nourished by Lutheran tradition.

Marty's greatest professional happiness, however, was being a teacher, mentoring and learning from students of all walks of life. Much of his life's work involved framing into historical context the changes in 20th-century American religious practice. In 1964 he spent six weeks as an invited Protestant observer at Vatican II in Rome. His unwavering support of the civil rights movement — including marching in Selma in 1965 — modeled for family and friends a lifelong commitment to justice and the dignity of every person.

A memorial service was held at Central Lutheran Church/Minneapolis, MN in March. ■

District Comfort Dog, Jemimah, Passes From Brain Tumor

St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL is mourning the unexpected and sudden loss of Jemimah, the congregation and school's comfort dog. She passed on Wednesday, March 12, 2025 from an inoperable brain tumor.



Ben Willocks and Jemimah visited Statham Elementary, other community locations and Apalachee High School in Winder, Georgia after Apalachee's school shooting in September, 2024. Ben and his wife, Sara, shared their home with Jemimah and served as her chief handlers.

Throughout the past three years, Jemimah has been a cherished

member of the St. Paul community, bringing love, joy, and comfort to those who stepped on campus. She was a constant presence in both the school and church. On Sunday mornings she was in the narthex prior to worship greeting everyone with her warm and loving spirit. She attended many events, including St. Paul's annual Night To Shine prom for special needs guests. She was also at the LCMS National Youth Gathering and Florida-Georgia District youth gatherings, convocations and the annual Veterans of the Cross retreats.

At the school Jemimah loved greeting everyone before chapel, reminding them of the love that surrounds the campus every day.

Jemimah had a special gift for meeting with people during their hard times, offering a listening ear and a comforting presence. Many found solace in sharing their lives with her, knowing that she was always listening without judgment.

Her team of handlers shared God's love regularly at local nursing homes and rehabilitation facilities. When Jemimah and her team visited those places the resident's faces lit up and they felt loved and cherished.

After Hurricanes Ian, Helene and Milton, Jemimah made visits to those communities and brought comfort to those going through the recovery and rebuilding process.

In one of the darkest times — after the school shooting in Winder, Georgia, Jemimah and her handler, Ben Willocks, deployed to that community to comfort families, students, faculty and friends. The shooting killed two teachers, four students and wounded another teacher and eight students — seven of them hit by gunfire. Jemimah was joined by other LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs to provide a loving, safe and comforting place to process the tragedy they endured. ■ *JL*

Eleventh Synod President, Bob Kuhn, Called Home

The Rev. Dr. Robert T. Kuhn, 87, passed away peacefully on March 1, 2025, in Oviedo, Florida. Born on April 5, 1937, Kuhn was a faithful servant of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS).

He was ordained in 1963 and began his ministry serving several churches in Illinois. His dedication to spreading God's Word also led him to serve as assistant director of Development at Concordia Teachers College (now Concordia University/Chicago) in River Forest, Illinois.

Kuhn's leadership within the church extended beyond his pastoral duties. From 1985 to 1995, he served as president of the LCMS Central Illinois District. He later became the Synod's first vice president in 1995 and its 11th president in 2001,

serving until 2013. He was president of the Synod for five months after the 2001 death of President Rev. Dr. A.L. Barry. He never wanted the president's office, but he served. Then in 2001, when he 'retired,' the Synod still wanted him for its Board of Directors and later as a regional vice-president. Kuhn had other things to do, but again and in a most Christ-like way, he served. He also held multiple positions on various boards and was vice president of the East-Southeast Region of LCMS.

In his personal life, Kuhn exemplified the values he preached. His unwavering love and devotion to his beloved wife, Judy, were a testament to his deep faith and belief in the importance of family. He is survived by his three children,



nine grandchildren, and twelve great-grandchildren, all of whom carry forward his legacy of faith and service. His celebration of life was at **St. Luke's/Oviedo, FL** on Friday, March 14. Dr. Kuhn had been living at Lutheran Haven since his retirement. ■

Broward County Lutheran Icon, Walt Volz, Completes Earthly Journey

by John List, Editor



One of Southeastern Florida's Lutheran icons passed away peacefully on March 10, 2025. The Rev. Walter D. Volz, born on July 13, 1936, in Faribault, Minnesota, was a beloved husband, father, and friend. Walter leaves behind a legacy of love and cherished memories. He was 88.

Pastor Volz is survived by his devoted wife, Gloria, and his children, David Volz, married to Nancy, and Kristin Iannarone, married to Joe. His family stood as a testament to his generous spirit and unwavering support throughout his life. He was preceded in death by his parents, Rev. Oswald and Louise Volz, whose values and teachings shaped Walter into the remarkable person he became.

Volz was also preceded by six siblings. Two of his brothers also became pastors. The son of a Minnesota minister, Volz decided to go into the ministry while working, during college summer breaks, as a deck hand on the iron ore ships that sailed the Great Lakes. "I realized there was a tremendous human need of people and I thought I had an ability to talk to them," he once said to me in an interview upon retiring. Volz's ability to comfort people was put to the test during the Vietnam War when, as a chaplain in the Navy Reserve, he was called upon to help notify families of a loved one's death.

"The more experience you got, the harder it got," he says. "The more death notifications I gave, the more I dreaded them."

Volz stayed with the Navy for 30 years, retiring as a one-star captain and the senior chaplain for the Navy Reserve in 1989. At the end of his

career, more than 300 Navy Reserve chaplains were serving under Pastor Volz. His Navy experience also helped him learn to deal with people from a wide variety of backgrounds and faiths. Working side by side with Catholic priests and rabbis helped him become more accepting. "You develop a greater tolerance for diverse values," Volz told me, "things are not just in black and white."

The diversity of the congregation in South Florida was one of the challenges Volz looked forward to when he left a church near Raleigh, N.C. in 1980 — where he had spent 15 years as pastor — and accepted a call to **Our Savior/Plantation, FL**.

"Pastor Volz was my first pastor," offers Jan Withers, his long-serving administrative assistant. "He introduced me to Jesus, taught me about forgiveness, inspired me as a pre-school teacher. When he hired me in the church office in 1997, he had to teach me everything. I think of his loud booming voice and how he was a true *shepherd* in the sense that his sheep knew his voice. When visiting people in the hospital he would use that booming voice and most often they would recognize it and open their eyes!"

"Walt left me with a most touching memory when his once 'loud booming shepherd voice' graveled by age, cracked with tearful emotions as he read the prayer of blessing in the marriage rite at his daughter Kristen's wedding on May 5, 2024," states The Rev. Tony Durante, pastor at Our Savior. "Due to his rapidly failing health and many near-death hospitalizations, he had not been expected to live to see the day his only daughter wedded. But on that day, he was rolled up the aisle in a wheel chair to the front row of the church where he witnessed her marriage and gave the prayer while on oxygen. It was decided that I would officiate but give Walt the honor of saying the prayer for the newlyweds. That would be the last time he would serve in a pastoral capacity in a divine rite at Our Savior," Durante explains.

"If there was a verse that described Walt Volz, it is in the 13th chapter of Numbers. '... and there was a giant in the land.' There was a larger than life quality to Walter —

his intellect, his voice, his presence and pastoral care were enormous. Of course, Walt would center all that in God's gigantic grace at work in and through him," expresses The Rev. Tim Hartner, pastor emeritus of St. Paul/Weston, FL and a long-time friend of Volz. "He loved being a 'beggar for the poor' — and he was good at it."

"Volz was a true light in the City of Plantation and an amazing man of God. He served Our Savior and Food For The Poor with great distinction and tireless dedication," demonstrates Father Albert Cutié of Saint Benedicts Episcopal Church in Plantation. "His powerful voice, Christ-like demeanor, and generous smile will never be forgotten. He was a trusted friend to me, and someone I greatly admired."

Pastor Volz was an ongoing mentor for me in my work with the Florida-Georgia District. He was pastor to my wife, Eileen, and me while we served as youth directors for Our Savior. He remained a constant encourager to us in our work with Lutheran High School of South Florida. I ended up being president and board chairman of the Lutheran Education Society under his mentorship.

Through our work with the high school, Pastor Volz ended up recommending that District President Lloyd Behnken use us as *Lutheran LIFE's* temporary writers and editors — until another pastor could be named to the position — after *LIFE's* editor passed away. We enthusiastically accepted the temporary assignment. That was 49 years and six District Presidents ago! Volz remained complimentary of our work with the District and Lutheran LIFE magazine until his passing.

Over the years, Volz told me that he has presided over more than 1,000 weddings at Our Savior, and probably an equal number of funerals. He has watched as children he baptized went through confirmation and eventually got married.

His presence will be deeply missed, yet his spirit will live on through the many lives he touched. ■

Lutheran Historian, Paul Maier, Enters Eternal Rest

by John List, Editor

The Rev. Dr. Paul Luther Maier, the best-selling author who wrote the enthralling and compelling *A Skeleton In God's Closet* died peacefully in the early hours of February 27, 2025.

He was 94.

The prolific author and theologian is a graduate of Harvard University, Concordia Seminary/St. Louis, MO and of the University of Basel Switzerland. He served as a four-term Vice President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and has published numerous books. Seven of his books he has written for children.

Professor Emeritus at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan, Maier was presented with the Albert Nelson Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award from Marquis Who's Who, publisher of biographical profiles since 1899. Maier taught at WMU for 51 years, making him the first faculty member at WMU to serve more than a half-century. He was also campus chaplain for 39 of those years.

A well-known and well-loved Lutheran historian, Maier has written scholarly works and 25 chronicaled fiction and non-fiction books on Christianity and ancient historians like Pontius Pilot and Josephus. Three of his well-known non-fiction publications include *In the Fullness of Time*, which correlates sacred with secular evidence from the ancient world impinging on Jesus and early Christianity. His first book, *A Man Spoke, a World Listened*, is a biography of his father, Dr. Walter A. Maier, who was the founding speaker of The Lutheran Hour radio program.

About four million Maier books are now in print in 120 editions translated into 20 languages as well as some 250

articles and reviews in professional journals and the general press.

After completing *A Man Spoke, The World Listened*, Dr. Maier turned to writing documentary novels: *Pontius Pilot* and *Flames of Rome*. These were followed by a fiction trilogy: *Skeleton in God's Closet*, *More Than a Skeleton*, and *Constantine Codex*. *First Christmas* and *First Easter* are included in *Fullness of Time*. Maier's last book is *The Genuine Jesus: Fresh Evidence from History and Archeology*. One of his children's books skillfully introduces youth to Martin Luther — *Martin Luther: A Man Who Changed the World*.

One of his most spellbinding novels was his critical rebuttal of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, which he co-authored with Hank Hanegraaf. Titled *The Da Vinci Code—Fact or Fiction?*, Maier and Hanegraaf refute many of the novel's claims about the history of Christianity. The authors challenged Brown's facts, but underscored that "It's only a novel." Such positioning places the reader in a schizophrenic world of fact and fiction.

Perhaps his most intriguing fiction was his *Skeleton* trilogy — when an ancient skeleton is discovered in Israel, will it shed new light on the life of Jesus or plunge the world into chaos? Dr. Jonathan Weber, Harvard professor and biblical scholar, (does this ring a bell?) is looking forward to his sabbatical year on an archaeological dig in Israel. But a spectacular find that seems to be an archaeologist's dream-come-true becomes a nightmare that many fear will be the death rattle of Christianity.

Carefully researched and compellingly written, *A Skeleton in God's Closet* explores the tension between faith and doubt when science and religion collide. In the end, it's a thought-provoking page-turner, driven by one man's determination to find the truth—no matter the cost.

Maier appeared in the documentary film "Who Is This Jesus" produced by Dr. D. James Kennedy's Coral



Ridge Ministries based out of Fort Lauderdale, Florida in 2000, largely in response to an ABC News documentary "The Search for Jesus," which featured a number of skeptical scholars, including members of the Jesus Seminar.

Maier appeared in a 2004 episode of the Showtime TV series, "Bullshit!," entitled "The Bible: Fact or Fiction?" The show's hosts argued against a literal interpretation of the Bible. Maier was invited to provide both a counterargument and relevant background information regarding the text. He was opposed by Skeptics Society founder Michael Shermer.

Maier also appeared on the TV series *Mysteries of the Bible*, in the episode titled "Paul The Apostle."

In addition to his published works, Dr. Maier produced nearly a dozen video and audio seminars such as *Jesus — Legend or Lord* and *Martin Luther and the Reformation*.

Maier was in high-demand as a lecturer and tour leader, conducting travel seminars throughout Europe and the Middle East — including parts of Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Malta, Italy, Sicily, Greece and Turkey.

Paul and his wife Joan have four daughters — Laura (Brett), Julie, Krista (Zach), and Katie (Brad), and nine grandchildren. ■

jl

Paul Maier Was The Real Deal — a Definite 5!

by John List, Editor

I first met my friend, The Rev. Dr. Paul Maier, up at Camp Arcadia — the 100-year-old Lutheran family camp located right on the shores of Lake Michigan. Located in Manistee County in Michigan's north country right off M-22, the camp has been operating since its founding in 1922. My parents — long before they were married — would retreat there with the Walther League group from Mt. Calvary/Detroit.

The weekend following each Labor Day, the Michigan District Lutheran Layman's League would retreat to Arcadia for lectures, golf, worship, singing, eating and a fish fry capped with Arcadia's famous ice cream. Paul was both a lecturer and participant for those retreats that culminated on Sunday morning with energetic and musical worship at Arcadia's downtown Trinity Lutheran. My dad was the director of the Lutheran Choralaires and most of those singing men participated in those retreats. I sang with them after college for several years and enjoyed those times Paul would gently push my dad aside so he could conduct the male chorus.

Paul was the ancient history professor at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan. His lectures and classes were in high demand and students often queued early in registration to ensure a seat in his lecture hall. Paul was a skillful and dramatic storyteller with an inclination to bring Bible stories to life. It's no wonder he became such a successful, published author of Christian fiction with novels like *A Skeleton in God's Closet*, *Pontius Pilate* or *The Flames of Rome*. Anyone who has attended major LCMS conventions, convocations or Maier lectures nationwide would often find Paul sitting at a table signing copies of his books — with his brilliant smile and keen way he could learn all about you and your family in a matter of minutes.

Fast forward to the early years of my marriage to Eileen, following our graduation from Valparaiso University. Dr. Maier was a frequent speaker in the Florida-Georgia District and we rarely missed the opportunity to be with him. When he was in South Florida he stayed in our home and we enjoyed great “post-event fellowship” with him. He convinced us to participate in a tour that involved video taping the life of the Apostle Paul from his birth in Tarsus to his schooling in Jerusalem and conversion on the road to Damascus. That tour enabled us

to become fast and furious friends with his cameraman, Woody Keim, an Estate Planning Attorney based in Baton Rouge, LA and Mark Tobias Joeckel, Maier's producer of the series. It may have been the hottest summer on record for the Mediterranean. My wife, Eileen, appears in the Bible video series as Lydia — Paul decided this would be appropriate since Eileen was always hosting him in our home. Lydia hosted St. Paul and his companions as they traveled through Philippi. Lydia is mentioned just once in the Bible but as Paul's first convert she deserves serious consideration and Eileen was clothed in vibrant colors of violet and while Paul and Eileen would walk up these steep mountains to prepare for filming, Woody, Mark and I would haul the heavy cameras and reflectors (to capture the sunlight). I was also in charge of ensuring a clean, dry shirt for Paul was at the ready before the camera rolled.

As we visited numerous historical sites and museums, Paul would quietly stand in the back while local guides lectured. He'd hold up the palm of his hand to indicate with his fingers a “1” “2” or even a “5” as to whether the information was accurate. He'd never embarrass the guide but we quickly learned that a “5” meant it was “the real deal.”

Years later we joined Paul, LCMS President Gerry Kieschnick and his wife Terry and our good friends from Boca Raton, Kip and Leslie Schnake on an unforgettable “Lands of the Bible” cruise to Ephesus, Galilee,

Jerusalem, Athens, and Malta. Each night on the ship at dinner Paul brought us to laughter with his incredible stories.

While lecturing our group at the Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque in Istanbul — once the largest cathedral in all of Christendom, serving as a center of religious, political, and artistic life for the Byzantine world — some of the local young men approached and asked us to move along. Paul ignored them and kept right on preaching. Kip and I had to put our arms around Paul and move him along because we could see the crowd growing angry.

I have too many endearing stories I could tell you about my times with Paul — it would take this entire magazine! Buy me an Old Fashioned and I'll be able to tell you a dozen more hilarious experiences. I'll miss seeing him all over the country at LCMS events — and I know so will other Lutherans worldwide. ■



Kip Schnake, from left, Leslie Schanke, Paul Maier, Eileen List and John List in Sicily — largest island in the Mediterranean Sea and located off the southern coast of Italy in 2012 on one of Dr. Maier's tours.

Please send address updates,
cancellations, additions,
news and photos to:
LutheranLife@aol.com

Lutheran Life
Florida-Georgia District
Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod
5850 T. G. Lee Blvd., Suite 500
Orlando, FL 32822-4410

NON-PROFIT
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
BOCA RATON, FL
PERMIT NO 1767

23RD Psalm Takes on Special Meaning This Issue

Having served on the planning committee for the recent Veterans of the Cross retreat, I've taken a deep dive into PSALM 23, you know, the famous psalm of David used to express faith and trust in God, especially during times of hardship or adversity.

First, while working with the VOC planning team we had meetings, zoom calls and phone discussions about the logo design and promotional materials. Do we use "sheep" in the graphic? How do we depict "still waters?" What visual can communicate the "restoring of the soul?"

Then late, during the VOC retreat, Pastor Dana Brones got into some heavy stuff — personal stories of his own life and it got me thinking. A lot. Throughout the retreat different speakers touched on sheep and how they identify with their shepherd's voice and know him and follow him.

Brones quoted from Phillip Keller's book, "A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23" — so right then and there from my phone I got on Amazon and ordered it. It's an excellent read and I highly recommend it.

Keller educates us on the seasons of shepherding. With the approach of autumn the shepherd moves the flock down to lower elevations. It's during this time that the sheep and shepherd are isolated — in wild mountains with rushing rivers and alpine meadows. In addition to avalanches and rockslides, bad weather, poisonous plants, the shepherd had to deal with predators!

Jump ahead to the part where we "walk through the valley of the

shadow of death," Brones and Keller emphasize that we "walk through" it. We don't stop or die there — we walk through it. Death is not an end but the door into a higher and more exalted life with God. It's not something to fear! It's the path to a perfect life.

That's so comforting.
I've recently lost friends to

The LAST WORD



John List
FLGA District
Communications Director
Editor, Lutheran Life
lutheranlife@aol.com

death. I know I've reached the age where death undoubtedly will become more common. In just the last month alone I saw friends like Paul Maier and Walt Volz pass through that heavenly door and I'm comforted that they'll be spending a magical Easter with Jesus, the Good Shepherd, this year. Both of those guys had a tremendous impact on my life as a Lutheran, a husband, a friend and a leader.

At the Divine Service in the midst of Veterans of the Cross Pastor Jeff Moore read the names of approximately 20 souls who have "faithfully departed" since last year's gathering of retired laity and professional church workers. His

prayer was especially meaningful that evening — remembering with vibrant thanksgiving those who served the Lord with energy and enthusiasm during their years here on earth . . . and who now rest from their labors. Moore asked God to keep us in fellowship with those saints and bring us to the joy of the heavenly kingdom when our time is complete here on earth.

It sure got us all thinking. At the conclusion of the VOC gathering there were lots of hugs and hand shaking. I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one who was wondering of all those participants . . . who might not be in attendance a year from now?

Unlike David, who wrote the 23rd Psalm while fleeing and wandering from place to place to avoid King Saul, we come from bustling metropolitan areas with malls instead of pastures. Phillip Keller emphasizes that he wants the Lord to be our shepherd and live by the Holy Spirit's direction in our life. Keller shows how this purpose is obtainable by explaining the necessary requirements to lie down and trust our Good Shepherd, Jesus. His easy-to-read style contains a plethora of common sense and easy-to-understand Biblical principles.

The quick-read book underscores God as a loving and all-sufficient shepherd who provides for his sheep, guides us through difficult times, and promises his constant presence, offering reassurance and hope even in the face of death. We know his voice and follow him. ■

John List