

LUTHERAN LIFE

**Lutheran Church-
Missouri Synod
Florida-Georgia District
January-February 2026**



GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

LUTHERAN LIFE

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



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DISTRICT CAPSULES

Transferred Out of FLGA to Other Districts

10/23/25 Debra Leech (E) to Indiana
10/23/25 William Leech (E) to Indiana
10/31/25 John Zeile (OE) to Southeastern

Transferred Into FLGA from Other Districts

11/10/25 Drew Newman (OE) from
Missouri

Initial Placements

08/21/25 Rochenel Jean Jacques from
Concordia Seminary/St. Louis
as Associate Pastor Peace/
Naples, FL (O)

Installations

11/02/25 John Kyle (O) as Sole Pastor Our
Savior/Zephyrhills, FL
11/02/25 Jeffery Moore (O) as Senior
Pastor TIM (O) Redeemer/
Stuart, FL
11/02/25 William Brath (O) as Exec TIM
Redeemer Stuart, FL
11/30/25 Kenneth Redmann (O) as Sole
Pastor Zion/Tampa, FL

From Candidate to Emeritus

11/25/25 Kurt Bickel (C)
11/25/25 Janet Boye (C)
11/25/25 Sheryl Essenburg (C)
11/25/25 JoAnn Deterding (C)
11/25/25 Theresa Greer (C)
11/25/25 Lisa Lovitsch (C)
11/25/25 J. James Mahler (C)
11/25/25 Mary Middleton (C)
11/25/25 Mary Sandfort (C)
11/25/25 Pamela Simela (C)
11/25/25 Laurie Steinke (C)
11/25/25 Mary Tereskiewicz (C)

11/25/25 Rachel Thureau (C)
11/25/25 Madelyn Tyson (C)
11/25/25 Carri Wetherell (C)
11/25/25 Mark Wetherell (C)
11/25/25 Tamara Worthington (C)
11/25/25 Randall Zook (C)

Called To Glory

10/01/25 Mr. Christian Rau (C)

Voluntarily Removed From The Roster

11/25/25 Jennifer Cislo (C)
11/25/25 Leta Brown (C)
11/25/25 Joan Friedrich (C)
11/25/25 Tyler Beltz (C)
11/25/25 Amanda Shears (C)
11/25/25 Beth Albrecht (C)

Removed From Roster By President

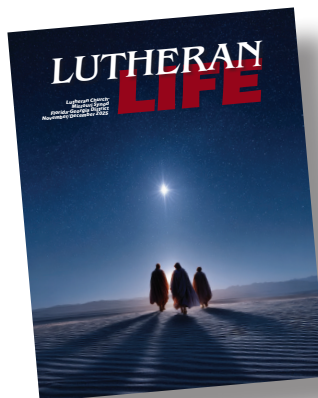
12/05/25 Jennifer Andrelczyk (C)
12/05/25 Lisa Cook (C)
12/05/25 Karen Doederlein (C)
12/05/25 Robert Fischer (C)
12/05/25 Sarah Haneline (C)
12/05/25 Andrew Rehkop (C)
12/05/25 Annalisa Rehkop (C)
12/05/25 Emily Toms (C)
12/05/25 Joanna Tubbs (C)
12/05/25 Kristen Vega (C)

Class Key

(C)Commissioned Minister
(E)Emeritus
(O)Ordained Minister
(SP)Sole Pastor
(AP)Associate Pastor
(Asst)Assistant Pastor
(TIM)Transitional Interim Minister
(Exec)Executive Administrative Pastor

free press

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@flgadistrict.org. 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@flgadistrict.org

High School Student Leaders Meet at Lake Yale



This year's High School Leadership Event (HSLE) brought together 30 students from 12 congregations across the Florida-Georgia District. The event is an annual Christian leadership training event designed for high school students (grades 9-12).

The purpose is to:

- Strengthen their faith in Jesus through Bible study, worship, and personal devotion time.

■ Build leadership skills through training, interactive experiences, and team-building activities.

■ Form lasting friendships and a supportive peer network with students from different congregations across the district.

■ Discover their God-given talents and abilities to actively contribute to their local church and grow in their personal walk with God.

The HSLE is held in conjunction with the Middle School Youth Gathering at the Lake Yale Conference Center and typically includes a mix of instructional sessions, small group challenges, and fun activities like a campfire. Participants are selected based on their demonstrated leadership abilities or potential to lead effectively. The weekend focused on the theme "Caring Connections – Supporting Peers Through Christ."

Drew Boggs, a missionary in Costa Rica and former DCE Intern at **St. Paul/Lakeland, FL** led a session on sharing the Gospel through meaningful relationships.

He walked participants through practical ways they can find connections, build relationships, and share the Gospel in their own communities.

2026 Lutheran Summer Music Festival Announced

Lutheran Summer Music (LSM) is the nation's premier faith-based music academy for high school students. It is from June 21 through July 19, 2026. It returns this summer to St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN, approximately 35 miles south of the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area. In addition to advanced musical instruction and numerous performance opportunities, LSM students form an intentional community, living together for four weeks on a Lutheran college campus. Since 1981, this unique and immersive program has guided the lives of thousands of young musicians, many of whom credit LSM as the starting place for their future careers and vocations.

This summer students will work with Dr. Jeffrey Scott Doebler, Professor of Music and Director of Music Education at Valparaiso University. He'll be working with band and handbells. Dr. Shannon Gravelle is the Director of the Festival Choir, the premier choral ensemble for LSM students. Chad Fothergill conducts the Chapel Choir and leads liturgical music for the festival's daily and Sunday services. MaryLynn Mennicke serves as the Dean and Director of Admissions for LSM; she is also an active choral conductor and singer.

More information: <https://www.lsmacademy.org/>

Save the Date
1517 CONFERENCE
Hosted by Trinity Delray



FEB. 20 & 21, 2026



**400 N SWINTON AVE,
DELRAY BEACH, FL 33444**

Come hear from Chad Bird, Scott Keith, Erick Sorensen, and more as we reflect on God's Word, celebrate His grace, and be encouraged in faith.

SCAN HERE TO STAY UPDATED:



GO TELL IT ON THE

GO!
Joyfully and
wonderfully on the
backside of Christmas, I
keep sensing a message

Go tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere,
Go tell it on the mountain,
that Jesus Christ is born.

growing Christ's Church!

- Plant New Churches
- Start New Outreach Ministries
- Raise up New Workers

HOW WILL THEY KNOW? THREE GOALS FOR MISSION ADVANCEMENT.

to "Go" and share what I have again heard, seen and experienced in the birth of the Christ Child — the unconditional love of the God who made me. A love so lavish that He sent His Son to come into this dark world and pay the price for my sin. Why? So that I might declare that "'Jesus is Lord', and believe that God raised Him from the dead, and be saved" (ROMANS 10:9)! I pray that you know and believe this too.

As you read this article, we have entered the season of Epiphany remembering that Jesus came to be the Savior of all! Jesus was born of the Jews as the promised Messiah, but "As the Scripture says, 'Anyone who believes in Him will never be put to shame' — for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" (ROMANS 10:11,13). It is with that in mind that we sing:

These noted Scriptures certainly make it clear, that what we celebrate and believe about Jesus isn't just about you or me. That may not surprise you, but I must admit that at times, we as members of Christ's Church can live as such. We come to worship, receive God's gifts of mercy and grace and we simply head back out to our lives. We hear the message and sing the songs but somehow fail to carry them out into the world in which we live and share it with those right next to us who do not yet "believe" or "call on the name of the Lord."

I praise God for the gift of the Law in His Word that leads us to see our failure, repent, receive forgiveness through the Gospel! He then sends us right back out to go start all over again!

This month, the Florida-Georgia District is launching **Compelled — A Mission Advancement Initiative** to perpetually focus on three practices that are vital to reaching new believers and

For more than 75 years, the Florida-Georgia District has been about the mission of Christ and has focused on how each congregation, and every member is called to make disciples and connect people to Jesus. That focus continues as we give greater attention to Christ's command for each of us to "Go, Baptize and Make disciples."

I, the Board of Directors and the staff stand united in the goals of **Compelled — A Mission Advancement Initiative**.

As noted above, we believe that we must perpetually

1. Plant New Churches,
2. Start New Outreach Ministries out of our existing congregations
3. Raise up New Workers to meet the growing needs.

In order to accomplish this, we have set a goal of raising \$10 million dollars. These funds will be endowed so that these mission objectives may continue for generations to come!

Six million dollars will be endowed to provide a minimum

MOUNTAIN

LIFELINES

of \$300,000 a year for two new Church Plant grants. Two million will be endowed for a minimum of \$100,000 a year for new Kingdom Seed Outreach grants that help congregations start new ministries to reach those outside the church. And two million dollars will be endowed for a minimum of \$100,000 a year for new Church Worker Student Financial Aid.

Yes, this is a big goal, but we have a *bigger God*. I am coming to you asking for your prayers as we seek to boldly honor the Lord and that He would move congregations and individual members to respond and give from what the Lord has first given us.

The opportunities here in FLGA are incredible and as those who rejoice in the gift of our Savior; as those who have come out of our darkness and into His

marvelous light; as those who are called to "Go, tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born", may we give ourselves over to His will!

In closing, I draw your attention to the Lord's Words through Paul in ROMANS 10 "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent?"

May we take these words seriously. How? Through you, me and all of us working together. How? Through each of us using the opportunities we are given to "go" tell others so that they may hear. How? Through each of us joining together as the larger family of faith to pray for these three **Mission Advancement Initiative** goals,

to actively be a part of these mission endeavors and to give. Why? So that, many, many more "may call on the name of the Lord and be saved!" Amen! May it be so!

THREE PRACTICES THAT ARE VITAL TO REACHING NEW BELIEVERS AND GROWING CHRIST'S CHURCH!

1. PLANT NEW CHURCHES,
2. START NEW OUTREACH MINISTRIES OUT OF OUR EXISTING CONGREGATIONS,
3. RAISE UP NEW WORKERS TO MEET THE GROWING NEEDS.



*Your Fellow
Servant
and Witness, James Rockey*

PRESIDENT Florida-GEORGIA DISTRICT
LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

**HIS LAST COMMAND
OUR FIRST PRIORITY**

You are invited!

Introducing “COMPELLED: A Mission

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

— 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

As those who have experienced Christ's love, we are COMPELLED! We are compelled to go and share this amazing gift that transforms lives for today and eternity!

As those saved by grace, we are called to “go and make disciples,” connecting people to Jesus! We seek not to make members, but to come alongside others so that they, too, might experience the joy of salvation and then, make disciples who make disciple-makers!

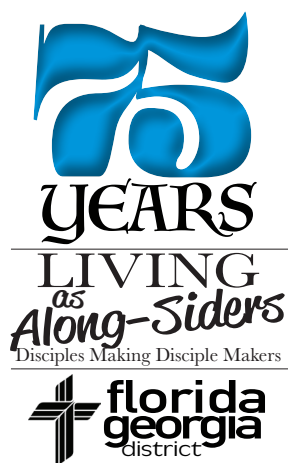
Florida and Georgia are seeing a population growth of nearly 2% annually, with nearly 35 million combined residents. With more than half of the US population having no connection to a place of worship and 25% having no spiritual belief whatsoever, there are millions living without saving faith. In response, there is an urgency for us to share our hope in Christ. For when we fail to live out this calling — and love our neighbors — we abandon them to a life separated from God.

Research confirms that new churches and new ministries reach up to 17 times as many new believers when compared to existing congregations. As the people of the Florida-Georgia District, we are compelled to respond by boldly starting new congregations, new outreach ministries and raising up new workers for the harvest!

THE GOAL —

Working together and with God's help, we prayerfully seek to raise \$10 million to perpetuate the vital mission endeavors of Church Planting, New Outreach Ministries and Church Worker Scholarships, funding these efforts for generations to come.

"Advancement Initiative" of the Florida-Georgia District



The Florida-Georgia District marked its 75th year in 2023. Since its inception in 1948 – and through many blessings – the District has grown from 22 congregations to nearly 200 today. Compelled to further the reach of God's Kingdom in this mission field, the Florida-Georgia District is committed to helping establish new congregations, new outreach ministries and raise up new workers to connect more people to Jesus.



Of the total funds raised, \$6 million will be used to endow new Church Planting in perpetuity. The earnings generated will fund at least two new Church Mission Start Grants annually of \$150,000 each.

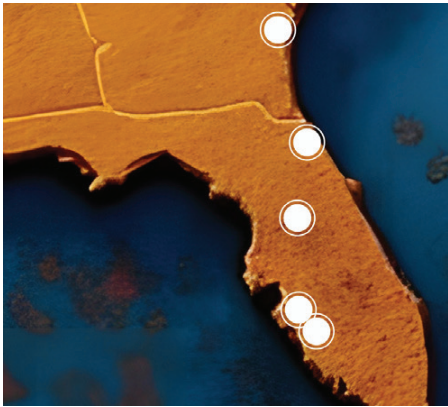


Conexion Confessional Lutheran/ Naples, FL held its charter service and installation of its pastor, Rev. Orlando Ramirez, in October of 2024. The congregation formed under a different denomination over a decade prior, but was led to re-charter under the Lutheran faith by their pastor following his own spiritual transformation through study of confessional Lutheran texts.



The first Ethiopian congregation in the Florida-Georgia District – **Mekane Yesus/Atlanta, GA** – celebrated its launch in October of 2024. The new congregation is hosted by Oak Road Lutheran in Lilburn, GA in partnership with the District and Mission Nation Publishing, with grant funding from the national LWML.

Endowing New Outreach Ministry Starts



\$2 million will be used to endow New Outreach Ministry Starts out of existing congregations. This will generate in excess of \$100,000 annually that will be distributed through Kingdom Seed Grants up to \$10,000 each, building off the evidence that new ministries and new churches reach more new believers!

Prayerful consideration is being given to future church planting opportunities in the communities of The Villages-South (FL), Northport/Sarasota County (FL), Savannah (GA), Babcock Ranch (FL), Yulee/Amelia Island (FL) and elsewhere!

As existing congregations of the Florida-Georgia District seek to "make disciple-makers," we are compelled to encourage their efforts through valuable resources like Kingdom Seed Investments. In 2024 alone, 13 congregations received Kingdom Seed Investments of up to \$10,000 to launch impactful new ministries and connect people in their communities to Jesus.

Numerous congregations also received \$300 Miracle Grow Grants to help fund a variety of outreach projects.



A Kingdom Seed Investment of \$5,000 helped **Trinity/Athens, GA** purchase and re-purpose a military mobile kitchen trailer. The trailer allows Trinity's Food Ministry Team to serve and minister to people in need "on site," including during disaster response deployments.



Faith/Sebring, FL received a Kingdom Seed Investment of \$10,000 to launch a ministry that provides a place of worship and connection for their local Hispanic community.



A Miracle Grow Grant was used to buy tools and equipment for a week-long youth servant event of St. Paul Lutheran in Lakeland, FL, where students cleared debris and freshened-up a property for **Stepping Stone Mission in Atlanta**.

Endowing Church Worker Scholarships

The decision to pursue ministry as a vocation is a significant milestone in a person's life. Choosing to become a pastor, teacher, Director of Christian Education (DCE), or any other ministry role requires prayerful consideration of many factors—including financial impacts. To ensure that educational costs are not a barrier for those seeking to answer God's call, we are compelled to support our District's future professional church workers through a robust Student Financial Aid Program.

In 2025, 15 students from Florida and Georgia received District financial support. This includes those entering to schools and seminaries in the Concordia system for their pursuit of professional degrees in church work. In addition, District funds helped first-generation immigrants attend the Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology through Concordia Seminary in St. Louis to further connect with our District's Hispanic and Latino communities. We also had new students receive tuition assistance to attend Concordia Seminary's Center for Hispanic Studies.

\$2 million will be used to endow additional funding for Church Worker Scholarships, generating more than \$100,000 per year. During the past three years, we have seen almost triple the number of scholarship requests for students studying to enter into ministry. In addition, increased church planting will demand more trained/rostered church workers.

Expected Outcomes

Compelled to share the gift of Christ's love with others, we will make vital connections—like pieces of a puzzle joining together to create an inspiring image. As we seek to connect people to Jesus through new churches, new ministries and new workers, the following powerful outcomes are expected:

- Two new church plants per year.
- Congregations engaged and excited about developing new ways to go and connect to their communities with new ministries both small and large.
- Greater financial support for our church work students to minimize debt and encourage others to also consider preparing for ministry.
- An increase in the number of new believers through Baptisms and affirmations of faith.
- And, in unison with the Lord, there will be “more rejoicing in heaven” over each lost individual who comes to saving faith! (Luke 15:7).

COMPELLED AND CONNECTED – YOU ARE INVITED!

Because this bold plan of the Florida-Georgia District connects with your own passion to share joy in Christ with others, you are invited to become a partner in this plan through your prayers and financial support. Gifts to the Florida-Georgia District—specifically for the COMPELLED initiative — can be shared at any time by visiting flgadistrict.org/give/.

You are also invited to stay connected with updates and inspiring news from around the Florida-Georgia District at flgadistrict.org/news/, where you may subscribe to newsletters, download the District's mobile app and more.

On social media, you can stay connected at:



Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

— Luke 15:7

In Miami, a once-thriving church suddenly finds itself in decline. As the neighborhood's demographics shift, the pews empty and financial reserves dwindle. This story isn't unique; it is the reality for thousands of congregations worldwide facing a rapidly changing culture.



Eric Sahlberg
Executive Director
Missions and Outreach
Florida-Georgia District LCMS
esahlberg@flgadistrict.org

The question is: will your ministry adapt or disappear?

A free, five-session course is being offered to provide the tools to bridge the gap between your church and your community.

You will learn to speak the language of your neighbors, addressing their specific hopes and fears with the timeless Gospel.

Over five lessons, you will learn from practitioners immersed in the work of Gospel Contextualization. You won't just study theory; you'll begin researching your own

community to develop a plan that effectively articulates and embodies the Gospel where you live. This course uses a

real world, case-study from a South Florida church that was dying and revitalized to fit its neighborhood. You will be equipped with tools and resources to understand your own ministry context.



Learn About Your City and the Mission Field in Your Backyard!

What You'll Gain:

Outreach Strategy: Learn to connect with those outside your church walls.

Missional Planting: Master the art of planting or replanting in unreached areas.

Contextual Intelligence: Gain the skills to research and evaluate your unique ministry landscape.

Is This For You?

The Pastor struggling to keep pace with a changing neighborhood.

The Lay Leader eager to share the Gospel with colleagues and neighbors.

Five Sessions on the Third Tuesday of the Month at 7PM

February 17 —
What is contextualization?

March 17 —
*What does contextualization
look like in the Bible?*

April 14 —
Observing your ministry context

May 19 —
*Bringing the Gospel
to your context*

June 16 — The Next Steps —
*Over five lessons, you will
learn from practitioners
immersed in the work of
Gospel Contextualization. You
won't just study theory; you'll
begin researching your own
community to develop a plan
that effectively articulates and
embodies the Gospel
where you live.*

YouthLead Training

For 40 years, YouthLead has equipped teens to develop and use their leadership skills as they serve Christ within their congregations and communities.

WHAT IS A YOUTHLEAD TRAINING?

It is an annual four day leadership event in St. Louis led by our youth Executive Team that gives teens the tools they need to mature in their faith, become leaders in their congregations, and reach out to their peers with the love of Christ.

Youth are equipped for leadership in two key ways. First, we engage them in studying God's Word through a Bible study they experience and are trained to lead back home.

Second, we focus on their unique identity and vocations as well as practical leadership skills that will benefit them in all aspects of servant leadership.

WHO CAN ATTEND YOUTHLEAD?

Any high school youth who is an active member of an LCMS congregation and desired to be a leader can join us along with adults who desire to mentor young leaders.

We prefer teens attend with an adult leader from their congregation. Arrangements can be made for them to come unaccompanied.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

Registration for youth and adults is \$425. This covers your food and housing during the training, transportation to and from the airport if needed, supplies and a shirt. Participants are responsible for transportation to and from St. Louis.

We encourage you to contact your district before you register as some districts have supports for those attending this training.



Our next St. Louis training is March 19-22nd, 2026.

**Or join us for our first YouthLead Servant Event
June 14-19th, 2026 at Camp Lutherhaven in Indiana.**

QUESTIONS? EMAIL US AT YOUTH.MINISTRY@LCMS.ORG!

**CHECK OUT LCMS.ORG/YOUTHLEAD
OR FOLLOW US ON INSTAGRAM AND FACEBOOK @LCMSYOUTHLEAD.**

YouthLead Training

For 40 years, YouthLead has equipped teens to develop and use their leadership skills as they serve Christ within their Lutheran congregations and communities. They offer resources, training, and mentorship to equip high school youth to lead now and into the future. Their annual leadership training event is facilitated by the YouthLead Executive Team. With a different focus each year, the event gives teens the tools they need to mature in their faith, become leaders in their congregations, and reach out to their peers with the love of Christ.

YouthLead is now looking to the future with the development of additional resources aligned with the 7 Practices for Healthy Youth Ministry. This will include

resources for adults who mentor and champion young leaders, potential regional conferences and connections to other programs like LCMS Servant Events and the LCMS Youth Gathering. Registration is at www.calendar.lcms.org/event/youthlead-training-march-2026/

LCMS Youth Ministry will host a YouthLead Training event Thursday, March 19, through Sunday, March 22, 2026, in St. Louis, MO.

This year's curriculum focus will be on apologetics, including how to understand and share Scripture and the resurrection of Jesus. Along with learning to teach this curriculum, YouthLead will lead youth in leadership skill development and building

relationships with other young leaders. Registration for youth and adult leaders is open until spots are filled or until February 25, 2026.

With the generous help of the Lutheran Women's Missionary League, LCMS Youth Ministry is hosting its inaugural servant event designed to help build LCMS high schoolers to be leaders for the church and community. They will gather from Sunday, June 14, to Friday, June 19, 2026, at Camp Lutherhaven, 1596 S 150 W; Albion, Indiana 46701.

Registration is open online. The cost is \$300 per person, which includes food, housing, supplies, and a T-shirt. There are limited spots for this event. Registration is at www.calendar.lcms.org/event/youthlead-servant-event-june-2026/.

District Youth Worker Mini-Conference Slated For February

The Florida-Georgia District Youth Ministry Council is excited to sponsor the Youth Worker Mini-Conference again this year. This conference is for everyone interested in developing healthy congregational practices to support youth. If you're involved in Youth Work and Family Ministry — as a volunteer, called worker, professional youth worker, Pastor, Vicar — you are invited to attend.

Building on last year's presentation, Julianna Shults, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's Program Manager for Resources and Leadership for LCMS Youth Ministry, will have interactive sessions that will blend research with ministry experience and challenge conference participants to see the vital role the



congregation plays in supporting healthy youth.

Julianna is a Director of Christian Education, having served congregations in Florida and Chicago for 11 years before moving to St. Louis for her current position. She has a BA in Psychology and a Masters in Community Development.

MINI CONFERENCE DETAILS

February 9-10, 2026

Begins on Monday at 1 pm | Ends on Tuesday at 2 pm

LOCATION

FLGA District Office
5850 T G Lee Blvd
Orlando • 32822

COST

Registration Cost: \$75
Dinner on Monday and lunch on Tuesday are included

HOTEL

Make your own hotel reservation or share a room with another attendee!

Do these words confuse you? Immigrants, migrants, illegal aliens, foreigners, newcomers, etc. Here is a word I hope you know well – REFUGEES! A refugee is

to provide housing, job placement, or language courses. Shutting down congressionally mandated programs harms thousands of vulnerable refugee families that

Refugees usually remain in United Nations sponsored camps for 10-15 years. They are approved (vetted) on many different security levels, have thorough physical

check-ups, take job training courses, English language classes, and classes on adjusting on a new life elsewhere.

A SHORT PRIMER ON REFUGEES

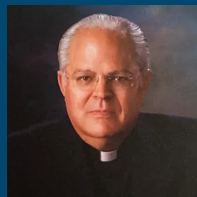
seeking "refuge" . . . because he/she is fleeing political/religious persecution and is forced to leave home and relocate to a shelter.

The U.S. Refugees Admissions Program is on pause by United States President Donald Trump who wants to determine if it's in the interest of our country. President Trump closed the door on many people who had already been approved to come here, including former Afghan allies who once aided the United States, and refugee family members waiting to be reunited.

Faith-based U.S. resettlement organizations are no longer able

we have pledged to support. Among the agencies affected are Church World Services, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, and Catholic Relief. Imagine this . . . under this order by President Trump these refugees would not have been allowed to enter our country: Henry Kissinger, Madeline Albright, Albert Einstein, Gloria Esteban, Sigmund Freud, Marlene Dietrich, Anne Frank, Billy Wilder, and Elie Wiesel.

They also must all have "a sponsor" who will meet them at the airport, assist them in finding a job, and help them secure



John Frerking
Emeritus Senior Pastor
Faith/North Palm Beach, FL
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561 252 5250

housing. No refugee can come to the U.S. without a sponsor who agrees to walk beside them until they are independent and able to care for themselves.



Although written from a Lutheran religious tradition, the invitation and reach of *They Are Us: Lutherans and Immigration*, is broad and inclusive. It includes all who are in touch with their own immigrant forebears and who share deeply spiritual hopes for our communal life. Authors Stephen Bouman and Ralston Deffenbaugh observe that ten years after they wrote the first edition of this book, immigration is an even a more contentious issue in society and the church, and immigrants are much more vulnerable, mistreated, and blamed than ever before. *They Are Us* encourages congregations to engage in the public space with grace and to offer hospitality in an often-alien world. The authors propose that the church, at every level, from local to national to global, work to transform our present polarization and fear and lead to real change. They envision a community that offers a haven for every refugee, a job for every migrant, a home for every immigrant – a vision that is profoundly biblical and deeply faithful. Through stories of crisis and hope, *They Are Us* helps Christian communities understand themselves and their ministries as part of God's narrative of love and hospitality for the little, the lost, the last, and the least. These stories show there is no greater power to unite our divided, angry, and fearful church and society than the presence of the crucified and risen Christ among us.

Government approved resettlement agencies pair a sponsor with a corresponding family. A sponsor receives no compensation, but funds are available by the sponsoring agency if there is an emergency.

Refugees agree to begin repaying the U.S. government for transportation costs within two years of their arrival in the U. S.

As a Lutheran Pastor I led our congregation to welcome more than two hundred refugees to Palm Beach County. All were successful and have given back more than they received.

For more information about the history of refugees, I recommend an outstanding book: *They Are Us: Lutherans and Immigration* available through Fortress Press as well as on Amazon. This book reminds us that the only natives here are the American Native Indians and that we all came from beyond our borders and have a duty to be hospitable and welcoming to all who desire to make our country even greater.

Editor's note:

The Rev. John Frerking is a Pastor Emeritus of Faith/North Palm Beach, FL and a long-time resident there. He is a prominent and persistent advocate for refugees. During his tenure, he led his congregation to welcome and settle more than 200 refugees in Palm Beach County. He is recognized for his extensive work in refugee support and has authored articles emphasizing the duty of hospitality toward migrants. In 2021, he ran for a seat on the North Palm Beach Village Council with a campaign focused on government transparency, term limits, and improving local recreation. Born circa 1942 in North Carolina, John's father was also a Lutheran clergyman.

— JL

Begins LEA Position January 1st

Dr. Thomas Wrege Accepts Call to Lutheran Education Association

On Oct. 4, 2025, Lutheran Education Association (LEA), a Recognized Service Organization of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), announced that Dr. Thomas Wrege has accepted the call to serve as its next Executive Director, effective Jan. 1, 2026. Wrege succeeds Dr. Jonathan C. Laabs, who is retiring after more than 28 years as Executive Director.

The LEA board recognized Laabs' long history of service to the organization, noting that under Laabs' leadership, LEA provided "a constant stream of resources, publications, awards and events to support educators in Lutheran ministries worldwide" and calling him "a tireless advocate for Lutheran educators and a champion for Lutheran education." Laabs gave his final address as LEA Executive Director during the LEA convocation, held last month in St. Louis.



Thomas Wrege is a veteran Lutheran educator with nearly four decades of experience in Lutheran schools. He holds a Bachelor's in Education from Concordia/Seward, NE, a Master's in Leadership/Instructional Technology from Butler University, Indianapolis; and a Doctorate in Leadership from Concordia/Mequon, WI. He received LEA's National Distinguished Principal award in 2013 and the Charles A. Winterstein Administrator of the Year award in 2023.

Wrege's mother is a graduate of Concordia River Forest, IL and a Lutheran school teacher and his father a graduate of Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, IN is also a teacher.



Dr. Jonathan C. Laabs, outgoing Executive Director of Lutheran Education Association (LEA), gives his final address during the 2025 LEA convocation in St. Louis.

The Mystery of Revitalization: Part 3

What can we do to reverse church decline? It's more about health and vitality than drawing a crowd on Sunday.

Yet it is that too.

A mystery? It may seem that way when efforts appear fruitless.



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But take heart. There is a way forward. In the first two articles we introduced five shifts and three realms. Now we want to take a closer look at the first realm: A Seaworthy Gospel Ship.

While many elements are "vitally" important for a seaworthy gospel ship here are some of the most important:

Boldly Proclaim Law and Gospel. This includes worship that is led with integrity, excellence and clarity while keeping the newer person in mind. This is not about the style of worship! It is about love and the gospel.

Next, a seaworthy Gospel Ship will know where it is going, stay on course and not drift by just repeating what we've always done. Rather, there is a clear purpose to "do everything in the name of Jesus" (COLOSSIANS 3:17), steward His gifts, including people! It recognizes that God has a reason His people and church exist in that place. No doubt it is to be "salt and light" to everyone who

are also there in that neighborhood (MATTHEW 5 & COLOSSIANS 4:6).

A seaworthy Gospel ship will excel in Christian Care, not only for the "crew" but also for the neighbor. Such love fulfills the will of Christ (LUKE 10:27; ROMANS 13:9 etc.) and is done by the crew, alongside the pastor, who provides training and oversight.

Every crew member has a place. So there will be a clear Christ Centered Christian Growth Pathway which includes making new disciples and emphasizes both faith and life (2 PETER 3:18; EPHESIANS 4:16-18;

as leaders requires the grace space to rehearse and practice.

Thus there is a constant effort to engage and involve others. No hoarding or solo ministries are allowed! Rather, partnerships, invitations, mentoring and apprenticeships are standard practice. And yes, it includes both crew members and even those not yet on the ship!

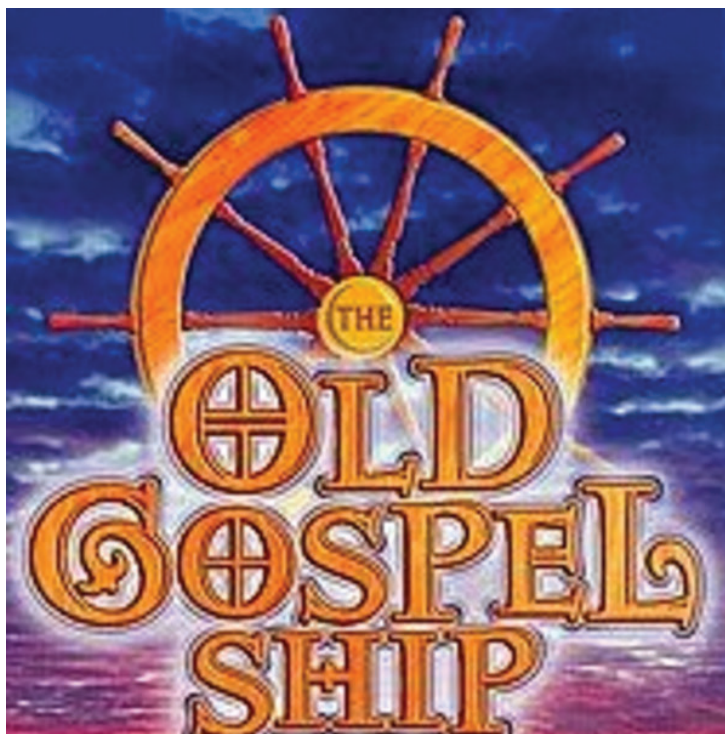
Finally, a seaworthy ship is kept ship shape doing regular maintenance, plugging holes and mending sails. This requires Functional Structures and Governance, Clear and Redundant Communication, Financial Integrity and Transparency with good stewardship that supports the chosen course.

Keeping it ship shape will mean regular confession and forgiveness. One example is where actions and programs are intentionally debriefed so learning and course corrections can be made and grace abound.

This list is not exhaustive yet perhaps something here inspires you to make some course corrections? Impossible at your church? Not at all. reversing decline begins one step at a time. Reach out to me and we would be honored to walk alongside you to think next

steps together. Remember MATTHEW 16:18.

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 working with him or your church. You can contact Scott through email scottgress@me.com or his blog page scottgress.com or at 561-542-4472



MATTHEW 28:20 & others). This means that learning and service are standard operating procedure! Growth is not an optional buffet of classes and programs, rather it is a high expectation modeled by elders and leaders. Intentional Leadership development is also pursued. Growing as disciples and

A Time For Every Purpose Under Heaven

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." Most of us have heard these words from ECCLESIASTES so many times that we almost move past them, yet they speak with surprising clarity when a congregation begins to wrestle with the future of its ministry.

Churches are planted, they flourish, they bless their communities, and sometimes they come to the close of their season. That reality can be painful, but it is not a sign of failure. It is simply acknowledging that the Lord of the Church directs His people according to His wisdom, not ours.

When a congregation senses that its ministry may be nearing completion, the first step is not administrative. It's spiritual! We begin with prayer, Scripture, and honest reflection. Jesus' words in JOHN 15 remind us that the Father prunes branches that He loves so they may bear more fruit. Sometimes pruning leads to renewal. Other times, God is gently preparing His people for a faithful conclusion so that the resources and people of the congregation can be redirected to new opportunities.

Even the Levites had defined seasons of service, as recorded in NUMBERS 8. God has always structured His people's work with beginnings and endings.

As the congregation enters this season of discernment, it must follow its own Constitution and Bylaws. These documents are more than formality. They protect the integrity of the congregation's decisions and guide how it moves forward. At the same time, the congregation does not walk alone.

In Florida and Georgia, the District walks alongside from the very beginning, and the District

itself walks in tandem with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. This is one of the gifts of LCMS polity. Congregations are independent yet deeply connected, supported, and encouraged by the wider church.

Once the congregation votes to close, attention naturally shifts to the property and assets. This part of the process can feel especially emotional because church buildings hold memories. They carry baptisms, confirmations, weddings, funerals, and countless

what assets must remain within LCMS ministries.

The District can help significantly here. District staff can explain the congregation's governing documents, offer



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guidance regarding property options, and help determine whether another LCMS congregation, a mission start, an RSO, or even the District itself may be the best steward of these resources. Their support ensures the process is done lawfully, honorably, and in harmony with Synod bylaws and the state nonprofit law.

Closure naturally brings grief, and that grief is real. Yet in Christ, nothing done in faith is ever lost. The sermons preached, the children taught, the prayers offered, and the mercy shown continue to bear fruit in ways we may never see. Acts 13 tells us that David served the purpose of God in his own generation.

Congregations do the same. They serve faithfully for their season, and when that season ends, God continues His mission with the same faithfulness He has always shown.

God brings every season to its close, and He also prepares the next one. Trust the Lord of the Church. He will guide, sustain, and lead His people, just as He always has.



ordinary Sundays that shaped the lives of God's people.

While "property" is not the Church, it has been "a tool of ministry" and should be handled with care. The congregation should secure the building, gather historical records, and create an inventory of all assets. Some items may be gifted to sister congregations. Others may be archived. It is important to review donor restrictions and determine

Synod's Third Missionary Cohort of 2025 Completes

On Nov. 14, 2025, new Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) missionaries who recently completed orientation were recognized following daily chapel at the LCMS International Center (IC) in St. Louis — the third cohort to do so this year.

The Rev. Dr. Cory Rajek, Executive Director of the LCMS Office of International Mission (OIM), noted that, in total, 25 missionaries completed training this year — *the highest number in at least six years.*

Rajek said, "It's been a delight to lead [these missionaries] through orientation, through [learning about] what is Lutheran missiology. We give thanks to God for their willingness to serve." Rajek added appreciation for the OIM's missionary recruitment team. "They've been doing a phenomenal job."

Missionary orientation comprises four phases:

- Zoom training about the region in which a missionary/missionary family will be serving;
- In-person training about the Synod's overarching mission to "Spread the Gospel, Plant Lutheran Churches and Show Mercy";
- Initial visits to potential supporters to teach on Lutheran mission, share about the OIM's work in the world, and help people find places to connect to the mission of the church; and
- A final training at the IC to learn more details about deployment, be trained in safety and resiliency, and prepare spiritually and logistically to begin service.

Rajek noted that Phases I and II of missionary orientation "engage Lutheran theology much more than in the past." Under the title of "Unpacking Lutheran Mission," the missionary orientees study:

- Mission Foundation – Justification (AC IV)
- Mission Focus – Word and Sacrament ministry (AC V)
- Mission Emphasis – Theological Education and Catechesis (Catechism as a missional document)
- Mission Vocation I – The Need for Both Clergy and Laity in Mission (AC XIV)
- Mission Vocation II – The Missionary's Role in the Three Estates
- Mission Cultus – Divine Service and Missionary Life
- Mission Challenges – Ecumenical Concerns

The Missionaries recognized on Nov. 14 were:

Rev. Jeffrey and Deaconess Gina Teeple, serving as a pastor and project manager in Germany; Daniel and Marie Lowitz, serving as ESL teachers and outreach specialists in the Dominican Republic; Rev. Michael and Shanna Hageman, serving as a theological educator and ESL teacher in

Tanzania; Kaelin Peralta, serving as a communication specialist in Africa, based in Kenya; and Sean McHugh, serving as business manager for the Eurasia region, based in Romania. McHugh will be accompanied by his wife, Hanna.

Peralta said that missionary orientation was a little like "drinking out of a firehose when you're there," but it "equipped me with the tools I need to serve the Lord as a missionary. The spiritual and practical preparation I received gives me confidence to boldly proclaim the Gospel of our Lord Jesus. I am excited to reach the mission field and pray the Lord uses me for the benefit of His kingdom."

Marie Lowitz said, "Daniel and I could both see God working throughout every step of this process. We could see His hand in our new missionary family, the staff who trained us, and the everyday events leading up to this point." Lowitz cited 2 Timothy 1:7,

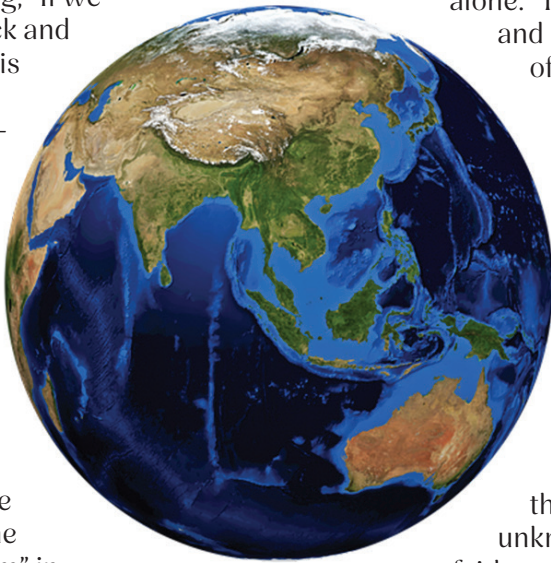


On November 14, 2025 at the LCMS International Center in St. Louis, new LCMS missionaries were recognized for completing training. Pictured, from left, are (front row) Kaelin Peralta, Shanna and the Rev. Michael Hageman, and Hanna and Sean McHugh; and (back row) Daniel and Marie Lowitz, and Deaconess Gina and the Rev. Jeffrey Teeple.

s Orientation

"For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control," adding, "If we take a step back and look at all that is to come, it can be quite nerve-racking. But we know God did not give us a spirit of fear, and we can find peace in seeing how far He has taken us."

Gina Teeple highlighted "the wonderful team" in the OIM, who "have been insightful, encouraging and supportive throughout this entire



process. As we head toward the unknown, we know we are not alone." Teeple said she and her husband often return to a familiar collect: "Lord God, You have called Your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that Your hand is leading us and Your love

supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

The Hagemans also take comfort from the knowledge that they have a large team behind them to whom, Shanna said, they "can confidently reach out for assistance when needed. Though we are beginning to wade into uncharted waters, we hold on to Psalm 119:105, which says that God's Word will be 'a lamp to our feet and a light to our path,' as well as to Psalm 139:5: 'You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me.'"

This missionary cohort began their training in September. Their deployment dates have been set for early 2026.



CHURCH & MINISTRY
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- ✓ 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.

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An endowment is a financial asset, typically established by donations, that is invested to generate income for a specific purpose. Most commonly an endowment is used to support nonprofit organizations.

Universities, hospitals, museums, and other charities have been using endowments to support and sustain their organizations for years. Ok, so we know that an endowment is a financial asset. What does that mean? I love the analogy of the apple tree. An endowment is like an apple tree. By envisioning the tree as the endowment fund, the apples become the fruits of the tree. As the fruits of a tree, apples can represent the income that is gained each year by investing the endowment funds.

Each year you can pick the apples and use them to do more ministry work, fund gaps in cash flow, or support special projects. If you don't cut off the branches (using up the original endowment funds) the tree will produce fruit every year.

Now if you fertilize the tree (adding more money to the endowment) or compost some of the unused apples (leave some of the income in the account) the tree will grow and produce even more fruit (income) each year. Because the endowment is a bridge to the future and should be invested for long-term, you could have a conservative spending plan for the income, such as 4-5% and an aggressive investment strategy. This would allow the endowment to grow over time and produce more fruit!

Why should your congregation or ministry start an endowment now? The best time would have

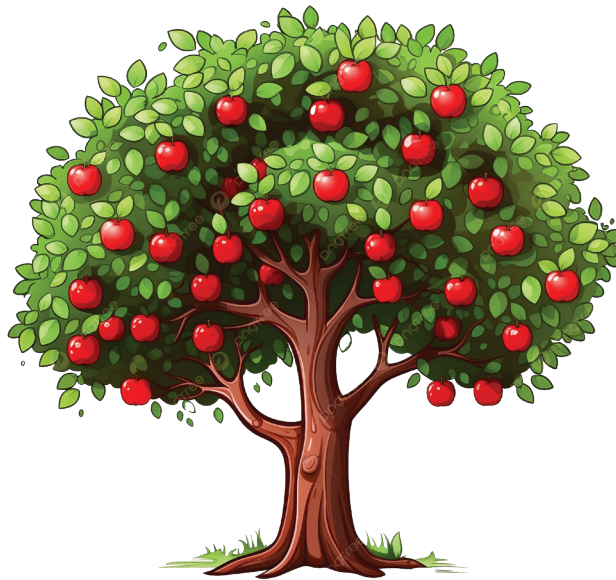
been twenty years ago, but if the seeds weren't planted then, why wait another twenty years. Starting today can help sustain the ministry for the long term.

With an endowment fund, you are in better position to weather economic downturns and changes in funding. Endowment funds can stabilize your budget and provide dollars for new ministry opportunities and capital or special projects. With the time value of money, a gift today could pay out the total amount of the gift over

gift knowing the ministry's future is solid.



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What Is An Endowment and Why Your Ministry Should Have One!

twenty years and still retain the same or higher value.

By creating an endowment, research shows that you are more likely to receive significant estate gifts in the future. Your members will appreciate the forward thinking and will be more likely to leave a

Your future members won't be left thinking that we should have started this twenty years ago. Sounds good, but we have debt, and cash flow is already tight. Talk to your members. Getting rid of debt is important but so is sustaining ministry into the future.

Consider investing a portion of memorials or estate gifts into an investment account to fund an endowment. If you aren't asking members to consider making a gift from their estate plan when they are called home, you are missing an important aspect of properly funding your mission. Other ideas are to have a debt reduction campaign and add an endowment component to the campaign or add the endowment component to a capital campaign. The important part is to get started!

Have a vision, create a strategy, and communicate with your members. Once started show them how the funds are being used, and they will be more likely to help grow the endowment. Don't ever let the endowment become a black hole where no one remembers why it was started and never sees the benefits.

I truly believe that endowments can help churches and ministries to move from operating out of scarcity and moving to operating out of surplus. My personal prayer is that our Lutheran churches have cups of blessings that are overflowing!

March 9-11, 2026

There is Still Time To Register For Veterans of the Cross Gathering

Registration is in full swing for the annual Veterans of the Cross Gathering in Titusville at the St. Stephen Christian Retreat and Conference Center. This event is open to all retired lay and rostered Servants of Christ. "Plenty of rest, reflection, and replenishment await all attendees," Ruth Wiedenmann, chair of the VOC Committee, emphasizes.

"Participants are invited to come and enjoy the 'still waters' of the Indian River at the St. Stephen Christian Retreat and Conference Center in beautiful Titusville, near the Space Center. Troubling finances, looming medical difficulties, horrors of war, violence and unrest in the news, family stresses and demands, and our own imperfections are towers of doom waiting to collapse," she continues. "But Christ, our refuge

and strength, takes us through the chaos and reminds us to 'be still, and know that I am God.'

"As we look forward to celebrating our nation's 250th anniversary and approach the

building a future Kingdom where one day the chaos of life's worries will 'finally' be still, forever."

Keynote speakers – The Rev. Dr. Gerald Kieschnick and his wife, Terry, and The Rev.

Dr. David Benke, and his wife, Judy – will be taking gathering participants first-hand through the events surrounding the series of coordinated terrorist attacks resulting in the deaths of nearly 3,000 people.

Registration is open at www.flgadiatrict.org/voc/ and costs are \$525 per couple (two to a room) and \$350 per person (single occupancy).

"These costs cover all meals and lodging for the duration of the gathering at the St. Stephen Christian

Retreat Center," Wiedenmann concludes. "The facilities are clean and very accommodating. The food is abundant and the campus enables us to move from sessions to dining facilities to our private rooms with ease."



*The Rev. Dr. Gerald "Jerry" and Terry Kieschnick
The Rev. Dr. David "Dave" and Judy Benke
are keynote speakers for the VOC event.*

25th anniversary of 9-11 we are facing turbulent times. But Christ is most certainly still with us. He reminds us that in His presence there is peace, connection, and rest. Christ Jesus reminds us that He delights in us, and He's



The 2026 Veterans of the Cross Gathering is expected to sell out due to the theme and keynote speakers.

The Retreat Center can only accommodate a limited number of rooms and meals.

Please register early at www.flgadiatrict.org/voc/

\$525 per couple (two to a room) and \$350 per person (single occupancy).

School and Church Leaders Meet, I



Back in November, 2025, church and school leaders from around the nation took part in a roundtable hosted by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's Lutheran Center for Religious Liberty (LCRL) in Washington, D.C., funded in part by a grant from the Lutheran Women's Missionary League. The goal of the meeting was to promote an understanding of forthcoming major changes to funding for Lutheran schools created by the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA), which became law in July 2025.

The OBBBA offers a federal tax credit of up to \$1,700 for individuals who contribute to Scholarship Granting Organizations (SGOs). Ashling Preston, associate director of Government Relations for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, explained it this way: "You can literally give for free. If you have more than \$1,700 dollars of [federal tax] liability, which we estimate that if you make more than \$50,000 a year, you probably have ... you can give for free. It does not cost you anything to give."

Preston noted that donors with \$1,700 in federal tax liability (beginning with the 2027 tax year) will turn over this money anyway, but now they will have a choice where it goes: "I get to decide if my money goes to Washington or to fund a child's education."

Although a \$1,700 contribution may seem small compared to the full price of private school tuition, the funding generated by this tax credit has enormous potential. The \$1,700 cap is on donations, not on the amount students may receive. Preston said that fiscal models suggest \$30 billion could be raised in the next 10 years.

The OBBBA is the first federal program of its kind, and it makes these scholarships available to a wide population of children: Any child who is eligible to enroll in public elementary or secondary school and whose household

income is below 300% of the area medium gross income is eligible to receive this funding through an SGO. The types of educational expenses that can be covered by the funding are expansive too. SGOs can offer scholarships not only for tuition, but also for curricular materials, books, tutoring, advanced placement tests, educational therapies for students with disabilities, and more.

The Treasury Department is currently working out the exact implementation of the law, meaning that certain questions are yet to be resolved, such as whether the \$1,700 contribution will be per household or per person. If the contribution cap is per person, married couples could contribute \$3,400 and receive the dollar-for-dollar tax credit. Other questions include the potential for SGOs to grant scholarships toward homeschooling students or students attending microschools, and how exactly states will complete the opt-in process.

States are required to opt in to the program each year in order to accept the funding generated by this tax credit, and some governors, such as those of Wisconsin and Oregon, have already declared their intent to opt out. However, even if a state opts out of receiving funding, the citizens of that state are still able to contribute to the SGOs of other states and receive the federal tax credit. Florida has not yet officially certified its participation for the 2027 launch, but it is considered a prime candidate for the program. Georgia is currently classified as a "wait-and-see" state."

The Rev. Dr. Gregory Seltz, LCRL Executive Director, emphasized the empowerment of parental choice as opposed to the dependency created by a lack of choices. "We're trying to say you're not going to take away our choices, and you're not going to take away empowerment, because I don't want my children dependent on [a choiceless] process."

Meeting attendees pushed against the narrative that the

parental choice movement is antagonistic toward the public school system, saying that what some are presenting as an "either/or" is really a "both/and" — all schools can benefit from increased parental choice. Scott Schumacher, Executive Director of The Lutheran Scholarship Granting Organization of Indiana, pointed out that "school choice helps everyone. It's a backdoor way of helping the public schools."

The OBBBA does not cut into funding for public schools since it relies on private donations and the tax credit is provided at the federal level, whereas public school funding primarily comes from state and local tax revenue. Public school students are also eligible to receive scholarship funding from SGOs for educational expenses such as tutoring or transportation.

LCMS church and school leaders believe that, with added opportunities for tuition scholarships, more parents may choose to send their students to LCMS schools. There is already evidence of this at the state level: In Iowa, where educational savings accounts (ESAs) have been rolled out over the last three years to provide scholarship funding to students, LCMS schools have seen substantial growth.

Rhonda Mohr, education executive for LCMS Iowa District West, shared that in Iowa, since the implementation of state ESAs, "We've seen tremendous growth. We're small in number of Lutheran schools, but we've grown more than 400 students since the [implementation of the] ESAs. ... Three of my schools have either finished a building program or are in the middle of one because of the growth they're seeing."

Donations to SGOs for this tax credit will begin Jan. 1, 2027. Those at the meeting agreed that 2026 will be critical for building awareness

[continued next page]

Discuss 2027 Potential Tax Credits

about donating at no cost, setting up SGOs for Lutheran schools in each district, and preparing schools to receive the funds.

"Schools are the battleground of the culture," Seltz said. "We've got to start thinking missionally again about how our schools will function so that we can [continue] starting new ones... I don't see why we should run out of people to give money to."

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has the largest Protestant school system in the United States. As such, the LCMS has a giant voice with 170,000 students, 22,000 educators, and just shy of 2,000 Lutheran schools nationwide.



The Rev. Dr. Gregory Seltz, Executive Director of the Lutheran Center for Religious Liberty, addresses LCMS church and school leaders at an education roundtable

Gainesville's Pastor Graham Glover Testifies Before Religious Liberty Commission

The Trump Administration's Religious Liberty Commission (RLC) convened its fourth hearing on December 10, 2025, to consider the state of religious freedom in the U.S. military. The RLC invited RFI's Senior Chaplain Fellow, Chaplain (Major) Graham B. Glover, currently serving with the U.S. Army Reserve, to submit written testimony to inform its deliberations on this critical set of issues.

Chaplain Glover's testimony focused on three main areas:

1. Strengthening religious freedom training for military chaplains.
2. Emphasizing the critical role of U.S. military chaplains in advising their commanders on the religious dynamics affecting warrior readiness and the religious landscape of their respective theater.
3. Expanding interagency involvement for U.S. military chaplains in support of the National Security Strategy.

The White House announced the establishment of the RLC on May 1, 2025. RFI's Ismail Royer, who was appointed as an advisory board member on May 16, has contributed to the RLC's efforts on multiple occasions since its inception. For example, Royer submitted an in-depth report to the RLC in August detailing the landscape of religious freedom violations in America.

To read Chaplain Glover's testimony, visit <https://religiousfreedominstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Graham-Glover-RLC-Testimony-FINAL.pdf>

Editor's note: for the past six years, The Rev. Graham Glover has served as a Chaplain Fellow at the Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) in Washington, DC, and the last 18 years as a Chaplain in the US Army – 12 or those on Active

Duty and as a Reservist for the last six years. He is assigned to the Army Office of the Chief of Chaplains at the Pentagon since August of 2017. Pastor Glover's responsibilities and service at RFI has allowed him to observe how the US Chaplain Corps is the most important governmental organization in



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ensuring that American service members have the freedom to exercise their faith and in understanding the role of religious freedom in contexts of engagement. He believes in every instance, the Chaplain Corps is the first line of defense in protecting the religious liberties of our nation's warriors. As this Commission advises the White House on what steps to take to ensure that American servicemembers' religious liberties are upheld, it must ensure that the Chaplain Corps remains strategically positioned to continue its critical role as the primary defender of this sacred American right.

FLORIDA GEORGIA

Out and About in the District

Pastor Henze Performs Prague Baptism



One of the greatest gifts of being a pastor is administering the sacraments. In late November, Pastor Scott & Kathy Henze's "German daughter" traveled from Worms, Germany to meet them and spend a few days with them.

"We've tried to see each other every five or so years since she was an exchange student in the United States and stayed with us," Pastor Henze explains. "Yesterday, on the riverbanks of Prague, Czech Republic, I had the privilege of



baptizing her baby girl! It was her birthday and her baby girl's baptismal birthday. How awesome is that?" Scott is pastor at **St. Paul/ Weston, FL** and Kathy is director of St. Paul's preschool.

Pastor Durante Coordinates Asian Student Visit



This past October 27 through November 2, 2025, a delegation of seven students from Miyazu, Japan visited their sister city, Delray Beach, FL **Our Savior/ Plantation, FL**. Pastor Tony Durante — a board member of Sister Cities of Delray Beach— organized efforts to host the students. The visit included home stays with local families, interactive tours of public schools, The Morikami Museum of Japanese Culture and historical and natural wild life centers. They were even able to enjoy the American Halloween experience at a costume party and neighborhood festival in the Bexley Park community. October 28, the mayor of Delray Beach presented the students with an official, written recognition on a plaque during a special session of the city commission to welcome them.

Two Christmas Programs Presented at First/Clearwater

The students at **First/Clearwater, FL**, filled the air with joy and excitement as they presented two delightful Christmas musicals on Thursday, December 11. The programs were directed by Minister of Music, Ann Hinz, co-directed by teacher Natalee Hallsted, with lights and sound by Rick and Marcus Howard, and sets and costumes by Ellen Bowlin.

The first of these enchanting performances, titled "What Is Going On?," was a heartfelt creation by First's very own Musician in Residence, Tim Jacobsmeyer. This charming production featured the enthusiastic talents of the school's preschool, kindergarten, and first-grade classes, showcasing the talent, dedication, and hard work of these young performers.

The performance of "Christmas Eve," was brought to life by the talented students in grades two through eight. Set in the fictional town of Elmsville, this enchanting story unfolded during the much-anticipated annual Christmas tree lighting,



broadcasted by a podcaster, where the beloved "Elmsville Star" mysteriously went missing, leaving the town in a flurry of questions and uncertainty. Would Christmas be ruined? Would the inaugural "Walk Through Bethlehem" be spoiled? As the program's director, Eve Holiday, navigated this suspenseful tale, she held a secret that revealed the true meaning of Christmas — reminding us that the Light of the world is what truly matters.

The presentation was filled with humor, mystery, majesty, and celebration, as the students shared their incredible talents through joyous songs and the timeless Gospel truth.

The magical evening not only highlighted the students' abilities but also brought families together to celebrate the true message of Christmas within the surrounding community.



First Lutheran Ends Church Year With Celebratory Lunch

First/Gainesville, FL ended the church year with a celebratory luncheon on November 30 in Besalski Fellowship Hall on campus. "There were so many things over the past year to be thankful for," exclaims Christine Dietrich, "especially the successful call to our new Pastor Chris Kollmann and his family. We also celebrated the dedication of Vacancy Pastor, Jonathan Rockey, a successful capital campaign to upgrade the roof and air conditioning units, the growth of our Sunday School program, many community events with our preschool Open Arms Child Development Center.

"First also increased attendance at VBS, held successful food drives each quarter for Gainesville Community Ministries, continued support for the homeless at Grace Marketplace, overwhelming generosity for the Guardian Ad Litem Christmas Angel Tree, ongoing mission outreach to Nicaragua."

The congregation enjoyed the growth of their campus ministry and welcomed many new members. Along with **Abiding Savior/Gainesville, FL** the sister congregations celebrated Advent by Candlelight. Three of First's young men are considering going into ministry. Stephanie Smith has also expanded the congregation's music ministry resulting in an increase in church attendance.



Pastor Chris Kollmann and his family are welcomed to First/Gainesville, FL



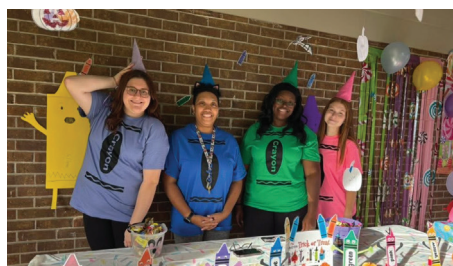
Vacation Bible School group photo at First/Gainesville, FL



Will, Patrick and Jonathan, three young men, visit Concordia Seminary



College students at First meet for fellowship and lunch after worship



Open Arms teachers participate in the congregation's Trunk-or-Treat



The Bolser's leading a children's message during worship



Vacancy Pastor Jonathan Rockey meets with his new member class

Isaiah Duport Joins St. Paul/Boca Raton as DCE Intern



Isaiah Duport standing at the Devil's Slide off the California Pacific Coast Highway in San Mateo County

Isaiah Duport, a Tustin, California resident, joins St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL as a Director of Christian Education (DCE) intern in January, 2025. He is the son of Kyle and Rebecca Duport; his mother is the current DCE Program Director at Concordia University Irvine, providing him with a direct model of Lutheran educational leadership from a young age. He completing his degree in Spring from Concordia University/Irvine, CA, where he served as a Residential Assistant (2022-2025), Student Ambassador, and was a member of the Men's Cross Country team.

Duport grew up as an active member of Peace/Tustin, CA. His experience as a tournament director for California Lutheran Schools in Orange County and his work at local businesses in Tustin helped him develop the administrative and relational skills necessary for congregational leadership. He has specifically credited his involvement in YouthLead

(an LCMS leadership program) at Peace Lutheran for providing him with a "community that sticks with you," which inspired him to pursue a career where he could "pour into" youth in the same way adult leaders did for him.

His training focuses on student ministry, instructional skills, and administrative congregational support. A DCE serves as a "team minister" alongside pastors and other church staff with primary duties. Duport will be working with St. Paul Pastors Steve Carretto and Jacob Scheler in areas including:

- Education — leading and developing programs for children, youth, and adults, including Sunday School, Vacation Bible School (VBS), and adult Bible studies.

- Youth & Family Ministry — organizing youth groups,

confirmation classes, retreats, and servant events like the LCMS Youth Gathering.

- Leadership & Training — recruiting, training, and equipping lay volunteers for service within the congregation.

- Curriculum Management—evaluating and selecting biblically sound educational materials that align with LCMS theology.

Isaiah Duport will be keenly involved in the National Association of Directors of Christian Education (NADCE) 2026 Conference, January 21-23, 2026, as it is being hosted by St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL. "Rest Assured: Seen by God, Sustained by Grace," — based on Psalm 139, is the theme for the bi-ennial event, which will give DCEs and ministry leaders the opportunity to pause for spiritual rest and professional renewal. Accommodations are at Deerfield Beach's Embassy Suites by Hilton, on the ocean just a few miles from St. Paul's campus.



St. Paul Senior Pastor, Steve Carretto first leads the congregation in prayer over Isaiah and then congratulates him as he is installed in all three services the weekend of January 4-5, 2026.

Christ's Cupboard Food Pantry Operating in Albany

Outreach projects are normally independent of each other. **Trinity/Albany, GA** had two unique opportunities to serve needs in their community in an act of Love, Fellowship, and Sharing. This is not for glory of the members, but to share the love of Christ in the community.

First, Christ's Cupboard was developed about two and a half years ago with a simple concept: help to provide food and personal care items to families in need. The project started with a "Name the Project Contest." The plan was to provide food and other necessary items every third Saturday morning of the month. Marie Grebel developed the concept and is Trinity's fearless leader for the program.

Grebel works tirelessly getting donors, checking inventory, and stocking the pantry. She keeps Trinity's team highly motivated. This year they made the decision to prepare for *A Thanksgiving Meal* and to not use items from

the pantry. Sixty boxes containing family size cans of green beans, sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes, mac and cheese, rolls, gravy, dressing/stuffing and a turkey were set up in an assembly line fashion.

Trinity members packed the boxes. Each box contained items to provide a meal for a family of eight to ten people at an estimated cost of \$35.00 each. The food items were provided with various donations. Sixty family members signed a form: 129 adults and seventy-three children for a total of 202 people. Together these family members can share with 600 people.

Then second opportunity came along to support *STEM High School Level*. One of Trinity's members is a teacher at a High School Level STEM (STEM is an acronym for Science Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Program). It is located about forty-five miles from Trinity's Albany campus. The teacher has ongoing STEM Projects for her students. Using

math, science, and the concepts of physics to build rockets, bridges, furniture such as chairs, tables and more out of recycled cardboard paper products that tend to be discarded every day.

Items included toilet paper and paper towel cones and every type of cardboard. The items were collected at Trinity and taken to the STEM school. This year all the cardboard containers used in the Thanksgiving Project were donated to the ongoing STEM Projects. Not only helping indirectly with recycling, but also with love and sharing for the future.

Christ's Cupboard is operated by Trinity/Albany, GA and not only offering food, but also other resources to those that might need help. Visit Trinity's Facebook page to determine when their food pantry is open.

Trinity Lutheran Church
1508 Whispering Pines Road,
Albany, GA 31707

Operation Christmas Child was a huge success at **Trinity/Delray Beach, FL** as church and school students, staff and community came together to pack 378 shoeboxes just before Christmas this year! The boxes are destined for children that need them most and to let them know the love of Jesus.





Epiphany/Tallahassee, FL celebrated their FIRST annual "Carols and Cocoa" with a fire, sweaters and Christmas music. Earlier in December they hosted "Breakfast With Santa" for the congregation's preschool students.



Thrive/Estero Gave Back To Community This Christmas Season

A sizeable group of volunteers from **Thrive/Estero, FL** helped deliver Christmas hams to one of the local food banks this past Christmas. The hams helped the food bank bring Christmas meals to families in the greater Estero community, ensuring more people can gather around the table and celebrate together this Christmas.



As part of their year-long 75th Anniversary Celebration, **Holy Cross/ North Miami, FL** hosted a joy-filled end-of-year service reflecting on 2025 – from the Manger to Ministry: Growing in God's Story, and all God has done through their church family. They produced a 75th Anniversary commemorative t-shirt.

Christ The King Largo Honors Pastor Mike Mast

Christ The King/ Largo, FL honored The Rev. Mike Mast after worship and after he preached his final sermon on Sunday, January 4, 2026. Pastor Mast came to Christ The King in 2019 and has served them for six years.

Pastor Mast left the congregation with these final words: "We exist to shine like stars everywhere we go. If all people matter to God, then all people must matter to us! Spread His peace, His love and His JOY to everyone!"



Hope/Plant City Recognizes Veterans



On Sunday November 9th, the members of **Hope/Plant City, FL**, paused to thank God for the Veterans in the congregation. As a part of the service each veteran

was recognized by their Human Care Ministry Team and presented with a special thank you card and gift to express the congregation's thanks for their service.

Pictured following worship are (from left:) Hope's Sr. Pastor, Rev. Dean Pfeffer, Jack Goetsch, Jerrod Hayes, Chris Kernan Geff Ferguson and Dan Slimer.

Marco Island Promotes A Night of Remembrance

The Christmas holidays can often be difficult for those who have recently lost loved ones. Even those who have lost a spouse, sibling, child, or friend many years ago often feel the loss more acutely during this time of year. Because of the raw emotions, **Marco/Marco Island, FL's** Lutheran's Pastor James Thelen and the Board of Human Care promoted a celebration of life for those loved ones who have gone before us. "There is something very tender about people coming together to remember their loved ones in the light of the star of Bethlehem," Pastor James Thelen offers. "That first Silent Night brought peace on earth, and in our lives." More than 40 saints were remembered at a service on Friday, December 12. The service was followed by a reception to offer support to all in attendance. Family photographs were displayed on several reception tables.



During the month of September members of **Hope/Plant City, FL**, led by their Human Care Ministry Team, donated packages of children's underwear in assorted sizes for Burney Elementary School in Plant City. This annual drive termed "Undie Sunday" has become an annual event to assist the school nurse as emergencies arise among the student population. Pictured after delivering the underwear are (from left) School Principal Brooke Quinlan and Human Care Team Leader, Sandy Howell.

Boca Raton Congregation Celebrates Autumn, Christmas

The **St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL** Pumpkin Patch is a key part of the school's Annual Fall Festival. This event is a community gathering held every October on the school's expansive campus.

It is a one-day event that coincides with the school's Fall Festival or Trunk or Treat event. The event typically includes various family-friendly activities: trunk-or-treating, carnival games and a bounce house, costume contests, pumpkin decorating, food and live music. The event is open to the community and aims to provide a safe and fun environment for families to celebrate the fall season while showcasing their new athletic fields.



Boca Center kicked off the holidays with **St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL's** student bell choir. Ms. Rebecca Schaffer (seated) is their musical director.



Adalynn is Pastor Jacob & Shelby Scheler's daughter

St. Paul's student bell choir also performed at the opening of Advent by Candlelight, an annual event for the ladies of the congregation. The gentlemen serve as waiters handing out coffee, tea and water. The Family Life Center is filled with tables of eight ladies with a hostess at each table. The tables are decorated for Christmas and they enjoy hors d'oeuvres and desserts while listening to St. Paul's praise team singing Christmas carols. Pastor Steve Carretto also delivers a short homily. More than 300 ladies attended this year's event.





Through their "Red Sock Project," **Faith/Lecanto, FL** raises funds throughout the year to

purchase brand-new bicycles and helmets for the Citrus United Basket (CUB) Christmas event. CUB

then distributes these new bikes to needy children in Citrus County. In recent years, they have donated more than 40 bicycles annually.



All Saints/Blairsville, GA held their annual Community Christmas Cantata on December 9th. The choirs presented The Ballad of Bethlehem, featuring their Adult Choir, Handbell Choir and Kids Sing Tuesday. A reception followed with the participants and audience bringing non-perishable food items and personal items for All Saints' Ecumenical Food Bank.

Advent Begins in June at Zion/Ft. Myers

Christmas outreach begins each June at **Zion/Ft Myers, FL**. The initiative that started six years ago, during the global COVID-19 pandemic, continues to mobilize the congregation.

"Interaction in 2020 was limited as we worshipped on screens," explained project creator and manager, Dr. Mary Manz Simon. "Offering an Advent devotional written by members connected us in new ways."

A total of 250 copies of the booklet were printed in the first year; 1,600 were printed last year in English. For the first time in 2025, 250 copies were printed in Spanish for distribution through Zion. An additional 250 copies were printed in a second Spanish edition, with congregation-specific content for Pelican Lutheran Church in Naples. Zion member Joe Nobile oversaw production of both Spanish language editions.

The publishing outreach capitalizes on the opportunity to reach people with the real

meaning of Christmas. In December, Lifeway Research released data that revealed less than half of Americans will attend a church service during the holidays. However, sales of gifts, non-profit campaigns, and even household decorations including hints of the actual "reason for the season" filter through the fourth quarter of the year.

Research shows that 9 in 10 Americans do something to celebrate the holidays; 56% are potential church goers. That means more than half would likely attend church if invited by someone they knew.

That's where Zion's booklet enters the outreach picture. Devotional writers are recruited from the congregation's members. Each daily entry in the 44-page booklet includes Scripture, devotional thoughts, and a "Did you know?" section. The theme differs each year, but always invites readers to "Come to the manger."

A holiday worship schedule is included on the back cover.

Although some congregations offer a staff-written Advent booklet, Zion mobilizes members at every stage of the initiative; each year, between thirty and forty members participate. Volunteers address and stamp the individual booklets during a "mailing party" in which seasonal attendees receive a copy. Additional copies are mailed to church visitors, including those who have attended the Saturday evening weekend worship service. Another volunteer manages delivery to carpool drivers who pick up students from Zion School.

Production of the booklet is funded anonymously by evangelism-minded donors from Zion. In 2025, each English language booklet cost \$2.15. Except for a graphic designer who earns a minimal wage, all writers and staff donate their efforts. Thrivent grants, written by members, fund mailing costs.

"Offering a slick, professionally-produced booklet makes it easy to begin a conversation about spiritual issues," Simon concludes. "In each booklet, Christ-centered content is wrapped in nostalgia, personal traditions and descriptive seasonal images."

Below – envelopes ready for the post office distribution.



Six years of published booklets, are shown with their cover artwork. Two Spanish language editions were added in 2025.



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Plant City Congregation Continues Annual Support to Community Food Bank

The United Food Bank of Plant City, FL has been and continues to be an integral part of the mission and ministry of **Hope/Plant City, FL** and The Rev. Dean Pfeffer. For the last number of years the congregation has gifted many organizations in their community as well as the Florida-Georgia District and LCMS with portions of the proceeds from the congregation's annual Turkey Supper.

This year, Hope has presented a check for \$1,500.00 to the food bank to support their ongoing work as they strive to end food insecurity for those in need in the Plant City community. In 2024 the food bank distributed more than four million pounds of food to more than 89,000 individuals and more than 26,000 families.

According to Pfeffer, "The ongoing work of The United Food Bank is essential to our community. We are so blessed to assist in reaching out and helping those in Plant City that need that extra hand. God has blessed us at Hope to be a blessing to others and we joyfully strive to share the blessings that come from our Lord's giving hands."

Pastor Pfeffer has been on the Food Bank board of directors for 15 years and has served as board secretary, vice chairman and chairman.

At right – Pastor Dean Pfeffer with Food Bank Director, Mary Heysek.



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Stepping Stone Mission Highlights Fall Activities

Stepping Stone Mission is a Christian non-profit organization in the Atlanta, GA, area dedicated to serving individuals experiencing homelessness by providing food, basic necessities, spiritual guidance, and pathways to rehabilitation. They are a Recognized Service Organization of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, offering a range of services to connect the homeless with Christ and the wider faith community. The Rev. Dr. Victor J. Belton is an at-large member of their board.



Stepping Stone Choir visited with brothers and sisters at the Korean Community Presbyterian Church (also known as Yunhap Church) and shared their faith through their gift of voice. Yunhap Church has been long blessed by God to be mission driven for Him with more than 2,000 members. Yunhap Church has been a partner in this ministry since Stepping Stone's inception.



Thanksgiving Sharing & Caring Festival Blesses God's Family: This past Thanksgiving, Stepping Stone Ministry celebrated all the helpers the Lord has sent to be a blessing to our brothers and sisters experiencing homelessness. The celebration was held in partnership with their Korean Community Presbyterian Church (KCPC), New Church of Atlanta, and Siloam Korean Church.



Stepping Stone's Annual Sharing Love Benefit Concert was held in October, 2026. It was an evening of beautiful music with brothers and sisters in Christ. The New Church of Atlanta and board member Dr. Ho Jin Kim worked together to make this happen.

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National Lutheran Youth Workers Conference Announced



LCMS Youth Ministry Update

Mark your calendars! The **National Lutheran Youth Workers Conference** (NATIONAL27) will take place **July 14–17, 2027**, at the **InterContinental San Antonio Riverwalk Hotel** in San Antonio, Texas.





NATIONAL is a standalone **youth ministry practitioner conference** that equips and encourages youth workers and Adult Leaders from across the country. It's a time to connect, learn, and grow in your calling to serve the next generation.

Adult participants will receive a transferable, complimentary registration to the 2028 LCMS Youth Gathering, and there will also be opportunities for high school students to participate in **YouthLead** training (*Please note, YouthLead training spots will be extremely limited*).

Registration for **NATIONAL27** will open in **Summer 2026**.



Save the Date for NATIONAL27!

-  **July 14–17, 2027**
-  **InterContinental San Antonio Riverwalk Hotel**
-  **Hotel Rate: \$142/night + tax**
-  **Adult participants receive a transferable, complimentary registration to the 2028 LCMS Youth Gathering**

Marco Lutheran Celebrates New Brothers and Sisters in Christ

For years **Marco Lutheran/ Marco Island, FL** has been a congregation of older adults. A growing number of Lutherans have joined the congregation in the past year. Pastor Jim Thelen has introduced a new way of assimilating new members.

"Gone are the days of a six-to-eight-week new members class," Pastor Jim explains. "Say 'Hello' to a new system of establishing a relationship with the Pastor and other perspective new members."

Pastor Thelen meets with each potential new member privately to share Lutheran beliefs and what makes Marco Lutheran the congregation it is today. He listens carefully to learn the individual needs of each congregant.



Once the participants are ready, all new members are invited to a group event so they can learn more about each other and enjoy fellowship. Finally, they are inducted into the congregation and are feted at a reception.

"In November, we welcomed our largest class of new members — 38! Last June we welcomed 16 new members. We're delighted that another three or four have already signaled their desire to join the church," he concludes.



Santa Shop a Success in Boca Raton

The Santa Shop at **St. Paul Lutheran/Boca Raton, FL** is a special holiday event, sponsored by the Lutheran Parent Teacher League (L.P.T.L.), that allows students to experience the joy of holiday shopping independently.

The shop is designed for students to purchase gifts for family and friends on their own, fostering a sense of giving during the Christmas season.

The event often relies on donations of handmade treasures

and fun gift items from the school community to stock the shop. The Santa Shop is one of many events organized by the active Lutheran Parent Teacher League to promote parent involvement and community within the school.



This year's Operation Christmas Child shoebox collection was a success for **St. Paul/Weston, FL**. The congregation donated 51 filled shoeboxes – an increase from 33 boxes last year.

Operation Christmas Child in Broward County, Florida, is the local execution of a global Christian relief effort organized by the non-profit organization Samaritan's Purse. The project involves community members, families, and local churches filling shoeboxes with small toys, hygiene items, and school supplies. These gift-filled shoeboxes are then collected and delivered to children in need around the world to demonstrate God's love in a tangible way.

This past November, Pastor Dean Pfeffer (center) and Pastor John Cabos (left) of **Hope/Plant City, FL** had the joy of presenting a check to Cheryl Taylor (right), of **St. Paul's/Lakeland, FL's** director of Moving Hope Mobile Food Pantry. The check was in the amount of \$1,500.00 and was a portion of the proceeds received at Hope's 29th Annual Turkey Supper which took place on Sunday, November 9th.



In November the Elderberries Group from **Trinity/Athens, GA** gathered "Blessing Bags" of food, clothing, and personal hygiene items for homeless individuals that are often see panhandling at intersections in greater Athens. These bags are a great alternative in offering help to those who need it and to share God's love and some words of encouragement.



PASSAGES

Former Synod Communications Executive

The Rev. Dr. Paul Devantier Called to Eternal Home



The Reverend Dr. Paul Walter Devantier, 79, of Appleton, WI, was called to his eternal home in Christ on November 30, 2025. Born in 1946, Paul lived a life devoted to his Savior, his family, and his calling to ministry. He was preceded in death by Walter Devantier (Father), Ella Devantier (Mother), Ruth (Sister), and Kathleen (Sister).

Paul was united in marriage to Ellen Devantier (née Stapel), his wife of 55 years. Together they were blessed with five children: Richard, John (wife Melissa), Andrew, Katie (husband Johnny) and Susie. Paul was a grandfather to 12 grandchildren. Paul and Ellen also welcomed more than 80 foster children into their home throughout their marriage.

During his career, Devantier was General Manager of the LCMS radio station, KFUE and KFUE-FM in St. Louis, MO, and for 18 years was Executive Director of Communications for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. While in this position, he supervised publications and radio and

television efforts and developed the widely used Missouri Synod logo cross. He was also a Senior Vice President at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

Paul was gifted with an exceptional speaking voice with great timbre and was the speaker on the internationally syndicated radio program, *"By The Way,"* and President of *By The Way, Inc.* He has been the only speaker on the program since 1974 and has provided messages for broadcast on many radio stations in the United States, through the Internet and through other means for more than 18,500 consecutive days. He authored five *By The Way* books.

A graduate of Concordia Seminary/St. Louis, with a Master of Divinity Degree, he held a Masters Degree in Mass Communications from Southern Illinois University and a Doctor of Letters Degree from Concordia University/Seward, NE.

A strong advocate for adoption and foster care, Paul was privileged to be National Director of the Adoption Awareness Program headquartered in Washington, D.C. This program, with activity in all fifty states, resulted from legislation passed by the U. S. Congress.

Paul successfully defended religious freedom in broadcasting in a nine-year case involving KFUE Radio. The case ended in a positive, landmark decision by the Federal Appeals Court in Washington, D.C. that affirmed religious

freedom in broadcasting. The media productions he supervised received awards from the National Association of Broadcasters, Hollywood-based Excellence in Media, Religion Communicators Council, Associated Church Press, Telley Awards and others. He served as a script consultant for a teen pregnancy film that received the First Place Gold Camera Award at the U.S. International Film and Video Festival. The Wisconsin Council on Developmental Disabilities honored him for his media efforts on behalf of those with developmental disabilities.

Paul also led the successful \$80 million "How Will They Hear?" Campaign of Concordia Seminary. He was a guest speaker on The Lutheran Hour and President of Lutheran Film Associates. Paul received the Distinguished Alumnus Award from Concordia/Wisconsin. He and his family received the Outstanding Adoptive/Foster Parent award from the Adoption and Foster Care Coalition of Missouri and the "Friend of Adoption" award from the National Council for Adoption.

Paul is a native of Wausau, WI. He and his wife, Ellen, lived in Minocqua, WI in semi-retirement where he was vacancy pastor at several LCMS congregations, including Rock of Ages/Minocqua and Faith/Mercer.

His memorial was held at Faith/Appleton, WI in December, 2025.

PASSAGES

Former Good Shepherd/ Chiefland Pastor Passes



The Rev. Larry F. Davis, of Gainesville, FL, was called to his eternal home on December 13, 2025. Born May 19, 1942, in Cedar Rapids, IA, Pastor Davis graduated from Concordia/Springfield, IL in 1963 and

was ordained on January 1, 1968. Throughout his ministry, he faithfully served congregations in Texas, Wisconsin, Mississippi, and lastly at **Good Shepherd/Chiefland, FL**, where he served until July 2001. As Emeritus, Rev. Davis and his wife, Gayle, worshiped at **First/Gainesville, FL**. He is survived by his beloved wife, Gayle, and their children, Aaron and Rachael.

Pastor Paul Sutterer Enters God's Kingdom



The Rev. Paul R. Sutterer, an emeritus pastor of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), passed away on December 3, 2025, at the age of 89 in Summerfield, Florida. He dedicated nearly six decades to the

ministry, serving congregations across Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, New York City, Maryland, and Florida. A faithful servant of Christ throughout his years of pastoral ministry. He is survived by his daughter, Michelle Strezishar, and his son, Mike Sutterer, as well as five beloved grandchildren who brought him immense joy. A memorial service honoring Paul's life will be held on Monday, February 2, at 10:00 a.m. at Hope Lutheran Church in The Villages, Florida.

Epiphany/Tallahassee Emeritus, Garth Baker Enters Eternal Rest

The Rev. Garth Larry Baker was born June 15, 1936, at Iowa City, Iowa to his parents Kenneth L. Baker and Eunice L. Bushnell Baker. His early years were spent growing up in the farm communities of Northeastern Iowa. He graduated from High School at Marion, Iowa in 1954. From 1954-1957 he served in the United States Navy. In 1956 he was united in Holy Matrimony to the love of his life, Carolyn Marie Stade Baker. To their union four children were born. Angela, Gary, Lisa and Gregory.

Desiring to serve his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the pastoral

ministry of the Lutheran Church, he entered Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois in 1957. Rev. Baker completed his vicarage at Trinity/Orlando, FL in 1960-1961. Following his Graduation and Ordination on June 12, 1963, he served the following congregations of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod: Crosby/Iron Hub, MN 1963-1965. St. John/Winsted, MN 1965-1969. Zion/Wilton, IA 1969-1977 and Immanuel/Rolla, MO 1977-1997.

Garth retired from active ministry in June 1997 to Tallahassee, FL and attended Epiphany/Tallahassee, FL leading bible studies.



PASSAGES

Former District Principal, Marv Oestmann Called to Jesus



A disciple of Jesus in every aspect of his life, Marvin Paul Oestmann, 83, was called home to heaven on November 16, 2025. Born on January 19, 1942, in Arkansas City, Kansas, he was a longtime resident of Aurora, Colorado.

Marvin began his studies at St. John's College in Winfield, Kansas, in the 'Teacher in Training' program. After two years, he transferred to Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana, where he received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1965. He accepted his first teaching position as a 5th grade teacher at Messiah Lutheran School and served as Music Director at Holy Cross/Independence, Missouri. During the summers of 1966 and 1967, he attended Concordia Teachers College in Seward, Nebraska, earning his Master of Education in Administration.

Throughout his 40-year ministry in Lutheran education, Marvin served faithfully in many roles. He was Music Director and a 5th and 6th grade teacher at Evergreen/Detroit, Michigan;

Music Director and Principal at **Lutheran Central School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida**; Principal at **Redeemer/ Stuart, Florida**; and ultimately completed his ministry as Principal at Peace with Christ Christian School/Aurora, Colorado.

While living in Broward County, Florida, Marv sang with Nova Singers, Southeastern Florida's preeminent community concert choir. He and his wife, Sharon, traveled to Austria, Germany and Switzerland with Nova Singers on the chorus' first European Concert Tour.

Marvin also held numerous leadership roles within Lutheran education. He served as Facilitator for the Beginning Teachers Retreats for Lutheran Teachers; President of the Florida-Georgia Administrator's Conference; President of the Lutheran Education Administrators Department; President of the Lutheran Education Association; Chairman of the Rocky Mountain District Lutheran Professional Educators Conference Planning Committee; and Chairman of the School Committee of the Rocky Mountain District.

In retirement, he continued to serve and lead. He worked at PostNet, served as President of the residence council at Cherry Creek Retirement Village, and initiated and led chapel services at Garden Plaza of Aurora, Bonaventure Senior Living, and Cherry Creek Retirement Village.

He shared his passion for music as an organist and choir director. His hobbies included spending time with family and friends, playing the

piano, traveling, attending his grandchildren's activities, playing cards, and enjoying family celebrations.

He is survived by his daughters; Sara Brandt (Lee) and Rebecca Huft (Todd); and seven grandchildren; and a great grandchild. He was preceded in death by his parents Ernest and Martha Oestmann, brother Vernon Oestmann, and wife Sharon.

His memorial was held December 19, 2025 at Our Father Lutheran in Centennial Colorado.



Marv with daughter Sara Brandt



Marv with daughter Rebecca Huft



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Living in the Light and as the Light

No one wants to live in darkness. In fact, what's the first thing you do when you enter your house after being out in the evening? You turn the lights on. No one likes to have to find their way around in the dark. Likewise, those who are living in the darkness of life really don't want to either, even though they may not want to admit it.

You may have seen the visual that is sometimes used in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School to express the holiness and purity of God: If you light a candle (God represented in the flame) and hold it up and then shine a flashlight on it, your hand and the candle will cast a shadow, but the flame will not. Thus is the purity of God – not one hint of darkness. It's hard to imagine such purity, isn't it, when we live in a world that has been tainted by sin in every direction. Can you imagine a world where locks aren't needed on your doors, family dynamics are pure and not strained, divorces don't happen, and anxiety doesn't exist? That is what awaits us in Heaven!

Ephesians 5:8 calls us to "live as children of light" in the world where we are now. We were once in darkness but now we have the joy of living in the Light of our Savior's grace – and now we are to BE the light of Christ to others. The surrounding verses in Ephesians 5 give us examples of

how to do that – casting off greed, sexual impurity, coarse joking, drunkenness, etc. The verses also give us the positive examples of how to live as light to others – living a life of love, sharing God's truth, speaking to one another with spiritual encouragement, and making the most of every opportunity.

The LAST WORD



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It's a calling. Have you thought of yourself as called by God to the mission fields of your life? Some are called to foreign mission fields, but all Christians are called to the places where God has placed them. Your specific family, your specific workplace, and your specific neighborhood are the specific mission fields in which you have been divinely placed by the God of the universe. In those mission fields we are called to be different from the darkness of the world so that others can see Christ and want what we have – the peace and joy that can only come

from Him. How can the purity of God be seen if we model darkness? It's a high calling, but it's possible with the love of God and the power of His Spirit.

We've entered the season of Epiphany, the ancient church festival that celebrates the Magi's visit to the Christ child. The word epiphany means "manifestation" or "revelation," and this day celebrates the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, represented by the Magi. Simeon's words in Luke 2:32 remind us that Christ is "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." Christ's grace is for all, both Jew and Gentile, and we have the joy of living in that light and sharing it with the world! How will the world know about Him unless we shine the purity of His light?! The light has to penetrate the darkness and dispel it!

The ministry targets of the Florida-Georgia District share that we are people "compelled by Christ's love to connect the lost, confused and hurting to Jesus, who is the true source of peace, hope, and life." The calling of being compelled to share Him is for every Christian everywhere. May we continue in God's grace, thanking God that we can live in His Light because of what His Son Jesus did for us, and may we always strive to share the purity of His Light with others.

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