

# LUTHERAN LIFE

*Lutheran Church-  
Missouri Synod  
Florida-Georgia District  
March-April 2026*



# 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 and those opinions may not necessarily be those of the District or the LCMS. 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

12/15/25..... Rev. Gary Boye (O) to Mid South  
01/05/26..... Ms. Lois Conner (C) to Central IL  
02/28/26..... Ms. Emily Moss (C) to Missouri

## TRANSFERRED INTO FLGA FROM OTHER DISTRICTS

12/04/25..... Ms. Sara Steinbauer (C) from  
Southern District  
12/19/25..... Rev. Jeffrey Niederstadt (O) from  
Minnesota South District

## INITIAL PLACEMENTS

01/04/26..... Ms. Elizabeth Jentz (C) from FTW to  
Grace/Naples, FL as D  
01/04/26..... Rev. Gregory Rowell (O) from SMP/  
FTW as SP Peace/Tifton, GA  
01/11/26..... Rev. Troy Curtis (O) SMP/CSL as SP  
Risen Savior/Palm Bay, FL  
02/01/26..... Rev. Timothy Richter (O) SMP/CSL as  
AP Zion/Ft. Myers, FL

## INSTALLATIONS

01/04/26..... Ms. Elizabeth Jentz (C) as D at Grace/  
Naples, FL  
01/17/26..... Rev. Lang Yang as Chaplain AP  
Grace/Winter Haven, FL  
01/18/26..... Rev. Jeffrey Niedersadt (O) as SP Son  
Life//Boynton Beach, FL  
01/25/26..... Rev. Christopher Futch (O) as SRP  
Our Savior/St. Petersburg, FL  
01/25/26..... Rev. Daniel Ritter (O) as AP Our  
Savior/St. Petersburg, FL  
02/01/26..... Rev. Ronald Pennekamp (O) as AP  
Hope/Plant City, FL

## CALLED TO GLORY

01/04/26..... Rev. Timothy Nickel (O)  
01/30/26..... Rev. Richard Holland (O)  
02/26/26..... Rev. Dr. James Bollhagen (O)  
03/02/26..... Rev. George Poulos (O)

## EMERITUS

11/25/25..... Mr. Randall Smith (C)  
2/10/25..... Ms. Sandra Birner (C)  
12/10/25..... Mr. Stephen Rockey (C)  
12/25/25..... Rev. Kent Fuqua (O)  
12/31/25..... Rev. Brian Albrecght (O)  
01/12/26..... Rev. Jonathan Horsman (O)  
01/30/26..... Rev. Donald Stier (O)  
02/08/26..... Rev. Terry McKee (O)

## REINSTATED TO THE ROSTER

09/09/25..... Ms. Heather Burtman (C)

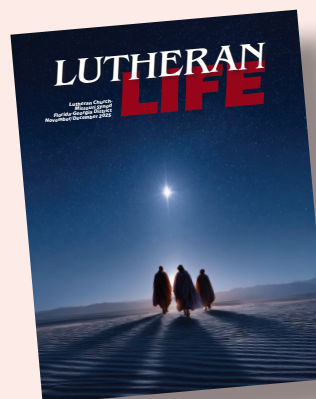
## Abbreviation Key

(C)..... Commissioned Minister  
(E)..... Emeritus  
(O)..... Ordained Minister  
(SP)..... Sole Pastor  
SRP..... Senior Pastor  
(AP)..... Associate Pastor  
(Asst)..... Assistant Pastor  
(SMP)..... Specific Ministry Pastor  
(TIM)..... Transitional Interim Minister  
(D)..... Deaconess  
(Exec)..... Executive Administrative Pastor  
CSL..... Concordia Seminary St. Louis  
FTW..... Concordia Seminary Ft. Wayne

# free press

[LutheranLife@flgadistrict.org](mailto:LutheranLife@flgadistrict.org)

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@flgadistrict.org](mailto:LutheranLife@flgadistrict.org). Want to subscribe?



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**Launched Just Weeks Ago  
Campaign Achieves 20 Percent of Goal!**

# District's Mission Advancement Initiative Takes Quantum Leap Forward

The Florida-Georgia District marked its 75th anniversary year in 2023. Since its inception in 1948 – and through many blessings – the District has grown from 22 congregations to 192 today and still growing. On March 1, our District's newest congregation, Siloe Haitian Lutheran Church, of Naples, was chartered! FLGA District President James Rockey kicked off the Mission Advancement Initiative at the beginning of 2026 designed to further the reach of God's Kingdom in this District's mission field. President Rockey, along with the FLGA District Board of Directors are committed to perpetually starting new congregations, new outreach ministries and raise up new workers to connect more people to Jesus.

"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," President Rockey emphasizes.

Florida and Georgia, with a combined population of nearly 35 million are seeing a population growth of nearly two percent annually. That equals almost 700,000 new residents every year. With more than half of the US population having no connection to a place of worship and 25 percent having no spiritual belief whatsoever, there are millions living without saving faith.

President Rockey responds, "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. Working together and with God's help, we are prayerfully seeking to raise \$10 million to perpetuate the vital mission endeavors of Church Planting, New Outreach Ministries and New Church Worker Student financial aid, funding these efforts for generations to come."

As of March 1st, Rockey reports that the campaign has already achieved nearly \$2.25 million in pledges and receipts obtained by the Mission Advancement Advisory Council.



"Reaching the 25 percent milestone in a capital campaign is a critical moment for building momentum and signaling to donors that the project is not only real – but our \$10 million goal is achievable," he illuminates. "At this stage, typically during a quiet launch phase, the focus is often on celebrating a few major lead gifts and inviting others to help maintain the energy. I have been amazed, humbled and overjoyed at the response from donors."

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!"

Paul Reaves is the Mission Advancement Adviser for the District. He served as Vice President of the Lutheran Church Extension Fund in the Mid-South District for nearly 33 years, helping congregations with financial services, investments, grants, and building projects. Reaves, alongside President Rockey, has announced a 1-to-3 return-on-investment ratio for donor contributions! "This measures how effectively initial donations are turned into expanded resources through matching grants or strategic partnerships," Reaves explains.

"We thank the Lord that He has moved the Lead Donors in such a generous way to offer this \$1 for every \$3 given match," Rockey continues, "There is no doubt, the people of God in the Florida-Georgia District are being *COMPELLED* to not only reach our Mission Advancement goals, but to reach many more for Christ's Kingdom!"

The Florida-Georgia District is Christ's Body called together to honor and serve our Lord while equipping the people of God to share Christ with our neighbors. The Mission Advancement Initiative is focused on doing that perpetually. "The Mission Advancement team is setting up *Mission Advancement Support Banquets* around the District in the coming months and we pray that you might join us," Rockey concludes. Our FLGA District Staff is also available to meet with you in person to share more about how you can be part of our *Mission Advancement Initiative!* Call our office at 407-258-5044 or contact Paul Reaves at 901-395-7051 or paulreaves@aol.com to learn more.



The season of Lent leads us to recognizing we daily fail to live up to the Lord's Law and standards. I know that might strike you as a bit harsh. But I too deal with my inclination to believe that I'm really a "good guy." I'm generally loving and considerate of others. I go to worship, give of myself and say I am a Christian. Yet regardless of my good deeds, I still fall short (ROMANS 3: 23).

Therefore, we are taught in the Lord's Prayer that we are to ask the Lord to "Forgive us our trespasses ..." Here's the problem, at least it is often for me. I skim the surface. I confess the obvious, the known sins. I pray that general prayer of confession without really looking at the depth of my sin and how true it is that "all our righteous acts are but filthy (blood stained and useless) rags" (ISAIAH 64: 6).

The truth is, "all have sinned" and stand guilty before our Just Judge and God. That means that it doesn't matter what good we've done. It doesn't matter if we meant to do what we did or not. It doesn't matter if our action or deed seems justified to us or others or not. It doesn't matter if it was our first time or thousandth or even if we didn't know what we were doing was against the will and commands of God ... If we've sinned, we are guilty and due just punishment. The Lord says through Paul, "For the wages of sin is death" (ROMANS 6:23).

Luther's explanation to the Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer "Forgive our trespasses" addresses this. What does this mean? We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look at our sins or deny our

# A JUST JUDGE... AND MORE

prayer because of them. We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them, but we ask that He would give them all to us by grace, for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment. So we too will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us.

I encourage you to regularly use the Small Catechism in your own faith life. I know that for me, like reading the above, my eyes and heart are often opened anew to seeing things more clearly. What strikes me in this Lenten season is again the reality that “I (we) daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment.” “That we are neither worthy of the things which we pray, nor have we deserved them.” Daily practicing the Biblical teaching and spiritual discipline of confession is a response to the Law of God that confronts me through His very Word and in listening to the Law written on my heart (ROMANS 2:15, JEREMIAH 31: 31-34).

As I write this, the news is filled with debate over the French ice skating judge and her scoring of the US team in contrast to that of the other judges. When I wrestled, it would have been unfair and unethical for the judges and referees to interfere or intervene to help a competitor. Once the event begins, athletes are supposed to be on their own. Judges are not supposed to get involved or show favoritism. Indeed, our God is such a judge. “God is a righteous judge, a God who displays his wrath every day” (PSALM 7:1). Or “Our God comes and will not be silent; a fire devours before him, and

around him a tempest rages. He summons the heavens above and the earth, that he may judge his people ... and the heavens proclaim his righteousness, for he is a God of justice” (PSALM 50: 2-6).

Yet our God, the One true God and Savior, does not fit into our limited understanding or definitions. Imagine that you are a judge. Your role is to uphold, apply and execute the law. It’s the standard you must adhere to without fail. One day a man stands before you who has committed one of the most heinous and vile crimes. The evidence is rock solid and his guilt is clear — he even confesses it and expresses his sorrow over what he did. Then he asks you to forgive him. And in spite of what the law says, in spite of your job and responsibility to apply justice, you grant him forgiveness and let him walk free. If a human judge acted in that way, we’d be angry and indignant.

Dear friends, that is exactly what our Judge has done. In spite of the clear standards of God’s Law. In spite of the overwhelming evidence of our sin and offenses, He forgives us our crimes, washes away our guilt and sets us free from the penalty of our sin. Such action begs us to ask; how can He do that and uphold His Holy Law?

Paul gives us God’s incredible answer. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 CORINTHIANS 5: 21). That is the

wonderous teaching of substitution and that is how God is both our just Judge and merciful justifier! God poured out the full penalty, the full punishment on His Son, Jesus to grant forgiveness to His people. It is overwhelming in this Lenten season to think that God treated Jesus on the cross as if He had lived my life and punished Him for every sin I ever committed or will, fully satisfying His justice. Yes, He did that for me and He did that for you!

Again, we are reminded that “the wages of sin is death.” Yet, be assured that our God is not only JUST, but He is “abounding in steadfast love” (PSALM 103: 8). Therefore, take to heart the second part of ROMANS 6: 23, “But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord!” Yes indeed, our God is “A Just Judge ... and More!”

*Your Fellow  
Servant  
and Witness,*



*James Rockey*

**PRESIDENT FLORIDA-GEORGIA DISTRICT  
LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD**

# NADCE Conference Brings Educators Together for

From January 21–23, 2026, approximately 225 Directors of Christian Education (DCEs) from across the country gathered in South Florida for the biennial conference of the National Association of Directors of Christian Education (NADCE), hosted by **St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL**

“The mission of the national organization is to promote

create a seamless experience that allowed attendees to focus fully on worship, learning, and relationship-building. Throughout the week, DCEs connected with peers from around the country, shared ministry stories, exchanged ideas, and found encouragement in being part of a broader professional and spiritual community.

and welcoming flow to the conference. Worship was led by *Tribe and Tongue*, who provided meaningful music during sessions and also hosted an outdoor Wednesday night concert at St. Paul that became a highlight for many. Together, these leaders and musicians supported the broader conference purpose of equipping DCEs for ministry while reminding them of God’s presence in both their work and their rest.

Behind the scenes, a dedicated planning team helped shape every detail of the gathering, including Katy Bass, Jeremy Becker, Tais Brekke, Rev. Steve Carretto, Audrey Duensing-Werner, Eric Gerken, Hannah Schauer, Nick Moss and Cassie Shermbeck. Support from the NADCE Board was provided by Maria Devenport, Tyler Tollefson, and Hailey Jo Miller, who served as vital partners throughout the process.



Christian Education by providing advocacy, professional connections and resources among the DCEs,” explains Jennifer Tanner, Executive Director for Schools and Youth Ministry for the Florida-Georgia District of the LCMS. Jennifer, along with Cindy Hammerstrom (Executive Assistant | Schools & Youth Ministry), and Tais Brekke (Communications Specialist) represented the FLGA district at the conference. This year’s theme, Rest Assured, invited ministry leaders to step away from the demands of daily service and rediscover God’s sustaining grace alongside colleagues who share the unique joys and challenges of Christian education.

Participants were welcomed with coordinated transportation from the airport and between the church campus and the beachfront hotel in Deerfield Beach, to help

“The goal was never just a conference,” Jeremy Becker, DCE at **St. Paul/Weston, FL** and a chair of the 2026 conference planning team, shares. “It was about creating space for DCEs to connect, to be supported, to grow in their calling, and to truly experience rest – spiritually and professionally.”

The conference featured keynote presentations from Kelly Balarie, an author of several books centered on mental and spiritual resilience and founder of Purposeful Faith; and Rev. Dr. Chad Lakies, Vice President for Ministry Engagement at Lutheran Hour Ministries – both of whom encouraged participants in faithful witness, resilience, and vocational renewal. Serving as engaging emcee’s throughout the event, Pastor Steve Carretto and DCE Cassie Shermbeck guided attendees through sessions with warmth and energy, helping create a cohesive



**Kelly Balarie**

*Balarie, a former resident of Boca Raton, Florida, lives in Annapolis, Maryland and is married to Emmanuel is a prominent figure in the financial services industry. They have two children: son Michael, who has been featured in her anecdotes about teaching faith and generosity, and her daughter, Maddie who has attended some mother-daughter Christian retreats with Kelly.*

# Rest, Renewal, Connection in Boca Raton, Florida

St. Paul Boca Raton's staff and congregation played a central role in creating a warm, hospitable environment for guests from across the LCMS. This effort was led by MaryBeth Keenan and Christy Secreto, along with more than 50 volunteers who assisted with transportation, meals, directions, and onsite coordination – helping every attendee feel genuinely welcomed and cared for.

A highlight of the conference was the celebration banquet, hosted by poet, author, and speaker Tanner Olson, who brought both humor and heartfelt reflection to the evening. During the banquet, NADCE honored three outstanding DCEs for their faithful service:

- Kurt Bickel, recipient of the Dale E. Griffin Master Statesman Award;
- Melissa Luepke, Master DCE Award;

- Julia Newkirk, Outstanding New DCE Award.

These recognitions underscored the association's commitment to celebrating excellence, longevity, and emerging leadership within the DCE community.

"As attendees returned home to their congregations, schools, and ministries, they carried with them more than notes from sessions – they left renewed by worship, strengthened through relationships, and reminded that they do not serve alone," Becker concludes. "The NADCE conference continues to be a vital space where DCEs are equipped, encouraged, and reminded of God's promise to sustain them in every season of ministry."



Tanner Olson      Kurt Bickel      Melissa Luepke      Julia Newkirk



Some of the breakout sessions were presented by



**Chad Lakies**

The Rev. Dr. Chad Lakies is the Vice President for Ministry Engagement for Lutheran Hour Ministries (LHM). He is a theologian, author, and speaker known for his work on how the church can engage with secular culture and non-believers. He is the author of *How the Light Shines Through: Resilient Witness in Dark Times* (2024), which discusses how to share faith in contemporary culture.



Brandon Metcalf is Associate Pastor of Family Ministry at Zion/Bethalto, IL. Overcommitment and Burnout.



Dr. Sara Zillinger is a frequent contributor to Lutheran youth and family ministries.



Dale Kreienkamp is Chair of the Board of Directors for Grace Place Wellness Ministries.



The Rev. Mark Kiessling serves as the director of LCMS Youth Ministry for The LCMS.



Julianna Shults is a rostered DCE serving as the Program Manager for Resources and Leadership for LCMS Youth Ministry.



The Rev. Andy Becker serves as the manager of Family Discipleships for the LCMS.



Amy Hubach is Associate Director of the DCE program at Concordia/Nebraska.



Hannah Lang serves Messiah/St. Charles, MO as Director of Kids Ministries.



Eric Gerken is a 28-year veteran DCE serving Prince of Peace/Orlando. Eric also serves as commissioned minister on the FLGA Board of Directors.



Audrey Duensing-Werner is a highly experienced DCE currently serving as the Family Life Director at Gloria Dei/Houston, TX.



Laura Keugele serves as DCE at Trinity/Tyler, TX. She has 25 years experience in helping parents be Christ-like servant leaders in their homes.



Ashley Bayless serves as the Vice President of Global Content at Lutheran Hour Ministries.

# District Executives Spend First Quarter of 2026 Meeting

The Florida-Georgia (FLGA) District Partnership Events are regional gatherings designed to unite local congregations for mutual encouragement and strategic planning. Led by President James Rockey and the District Executive Staff, these events center on the theme “Compelled by Christ’s Love” to fulfill the mission of “Connecting People to Jesus.”

Key elements of these events include:

1) Equipping Congregations: The attendees participate in a meal and round table discussions focused on practical ways to better reach their local communities.

2) Relationship Building: The events provide a space for lay leaders, pastors, and school administrators to get to know District staff and one another.

3) Vision & Ministry Targets: Participants learn about the District’s Vision and Ministry Targets, which include cultivating the Christian identity of every disciple, supporting church workers and leaders in healthy ministry, helping congregations engage their communities and fostering a sense of shared District identity.

4) Resource Awareness: Leaders gain insight into the specific resources and assistance the District provides to support local ministry efforts.

These partnership gatherings often lead into encouragement for larger District activities, such as the 2026 Fall President’s Equip Conference held at the Rosen Centre Hotel, 9840 International Drive, Orlando, FL 32819 from September 30th through October 2nd.

## ROAD SHOW

The Rev. Dr. James “Jim” Tino (left) is currently based in Miramar, Florida, where he serves as the Founder and Director of Global Lutheran Outreach (GLO).

While his administrative and missionary leadership office is in Florida, he has a significant international presence. Pastor Tino served as the interpreter for the District Partnership Event held Monday, February 2 at Principe De Paz in Hollywood. FLGA District President James Rockey led the event with presentations made by The Rev. Eric Sahlberg, Executive Director for Mission and Outreach; Jay Wendland, the District Vice President for the Lutheran Church Extension Fund (LCEF) and the FLGA District Disaster Relief Coordinator; and Jennifer Tanner, Executive Director for School and Youth Ministry – where she



focused on Children’s Ministry and Family Outreach working alongside the leadership team to equip local leaders for the district’s vision.

The events have had robust participation with a strong mix of pastors, educators and lay leaders of the congregations and schools.



# g With All Circuits



*Eric Sahlberg*



*Jay Wendland*



*Jennifer Tanner*

## JANUARY PARTNERSHIP EVENTS

All dates begin at 5:30pm and finish by 8:00pm with dinner provided.

Tallahassee - Circuit #5  
Epiphany Lutheran Church  
8300 Deerlake Road, Tallahassee, FL 32312  
**January 6, 2026 | RSVP by December 22**

First Coast - Circuit #6  
Grace Lutheran Church  
12200 McCormick Road, Jacksonville, FL 32225  
**January 7, 2026 | RSVP by December 23**

North Central FL - Circuit #7  
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church  
5200 SW College Road, Ocala, FL 34474  
**January 8, 2026 | RSVP by December 23**

Southwest - Circuit #17  
Zion Lutheran Church  
7401 Winkler Road, Fort Myers, FL 33919  
**January 13, 2026 | RSVP by January 8**

Sarasota - Circuit #16  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
5659 Honore Avenue, Sarasota, FL 34233  
**January 14, 2026 | RSVP by January 7**

Heartland - Circuit #12  
Trinity Lutheran Church  
25 Lakeview Street, Lake Placid, FL 33852  
**January 15, 2026 | RSVP by January 10**

**Circuit 5 - Tallahassee**  
RSVP to Cindy Hafner  
Chafner@epiphanystar.org

**Circuit 6 - First Coast**  
RSVP to Ari Johns  
areannah718@yahoo.com  
810-333-0529

**Circuit 7 - North Central FL**  
RSVP to Teresa Silberman  
churchoffice@ourredeemerocala.org  
352-237-2233

**Circuit 17 - Southwest**  
RSVP to Rachel Gumbs  
officeassistant@zionfm.org  
239-481-4040

**Circuit 16 - Sarasota**  
RSVP to Chris Dermody  
941-356-7705  
billchris4952@gmail.com

**Circuit 12 - Heartland**  
RSVP to Susan Norris  
s\_norris123@yahoo.com  
863-465-6313



## FEBRUARY PARTNERSHIP EVENTS

All dates begin at 5:30pm and finish by 8:00pm with dinner provided.

**Circuit 20/21**  
**Gold Coast & Monroe-Miami- Dade**  
RSVP to Paloma Urra  
pramirezurra@gmail.com  
786-400-8327

Gold Coast & Monroe-Miami-Dade - Circuit #20 & #21  
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church  
3000 N 75th Avenue Hollywood, FL 33024  
**February 2, 2026 | RSVP by January 27**

**Circuit 19 - South Palm Beach**  
RSVP to Brandi Ball  
sonlifelutheran@bellsouth.net  
561-738-5433

South Palm Beach - Circuit #19  
Son of Life Lutheran Church  
9301 Jog Road Boynton Beach, FL 33437  
**February 3, 2026 | RSVP by January 27**

**Circuit 11 - Winter Haven**  
RSVP to Ellen Mocaraski  
churchsecretary@clclakeland.org  
863-682-7802

Winter Haven - Circuit #11  
Christ Lutheran Church  
2715 Lakeland Hills Blvd. Lakeland, FL 33805  
**February 4, 2026 | RSVP by January 28**

**Circuit 18 - Treasure Coast**  
RSVP to Kristen Cruz  
kcruz@redeemerstuart.com

Treasure Coast - Circuit #18  
Redeemer Lutheran Church  
2450 SE Ocean Blvd. Stuart, FL 34996  
**February 26, 2026 | RSVP by February 18**



## MARCH PARTNERSHIP EVENTS

All dates begin at 5:30pm and finish by 8:00pm with dinner provided.

Space Coast - Circuit #8  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
2073 Garden Street Titusville, FL 32796  
**March 2, 2026 | RSVP by February 26**

**Circuit 8 - Space Coast**  
RSVP to Krista Mathews  
kmathews7577@earthlink.net  
321-474-7445

East Central GA - Circuit #4  
Christ Lutheran Church  
208 Langston Road Perry, GA 31069  
**March 5, 2026 | RSVP by February 27**

**Circuit 4 - East Central GA**  
RSVP to Church Office EMAIL only  
ChristLutheranPerry@gmail.com

Northeast Georgia - Circuit #1  
St. Peters Lutheran Church  
3460 S. Chestatee Street Dahlonega, GA 30533  
**March 22, 2026 | RSVP by March 12**

**Circuit 1 - Northeast Georgia**  
RSVP to Jane Siedschlag and Jan Munson  
church@stpeter-lutheran.org  
706-864-6001

North Atlanta - Circuit #2  
Faith Lutheran Church  
2111 Lower Roswell Road Marietta, GA 30068  
**March 23, 2026 | RSVP TBD**



South Atlanta - Circuit #3  
Christ Lutheran Church  
3235 Teamon Road Griffin, GA 30223  
**March 24, 2026 | RSVP by March 16**

**Circuit 2 - North Atlanta**  
RSVP to TBD

**Circuit 3 - South Atlanta**  
RSVP to Pastor Joe Warnke  
pastorwarnke@gmail.com  
706-974-8932

# NATIONAL LUTHERAN SCHOOLS

National Lutheran Schools Week (NLSW) is an annual celebration that gives more than 1,800 schools across the The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) network a public opportunity to proclaim and celebrate the work of God in their classrooms and communities.

“Approximately 300 middle schoolers shared in worship, serving, and fun interaction from **Trinity/Delray Beach, FL, Redeemer/Stuart, FL, Shepherd of the Coast/Ft. Lauderdale, FL and St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL.** The day made a huge impact to unite for National Lutheran Schools Week and work together as the Body of Christ,” exclaims Rebecca Schaffer, Music Director for St. Paul. “The students assembled 20,000 pairs of socks and 200 hygiene kits for GIVT along with 60 Cancer Care Boxes including tie blankets and cards of encouragement for Phil’s Friends.”

GIVT is a service project platform that schools often use during National Lutheran Schools Week to collect offerings for mission projects, such as supporting food pantries, military personnel, or international ministries. Donors can receive updates and see exactly how their money is being used for the service project.

Phil’s Friends is a faith-based nonprofit organization, an official Recognized Service Organization (RSO) of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod that provides Christ-centered support and hope to individuals of all ages who are battling cancer. It was founded in 2006 by Phil Zielke,

for patients and their families – especially during chapel services of National Lutheran Schools Week.

Schools typically engage in a variety of spiritual and community-building activities with daily themed dress-Ups – students might dress as service professionals, in school colors, or in “joyful noise” attire; service projects – collecting items for food pantries, military personnel, or nursing homes – or in the case of the four South Florida schools, Phil’s Friends. Additionally, special worship services and collaborative chapel services featuring student music groups, or special

drama performances. Community outreach might include creating banners for local congregations or passing out handmade thank-you bookmarks to church members.

The Lutheran school system is the largest Protestant school system in the United States, comprising more than 2,500 institutions including preschools, high schools, and universities. During this week, these schools highlight their mission of providing excellent academic preparation while sharing the message of Jesus’ love with families. Approximately 92 schools exist in the FLGA District comprised of 60 pre-schools, 30 elementary and middle schools and two secondary high schools.



a two-time Stage 4 cancer survivor, who wanted to replicate the encouragement he received during his own treatment. The organization focuses on three main ways to support cancer patients: care packages that are often hand-assembled – customized boxes containing practical and comforting items such as a Bible, a warm blanket, a hat, a journal, personal care products, and puzzle books. Cards of hope – after receiving a care package, patients receive hand-colored cards and personalized notes of encouragement monthly for a full year. And lastly, prayer: – dedicated students, staff and volunteers regularly offer prayers



# WEEK MAKES A JOYFUL NOISE



# First Launches National Schools Week With Original Composition



“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!”  
— PSALM 98:4

**First/Clearwater FL** launched National Lutheran Schools Week as students joyfully lifted their voices on Sunday, January 25, 2026. The week opened with a special worship service giving thanks for the gift of Lutheran education. Children from preschool through eighth grade sang spirited songs and played rhythm instruments, recorders, and tone chimes.

One of the service’s most memorable moments came when the entire student body performed “*Make a Joyful Noise to the Lord*,” an original song composed by Musician in Residence Tim Jacobsmeyer. With voices, instruments, and joyful movement, the students offered a beautiful and heartfelt praise to God.




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In the world of church planting, the charisma of the planter or the location of the Sunday service are often mistakenly viewed as the primary drivers of growth. Research from major networks indicates a different reality: the core team is the *single greatest predictor* of whether a church plant will survive past its fourth year. Building this team is not merely a logistical necessity; it is the strategic engine that determines viability, culture, and evangelistic impact.

### The “Critical Mass” Rule

The difference between a church that thrives and one that struggles with burnout often

strategic archetypes. To succeed, a planter must recruit:

✓ **The Stakeholder:** Financially stable individuals who anchor the budget, reducing early financial stress.

✓ **The Gatherer:** People with the natural ability to attract others, ensuring growth extends beyond the pastor’s personal network.

✓ **The Theological Anchor:**

Individuals grounded in doctrine (e.g., the Small Catechism) who can share the load of discipleship.

programs, but to love the city, share the Gospel, and engage new populations effectively.

### The Compelled Mission

The FLGA District Mission Advancement Initiative’s vision is to plant twenty new churches over



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the next ten years. To reach this goal, we need dozens of new core teams across the FLGA District. A new core team starts with one

# The Engine of Survival: Why the Core Team Defines Church Planting Success

comes down to a specific number. Launching a new church with fewer than 25 adults is categorized as “High Risk,” leaving the church vulnerable to financial anxiety and requiring a bivocational leader (where an individual maintains two distinct vocations – typically a religious ministry role and a separate “secular” job to survive). However, starting a new core team starts with just one Spirit-led leader. Over time, additional people are added to the core team reaching new milestones for the church plant.

### Recruitment

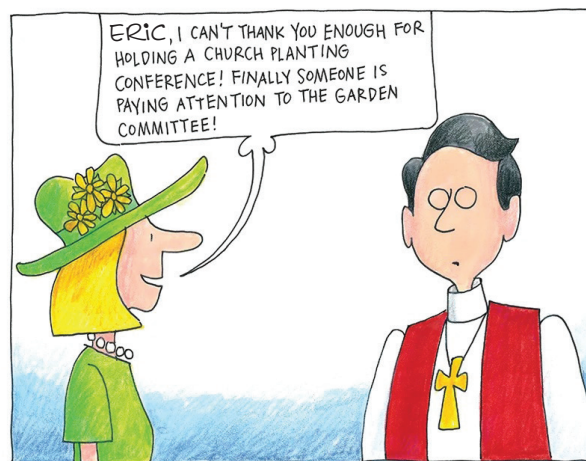
The most vital function of the core team phase is shifting the mindset of members from “Attendees” (consumers) to “Founders” (owners). Building a healthy core team requires a rigorous “quality filter.” A common mistake is filling the room with “warm bodies” rather than

### FLGA District Best-in-Class Training

Survivability increases by 250% when the core team receives formal leadership development rather than just logistical instructions. By utilizing peer cohorts, online and in-person style training with best-in-class, globally tested resources success rates increase to 93% by year four, compared to the national average of 68%.

Ultimately, the core team is the first line of proof for the church’s mission. Since new churches gain 60–80% of their members from the unchurched – compared to established churches which rely mostly on transfers – the core team must be trained not just to manage internal

Spirit-led leader with a heart for Jesus and their community. If you would like to start a new core team in your city and receive globally tested, best-in-class training, please contact Eric Sahlberg at the FLGA district office. Email [esahlberg@flgadistrict.org](mailto:esahlberg@flgadistrict.org) or call 407-258-5051. The FLGA district is registering teams for a Fall cohort starting September 2026.



# Habitat For Children Ministries

For two decades now, Habitat For Children Ministries (HFCM) has navigated every challenge with steadfast joy and unwavering faith. “We have been humbled to watch God expand our mission, allowing us to deliver vital food, supplies including household, school and medical, and hope to the resilient children and families in Haiti,” explains Meschac St. Amour, President of Habitat For Children Ministries, Inc. “God’s faithfulness remains our compass as we look toward the future, committed to the same passion and purpose that first ignited this ministry.”

“In one of the most challenging chapters of Haiti’s history, Habitat For Children Ministries is pouring its heart, energy, and faith into the nation,” St. Amour continues. “The work transcends simple aid. It is a dedicated mission to restore hope, dignity, and opportunity to the communities that have endured years of instability, poverty, and natural disasters.”

At the core of the ministry is a fundamental belief: every child deserves safety, education, and love. It is a challenge to provide nutritious meals and essential supplies to children facing severe

and the resources necessary for a productive learning environment;

- Empowering educators – supporting teachers and staff so they can remain in the classroom, even when local conditions are volatile;
- Ensuring stability – offering a safe place for children to learn about the Bible when the world around them feels uncertain.

“Our impact is felt through hands-on, local engagement. Our teams are active on the ground to deliver critical aid, life-saving clean water, food, and hygiene kits,” he says. We emphasize spiritual care – providing emotional support and spiritual encouragement to those who feel overlooked by the world.”

HFCM is committed to the community. They absolutely refuse to fade. When others might pull back due to danger or unpredictability, HFCM continues to show up. This persistence is rooted in deep compassion, steadfast faith, and a genuine love for the Haitian people. “We aren’t just reacting to the crisis of today we are nurturing the hope required for a brighter tomorrow.”



Because of the generosity of donors, this vital kingdom work persists – even in the face of immense obstacles. Each trip is a testament of faith in motion choosing joy through every trial.

Getting food and medical supplies to the poor in Haiti is increasingly a high-stakes logistics battle against gang-controlled territory, soaring inflation, and broken infrastructure. Humanitarian organizations and local communities use a mix of “over-the-road” alternatives and local sourcing to reach the estimated 5.4 million people facing acute hunger.

food insecurity.

Delivering basic necessities to families struggling to survive and creating safe, nurturing environments where children can learn, grow, and reclaim their right to dream remains the priority of HFCM. They focus heavily on rural regions like La Jeune in northern Haiti. The organization views education as the cornerstone of long-term change. Despite the immense obstacles facing the Haitian school system, they continue to invest in the next generation by:

- Equipping students – providing uniforms, books,



Dr. St. Ulysse is the Medical Director of the Habitat Care Center. He has witnessed a significant shift over the past two years. “Our patient volume has grown substantially – with

# Achieves 20 Years of Faith in Action

a pressing need for pediatric care and the management of chronic conditions like hypertension and diabetes,” he submits. “Yet, as our numbers grow, our mission remains constant— to provide high-quality medical intervention paired with unwavering family support. We view education as the cornerstone of community health. By instilling habits of self-care and health awareness in our youth, we empower them to become the architects of their own well-being.”



*The Rev. Cris Escher and Meschac St. Amour are key leaders of Habitat for Children's Ministries based out of Grace/Port St. Lucie, Florida*

St. Ulysse’s dedicated team is committed to maintaining a sanctuary of healing for every family. “Beyond the clinic walls, we embrace a holistic vision extending our reach into schools and remote communities to cultivate a healthier, more resilient generation for the future of Haiti.”

Additional information is available from Habitat For Children Ministries at their Florida headquarters: 555 SW Cashmere Blvd., Port St. FL 34986 or via email: [information@habitatforchildrenministries.org](mailto:information@habitatforchildrenministries.org).



Whether you call it church health, reversing decline or church revitalization, the goal is the same: *being the church which receives and shares the grace of God in Jesus Christ*. The motivation is also God's grace in Christ. As Jesus said in MATTHEW 10:8, "Freely you have received; freely give." We have been forgiven and we bear witness, evangelize or love others because "He first loved us" 1 JOHN 4:19. Yet

It begins in the Christian home where such supportive mentoring, conversation, prayers and practices are regular and intentional. Then a healthy church will likely include personalized conversations with individuals and families where a growth plan is co-created. Then devoted mature Christians or even a couple come alongside as mentors or coaches for the journey. I have witnessed

exactly this blessing as I saw my parents mentored by others at church.

Yet there is another key ingredient: *helping people find a way to serve beyond themselves*. The

principle is that as one serves others, the pull of sinful self-service weakens. This is growing in

**A healthy church will likely include personalized conversations with individuals and families where a growth plan is co-created**

Christ who came "not to be served but to be served" (MATTHEW 20:28). Christian growth happens most readily on a safe "canvas" where one can learn and practice and serve.

Such selfless service does not come naturally. Thus the value of mature Christians who selflessly, faithfully and intentionally model and mentor others as their apprentice. Which, by the way, doesn't come naturally either! So there is great value of being together as the body of Christ. The bonus is growing closer together until the apprentice can replicate what they are learning! All the while each each hungers all the more for God's Word and worship. There they will gather with the "communion of saints" and say all the more in word and deed, "Jesus loves you!"

*Rev. Scott Gress is a Professional Certified Coach and believes in Growing People for Ministry with a focus on leadership, discipleship and teamwork. Check out The Coaching Leader podcast and Scott's YouTube channel for more on revitalization. Contact Scott if you are interested in working with him or your church: scottgress@me.com, scottgress.com or at 561-542-4472*



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like most things such Christian practices are more caught than taught.

This leads us to the second "realm" of intentionally growing people. (See prior columns for the five shifts and first realm). Of course people grow through the Word or the Bible as it is preached and taught in sermons and Bible class in addition to personal Bible reading. Such devotion is "standard operating procedure."

Yet Christian growth is far more than just learning new information. Growth consistently requires timely, in the moment behavioral "rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 TIMOTHY 3:16). This is not a solo act but rather learning as an apprentice with the active support of others.



## The Mystery of Revitalization Part 4

# Faithful Care in Changing Seasons of Ministry: Teaching Positions, Parental Leave, and Enrollment Realities

Early Learning Centers connected to our congregations are living through a season of change. Shifting enrollment patterns can require difficult decisions, including reducing classrooms, consolidating age groups, or discontinuing a portion of a program that can no longer be sustained. When these changes affect staffing – particularly a teaching position – the impact is deeply personal. That impact is felt even more acutely when a teacher is on maternal or paternal leave at the time the decision is made.

As people of faith, we rightly want to lead with compassion, care, and respect for the vocation of those who serve our children. At the same time, congregations and schools must act responsibly as stewards of limited resources. Holding these commitments together requires prayerful discernment, transparency, and careful attention to both pastoral responsibilities and legal obligations.

At the federal level, parental leave protections are governed primarily by the Family and Medical Leave Act, commonly referred to as FMLA. This Act applies in both Florida and Georgia, but it does not apply in every situation. A ministry or Early Learning Center is covered only if it employs at least 50 employees within a seventy-five-mile radius, and the individual teacher must also meet eligibility requirements related to length of service and hours worked.

When FMLA applies, it provides eligible teachers with up to twelve weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave following the birth or adoption of a child. Ordinarily, a teacher returning from FMLA leave is entitled to return to the same position or an equivalent one. At

the same time, the Act recognizes that ministries may face legitimate operational changes. If a teaching position is eliminated because a classroom or program no longer exists due to declining enrollment, that decision may still be lawful, even if it occurs during parental leave. The key distinction is whether the position was eliminated because of ministry needs, not because the teacher took leave. Even when FMLA does not apply, congregations are not operating in a legal vacuum.

Other federal laws and applicable state law in Florida and Georgia continue to govern employment decisions. Teachers remain protected against discrimination related to pregnancy, childbirth, or family status, as well as retaliation for exercising lawful rights. For that reason, decisions involving a teacher on parental leave should always be approached with care, humility, and good documentation.

In an Early Learning Center setting, enrollment decline can be a legitimate reason to eliminate a teaching position. If student numbers no longer support a classroom or age group, leadership may determine that the associated teaching role can no longer be sustained. What matters, both legally and pastorally, is that the decision focuses on the elimination of the classroom or program, *not on the individual teacher*. Clear records showing enrollment trends, staffing needs, and budget realities help ensure transparency and fairness.

Leadership should also thoughtfully consider whether reassignment is possible. If a particular classroom is eliminated but other substantially similar teaching positions remain, it may



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be appropriate to explore whether the teacher could be placed in another role. The law does not require creating new positions or displacing others, but exploring reasonable options reflects care for the individual and respect for their calling.

Communication in these moments matters greatly. A teacher returning from parental leave should not feel blindsided or treated as an afterthought. While conversations during leave must be handled sensitively, honest and compassionate explanation grounded in ministry realities honors the dignity of the teacher and helps preserve trust, even when the outcome is painful.

Ultimately, eliminating a teaching position because enrollment has declined *is not a judgment on a teacher's worth, faithfulness, or effectiveness*. It is a response to changing circumstances within the ministry. When these decisions are made with prayer, transparency, and attentiveness to both the law and the Gospel's call to love our neighbor, congregations can navigate even the hardest seasons with integrity and grace.

## Third Annual LCMS District Forum

Despite the snowy road conditions in St. Louis, MO, and much of the Midwest, the weather did not deter any of the 48 district leaders – representing 31 LCMS districts – who attended the third annual district forum at The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) International Center (IC) in St. Louis on Dec. 2–3, 2025.

The event, hosted by the LCMS Office of National Mission (ONM), acts as a key opportunity for ONM staff and district leaders to collaborate on areas of both growth and challenge that face their ministry.

Many district leaders shared that they had prioritized attending the forum: “We knew that this was going to be a really important conference to get more tools in our toolbelts,” said first-time attendee Deaconess Melissa DeGroot, mission executive for the LCMS Rocky Mountain District.

Attending for the third time, the Rev. Jim Henkell, ministry executive for the LCMS Pacific Southwest District, described the shared enthusiasm around the event: “The interaction with colleagues is phenomenal: to discover and learn what God is doing in their districts and to discern if that applies to us, and also to delight in it with them.”

The first part of the day included two breakout training sessions, offered by National Mission, from which participants could choose: one on “Exploring God’s Mission Here,” a Bible study and congregational planning tool; and another on ONM grant programs, led by Deaconess Maryann Hayter, LCMS manager of grantmaking.

The Rev. Dan Galchutt, ONM executive director and interim LCMS chief mission officer, explained “Exploring God’s Mission

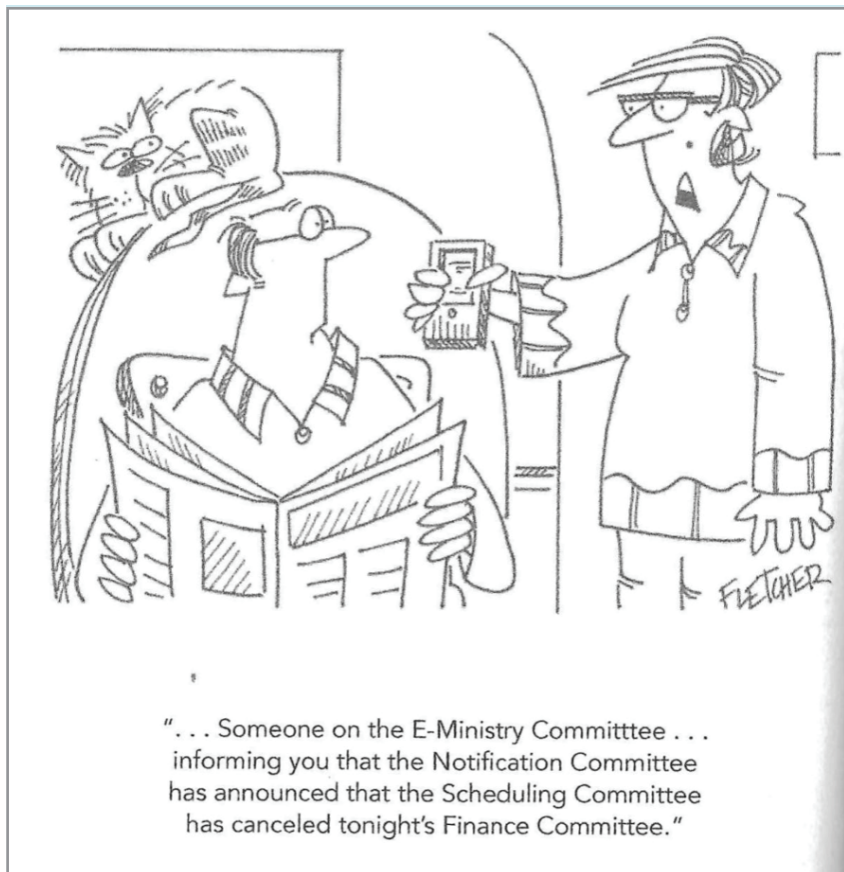
Here” as a resource designed to help facilitate “tough conversations with congregations that are in challenging spots.” It seeks to address the spiritual and emotional side of those conversations while also helping to isolate the relevant facts and numbers. Designed to be led by a district leader, the Bible study includes questions to guide congregational self-appraisal, then points the congregation toward possible next steps, such as revitalization, developing partnerships, church planting/replanting, or even a blessed end.

Throughout Galchutt’s presentation, group discussion revolved around two main questions: How can leaders and congregations be more proactive, and how can leaders encourage people to participate in the ongoing mission of God: seeking and saving the lost?

In the grantmaking training session, Hayter walked participants through nine separate grant programs that offer funding to congregations, schools, Recognized Service Organizations (RSOs) and workers. “What I really love [about the district forum] is [that] it’s an opportunity to hear from the district personnel. While I was giving them a ton of different information, I was also acquiring from them what we could do better to communicate with them and with the congregations and RSOs within their districts,” said Hayter.

Later in the day, discussion topics and presentations were provided by the district leaders. The Rev. Daniel Grams, mission executive in the LCMS Kansas District, and the Rev. Dr. Allan Buss, president of the LCMS Northern Illinois District, discussed church revitalization.

Grams walked through a case study of successful revitalization at Christ Lutheran Church in Manhattan, Kansas, which had declined to only 12 members and



# Held in St. Louis

was ready to close its doors. Through a partnership with the district and the calling of a pastor (The Rev. James D. Woelmer), the church devoted itself to the intention “that God may instill in our hearts a passion for the lost.” Woelmer visited and shared the Gospel with more than 250 unchurched families. During the course of two years, Christ Lutheran gained 45 new members and now has a weekly attendance of approximately 60.

No matter how big or small, “all of our congregations are always in need of revitalization,” said Buss in his presentation, which emphasized the importance of tapping into the energy and leadership of laypeople.

Addressing the group on the topic of all nations ministry, three mission executives presented: the Rev. Vue Lee from the LCMS

Minnesota South District, the Rev. Dr. Yared Halche from the Southeastern District and the Rev. Kristopher Whitby from the Northern Illinois District.

“The Gospel works. Don’t be tired of the Gospel,” said Halche, a message echoed by Lee and Whitby, as all three gave testimony of the Lord at work across the U.S. through ethnic church plants, partnerships and urban ministry.

The ONM offered a resource fair for attendees to have consultation and discussion with staff, and, on the second day, district and ONM leaders took part in roundtable discussions focused on the districts’ recently concluded conventions, exchanging ideas, struggles and success stories in areas including school ministry, worker wellness, church planting and disaster response.

Speaking to the 48 district

leaders and 32 ONM staff, the Rev. Michael Meyer, ONM managing director, preached on JAMES 5:7-12: “Yes, there are dry spells and challenges, but there is also blessing upon blessing, grace upon grace, from which our hearts are established and rooted and strengthened. From the words and the promises of God, patience springs forth like a well of living water – patience to endure one another, on the one hand, and to endure with each other on the other. ...

“And may there be a lot more of this. For we have the opportunity not to grumble, but to be patient – to share and converse, to listen and to learn, and to encourage and to endure together.”

*by Mary Henrichs  
(mary.henrichs@lcms.org),  
staff writer for LCMS Communications*



## LEGAL GUIDANCE FOR CHURCHES & MINISTRIES

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

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I am a long-distance grandma!

Living 1,108 miles away from two grandsons and 1,158 miles from three other grandsons is a challenge. So for many years, I have personally supported the U.S. Postal Service by sending countless brown boxes.



**Dr. Mary Manz Simon**  
Author & Educator  
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marymanzsimon.com  
239-208-2260

Clippings from newspapers, magazines with articles of interest, but most of all books, have reminded the boys of this grandma who loves them, but lives in Ft. Myers, Florida.

I'm grateful that the Holy Spirit has provided a more significant way to leave a legacy. Each day, my husband and I pray. For several years, every day we have prayed individually for the boys.

As an educator, I concur with research recently revealed by the Barna Group: faith-based rhythms "help reinforce, emotional, relational and spiritual bonds at home." I believe prayer is one of those "rhythms."

I yearn for these young men to embrace what matters: honesty, resilience, discretion, loyalty and the other virtues

## New Project Connect Booklets Announced: Character-Building Prayers For Grandchildren

that are embedded in a Christian family. Years ago, we wrapped our children in these character-building values. Now, I ask God to deeply embed these same values in our grandsons.

These petitions aren't fancy. The prayer about courage asks God to "boost inner resilience to stride past risk." I'm thinking that perhaps Josh might need that today as he copes with life as a college freshman. And Solomon might need the ethics, or that "strong moral sense of rightness," to make wise choices in his public high school. What will Luke, Nate and Eli need? I have confidence that God knows. He loves these boys and will deliver what they need. My prayers continue to wrap the boys in a circle of Christian care.

Each day, we jot down the date on which we pray one of these character-building petitions. At some point in the future, we will give each boy the booklet into which years of prayers have been recorded. These pages will reflect the written version of the moral compass we prayed across the miles. In spite of the distance,

Christ-centered love mirrors God's great love through Jesus.

Through these heart-felt petitions, the circle of Christian life continues through our family. Or, in the more eloquent words of the psalmist, "We will tell the next generation about the Lord's power and His great deeds and the wonderful things He has done." (PSALM 78:4)

You can purchase both volumes of "35 Character-Building Prayers for My Grandchild" as inexpensive physical booklets or download them for free as PDF files directly from the Lutheran Hour Ministries (LHM) online store. [www.lhm.org/](http://www.lhm.org/)

### About the Author:

*For more than forty years, Mary has combined her training as an early childhood educator, insights as a corporate consultant and children's market analyst and experiences as a mother and grandmother to provide a wide range of services and presentations to audiences and companies. She holds bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in education. Her platform of practical advice within a developmental framework appeals to educators and parents who want real-time solutions. Named by a major national magazine as "one of America's top parenting pros," Simon's extensive work in publishing, education and children's entertainment gives her a comprehensive perspective on emerging issues that impact families. With sales of more than 3 million books in English alone (and many more in 11 other languages) and hundreds of magazine articles and media interviews, Dr. Mary is, in the words of her son, Matthew, "a world changer." She is married to The Rev. Henry "Hank" Simon and enjoying life in St. Myers, Florida. They are members of Zion Lutheran Church.*

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from **PROJECT CONNECT**

Available in print, digital, and audio!

**35 Character-Building Prayers for My Grandchild**  
Volume One

**35 Character-Building Prayers for My Grandchild**  
Volume Two

**35 Character-Building Prayers for My Grandchild**  
Volume 2

LHM.ORG/PROJECTCONNECT

# 2026 President's Equip Conference Announced

*Flourishing in a Changing World invites Lutheran educators, pastors, DCEs and lay leaders to gather in hope and shared purpose amid rapid cultural, technological, and ministry change. According to President James Rocky, "this Florida-Georgia District Conference moves beyond the simple adoption of new tools to explore the ethical, theological, and instructional implications. Breakouts and conversations will focus on worker well-being, vocation, and faithful leadership in a fast-paced world."*

*Grounded in Scripture and centered on Christ, participants will be strengthened through worship, keynote insights, and meaningful connection—leaving equipped to see change not as a threat, but as an opportunity for joyful, resilient, and flourishing ministry.*

*Registration will be opening in May, 2026. To learn more about sponsorships or participating as an exhibitor, please contact either Laura Zirbel or Debbie Arrington at the FLGA District Office: [darrington@flgadistrict.org](mailto:darrington@flgadistrict.org) [lzirbel@flgadistrict.org](mailto:lzirbel@flgadistrict.org)*

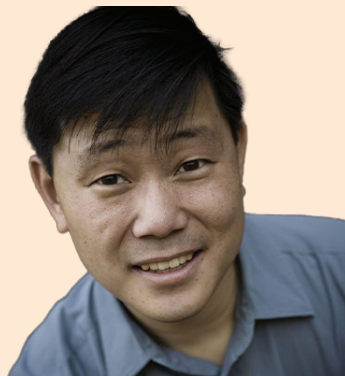
## Save The Dates!



PRESIDENT'S EQUIP CONFERENCE

September 30 –  
October 2, 2026

## Keynote Speakers Announced!



*Dr. Eugene Paul Kim is a Professor of Leadership and Organizational Change at Concordia University Irvine (CUI), where he also serves as Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and a dissertation chair in the Ed.D. in Leadership program. He earned his Ph.D. in Social Sciences & Comparative Education from UCLA (2004). He also holds an M.A. in the same field and a B.S. in Psychobiology from UCLA.*

*His focus includes organizational leadership, international education, faith-learning-vocation integration, and innovation. He specializes in mentoring doctoral students in sectors ranging from K-12 and higher education to non-profits and business. He co-founded House For Kids, which provided social and educational services to homeless mothers and children in Los Angeles.*



*Megan Miessler is the Executive Director and a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) at Lutheran Counseling Services (LCS) in Florida. She oversees the clinical and administrative operations of LCS and has served as Executive Director since 2013.*

*Megan specializes in counseling children, couples, and families. Her clinical focus includes play therapy, anxiety, depression, crisis intervention, and marriage therapy. She founded and leads the School Counseling Ministry at LCS, providing mental health support within private and public school settings. She has extensive experience in disaster response, assisting congregations and schools following tragedies in Florida, Virginia, and North Dakota. She earned her Master of Social Work (MSW) from the University of Central Florida and is a trained Director of Christian Education (DCE) through Concordia University/St. Paul, MN.*

**WHEN:** September 30 – October 2, 2026  
**WHERE:** Rosen Centre Hotel,  
9840 International Drive  
Orlando, FL

Exhibitor Information and Registration  
Available in May 2026

Event sponsorships are available.

Please contact **Laura Zirbel** at [lzirbel@flgadistrict.org](mailto:lzirbel@flgadistrict.org) or direct inquiries about exhibitors to **Debbie Arrington** at [darrington@flgadistrict.org](mailto:darrington@flgadistrict.org)

# FERPA, Alumni Outreach, and Faithful Ministry: Legal Boundaries and Practical Paths

Questions surrounding alumni outreach and ministry communications arise regularly across our churches and schools. These questions are well intentioned and rooted in a desire to maintain connection, encourage

Personally identifiable information from those records may not be disclosed without prior written consent. While FERPA rights belong to parents while a student is a minor, those rights transfer to the student once he or she reaches

written consent, but only if the school has properly designated directory information, issued a fully compliant annual notice, and provided a meaningful opportunity to opt out (20 U.S.C. § 1232g(a)(5)(A); 34 C.F.R. §§ 99.3, 99.37(a)).

Once directory information is lawfully released, FERPA does not restrict the purpose for which it may be used, including alumni or ministry communications (34 C.F.R. § 99.37(b)). However, if a parent or eligible student has opted out, disclosure is prohibited regardless of purpose. Schools are encouraged to view these requirements as an opportunity to strengthen compliance prospectively.

Issuing a compliant annual FERPA notice each year, clearly defining directory information categories, documenting opt-out elections, training staff on record access and disclosure boundaries, and maintaining written procedures for handling student records allows future questions to be addressed with clarity rather than uncertainty.

It is equally important to understand what FERPA does not regulate. FERPA governs only information taken from education records maintained by the school. It does not regulate information independently obtained from non-school sources or from publicly available materials (20 U.S.C. § 1232g(a)(4)(A); 34 C.F.R. § 99.3). This distinction materially changes the legal analysis.

A practical alternative exists that avoids FERPA altogether if followed carefully. If the church or school does not access student education records at all, but instead identifies former students through publicly distributed materials such as yearbooks



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ongoing faith formation, and support ministry. At the same time, they raise legitimate legal considerations that must be handled carefully.

Clear guidance at the outset protects our institutions and allows ministry to proceed with confidence and integrity. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) applies to any school that receives federal educational funds under a program administered by the U.S. Department of Education, regardless of whether the school is public, private, or religious in character (20 U.S.C. § 1232g(a)(3); 34 C.F.R. § 99.1(a)).

For schools that receive federal funding, FERPA governs the handling and disclosure of student education records. Schools that do not receive any federal educational funding are not subject to FERPA.

When FERPA applies, it governs "education records," defined as records that are directly related to a student and maintained by the school or by a party acting on behalf of the school (20 U.S.C. § 1232g(a)(4)(A); 34 C.F.R. § 99.3). The default rule under FERPA is nondisclosure.

age 18 (20 U.S.C. § 1232g(d); 34 C.F.R. § 99.3). Importantly, the records themselves remain protected regardless of

the former student's age. Informal sharing of contact information from school-maintained records to a church – even for alumni or ministry purposes – is not permitted unless FERPA's requirements are fully satisfied. A compliant FERPA annual notice is not a general privacy statement. Federal regulations require that schools annually notify parents and eligible students of their specific rights under FERPA, including the right to inspect and review education records, the right to seek amendment of records believed to be inaccurate or misleading, the right to consent to disclosures of personally identifiable information except where FERPA permits disclosure without consent, and the right to file a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education concerning alleged failures to comply (34 C.F.R. § 99.7(a)).

The notice must also identify any categories of information designated as directory information and explain the right to refuse disclosure, including the method and deadline for opting out (34 C.F.R. §§ 99.7(a)(3), 99.37(a)). FERPA does allow disclosure of directory information without

or class photographs, and then independently locates current contact information through public sources, no education record is being disclosed. In that scenario, FERPA is not implicated, no consent is required, and directory information rules do not apply. That boundary must be observed strictly. Contact information may not be taken from cumulative files, enrollment cards, databases, or archived student records. Crossing that line reintroduces FERPA in full.

This approach does present pastoral and relational considerations. Publicly sourced information may be outdated, and some individuals may not welcome unsolicited contact.

Those concerns are real but are relational rather than legal and can be addressed through respectful tone, transparency, and clear opt-out language.

In summary, there are two lawful paths forward. One is full FERPA compliance, including a properly issued annual notice and directory information procedures before any record-based disclosure. The other is a clean break from student records entirely, relying solely on publicly available information for outreach. What should be avoided is an informal middle ground that relies on convenience or good intentions while accessing protected records. With thoughtful planning, both the law and the mission can be honored together.

## Concordia/St. Paul Offers Free Tuition!

Concordia University/St. Paul, MN, is strengthening its commitment to the church through an expanded Church Work Tuition Guarantee, offering \$0 tuition for all students preparing for full-time church work vocations. This initiative affirms CSP's long-standing mission to prepare workers for the church wherever and however they are called to serve.

"This commitment reflects who we are and what we value – affordable tuition, outstanding faculty and a robust, confessionally Lutheran curriculum," said the Rev. Dr. Mark Koschmann, Concordia's Chief Mission Officer. "Our prayerful hope is that this removes financial barriers so that more students can joyfully prepare for lives of service in the church, strengthened by the gifts God has entrusted to them."

Since joining Concordia's faculty in 2015, Dr. Koschmann has designed and taught undergraduate and graduate courses in various subjects related to Lutheran Theology, the New Testament, Christian mission and outreach, and urban ministry. Until his appointment as chairperson for the department, he served as the Fiechtner Chair in Christian Outreach and Assistant Professor of Theology and Ministry. He also directs the Solus Christus Fellows program (a student-focused, mentoring program of CSP's Hoffmann Institute).

Through this commitment, Concordia/St. Paul seeks to ensure that financial barriers do not prevent students from responding to God's call into church work.

"We pray that this commitment to ensuring an affordable, Christ-centered Lutheran education will bless countless students now and in the years to come," said the Rev. Dr. Brian Friedrich, CSP president. "We are grateful to CSP's many friends and alumni who generously support our students through scholarships and endowments, which help us underwrite their educational costs."



*Mark Koschmann*



*Brian Friedrich*



*"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.*

*And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock." — MATTHEW 7:24-25*

Most of us in ministry understand the importance of a strong foundation and structural strength. Think about structural pillars, they hold buildings up, they don't wobble, they aren't decorative; they're essential. Can we identify financial pillars that will do the same for the

financial health of our ministries.

Created from my training at the Indiana

University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy. I believe that we can use the concept of my Four Pillars of Ministry Funding to strengthen and support the funding of our ministries.

## Annual Giving

The first pillar is called "Annual Giving." Most of our Lutheran churches do this well and are the primary source of support. This is our weekly or regular giving. Pre-COVID this was usually accompanied by passing the plate. Now on-line giving and other methods are being used. While we may not all be passing the plate, I hope that our churches are still willing to talk about the importance of giving and blessing their members' giving during the service. Other ways

to raise annual giving is through annual events such as Gala's, Auctions, Golf events and other fundraising ideas.

## Capital Campaigns

Pillar number 2 is "Capital Campaigns," Normally a capital campaign is a multi-year effort.



**Tony Hunt**  
Florida Region Gift Planning Counselor  
LCMS Foundation  
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260-222-129

Usually designed to accomplish major building or new ministry initiatives. It could be a campaign to eliminate debt. You could hire a Campaign Consultant to advise on how to raise the money or how much can be raised. Typically, the

consultant doesn't raise the funds but works with a committee of lay people to show them how to best raise the funds. This might include a pledge drive as members might make a longer-term financial commitment. The success of the campaign can depend on how well the vision is communicated to the members.

# The Four Pillars of Ministry Funding and the Importance of Planned Giving

## Special Projects

The third pillar is called "Special Projects." Typically, these are shorter term or "mini" campaigns. This could be for new equipment, maintenance or repair projects, or new ministry ideas. Some non-profit organizations like hospitals do a great job at raising money for new equipment. They may ask former patients or family members to consider funding a project by sharing their vision or maybe have a doctor tell them why the equipment is critical.

We shouldn't be afraid to let our members know the needs/desires for ministry opportunities. Many

## The Four Pillars of Ministry Funding



younger members would rather give to special projects than not know where their gifts are going.

## Planned Giving

Pillar 4 is “Planned Giving.” Planned giving refers to giving that a member arranges in advance to support a ministry in the future. This giving is often part of their financial or estate plan. These types of gifts are many times the single largest gift that a member makes. This is the type of work that I do as a planned giving counselor with the LCMS Foundation. Consider using the Foundation to help you create a planned giving program at your ministry. Whether you use the Foundation or not, having a leader in the ministry with the responsibility of keeping members informed about leaving a gift in their will or estate plan can help provide a strong financial foundation and this pillar will provide long-term support to your ministry. This pillar can be handled by the stewardship, finance committee, or a new committee. It really is that important.

There is a historic wealth transfer going on from the Baby Boomers to the next generation. What a great way for our members to create a legacy and extend their values and faith beyond their lifetime. Why don't all our members make a planned gift? Common reasons: they have never been asked (Let's make sure we ask!), too complicated and procrastination. We at the Foundation can help make it simpler and we can walk along side to help with the procrastination. I invite you to contact me for discussions about how you can help our ministries operate out of surplus and help solve our budget woes that weaken our foundations. I pray that we build strong ministries that can withstand the storms that this world hurls at us!

I look forward to your inquiries.

## District To Host Pastoral Formation Listening Session March 27th in Orlando

The Florida-Georgia District will host one of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's (LCMS) East-Southeast Regional Pastoral Formation Committee Listening Sessions at **Christ The King/Orlando, FL** on Friday, March 27, 2026 from 1 to 4 pm.

“It is the hope of the Pastoral Formation Committee to engage in a fruitful discussion about how the LCMS is forming faithful pastors to meet the current and future demands of the holy ministry,” explains The Rev. James Baneck, Executive Director of the LCMS Office of Pastoral Education, an office he has held since January, 2017. “The panel will include the two seminary presidents – the Rev. Dr. Thomas Egger (Concordia/St. Louis) and the Rev. Dr. Jon Bruss (Concordia/Fort Wayne) – along with the Rev. Dan Galchutt, LCMS Interim Chief Mission Officer along with myself.



“We are hoping for a healthy conversation as we answer questions and share insights and information. We are encouraging attendance from district staff, pastors, commissioned workers and laity.”

The goal aims to build an intentional, long-term culture within every LCMS congregation, school, and home to identify and encourage future church workers. The initiative was launched in response to a significant decline in enrollment for church work programs and an aging pastoral workforce – nearly 50 percent of active LCMS pastors are over 55.

Set Apart to Serve (SAS) targets multiple demographics, including children (from early childhood), youth, and second-career adults. God gives His church pastors and church workers for the sake of the Gospel. Pastors proclaim Christ and administer the Sacraments, means through which people receive Christ's saving work. Church workers assist the pastoral office in service to the Word, witnessing to Christ daily in various roles. Christ's church will continue until He returns, and that church will continue to need workers.

Parents and grandparents, pastors, professional church workers, Sunday school teachers and others in LCMS congregations help influence children to consider serving the church in these sacred and joyful vocations.

Set Apart to Serve is building a culture of church work formation and recruitment by helping everyone throughout the Synod – LCMS church workers and families, congregations and schools, circuits and districts, universities and seminaries, and all other entities – raise up future pastors and church workers.

Additional information is available from Baneck:  
james.baneck@lcms.org | 314-996-1258 | office | 701-226-9136 | cell



# FLO<sup>R</sup>IDA GE<sup>O</sup>RGIA

## *Out and About in the District*

### Lake Worth Beach Quilters Provide Annual Gifts to Shut-Ins, Veterans



**Our Savior/Lake Worth Beach, FL** has lovingly made these quilts. The quilters meet once a week on Saturday mornings for fellowship,

quilting and praying. Each one is made uniquely different from the other. When finished, the pastor typically prays over the quilts. The quilts are then passed on to

the Veteran's Hospital in West Palm Beach, Florida, or taken to local shut ins and those afflicted with Alzheimer's, as told to photographer, Rita Kaiser, by master quilter Donna Macha.



As a part of their morning worship on Sunday February 1st, the members of **Hope/Plant City, FL** participated in the Installation of The Rev. Ron Pennekamp as the congregation's Associate Pastor for Outreach and Discipleship. Pastor Pennekamp, the retired Senior Pastor from St. Paul/Lakeland, FL joined Hope following his retirement. With the strong desire to "Connect People to Jesus" Hope's Senior Pastor, Dean Pfeffer and Pennekamp discussed the possibility of becoming a staff member at Hope in order to work with the congregation to strengthen their outreach in the community.

While serving in this capacity on a part-time basis, he will also assist in many of the other pastoral functions within the congregation in support of Pastor Pfeffer. The congregation welcomed Florida-Georgia District President, The Rev. James Rockey who proclaimed God's word with its missional emphasis and installed Pennekamp to his position.

Despite the freezing temperatures that gripped the Plant City area that morning, the joy of welcoming Pastor Ron & Barb Pennekamp overcame the cold especially as the congregation gathered for a meal following the installation.

*At left – The Revs. Dean Pfeffer, Ron Pennekamp and James Rockey.*

# Award-Winning Christian Band Adds Marco Island to Its Spring Tour

**Marco Lutheran/Marco Island, FL** will welcome the Sidewalk Prophets, a mainstay on Christian radio, to the Marco Island and Naples communities in late March. This acoustic Christian band has won four Dove Awards, which are given to expose, promote and celebrate the Gospel through music. Through their five major albums – including *These Simple Truths* (2009), *Live Like That* (2012), *Something Different* (2015), *The Things That Got Us Here* (2020), and *Looking Up* (2025) and their tours – Sidewalk Prophets have played for more than 2.5 million fans.

“I’ve invited this group to perform at our church three different times,” says The Rev. Jim Thelen, senior pastor at Marco Lutheran. “The community is in for a real treat. Sidewalk Prophet’s music transcends the generational gap by sticking to their goals of sharing stories and Jesus through their music.

Tickets are available for An Acoustic Evening with Sidewalk Prophets being held on Thursday, March 26, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.



Marco Lutheran Church, 525 N. Collier Blvd., Marco Island  
Tickets for assigned seats: \$30  
Tickets are available at the Artist Series Desk at Marco Lutheran Church on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10:00

a.m.–2:00 p.m., Sundays after services (approximately 10:45 a.m.), by email at [artistseries@marcolutheran.org](mailto:artistseries@marcolutheran.org), or phone at 239-394-5579.



Another amazing **High School Youth Lock Out** involving bowling, broomball, sardines and a trip to Denny’s at **St. Paul/Weston, FL** with Jeremy Becker, Director of Youth and Family Ministry.



## Bartow Congregation Dissolves in January, 2026

**Redeemer/Bartow, FL** closed its doors on Sunday, January 12, 2026. A new LCMS church will be organized with a mission pastor, in a nearby location to be chosen by the Florida-Georgia District.

"The District will organize a new LCMS church to serve the community, intentionally moving forward with a fresh mission focus," stated FLGA District President James Rockey. "A mission pastor will be appointed to lead this new effort."

The District is in the process of choosing a nearby location for the new congregation, rather than continuing at the historic 1880s building on East Parker Street.

At right are The Revs. James Rockey, Jonathan Horsman, and Ron Pennekamp. Pastor Horsman served as the final clergyman for Redeemer/Bartow.

## Risen Savior Ordains, Installs Former Vicar Troy Curtis

The Rev. Troy Curtis was Ordained and Installed as Pastor of **Risen Savior/Palm Bay, FL** on January 12, 2026. His installation followed a long pastoral vacancy where the congregation relied on guest preachers and interim leadership, including Rev. Alan Koch.

Pastor Curtis completed the first two years of the Specific Ministry Program (SMP) through Concordia Seminary/St. Louis, MO while he served Risen Savior as a Vicar. Upon satisfactory completion of the first two years of study, an SMP student/vicar is certified for Ordination.

Pastor Curtis came to the Lutheran church through his wife and served actively in lay leadership in Minnesota and Palm Bay. He was also a student in the FLGA District's former Concordia House of Studies as he sought to grow

in serving the Lord and His Church. Since his assignment to Palm Bay, he has focused on local outreach, including the God's Pantry food ministry, and strengthening the church's worship and emphasis on being rooted in the Word.

Participating clergy below are (front from left) The Revs. Jonathan Moyer, Ron Meyr, Troy Curtis, James Rockey, Greg Le Sieur. Back row: Bruce Rudolf, Alan Koch



# River Forest's Kapelle Visits Boca Raton Campus

Concordia Kapelle choir from Concordia/Chicago blessed the students of **St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL** with an amazing interactive concert held during the school's chapel service. "They shared vocal examples of the soprano, alto, tenor, and bass ranges as well as connecting notes with vowels and consonants to communicate the text," explains Rebecca Schaffer, St. Paul's music teacher and host.

"Most importantly they shared in the calling of the Lutheran Church to share Christ's love. Many choir members shared they are studying to be pastors, teachers, and organists. I'm praying God stirs in the hearts of our community to attend Lutheran Universities to further serve the church.



# St. Petersburg Installs Chris Futch and Dan Ritter



On Sunday, January 25, 2026, the Rev. Chris Futch was installed as Senior Pastor and the Rev. Dan Ritter as Associate Pastor at **Our Savior/Petersburg, FL**. Pictured (from left) are FLGA District

President, The Rev. James Rockey with The Revs. Dan Ritter, Chris Futch, Pat O'Brien, Rick Armstrong, and Ed Krauss.

Pastor Futch has been part of the Our Savior team since 2016.

Pastor Ritter joined the church staff in August, 2023. President Rockey delivered a message entitled "*The Light of Jesus in a Dark World.*"

## Boynton Beach Congregation Welcomes New Shepherd

The Reverend Jeffrey (Jeff) Niederstadt was installed at **Son Life/Boynton Beach, FL** on January 18, 2026. The Rev. Stephen Carretto was officiant and FLGA District President, The Rev. James Rockey preached. Pastor Niederstadt and his family were warmly welcomed.

Prior to coming to Son Life, Pastor Niederstadt served Holy Cross/Rochester, MN and in 2019, he was the pastor of Family of Christ when the congregation merged with Holy Cross. He previously served in the Minnesota South District of the LCMS.

Participants in the installation were The Revs. David Albers, Scott Gress, Joseph Adams, Stephen Carretto, Christopher Escher, Mark Stillman, Daniel McPherson, Jeffrey Moore, Jacob Scheler, John Johnson, Scott Henze. Pastor Niederstadt is flanked by his wife, Michelle, and FLGA District President, The Rev. James Rockey.



## Pastor Terry McKee Retires From Peace/Dunnellon

The Rev. Terry McKee retired after 26 years of ministry – 21 of those as a pastor. He was first serving as a registered lay deacon and then was ordained through the DELTO program. DELTO stands for Distance Education Leading to Ordination. It was a non-residential, contextual program designed to prepare individuals for pastoral ministry while they remained in their local communities and ministry settings. DELTO was created to provide a formal path to ordination for lay deacons and men serving in congregations that could not support a full-time, traditionally trained pastor. The program used distance learning methods, including correspondence work and field-based instruction, allowing students to keep their secular jobs while training.

In 2007, the LCMS adopted the Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) program to supersede DELTO. The SMP program continues the mission of providing an alternate, non-residential route to ordination for men in specific ministry contexts. "We thank the Lord for Pastor McKee's 21 years of faithful ministry at **Peace/Dunnellon Florida**," President James Rockey stated.

At left – President Rockey with Pastor Terry McKee.



## AGO Field Trip for Boca Raton Choir

Members of **St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL's** Festival Choir took a group field trip to hear the Palm Beach County Chapter of the American Guild of Organists concert on Sunday, February 22, 2026 at the Royal Poinciana Chapel in Palm Beach, FL. They surprised Mark Lohmeyer, St. Paul's Music Minister Emeritus, one of the participants. Lohmeyer performed "Through the Red Sea Brought at Last" by Daniel Grotz on the 106-rank Austin organ.



# Gainesville's College Group Treats With Pancake Breakfast

Food and fellowship go hand in hand at **First/Gainesville, FL**. At the end of January, the annual chili cook-off featured about 15 different entries. First/Gainesville is home to some amazing chili chefs, which made the judging difficult. In the end, Michelle Langkop took first place, with Rachel and Caleb Ghulamani coming in a close second.

Two Sundays later, the college group hosted a pancake brunch for the congregation as a thank-you for the weekly lunches that members of First provide during the school year. Besalski Fellowship Hall was packed with hungry attendees. First/Gainesville truly loves its college students.



# Marco Celebrates Largest New Member Class in Their History



**Marco Lutheran/Marco Island, FL** has traditionally been a congregation of older adults. Recently they have seen an uptick in membership of all ages.

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. Say "Hello" to establishing a relationship with the Pastor and other perspective new members.

Pastor Jim meets with each potential new member privately to share our Lutheran beliefs and what makes Marco Lutheran Church what it is today. He listens carefully to learn the individual needs of each congregant. Then, 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 with other Christians.

Finally, they are inducted into the congregation and are feted at a post-service reception. This past November they welcomed their largest class of new members – 38! The previous June they had welcomed an additional 16 and they are delighted that another three or four have already signaled their desire to join the church.

# Gainesville Preschool Recognized for Excellence



**First/Gainesville, FL** reports that Open Arms Preschool has been recognized with a Certificate of Excellence for the 2024-2025 Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) school year – the highest distinction a VPK provider can receive. “We give thanks to God for His faithfulness and guidance in this achievement,” states Angie Burr, Preschool Director. “Out of 68

VPK programs in Alachua County, only 18 programs earned this honor. Of those, just 4 were private programs, and we are humbled and proud that Open Arms is one of them.”

“This recognition reflects not only academic excellence, but the loving, Christ-centered care our teachers provide each day,” The Chris Kollmann, Senior Pastor,

says. “In February we honored our teachers during worship with a plaque presentation and luncheon, celebrating their dedication, compassion, and commitment to serving our children as unto the Lord. We are deeply thankful for our teachers and for the blessing God has placed on the ministry of Open Arms,” Kollmann concludes.

## Celebrating 104 Years of Faith: Irene Buchhorn



On December 23, 2025, **King of Kings/Jasper, GA** joyfully celebrated Irene Buchhorn’s 104th birthday. Irene was born on December 23, 1921, in Wellesley, Massachusetts. Raised in the Lutheran faith by her Norwegian mother, Irene has lived a life marked by deep devotion and service. Together with her husband, she was actively involved in their congregations, with her husband serving as church president.

Irene taught Sunday school, participated in the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League (LWML), and worked alongside her husband in the Lutheran Laymen’s League. Their commitment to ministry included helping start several Lutheran churches in California, as well as a church school. Irene’s legacy of faith continues through her son, Ralph Buchhorn, a retired Lutheran minister.

King of Kings gives thanks for Irene’s life, her witness, and the blessing she continues to be to their church family.

# Let's discover your financial path together

[lcef.org/FLGA](http://lcef.org/FLGA)




## Meet your LCEF representative

Your LCEF District Vice President (DVP) is

### Jay Wendland



 678-455-9287

 [jay.wendland@lcef.org](mailto:jay.wendland@lcef.org)

I am here to help **start, sustain and strengthen** LCMS ministries through financial and strategic partnerships.

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR

## Scholarship Opportunity

High school seniors who have a Young Investors StewardAccount® with Lutheran Church Extension Fund (LCEF) are eligible to apply for the Take Heart Scholarship. Answer this question, and you could receive up to \$3,000:

Other than Jesus, which person in the Bible would you love to talk with?



- Recipients awarded up to \$3,000
- Apply by May 1, 2026
- Visit [lcef.org/scholarship](http://lcef.org/scholarship)



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# Lori Durante Honored By Black Women's Organization

On Sunday morning, February 22, 2026, Lori Durante was honored at Mt. Olive Missionary Baptist Church/Delray Beach, FL by the Frances J. Bright Woman's Club. The Frances J. Bright Woman's Club (FJBWC) is a volunteer community service organization named in honor of Frances J. Bright, a black educator, who came to Palm Beach County, Florida in 1899 and was hired in 1900 to teach at Colored School #4 that was established in year 1895. Mrs. Bright was the first woman black educator in Delray Beach. The school operated from a thatched hut built by local black residents located on historic NW 5th Avenue in Delray Beach. It was the first public school in Delray Beach.

The first principal at Colored School #4 in year 1895 was Mr. B.F. James of Miami (Lemon City). The school was a part of the Dade County Public School System at that time because Palm Beach County was not incorporated as a separate county until year 1909. During segregation, the 'colored' schools served students from Delray Beach, Boca Raton, Boynton Beach, Lake Worth, Deerfield Beach and Pompano Beach.

The leaders of this prestigious organization of the FJBWC, who are also mentors for the 12th grade debutantes, are esteemed African American educators, professionals, and business owners who are the same composition type as those who established the FJBWC organization. The mission of FJBWC debutante program is to provide mentorship, etiquette training and cultural experiences for 12th grade high school girls who are invited into the program based on their academics and good character status.

The debutante program also raises educational scholarship monies. In Palm Beach County, Florida, the Frances J. Bright Woman's Club is one of the oldest historically black civic organizations in continuous operation since 1959. In 1969, Charlotte G. Durante, Lori's mother, served on the board of and in 1970 and 1971 she chaired the debutante program. Since year 2015, in volunteer capacity, Lori has been organizing cultural programs and study tours for the 12th grade debutantes where they are immersed in Florida history and cultural arts. The Durante family has a deep and multifaceted history in Delray Beach, marked by significant contributions to local government, civil rights, and cultural tourism.

The historical significance of Mt. Olive Missionary Baptist Church in Delray Beach is that it was established in year 1896 by early black settlers to Delray Beach. Mt. Olive is the oldest church in Delray Beach and was established before the historic white churches because the first residents of Delray Beach were black, implementing the first churches and first public school.

Lori is the sister of The Rev. Kenneth Anthony "Tony" Durante, Senior Pastor of Our Savior/Plantation, FL. The Durante family is native to Delray Beach. They were the second black family to join Trinity/Delray Beach, FL in 1972. His career is marked by a unique transition from law enforcement to full-time ministry.

Pastor Durante has been serving Our Savior/Plantation since April, 2018. He has served on the Board of Directors for the Florida-Georgia District and was appointed to chair a Multicultural/Ethnic Task Force to address



*Lori Durante*



*Tony Durante*

racial and ethnic issues within the Florida district. Prior to his 6-year stint with the Delray Beach Police Department, Durante served two years as a missionary English teacher in Hokkaido, Japan, with the Lutheran Church's Volunteer Youth Ministry Program. He met his wife, Junko, during his mission work in Japan. They have three daughters.

# Marco Lutheran Awards More Than \$300,000 in Grants

The **Marco Lutheran/Marco Island, FL** Church Foundation has been providing grants to Christian not-for-profit organizations since its inception in 1999. To date, the Foundation has awarded grants totaling \$2.2 million to local, national, and international recipients. This year

Here is a sampling of the grants that were awarded this year:

▲ **Christ the King/Labelle, FL:** To develop a Christ-centered STEM, Agricultural Science, and Life Skills program, integrating faith, academics, and stewardship, for students in grades 6–12.

to enable the oldest Congolese to sustain themselves.

▲ **Design Outreach of Malawi, Africa:** To purchase and install a reliable water source for 15,000 people and sell an additional water centralizer through local supply chains.

▲ **Haggai International of**

**China:** To train and support Christian leaders in spreading the word of God.

▲ **Trinity Hope of Haiti:** To feed 147 children, teachers, and cooks every school day.

These organizations and the others receiving grants will use their funding to educate, nourish (both physically and spiritually), and improve the living conditions for their constituents. “We had a tremendous



the Foundation funded 22 grants: nine local, three national, and ten international, totaling \$302,779.

This is the largest dollar amount ever dispersed in one year for the group. “The Marco Lutheran Foundation is honored to be able to fund the efforts of these grantees. We look for 501c3 organizations who provide resources, education, food and hope for the less fortunate in our communities and world,” Karen Kuhnly, chair of the Foundation Board, explains. “This year the organizations receiving grants are passionate in caring for the people they serve, giving them quality of life and a hope for their future.”

▲ **Immokalee Fair Housing Alliance/Immokalee, FL:** To build hurricane-resilient apartments for working families.

▲ **Pelican Lutheran Church/Naples, FL:** To fund a Spanish-speaking Deacon to support the existing Pastor.

▲ **Our Daily Bread, Marco Island, FL:** To fund breakfast for hungry children at Marco Academy, Tommie Barfield Elementary School, Manatee Elementary and Middle Schools, and Lely Elementary and High Schools.

▲ **Our Father’s Lutheran Church and School, Greenfield, WI:** To provide transportation and food assistance for Congolese families and to create a permaculture farm

group of grant applicants this year,” says Lili Surber, chair of the grant program. “It is such a blessing to be able to help such dedicated organizations impact their communities and share the love of the Marco Lutheran family and the love of God with their constituents.”

You can help by praying for the grant recipients and their ministries, as well as the Foundation – that they are able to continue to do God’s work through this outreach effort. If you’d like to know more about the Foundation or make a donation, please contact the group at [foundation@marcolutheran.org](mailto:foundation@marcolutheran.org) or visit [www.marcolutheran.org/foundation](http://www.marcolutheran.org/foundation).

# Messiah/Valdosta, GA Celebrates Success of First Annual Chili Cookoff

The competition took place on a cold day in February that perfectly complemented the "hot" chili. Each winner received a commemorative apron, necklace, keychain, and a custom spoon trophy.

This was the first annual Chili Cook-Off at **Messiah/Valdosta, GA** and it was a huge hit! More than 45 friends and neighbors joined the congregation to taste, savor, and celebrate some seriously spicy creations. "We had a blast awarding 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place prizes to the chilis that stole the show," one of the organizers

commented. A sizable group included Cindy Hodge, Mary Beth Francis, Connie DiMarco, Heather Miller, and Marcia Lorden. Their hard work turned up the heat and made it all happen. Tickets were purchased with all proceeds going toward their Stewardship Ministry and to encourage more successful events in the future.

The First Place winner, Donna Berg, also received a personalized "First Place Winner Chili Master" Messiah Lutheran Church 1st Annual (2026) Chili Cook-Off charcuterie board!

The winners were:

- First Place: Donna Berg – With chili that was "nacho" average chili and truly reigned supreme.
- Second Place: Susan Walter – Whose flavor had us "simmering with delight."
- Third Place: Barb Fluder & John Obermann – Their chili really "spiced up the competition!" What a flavor-packed duo!



## Redeemer Collects Cereal During Lutheran Schools Week



Rachel Gonzalez has joined the staff at **St. Paul/Weston, FL** as Administrative Assistant. A South Florida native from Cooper City, FL, she has been a member of the congregation since March, 2022. Rachel brings more than ten years of experience in the hospitality industry, where she developed a strong heart for service, organization, and supporting others. She is looking forward in this role to support the ministries and staff of St. Paul.

Rachel and her husband, Freddie, have been married since 2022 and are the proud parents of their two-year-old son, Mason, who was baptized at St. Paul. In her free time, Rachel enjoys cooking, being outdoors, and going on cruises.



Students at **Redeemer/Stuart, FL** collected boxes of cereal as a service project kicking off Lutheran Schools Week. They were donated to a local charity. The boxes were set up like dominos to show the domino effect of God's love towards others.

# AS LIFE HAPPENS, WE'RE HERE TO HELP.

**Personal Loans**

**Auto Loans**

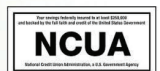
**Credit Cards**

**Refinances**



**LCU** LUTHERAN  
FEDERAL CREDIT UNION

We are *the* credit union of The LCMS.



# Weston Congregation Has Productive, Meaningful February and March

**St. Paul/Weston, FL** has enjoyed several meaningful moments of fellowship and worship since the first of this year. On Friday, February 29th, members gathered for a Small Group Celebration – Spring Festival. It was a time of fellowship celebrating the small group ministries at St. Paul.

During the evening, each small group had the opportunity to share about their ministry, offering a glimpse into the ways they connect, grow in faith, and support one another. The night highlighted the meaningful relationships and spiritual growth that continue to strengthen their church family.

On Sunday, March 1st, the congregation gathered for their annual Blessing of the Animals. Members were invited to bring their special animal companions to receive a blessing for the year ahead. It was a joyful time as they celebrated and gave thanks for the animals God has entrusted to their care. From wagging tails to gentle purrs, the morning was a beautiful reminder of God's love for all creation and the many ways our pets bless our lives.

On Monday, March 2nd, they hosted the Concordia Kapelle in concert. It was a beautiful evening of sacred music as their voices filled our sanctuary with inspiring hymns and choral selections. As part of the evening, four members of the St. Paul Adult Choir were

invited to join Kapelle on stage to sing one hymn together – a special and meaningful moment of shared praise and partnership in music ministry. We are grateful for the gift of music and the opportunity to welcome these talented students to St. Paul.



## Marco Lutheran Foundation Awards \$20,000 Grant to District's Disaster Response

"We give thanks to God for the \$20,000 grant awarded by the **Marco Lutheran Church Foundation, Marco Island, FL** to FLGA Lutheran Early Response (FGLER)," Jay Wendland offers. "This gift will help purchase a truck to haul disaster response equipment, strengthening the ministry's ability to serve those affected by hurricanes and other disasters across Florida and Georgia. Through this support, we are better equipped to share Christ's love by bringing help, hope, and healing to neighbors in need." Wendland serves as the FLGA District Disaster Response Coordinator.



*Wendland*



*Thelen*

According to The Rev. Jim Thelen, the Marco Lutheran Church Foundation is a charitable non-profit organization established in 1999 by the Marco Lutheran Church on Marco Island, Florida. Its primary mission is to manage gifted funds

and bequests to provide financial support to Christian organizations that spread the Gospel and improve the quality of life for those in need. He was installed on July 21, 2024, and has over 35 years of ministry experience, having served congregations in Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, Arizona, and Nebraska before coming to Marco Island.

The church recently celebrated its 50th anniversary and remains active in the community through its Marco Lutheran Foundation and partnerships with local organizations like Our Daily Bread Food Pantry.

Send Your  
Organization's News to  
[LutheranLife@flgadistrict.org](mailto:LutheranLife@flgadistrict.org)

## District Response Team Receives \$10,000 Grant



FGLER stands for **Florida-Georgia Lutheran Early Response**. It is a Recognized Service Organization (RSO) of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) that functions as a 100% volunteer disaster response nonprofit. Early in January, they received a \$10,000 Grant from Barge Design Solutions to support the purchase of disaster response equipment used in recovery efforts across Florida and Georgia.

According to Jay Wendland, who serves as the FLGA District Disaster Response Coordinator, "the funding will help equip trained volunteers as they serve communities affected by natural disasters; strengthening FGLER's ability to respond quickly, safely, and compassionately. As Scripture reminds us – 'each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others.'" (1 Peter 4:10).

Joel Mathews serves as Executive Director of FGLER. In this role, he oversees the coordination of 100% volunteer teams that provide disaster preparedness and response throughout the District. He is a nationally recognized Senior Chainsaw Instructor for the Lutheran Early Response Team (LERT). He frequently travels across the southeastern U.S. to lead advanced safety training in chainsaw operation, debris removal, and injury prevention. His commitment to this work began in 2005 following Hurricane Katrina. After volunteering in Biloxi, MS, he returned to Florida to organize a dedicated response team out of Messiah/Tampa, FL.

Before dedicating his time to full-time volunteer disaster leadership, Mathews served as a Hillsborough County Sheriff's deputy. His philosophy focuses on "Christian love in action," meeting the physical and spiritual needs of communities hurting from crisis.

He is a primary point of contact for the FLGA District regarding disaster response equipment and team deployment. His official contact email for FGLER business is [jmathews@fgler.org](mailto:jmathews@fgler.org)



# PASSAGES

*Former Chairwoman of  
National LWML Convention*

## Marilyn Treanor, Former District LWML President Passes

Marilyn Hope Treanor, aged 80, passed away in early February 2026 after a courageous and lengthy battle with alzheimer's disease. A celebration of her life will take place on March 28, 2026, at the Florida Memorial Gardens in Rockledge, Florida.

Marilyn was a dedicated, lifelong member of the Lutheran Women's Missionary League (LWML), where she held several significant leadership positions. She served as the President of the Florida-Georgia District of the LWML and held the prestigious role of Chairman for the 2005 LWML International Convention.

She was an active proponent of "Mite Box" donations, often encouraging convention guests to contribute to these mission-focused funds. Through her service, she fulfilled a personal dream by participating in a mission trip to Africa.

Marilyn was also a strong supporter of the Lutheran Church Charities K-9 Comfort Dog Ministry during her time with the LWML. Her hobbies included fishing, bowling and golf. She was also a dedicated crafter. She was known for her cherished recipes (including BBQ ribs, meatloaf, and "crazy lemon cake") and spending time at the family fishing cabin in Minnesota.



## The Rev. George Poulos Falls Asleep in the Lord



The Rev. George E. Poulos, Jr. passed away on March 26, 2026. He was 68. Most recently, he had been serving as Senior Pastor of Gloria Dei/Davie, FL. Previously he served as Senior Pastor and Interim Principal of St. Mark's/

Hollywood, FL, prior to the historic merger of the Gloria Dei and St. Mark's ministries in July of 2011.

Ordained in 1984, Pastor Poulos has served Florida congregations in Miami, North Miami, Hollywood and Davie. In addition to congregational ministry, Pastor Poulos served as Chaplain to the City of Miami Department of Police, a voluntary ministry since 1984.

Pastor Poulos earned the Bachelor of Science degree, Magna Cum Laude, with majors in Education Administration and Biblical Studies from Trinity International University/ Miami (1979), where he was also elected Student Government Vice-President and President.

He is also an alumnus of the University of Miami/Coral Gables, FL. He holds the Master of Divinity, and Masters Specialty in Educational Leadership from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield, IL) and Concordia Seminary/St. Louis, MO. While at Trinity, Pastor Poulos was elected Student Government President.

He is survived by Virginia (nee Gravlin), who is better known as "Ginger." Their marriage has been blessed with four children: Nina Virginia, James Evangelos, Thomas George, and Daniel Mark.

A memorial celebration of life service was held at Gloria Dei/ Davie, FL on Tuesday, March 10.

# PASSAGES

*First Early Childhood Teacher to Receive  
District's Outstanding Educator Honor*

## Barbara Fisher Called to Eternal Rest

Barbara Fischer was called to her eternal rest on Monday, January 12, 2026. Barbara faithfully served as an Early Childhood innovator in the Florida-Georgia District for more than 30 years, blessing countless children, families, and educators through her dedication and passion for Christian education.

"Early on it was apparent that God had placed a passion for children in Barbara Fisher's heart," explains Nancy Volz, a long-time family friend and member of the FLGA District Board of Directors. "She joined Our Savior/Plantation, FL with her husband Howard in 1970 and began teaching a Sunday school class just two years later. That same year she coordinated our congregation's first Vacation Bible School – a daunting task that drew in more than 200 children from the community.

"In February of 1976, Barbara put her gift of working with children as a substitute teacher in the church's preschool four-year-old class. Just a few days later when an unexpected teaching vacancy occurred, she agreed to take on the responsibilities of a full time class," Volz continues. "After teaching four-year-olds for two years, she began serving as Our Savior's Director of Early Childhood and for eight years Barbara juggled the roles of teacher and director before becoming the full-time Director of Early Childhood in 1986."

Our Savior team members would emphasize that Barbara's



*Rev. Walter Volz, Barbara Fisher and Rev. Edwin Nicklas  
at her 25th Anniversary Celebratory Luncheon*

passion for children has only been rivaled by her passion for excellence. In 2012 Fisher was honored for serving Our Savior/Plantation for 25 years. In 1991 she became the *first early childhood teacher* to be named Outstanding Lutheran Educator by the Florida-Georgia District. Under her leadership and with God's blessing, the preschool's enrollment increased from 70 to 235 students – making Our Savior's preschool *the largest in the Florida-Georgia District at that time*. Our Savior Lutheran Preschool has received the Gold Seal of Excellence Award for the last seven consecutive years – an honor awarded to quality preschools and day care centers by Florida's Department of Children and Family Services.

For almost 25 years Fisher served on Our Savior's altar guild, two pastoral call committees, campus renovation committees, secretary of the couples club and president of Esther Guild. She also brought "Market Day" to Our Savior, one of the most successful

fund-raisers for both the school and church.

Outside of Our Savior, Barbara held offices in Beta Sigma Phi, the world's largest non-collegiate women's sorority, focused on social, cultural, and civic enrichment rather than academic or professional affiliation. She served on four accreditation teams for the LCMS. In the mid 1980s she was on the FLGA District's Early Childhood Task Force, forming an association to address the concerns and direction of private parochial schools.

"One of Barbara's most admirable qualities is her elusive style of leadership," states Gloria Volz, Pastor Walter Volz's widow and long-time friend. "She would never ask someone to do a task that she wasn't prepared to do herself. When we began our after-school program, Barbara participated in every aspect during our initial year of operation – including painting, landscaping and furniture repair.

A celebration of life was held January 22nd at Our Savior.

# PASSAGES

*Former District Board Member*

## The Rev. Dr. Doug Fountain Passes



The Reverend Dr. Douglas Elmore Fountain, a beloved figure at Faith Viera Lutheran Church in Viera, Florida, passed

away on February 6, 2026, at the age of 78.

Dr. Fountain graduated Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA with a Bachelor of Science in Sociology in 1979; Concordia Theological Seminary/Fort Wayne, IN with a Master of Divinity in 1983; and received his Doctor of Philosophy from Barry/Miami Shores, FL in 1992. Throughout his career he was a gifted counselor.

His vicarage was served at Christ the King/Southgate, MI. Upon ordination in 1983 he accepted the call to Epiphany /Lake Worth,

FL, for 19 years, leading the congregation through significant membership expansion during the late 1980s and 1990s. He served as the Circuit Visitor for the Palm Beach Circuit for many of those years and served on the FLGA District Board of Directors from 1985-1991.

He is survived by his wife, Jane. They have been residents of Rockledge, FL.

Like many pastoral spouses in the LCMS, Jane was involved in both Epiphany/Lake Worth and Faith/Viera's educational and fellowship programs. This included participating in and



supporting the Preschool and work with Adult Lutherans Organized for Action (ALOA), an organization dedicated to the spiritual and social needs of older adults in the church.

## The Rev. Dr. James Bollhagen Called Home



The Rev. Dr. James Bollhagen was a professor of exegetical theology (Old Testament) at Concordia Theological Seminary/Fort Wayne,

IN. He earned his M.Div., S.T.M., and Ph.D. from Concordia Seminary/ St. Louis, MO. He had been serving as Pastor Emeritus of Grace/ St. Cloud, FL. He officially retired from active pastoral duties on June 1, 2014.

Dr. Bollhagen was a recognized scholar and author, notably of the Concordia Commentary: Ecclesiastes, a major theological exposition of Scripture published

by Concordia Publishing House. It was published in June of 2014.

He was married to Carla Albers Bollhagen, who was also active in ministry at Grace/St. Cloud – particularly in Vacation Bible School.

When the Bollhagens came to St. Cloud, Dr. Bollhagen transitioned into parish ministry as Senior Pastor at

Grace. He applied his expertise in the Old Testament to congregational study, bridging the gap between seminary-level exegesis and practical Christian living for the St. Cloud community. He helped establish "Family Worship" initiatives—short, kid-centered services designed for families to worship together, a tradition that continues with

sessions scheduled as recently as January 2026.

He leaves behind his wife Carla and his son in law The Rev. Dan Brammeier and son Karl Bollhagen (Iowa) and his two daughters as they celebrate his life and faithful service for the Kingdom. A celebration of life was held March 7th at Grace/St. Cloud.

# PASSAGES

## Pastor Tim Nickel Called to Glory



The Reverend Timothy Mark Nickel, 81, went home to be with the Lord on Jan 4, 2026, surrounded by his loved ones. He was born on October 16, 1944, at the end of the silent generation, he embodied a stoic faith in God.

Pastor Tim was born in Michigan and grew up in Missouri

and Nebraska before he attended Concordia Seminary/St Louis, MO. He met his wife of 55 years, Rosalie Nickel (née Crilley), while attending seminary. Together they raised four children across Gowanda, NY, Scranton, PA, Ridley Park, PA, and Hamlin, NY. Tim touched the lives of every congregation he served.

After raising their family, the Nickels were called into the mission field serving in Central Asia and Turkey. In 1998 he became fluent in Russian and began spreading the gospel in former Soviet countries.

In 2009 Pastor Nickel retired and lived the life of a grandpa in St Augustine, Florida. He continued to minister to churches in need and volunteered for Lutheran Heritage

Foundation for many years.

Tim was a lifelong scholar, sports fan, and fisher of men. As he traveled the world he followed in the footsteps of his heroes, Homer and Paul. He spent his life studying the ancient world so he could lead everyone he met into the next world. He did it all while keeping up with Red Sox scores.

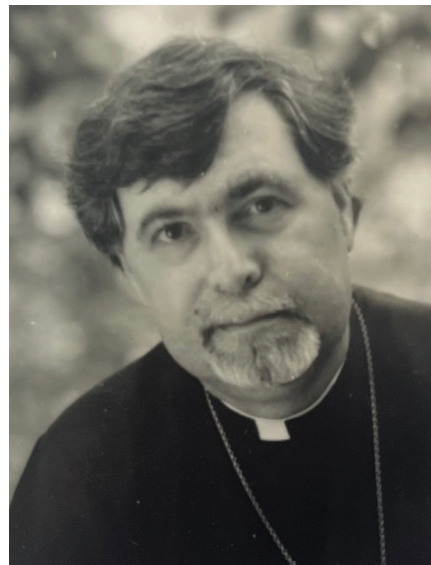
He is survived by his wife, two sons, two daughters, six grandsons, three granddaughters, two daughters-in-law, two sons-in-law, one granddaughter-in-law, one grandson-in-law, his sister, many nieces nephews and cousins, and his poodle, Ajax, all of whom feel his absence deeply.

His memorial service was held at Christ Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church in St. Augustine, Florida.



## Pastor Larry Davis Enters Eternal Rest

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 1968 and was ordained on January 1, 1969. 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.





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## The Lent Trifecta: Three Habits That Will Change Your Life Before Easter

The “Three Pillars of Lent”—prayer, fasting, and almsgiving—are often described as the “three wings” of the soul, designed to lift us toward a deeper relationship with God. Rather than being mere obligations, they serve as a spiritual “recipe for holiness” and a powerful antidote to worldly distractions.

**1. Prayer:** The Foundation of Connection — is more than a list of requests; it is the lifeline of our relationship with the Father. In a world of constant noise, prayer is the “quiet retreat” where we finally hear God’s voice. It “lifts our hearts above the things of earth” and softens them to receive God’s Word. Don’t just speak; listen. Use the “extra time” from fasting to simply sit in God’s presence.

**2. Fasting:** Creating Space for the Divine — is not just *giving something up* —it is *making room* for something better. We “give things up” not to punish ourselves, but to free ourselves from attachments that act as stumbling blocks between us and God’s love. It tames the passions and reminds us that “man does not live on bread alone,” pointing our spiritual hunger back toward Christ. Don’t just think about food! Consider a “fast” from social media, complaining, or negativity to “detoxify” your soul.

**3. Almsgiving:** Love in Action is the pillar that turns our spiritual growth outward toward our neighbor. It is a response of

gratitude to God, acknowledging that everything we have is a gift. It makes us “more human” by breaking the prison of selfishness and hoarding. It isn’t just about money; it’s about giving your time, a word of encouragement to the insecure, or the “gift of your attention” to someone who feels unseen.

### The LAST WORD



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My congregation is in the midst of “The Giving Challenge,” a 40-day structured discipleship program designed to integrate the pillar of almsgiving into daily life. The challenge is based on Pastor Zach Zehnder’s *Red Letter Living* series which provides daily prompts and lessons to put intention into action. Members are encouraged to join small groups to discuss their progress and the “heart” of the weekly lessons. The challenge is highlighted every Wednesday throughout Lent, coinciding with special midweek services and congregation meals.

The book is structured as a 40-day journey aimed at transforming how participants think about and practice generosity, focusing on giving that is:

Happy • Eternal • Abundant •  
 Regular • Today

My pastors have been incorporating this acronym that Zehnder established to categorize different aspects of biblical generosity:

Zach’s 40-day challenge is built on the premise that the best way to follow Jesus is simply to do what He said and did. Each 40-day challenge focuses on a specific “target” of discipleship identified in the words of Christ.

Each day presents a new, concrete challenge to “stretch” our faith. *The Giving Challenge* increases giving by shifting the focus from a “financial transaction” to a “spiritual transformation.”

By framing generosity as a key mark of a disciple, it removes the “awkwardness” often associated with church stewardship programs and replaces it with a shared community mission.

Our challenge launched Ash Wednesday and concludes on Holy Saturday just before the Resurrection celebration. Success in this context is defined by spiritual engagement and behavioral change.

Stay tuned . . . it’s looking like a prodigious success and we’re not even halfway as of this writing.