

LUTHERAN LIFE

**Lutheran Church Missouri Synod
Florida-Georgia District
Oct/Nov/Dec 2026**

Reformation Advent

Rooted in Scripture. Waiting in Hope.

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.



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

flgadistrict.org/lutheranlife

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

email:
LutheranLife@flgadistrict.org

James Rockey,
District President

Andrea Ellis,
President's Executive Assistant

Jennifer Tanner, Executive
School & Youth Ministries

Cindy Hammerstrom, Asst.
School & Youth Ministries

Eric Sahlberg, Executive
Missions & Outreach

Laura Zirbel, Executive
Finance/Administration

Debra Arrington, Asst.
Missions & Finance

Jay Wendland, LCEF District VP

Rusty Huseman,
District Legal Counsel

John List, Editor &
Florida-Georgia District
Communications Director

DISTRICT CAPSULES

TRANSFERRED OUT OF FLGA TO OTHER DISTRICTS

04/15/26..... Rev. Kenneth Garazin (O)
to Northern Illinois
07/12/26..... Rev. Timothy Brown (O)
to Missouri
07/12/26..... Rev. Scott Jensen (O)
to Southern
08/09/26..... Rev. John Bumgardner (O)
to Ohio
08/14/26..... Mrs. Sarah Haupt (C)
to Indiana

TRANSFERRED IN FROM OTHER DISTRICTS

06/19/26..... Dcs Joanna Lee (C) from Eastern
06/28/26..... Rev. Thomas Boeck (O) Mid-South
08/01/26..... Rev. Jeffrey Nehrt (O) Southern IL
08/24/26..... Rev. Evandro Kopper (O) Missouri

INSTALLATIONS

03/15/26..... Rev. David Kruger (O) TIM
at Oak Road/Lilburn GA
06/07/26..... Rev. Wilfredo Ramirez (O)
AP at Christ/Lakeland, FL
06/28/26..... Rev. Thomas Boeck (O)
SP at Trinity/Summerfield, FL
08/02/26..... Mr. Ryan Kaelberer (C) Teacher
at Redeemer/Stuart, FL
08/02/26..... Ms. Elissa Juergensen (C) Teacher
at Redeemer/Stuart, FL
08/09/26..... Rev. Richard Cox (O)
SP at Trinity/SW Florida
08/09/26..... Mr. Isaiah Duport (C) DCE at
St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL
08/09/26..... Ms. Jennifer Ferguson (C) Teacher
at Grace/Winter Haven, FL
08/09/26..... Ms. Bethany Gebhardt (C) Teacher
at St. John/Ocala, FL
08/09/26..... Mr. Charles Oliver (C) Teacher
at St. John/Ocala, FL
08/09/26..... Mrs. Teckla Coerber (C) Teacher
at Woodlands/Montverde, FL
08/16/26..... Mrs. Ruth Eatherton (C) Teacher
at Holy Trinity/Tampa
08/16/26..... Rev. Eric Luhman (O) TIM
Trinity/Rockledge, FL
09/12/26..... Rev. Evandro Kopper, Sr. (O)
SP at Redeemer/Vero Beach, FL

CALLED TO GLORY

06/11/26..... Rev. Timothy Krieger (O)
06/15/26..... Rev. Alberto Garcia (O)
08/21/26..... Rev. Juan Martin (O)
08/25/26..... Rev. David Mennicke (O)

STATUS CHANGE WITHIN DISTRICT

07/01/26..... Mrs. Janet Tumminello (C) to Emeritus
07/01/26..... Ms. Michelle Pitts (C) to Emeritus
04/26/26..... Rev. Marthinus Olckers (O) to Emeritus

REMOVED FROM THE ROSTER

08/01/26..... Mrs. Mary Sankey (C) Voluntary

INITIAL PLACEMENTS

08/02/26..... Mr. Ryan Kaelberer (C) CUW
Teacher at Redeemer/Stuart, FL
08/02/26..... Ms. Elissa Juergensen (C) CUW
Teacher at Redeemer/Stuart, FL
08/09/26..... Mr. Isaiah Duport (C) CUI
DCE at St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL
8/09/26..... Ms. Jennifer Ferguson (C) CUW
Colloquy Teacher Grace/Winter Haven, FL
08/09/26..... Ms. Bethany Gebhardt (C) CUN
Teacher at St. John/Ocala, FL
08/16/26..... Ms. Ruth Eatherton (C) CUC
Teacher at Holly Trinity/Tampa

ORDINATION

05/24/26..... Rev. Euder Paul (O) CSL
Concordia/Sarasota, FL

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
(DCS) Deaconess
(DCE) Director Christian Education
(Exec) Executive Administrative Pastor
(CSL) Concordia Seminary St. Louis
(FTW) Concordia Seminary Ft. Wayne
(CUC) Concordia/Chicago River Forest, IL
(CUI) Concordia University Irvine, CA
(CUN) Concordia University Seward, NE
(CUW) Concordia University Mequon, WI



**Lasting faith. True friends.
A life with purpose.**

Independent Living
Assisted Living
Memory Care

(800) 272.5676

LutheranHaven.org

License #AL12811
(ALF & MC)

Harvest Fields...in All Seasons

In my September e-blast I drew attention to the harvest season and how it reminds us of God's goodness and provision. I reflected upon how this is true both temporally and eternally and that it is not all about us...but how the Lord has called us to live in such a way so that others too may believe and be part of His harvest.

Here again I draw your attention to the harvest fields. Have you ever noticed how when we speak of the Lord's harvest or the passages about "the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few" we almost exclusively focus on the end result? You get it, I'm sure. We picture the gathering and literal harvesting of the crops.

While growing up, I loved working with plants. Whether it was planting roses and spending my own money to landscape our backyard or having a greenhouse built, or planting a vegetable garden, I loved the whole process and even thought about being a botanist. But did you catch that phrase, "the whole process"? You see, I never just went outside and there were cucumbers, tomatoes, onions, peanuts or even roses ready to harvest. The process began long before. There were weekends filled with pulling out weeds and invasive grasses, digging out roots from the ever-growing pine trees, adding mulch, tilling and mixing the nutrients with the sandy soil. Then came the actual work of planting both seeds and seedlings. That was followed by watering, fertilizing, weeding, spraying for bugs, pruning, watering, weeding and more.

By the time I began to harvest any of those crops, four to five months of labor had been invested. Do you see? The "Lord of the Harvest" calls for workers to enter His harvest fields. His design is that we are the vessels through whom He works to prepare the soil, to

plant the seeds, to water, prune, tend, fertilize and nurture. Yet we somehow think that it's just about us going out and harvesting.

Consider what Paul wrote: *"What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building."* (1 CORINTHIANS 3)

Yes, there is work in the harvest fields during all seasons. We are all called to be Christ's witnesses and labor in the harvest, but we are "only servants." Those who plant and those who water are "one" in purpose, serving the same Master and pointing to the same crucified and risen Christ!

I pray that this is an encouragement to you as it is to me. Sometimes, I find myself walking with someone and building on the seeds or work that another laborer did before me. Other times I find that I am adding new insights, teaching or for the sake of this analogy, fertilizer, to nurture the seeds already planted. Other times I find that I am blessed to see what the Lord has grown and it come to harvest. Dear friends, no matter what, all around us are fields ready for us to enter. Your gifts or your calling may be to plant, water, prune or nurture. Regardless of your gifts, circumstances or passion, enter the fields filled with the Spirit and Word of Christ that there may be a great harvest!

In the Florida-Georgia District, our mission has been summarized for years as **"Connecting People to Jesus."** That remains true today and will be going forward. It is about us reaching people where

they are. It is about planting seeds that others may see their need, know whose they are and the God who so loved them that He sent His Son that they may be forgiven and experience the joy of the Lord's salvation, His harvest!

It is why we are **Compelled** in all that we do. Compelled to go and make disciples, to faithfully proclaim the message of life and salvation through grace alone, by faith in Christ alone. We, as the people of the Florida-Georgia District, are compelled to accomplish the mission of Christ through perpetually Planting New Churches, Starting New Outreach Ministries and Raising up New Workers!

So, with that in mind, it all goes back to being a people who have been called to join in the Lord's harvest fields now. Yes, Now! As stated in this article, there is work to do in the harvest fields in all seasons. ■



*Thankful to labor
alongside each of you.
James Rockett*

PRESIDENT FLORIDA-GEORGIA DISTRICT
LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

LIFELINES

What does it mean to invest in the future of ministry?

Building a Future for Ministry

For the Florida-Georgia District, the **COMPELLED: Mission Advancement Initiative** is an opportunity to do just that, strengthen ministry today by building a foundation that will support the work of sharing Christ for generations to come.

"The response so far has been encouraging. Nearly than \$2.5 million has been pledged toward the \$10 million COMPELLED: Mission Advancement Initiative goal," President James Rockey illustrates. "We are deeply grateful to everyone who has already made a pledge or gift and joined us in this vision for the future. Such generosity is helping to lay the foundation that will perpetually impact our mission and ministry!"

At the heart of Mission Advancement are three important purposes:

- 1) New Church Plants,
- 2) New Outreach Ministries, and
- 3) Raising Up New Church Workers.

Together, these priorities are about creating opportunities for the Gospel to reach more people and helping ensure resources are available to support ministry well into the future.

This fall, Mission Advancement is also bringing people together through a series of gatherings throughout the District, providing opportunities to hear more about the vision, celebrate what God is doing through our ministries, and consider how to participate in the future of ministry together. "But the vision doesn't stop with reaching a financial goal," Rockey continues, "every pledge and gift represents a commitment to the future of ministry and provide resources that will support new church plants, new outreach ministries, and the raising up of new church workers for generations to come."

"As we move toward the end of the year, we invite everyone to prayerfully consider how they might be part of this vision. Whether through prayer, fulfilling a pledge, making a new gift, or attending one of the fall

Mission Advancement dinner receptions, there are many ways to participate. A year-end gift can take many forms. In addition to making a traditional cash gift, there are many ways to support the Mission Advancement Endowment through other charitable giving methods, including:

- 1) Qualified charitable distributions from an IRA;
- 2) Donor-advised fund grants;
- 3) Appreciated securities;
- 4) Estate or planned gifts;
- 5) Or a sacrificial gift from what the Lord has given.

Rockey uses these examples of ways to give because charitable giving can have different tax and financial implications depending on individual circumstances, it is recommended to consult a tax adviser, financial adviser, or other qualified professional before making a charitable donation.

"Whatever form that participation takes, we invite everyone to prayerfully consider being part of Mission Advancement. We are grateful for the generosity, prayers, and



COMPELLED: **Mission Advancement Initiative Goals:**

- **New Church Plants**
- **New Outreach Ministries**
- **Raising Up New Church Workers**

commitment that continue to support the future of ministry throughout the Florida-Georgia District, he concludes. "Together, we can help build a lasting foundation for years to come that will connect people to Jesus."

To learn more about the mission initiative, visit flgadistrict.org/mission-advancement. ■

Upcoming Mission Support Banquet Schedule

October 8 | Timothy Lutheran Church, Woodstock, GA
October 9 | Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, Augusta, GA
October 10 | Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Gainesville, GA
October 11 | Living Faith Lutheran Church, Cumming, GA
October 12 | Trinity Lutheran Church, Athens, GA
October 13 | Mount Calvary Lutheran Church, Warner Robins, GA

November 1 | Rivercliff Lutheran Church, Sandy Springs, GA
November 2 | Trinity Lutheran Church, Savannah, GA
November 3 | Grace Lutheran Church, Jacksonville, FL
November 4 | Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Jacksonville Bch, FL
November 15 | Faith Lutheran Church, North Palm Beach, FL
November 16 | St. Paul Lutheran Church, Boca Raton, FL
November 17 | Grace Lutheran Church, Naples, FL
November 18 | Trinity Lutheran Church, Orlando, FL

NOTE – Twenty Additional Banquets are being planned for early 2027!

LCMS Leaders Team Up for “It’s Okay To Pray”

“It’s Okay to Pray” is a memoir and historical account co-authored by Rev. Dr. David Benke, former President of the Atlantic District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and Rev. Dr. Gerald Kieschnick, former President of the LCMS. Released on September 11th, 2026 – to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the September 11 attacks – the book reflects on a highly turbulent and historic era within American Lutheranism.

Benke captures the immediate horror and heartbreak of the attacks in New York City, recounting moments such as grief-stricken parents arriving at St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Brooklyn covered in ash. It documents the creation and heroic eight-year operational timeline of the Lutheran Disaster Response of New York, highlighting how the church mobilized to support thousands of affected families.

The book centers on the famous “A Prayer for America” interfaith event held at Yankee

Stadium just 12 days after the attacks.

Benke recounts his choice to offer a public Christian prayer alongside leaders of other faiths, which sparked massive internal strife within the LCMS. It explores the deep personal and systemic trauma resulting from the formal ecclesiastical charges, his subsequent suspension, and the heresy trials stemming from accusations of religious syncretism.

Benke and Kieschnick share the ultimate resolutions of those conflicts, emphasizing the difficult spiritual work required to refuse resentment and foster reconciliation and the launch of a nationwide leadership initiative aimed at helping people of faith

confidently bring their Christian witness into public spaces.

“Dave and his dear wife Judy have memories still indelibly etched in their minds and hearts. So do Terry and I,” Kieschnick offered. “The four of us have formed a lasting friendship that’s still very much alive today. We chose a simple but profound title: ‘It’s OK to Pray!’ subtitled ‘Witness in the Public Square.’”

The book is available through the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau (ALPB) – a non-profit organization that produces independent journals and resources to foster theological discussion. It can also be purchased on Amazon or from the official website: itsoktopray.com/



Meet The Authors: David Benke & Gerald Kieschnick

For ten years before September 11, David Benke led the Atlantic District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod: 101 congregations, 54 schools, and 35,000 members across greater New York. Through it all, he kept his boots on the ground as pastor of St. Peter’s Lutheran in Brooklyn, New York. On September 23, 2001, he joined clergy at Yankee Stadium for “A

Prayer for America.” Before 20,000 people still grieving the attacks, he prayed in the precious name of Jesus. Within weeks, pastors from his own church body charged him with heresy. Benke co-founded Lutheran Disaster Response of New York, which delivered \$25 million in recovery aid with a staff that never exceeded three people. After a two-year fight, he was restored in good standing. For years afterward, he introduced himself with the same words: “Hi, I’m Dave. I’m a recovering heretic.”

brought two years of attacks on his own presidency, a gag order, and attempts to overturn his election. In one of the story’s great ironies, he had personally chaired the commission that wrote the very guidelines that would exonerate Benke. He tells his side of the ordeal alongside Benke in “It’s OK to Pray: Witness in the Public Square.”



Gerald Kieschnick was elected the 12th president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod by eighteen votes out of nearly 1,200. He was installed three days before the September 11 attacks. When Benke called about the invitation to Yankee Stadium, Kieschnick asked two questions, gave his blessing, and never took it back. Standing by that decision



The Florida-Georgia District Harvest:

Jesus teaches us to count the cost before moving forward – to consider resources, risks, and commitment with wisdom and care (LUKE 14:28–30). This baseline review helps us see the Florida-Georgia District's present reality more clearly— not with fear or discouragement— but with honesty, humility, gratitude, and hope. As Max De Pree, former CEO of Herman Miller, wrote, "The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant."

In that spirit, we give thanks for God's faithfulness and look ahead with confidence in Christ, trusting Him to guide and strengthen our shared commitment to Gospel ministry.

DEFINING REALITY

Understanding what exists is the first step toward faithful planning, and there is much to encourage us. During this past year, I have listened, learned, and gathered feedback through several important touchpoints:

- ◆ Visited approximately one-third of the 192 FLGA churches
- ◆ Participated in the multi-day pastors' and educators' conference in Daytona
- ◆ Attended 19 of 20 district partner events
- ◆ Facilitated five regional pastors' conferences, gathering feedback from 70 percent of clergy who attended
- ◆ Held many in-person visits, one-on-one conversations, and Zoom meetings with churches across Florida and Georgia
- ◆ Listened to hundreds of pastors, church workers, and lay leaders
- ◆ Learned from seasoned church workers in Florida and Georgia
- ◆ Collected feedback across our churches.

GRATITUDE FOR FAITHFUL SERVICE

Praise God for the faithful clergy, church workers, and lay leaders serving across the FLGA District. Through Word and Sacrament ministry, service in churches and schools, campus ministry, and outreach in local communities, the Lord has blessed this district with remarkable competence, gifts, and commitment.

These God-given gifts matter, and they make a meaningful difference in the Kingdom.

FIVE DISTRICT NEEDS IDENTIFIED THROUGH FEEDBACK

Feedback from lay leaders and clergy highlighted *five major needs* across the FLGA District, each of which also represents an opportunity for faithful growth:

1. LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND PASTORAL SUCCESSION PLANNING.

We give thanks for retirees and seasoned church workers who continue to serve faithfully. At the same time, *a significant wave of clergy retirements is approaching*: 40 percent of FLGA clergy are age 60 or older, and 15–20 percent of pastors at the 2026 regional conferences said they plan to retire within four years. With prayerful planning, this season can become an opportunity to raise up and equip hundreds of new lay leaders for the Church's future. Meanwhile, it is important to put a robust pastoral succession plan in place.

2. CHURCH REVITALIZATION.

Revitalization helps congregations strengthen the systems that support ministry, so they can continue, improve, and expand how they deliver the Means of Grace to members and their communities with renewed energy and focus.

3. CHURCH VISION.

Vision gives a congregation a clear picture of where God is leading and what faithful impact could look like in its next season of ministry.

4. ALIGNMENT AND PARTNERSHIPS.

Congregations, district bodies, synodical agencies, and global partners can accomplish more together than alone. Since 61 percent of FLGA clergy want more partnership conversations, key opportunities include shared ministry across churches, such as youth events, VBS resources, young adult ministry, senior ministry, and marriage ministry.

5. CHURCH PLANTING.

FLGA pastors are committed to starting new Lutheran congregations and ministries in Florida, Georgia, and the Bahamas. By God's grace, several new efforts are already underway:

- ◆ Siloe Haitian Lutheran Church was chartered in Naples, FL.
- ◆ Pastor Wilfredo Ramirez was installed to plant Hispanic congregations in Lakeland and St. Cloud, FL.
- ◆ Vicar Gachena Denu is being trained to serve the new Ethiopian Amharic congregation in Lilburn, GA.
- ◆ A Sebastian, FL, core team is forming with retired Pastor Bruce Rudolf as catalyst.
- ◆ A multiethnic Orlando house-church network is developing through retired Pastor Larry Schaefer.
- ◆ Trinity Delray has launched a multisite ministry in Hobe Sound, Florida.

Thanks be to God, the Holy Spirit is clearly at work throughout the FLGA District.

FLGA DISTRICT RESOURCES

The FLGA District offers synodical tools, online workshops, church coaching, and other strong resources to support the five needs identified in this article. The

Defining Our Reality & Sowing for the Future

district is also working with Synod and other districts to strengthen pre-existing church revitalization and partnership resources, encouraging and equipping local congregations with practical, faithful support for renewed ministry.

AREAS OF DEVELOPMENT

Looking ahead to 2027, humility, prayer, and collaboration give us a hopeful path forward. These six areas of development can help strengthen ministry across the FLGA District.

- 1. PRAY.** Nearly **10 PERCENT** of the United States lives in Florida and Georgia. ***The FLGA District serves 192 churches with a baptized membership of 38,411.*** Your prayers matter. Please consider setting a daily alarm for 10:02 a.m. to pray for additional harvest workers, as Jesus teaches in LUKE 10:2. We need more pastors, deaconesses, directors of Christian education, Lutheran school principals, Lutheran school teachers, music directors, and faithful lay leaders to serve Christ's Church.
- 2 READ THE BIBLE.** Regular engagement with Scripture forms disciples and strengthens Gospel witness among friends, family, and neighbors.
- 3 SHARE IDEAS.** Please share them with the District Office and with other LCMS churches across your circuits. Share them in Lutheran LIFE magazine! God is at work in each congregation, and what He is doing in one church may encourage and equip another church elsewhere in the district.
- 4 COPY AND ADAPT.** For more than a decade, the Texas District has planted between 5 and 17 churches per year – resulting in 89 new Lutheran churches in the last ten years. Because

the Texas District is about twice the size of the FLGA District, its model offers a helpful benchmark for learning, adaptation, and faithful ministry. We are studying the Texas District model and adapting what fits the FLGA context. This approach can support the **Compelled Mission Advancement Initiative** by helping plant 20 new Lutheran churches over the next decade, expand ministry grants, and increase scholarships for future church workers.

5 EXPLORE MULTISITE MINISTRY.

A multisite church is one church serving in multiple locations. Today, between 3-5 percent of U.S. Protestant churches are multisite (accounting for roughly 8,000 to 10,000 total multisite churches). The FLGA District has launched its first multisite ministry in

Hobe Sound this past summer through the prayers and energy of Trinity/Delray Beach, FL and Pastor Jacob Roedsens. While not a "silver bullet" or tied to one worship style, multisite ministry can help a congregation extend what is working well into a nearby community for greater Kingdom impact.

6 EXPLORE NEW MODELS AND TECHNOLOGY.

The LCMS has a rich history of forming faithful preachers who proclaim the Word and administer the Sacraments. At the same time, clergy retirements are outpacing the number of new pastors receiving calls from our Saint Louis, MO and Fort Wayne, IN seminaries (retirements outpace incoming candidates by roughly 2-to-1 to 3-to-1, creating a growing need for collaborative ministry

moving forward). We continue to pray for a new generation of seminarians and leaders to receive the ministry baton from senior pastors across the district.

If pastoral shortages continue, we can prayerfully explore new ministry models, raise up additional leaders, and prepare together for the future with faith and creativity. Other Protestant church bodies are experiencing similar challenges and opportunities.

Some churches are using technology, such as live preaching simulcasts from one congregation to other regional locations. Video encoders at the main preaching site and decoders at sister locations are already used



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

by churches across the United States. While this approach is not perfect and would be new for the FLGA District, it may be one tool among many to address pastoral shortages faithfully and creatively.

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

Together, these baseline facts give us a clear and hopeful picture of the FLGA District's present reality: 192 churches, faithful church workers and lay leaders, emerging leadership needs, revitalization opportunities, partnership potential, and new mission fields already taking shape. As we count the cost with honesty and humility, we move forward with confidence in Christ – grateful for what He has already done and trusting the Holy Spirit to raise up workers, renew congregations, and open doors for Gospel ministry across Florida, Georgia, and the Bahamas. ■

Steadfast in the Desert: LCMS Elects Leadership,

Many people have never been to a National Convention of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. The reality is that only two people are chosen from each circuit, one pastor and one layperson. They go to serve our District and the Synod in the important role of being voting delegates. Others are chosen as well to be advisory delegates, representing our commissioned workers (teachers, DCEs, retired

events, votes, reports, and elections falls to the delegates who were there, but I will summarize some of it for you in this article including a little bit of how the Convention works.

The Convention began well before anyone stepped foot in balmy Phoenix, Arizona in July, as the Synod opened nominations and the submissions of overtures. Overtures are received from various bodies within the Synod,

crop of overtures to the Convention with 374 overtures, a little more than 100 overtures submitted at the 2023 Convention.

These overtures included titles like *"To Support Lutheran Congregations and Schools in Urban Contexts,"* and *"To Broaden and Reopen Specific Ministry Pastor Program for Wider Pastoral Formation and Service."*

Once overtures are received, they are assigned

These various Floor This convention succeeded in turning 374 overtures into 108 resolutions that would be put before the voting delegates. In addition to those 108 resolutions, the delegates also voted on 105 different elections featured at the Convention.

It is worth stopping here to give thanks to our delegation from the Florida-Georgia District. These delegates had to research and be prepared

Florida-Georgia District 2026 Convention Delegates & Guests



pastors, district staff, and others.

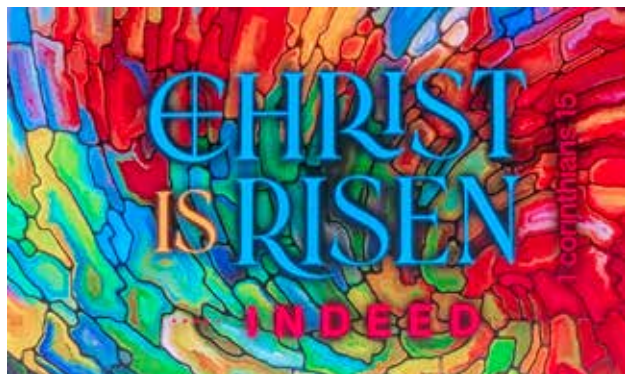
All in all, 42 people out of our entire Florida-Georgia District served by filling these important roles. So, what happened at this convention? The full job of reporting the

including congregations, circuits, District conventions, and boards throughout the Synod. Essentially, an overture is a petition that proposes business for consideration by the Convention. This year there was a bumper

to Floor Committees. These committees review the overtures and determine how to present them to the delegates. This may include combining similar overtures or recommending that certain overtures not be adopted.

to intelligently vote on 108 pieces of business that stretched over eleven topics such as *"National Witness"* and *"Pastoral Formation and Seminaries."*

Delegates also had to research the slates of



Secretary Greg Michael and Vice President Jay Winters reviewed daily business, overtures and answered questions for the FLGA delegates. At left, secretary Greg Michael and Vice President Scott Henze.

Strengthens Global Fellowship in Phoenix

candidates for each of the 105 elections at the Convention. This was truly a herculean task that they took on with seriousness in thought and prayer. If you know a delegate to this past election, please thank them for their service.

When the dust settled after the end of the Convention, much had been discussed and voted upon. It is an impossible task to share all of the important decisions made, and it is even more impossible to fully explain those decisions in their full context. However, there were a few major discussions and votes that occurred at the Convention.

The Convention celebrated many milestones, including anniversaries for deaf ministry and black ministry, as well as passing a plan to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's Large and Small Catechisms in 2029.

There was significant attention paid to the discipleship of the next generation of Christians in resolutions that called for a paid fulltime director of campus ministry, promotion of Christians

adopting and fostering children, and several resolutions looking into the health of the Concordia University System and the students served by it.

A heavily scrutinized issue included resolutions about seminary education for pastors. The resolutions that were passed clearly and firmly turned away from any online versions of the Masters of Divinity and Residential Alternate Route paths to ordination, preferring to keep these programs residential in nature. Additionally, the resolutions passed hoped to make clear some things about the Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) program and encouraged current SMP pastors to complete the "General Pastoral Certificate," removing any restrictions they currently have as SMP pastors.

The Convention also approved an expansion of the Pastoral Formation Committee — a group of people that make decisions on things like seminary education — from three people to six people.

Elections at the Convention involved many people to boards and commissions including

a new Commission on Worship that was reinstated after having been left out of the 2010 revision of the Bylaws of Synod.

The Synod vice-presidents were elected to renewed terms, but

much more.

The delegate who was voted to represent your circuit and the advisory delegates who served at the Convention are charged with making full reports to your congregation. Be sure



Jay Winters, Florida-Georgia District Chairman, Board of Directors
Campus Pastor Florida State University
pastor@universitylutheranchurch.org
850-224-6059

the retiring Rev. Dr. Scott Murray was replaced in his role by Rev. Dr. Alphonso Espinosa.

The Convention also refused a resolution that would have changed the vote for the national President of Synod to be elected at the Convention instead of allowing every congregation to register and vote for this office.

Many other things were discussed and voted upon at the Phoenix event, including questions pertaining to who should read Scripture publicly in the worship service, considerations of invitro fertilization, worker wellness in the Synod, church planting, and so

to follow up with them and attend any meetings that they may host to give you a comprehensive picture of what happened at this event.

Lastly, it is never too early to begin to pray about who might serve your circuit and congregation in the upcoming 2029 Convention. The Florida-Georgia District was blessed this year to have a top-notch delegation that was enabled by the Holy Spirit to do great work. We have a little less than three years before we do this all again.

In the meantime, let us pray for our leaders in the Synod and in our District, that we may be a church body that connects more and more people to Jesus.



Far left — Delegates gave a standing ovation to LCMS President Emeriti, The Rev. Dr. Gerald Kieschnick and his wife Terry. FLGA delegates met for breakfast, enabling abundant discussion and questions; Pastor Cris Escher celebrating the close of convention — he's headed home!

What is revitalization? One's thoughts of revitalization will likely depend on reversing what got your attention in the first place. It may be attendance, money to pay the bills or re-igniting that favored ministry. For us, revitalization means God's people faithful in worship, growing in Christ — while also being selfless in blessing others with God's heart that desires to see more people baptized and proclaim faith in Jesus.

Yet revitalization can be a mystery. It may seem perplexing to see your church stuck. You love your church but for outsiders your church may be invisible.

What to do? In previous columns we have talked about five shifts in mindsets, assumptions, behaviors and routines plus three "realms." For today we will look a bit closer at the first shift: away from an "I'll just do it myself approach" (few in charge) to a more intentional practice of apprenticeship, discipling or empowering others (many engaged in a serving pathway).

The reality is that there is a direct relationship between how many are involved in something other than worship and one's spiritual growth, frequency of worship and the health and vitality of the church. In other words, the less people who take responsibility for something beyond themselves, the less likely they will have a sense of ownership.

Put positively, when you prioritize engaging and involving people in your church, in taking on even some small piece of responsibility, they will more likely take their church membership and their faith more seriously! The temptation is to just do it ourselves (whatever the "it" is). Our accomplishments feel good and we may like the control!

We feel valued when we deliver the thing, call the people, provide the ride, make the visit, bake the cake, set up the chairs, take out the trash, fix the piece of equipment and so on. But if we do not prioritize intentionally inviting and involving someone to join us, even if it is making a few phone calls, we miss a rich, golden opportunity to bless them!

We are not referring to

public announcements or making sure those opportunities are listed in the bulletin. Those are essential to keep people informed and invite them to pray! It really comes down to one person talking personally to another. P.S. we're not talking about your circle of friends! We're talking about the inactive member spouse, the newer member, the younger attendee who sits alone etc.

Such invitations say, "I like you . . . you are important . . . you can make a difference!"

Volunteerism is relationally driven far more than it is about the task. Also, don't dismiss this because you think they will say no. Keep inviting people to take on some small responsibility: bring the donuts, host the meeting at their home, join you in cooking, etc. That's the "on ramp." Then along the way those with more capacity will take on more responsibility.

Of course you feel responsible and you don't want to be lazy. But with this shift you are helping people move

from being spectators to getting in the game! This is important for pastors too. So first, model the way. Serve with integrity and humility — lifting and advocating for others. Find someone to take with you when you do things and encourage them to replicate this with another! Second, share what are doing with other leaders in your church and give thanks to God. Then encourage



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

them to mentor someone as well. Third, when you are involved in planning activities remind one another that the first goal is to engage and involve others early in the planning process: the inactive, even non-members, the youngsters and those who will likely participate later. Afterwards, intentionally celebrate what God has done.

Then watch what happens! People will increasingly lean on God to do something in His name - including your current leaders! They will increasingly be in worship and to pray for God's help as they carry out their new role in XYZ ministry. They will want to be there to greet the other member friends they were with while serving. They will tell their friends what they are doing. They will have more incentive to support the ministry through their prayers and even their offerings. God and church and the body of Christ will become much more important to them. ■

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



The Mystery of Revitalization Part 6

2027 Veterans of the Cross Gathering Welcomes Dr. Dean Nadasdy as Keynote Speaker

The LCMS Florida-Georgia District Veterans of the Cross Committee is thrilled to announce that The Rev. Dr. Dean Nadasdy, President Emeritus of the Minnesota South District, will serve as the keynote presenter for the annual Veterans of the Cross (VOC) 2027 Gathering. Under the theme "Wellspring Of Wisdom," retired professional church workers, commissioned ministers, lay leaders, and spouses *from across the Synod* are invited to gather for this highly anticipated event of fellowship, worship, and spiritual growth.



The event will take place March 1-3, 2027 at the **St. Stephen Christian Retreat Center in Titusville, Florida.**

A Lifetime of Ministry and Leadership

Dr. Nadasdy brings a wealth of pastoral depth, theological expertise, and national leadership to the 2027 gathering. He retired in 2018 after serving a six-year tenure as District President of the LCMS Minnesota South District. Prior to his district presidency, he dedicated 35 years to local parish ministry, leading three notable LCMS congregations: Woodbury Lutheran Church in Woodbury, Minnesota (2000-2012) Cross

View Lutheran Church in Edina, Minnesota (1981-1997) Grace Lutheran Church in Eugene, Oregon (1973-1981). His leadership extended to the national stage as well, where he served as a Vice President of the LCMS from 2004 to 2010. He also chaired major Mass Events and Worship Committees for multiple LCMS National Youth Gatherings.

"Attendees of the 2027 VOC Gathering will benefit immensely from Dr. Nadasdy's deep commitment to homiletics and practical theology," offers Ms. Ruth Wiedenmann, VOC Committee Chairperson. "From 1997 to 2000, he held the Gregg H. Benidt Memorial Chair in Homiletics and Literature as an Associate Professor of Practical Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. For more than two decades since, he has continued to shape future pastors as an adjunct instructor in the seminary's Doctor of Ministry program.

"An accomplished author, Dr. Nadasdy's written contributions span widely across the Synod, including curricula for Concordia Publishing House and Augsburg, study notes for the Lutheran Study Bible, and articles for the Concordia Journal and Preach the Word," she continues.

His biography states his published books include *Preaching is Worship*, *Cross Views*, and his most recent work on the aesthetics of preaching, *The Beautiful Sermon*. Lutheran

audiences will recognize his voice as a periodic guest preacher on *The Lutheran Hour*.

Even in retirement, Dr.

Nadasdy remains active in global and local ministry. He currently chairs the Board of Directors for Feed My Starving Children, a prominent global hunger relief agency. He resides in Minnesota with his wife, Susie, a retired Lutheran



middle and high school English and speech teacher. They are blessed with three children and five grandchildren.

Join Us in Titusville

Established in 1979 by the late FLGA District President, The Rev. Dr. L. Lloyd Behnken, the annual Veterans of the Cross gathering continues to honor, stimulate, and serve those who have given so much to the cause of the Gospel. "Alongside Dr. Nadasdy's keynote presentations, the 2027 gathering will feature uplifting worship services, mission insights, and invaluable time to reconnect with old friends and colleagues," Wiedenmann concludes. ■

**2027 Veterans of the Cross
Monday, March 1 – through
Wednesday, March 3, 2027
St. Stephen Christian Center
Titusville, FL on the banks of the
Indian River/Intracoastal
All retired LCMS pastors,
teachers, commissioned workers,
lay leaders, and spouses.
Registration details early 2027**

Faith in the Modern Age: Young Adults to Gather in Dunedin for 'In the World, But Not of the World' Conference

In a culture that often feels increasingly disconnected and fast-paced, finding a sense of grounding and community can be a challenge for young adults. This January, **Faith/Dunedin, FL** aims to provide exactly that space. From January 15–17, 2027, young adults ages 18 to 35 will gather for a weekend conference titled *"In the World, but Not of the World,"* featuring a dynamic lineup of speakers, worship services, and dedicated social time.

The weekend promises bold teaching tailored to the unique challenges of navigating modern life as a person of faith. Over the course of three days, attendees will dive into sessions designed to encourage faithful living, deep relationships, and a clearer understanding of identity," explains The Rev. Andrew Sorenson, pastor at Faith. "The speaker lineup brings together perspectives from across the Florida-Georgia District and beyond."

Sorenson will lead a two-part



Andrew Sorenson

session titled *"The Babylonian Captivity."* His presentations will focus on how young Christians can effectively bring the salt and light of God's truth into an increasingly dark and secular world.

Pastor Roberto Rojas from **Zion/Winter Garden, FL** will address the modern loneliness epidemic. His talk, *"A Theology of Friendship in an Age of Isolation,"* will explore what it truly means to make, cultivate,

and keep meaningful Christian friendships today.

Pastor Andrew Apple of **First/Clearwater FL** will speak on the balance of daily habits and grace. In his session, *"Discipline in the Christian Life,"* he will examine how to build faithful, structured habits while resting completely in Christ's forgiveness.

The Rev. Luke Onken serves as Campus Pastor and a Theology Teacher and travels from Mayer

Lutheran High School in Mayer, MN. His session is entitled *"Understanding Vocational Identity Through the Two Kinds of Righteousness,"* This session will explore how a Christian's baptismal identity directly shapes and influences their daily work and vocational life.

Beyond the educational sessions, the conference is designed to be a holistic weekend of fellowship. Registration is open to all young adults in the 18–35 age range, and organizers encourage past attendees and local church members to share the event with friends, roommates, and family members who might benefit from a weekend of spiritual refreshment. The event will be hosted at Faith Lutheran Church, located at 1620 Pinehurst Road, Dunedin, FL 34698. The registration fee is \$40 per person, which includes four meals over the course of the weekend.

For more details, housing information, and to secure a spot, visit the official event page at www.faithdunedin.org/young-adults. Early registrants can use the promotional code LIFE27 to receive \$5 off their registration fee. ■

[UNFILTERED]



SAVE THE DATE

Mark your calendars for the Middle School Youth Gathering and The High School Retreat. The date is November 6–8, 2026 and it all takes place at Lake Yale Baptist Conference Center, a 288-acre full-service Christian retreat, camp, and ministry center located about an hour north of Orlando.

This one weekend, one location, will encompass two incredible events: The Middle School Youth Gathering and The High School Retreat offer faith-filled experiences tailored to each age group. Registration is now open! Registration

is \$205/person (until 9/23); \$230/person until 10/6. All the details can be found at flgadistrict.org/ymw/

High School Retreat

This is a brand-new opportunity for high school students – replacing the former High School Leadership Event. The Retreat is open to all high school students. It will deepen their walk with Christ and let them form meaningful connections through engaging Bible studies, powerful speakers and worship. The Retreat will also be a time for fun ---

roasting marshmallows over a campfire, playing outdoor games and much more.

Middle School Youth Gathering

More than 400 middle school youth from all around the FLGA District come together for an exciting weekend. They experience mass events, powerful speakers, breakout sessions, and games that provide opportunities for spiritual growth, learning, and building connections.

REGISTRATION IS NOW OPEN!

Editor's Note: *Claude* is a family of large language models (LLMs) and a conversational AI assistant developed by the AI research company Anthropic. Similar to OpenAI's *ChatGPT* or Google's *Gemini*, *Claude* is designed to textually converse with users, write content, analyze and explain complex data, and write or debug computer code.

Keeping the attention and participation of 7th and 8th graders while reading through *Luther's Small Catechism* is a yearly struggle. Recently, the challenge came during the 8th Commandment when the class fidgeted and doodled while waiting for me to explain the word "reputation" to one or two students who did not quite grasp the concept.

a picture. That picture is your reputation.

Claude defined reputation as "'your name' at school. When teachers hear your name, what do they think? When other students hear your name, what comes to mind? That's your reputation — it's what people think about you based on what they know or have heard."

Claude went on to illustrate how the 8th Commandment is broken: "Imagine someone spreads a rumor about you that isn't true.

Notice what I didn't do. I didn't abdicate my responsibility as a teacher to know my students and to cultivate the best conditions



Brian Stolarczyk
Senior Pastor
Lutheran Church of the Cross
Port Charlotte, Florida
brian@thestolarczyks.com
(941) 979-7490

for their learning. I did not use the LLMs as a replacement for our class materials. I remained the teacher. The Catechism and Bible remained the text we were studying. *ChatGPT* and

LLM AS A TOOL, NOT A TEACHER

When I finished my explanation, I invited the class to evaluate *ChatGPT* and *Claude* with the prompt: "Explain the word, reputation, for a class of 7th and 8th graders of an LCMS congregation in a manner that is age appropriate with examples."

ChatGPT defined reputation as "what people come to expect from you because of what they have seen you do over time." It offered eight examples of reputation including: "Imagine everyone who knows you has an invisible file folder with your name on it. Every interaction adds another little piece of information: 'keeps promises,' 'lies when caught,' 'helps people,' 'always late,' 'good sport,' 'makes fun of people,' 'admits mistakes.' After a while, those pieces form

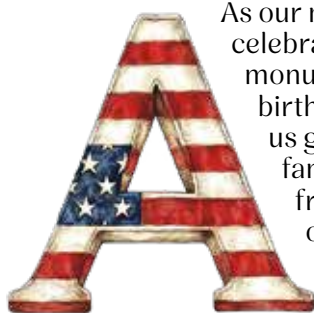
Maybe they say you cheated on a test when you didn't, or that you said something mean about someone when you never did.

How does that feel? That rumor damages your reputation — it makes people think badly of you even though it's not true. The Eighth Commandment is about protecting each other's reputations."

Suddenly I had a room full of students clamoring to tell me which scenarios had taken place in their school or among their friends. They took turns identifying the ways they had witnessed the 8th Commandment broken and which suggestions from the LLMs seemed implausible. The LLMs gave the students something to judge using the Bible and their Catechism.

Claude provided two additional explanations for the class to examine, question, and compare with what we were learning.

If you have wanted to test the waters with LLMs in your ministry but did not know where or how to begin, give it a try. This technique works with youth and adults alike and is enhanced through the use of multiple LLMs given the same prompt. Allow time for the students to process and evaluate the LLM's output and judge it on the basis of Scripture, your lesson objectives, and teaching materials. You might be surprised at the classroom engagement you get when using an LLM as a tool in your teaching toolkit. ■



As our nation recently celebrated its monumental 250th birthday, many of us gathered with families and friends to reflect on the founding of our country.

It was a profound moment to remember our founders and the immense sacrifices they made — many with their very lives — to bring this nation forth.

Above all, it was a moment in history where those early leaders completely trusted the Lord God with their success. Reflecting on that bravery, I sometimes wonder about us today. As Americans who freely enjoy the liberties won for us by those patriotic and courageous souls, do we possess the same faith, fortitude, and commitment to “lay it on the line” to change the world for Christ? Our nation’s founders faced extraordinary challenges, certain death, and absolute financial ruin if their revolution against the British Crown failed. The fact that they were willing to risk everything to gain freedom from tyranny and end taxation without representation demonstrates unparalleled determination.

Today, the Lutheran Church faces a modern, quiet crisis of its own. Church attendance has steadily declined over the past

four decades, a trend that only accelerated after the COVID-19 pandemic. According to recent Pew Research data, just 62 percent

relishes the notion that a nation built “under God” is seeing a retreat from the pews, and he delights in the disruption caused by a global pandemic.

But my friends, be of good cheer! This is not the end of Christianity. Far from it. This is our moment to rise and take control of our Christian destiny, just as our founders took charge of theirs 250 years ago.

Florida-Georgia District President James Rockey has asked me to share an extraordinary project that the Florida-Georgia District has undertaken to meet this challenge head-on. The District is establishing a \$10 million endowment to permanently fund the **“New Church Plants, launch New Outreach Ministries, and raise up New Church Workers.”** In short, this fund will strengthen and enhance our opportunities to **connect new souls to Jesus.** The mission field right outside our doors is vast and growing. The populations of Florida and Georgia are projected to expand by 8 percent to 10 percent during the next decade, bringing an influx of three to four million new residents to our southeast corner of the United States. If we can reach just 3 percent of those newcomers and help them find a Lutheran church home, our District will grow by more than 100,000 members! We know exactly how

A REVOLUTION OF THE HEART



of Americans now identify as Christians, down from more than 80 percent in the mid-1980s. This decline is not news to the faithful; we see the empty pews in our own sanctuaries. Satan certainly

COMPELLED:

Mission Advancement Initiative

floridageorgia
district

OUR \$10 MILLION ENDOWMENT GOALS: A VISION FOR SUSTAINABLE MISSIONS

Investing in the Future of Florida and Georgia.

ENDOWED FUNDS TO SUPPORT:

1. Church Planters & Missions
2. Theological Education Scholarships
3. Cross-Cultural Evangelism
4. Emergency Response & Relief



JOIN US IN BUILDING A LASTING LEGACY.

877.457.5556 • <https://flgadistrict.org/mission-advancement/>



to achieve this, but it requires prayer, commitment, and financial resources.

This brings us to a fundamental question: *Why should we give?*

To answer that, we must look to how Scripture defines stewardship. Under the Law of Moses, the Israelites were expected to give a tithe – basically 10 percent of their income, crops, or livestock – to the local temple. When you factor in festivals and other required offerings, their annual giving was often *well above 10 percent*.

that tithing is a magical transaction to ensure material riches. God does not promise to make us millionaires. Rather, He promises to be a faithful provider.

In my 39 years practicing estate planning and real estate law in Ocala, I have assisted thousands of clients – some wealthy, many average, and some poor. Because faith often intersects with legacy, I frequently discuss tithing and charity with



Jonathan Dean
Managing Partner & Attorney
Dean & Dean, LLP
Ocala, Florida
jondean@deananddean.net
(352) 368-2800

a true sacrifice, not unlike the sacrifices of our nation's founders who trusted God with their very livelihoods. Together, let us start a new revolution – one aimed at winning souls for the Lord, building up His kingdom, and reclaiming our culture for Christ. ■

Expected Outcomes:

- **Two new church plants per year.**
- **Congregations engaged and excited about developing new ways to go and connect to their communities with new ministries both small and large.**
- **Greater financial support for our church work students to minimize debt and encourage others to also consider preparing for ministry.**
- **An increase in the number of new believers through Baptisms and affirmations of faith.**

And, in unison with the Lord, there will be “more rejoicing in heaven” over each lost individual who comes to saving faith (LUKE 15:7)

To modern ears, that can sound overwhelming. But that fear usually stems from looking at wealth through the lens of “Man’s economy” rather than the “Lord’s economy.” Most people give to the church out of whatever is left over after paying the mortgage, car payments, utilities, and grocery bills. God’s economy actually works in reverse!

In the book of MALACHI, God issues a bold invitation: “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it” (MALACHI 3:10).

This is the only place in Scripture where God explicitly invites us to test Him, yet so few take Him up on it, leaving immense blessings untapped and reducing the work the Church can accomplish. When we talk about these blessings, we must be careful not to fall into the trap of the “prosperity gospel” – the false idea

clients looking to remember their church in their estate plans. During nearly four decades of legal practice, I have observed a consistent truth among those who give generously to the Lord: those who practice tithing by giving of their first fruits before paying their bills always have enough. They make intentional adjustments to their expenditures to honor the Lord first, and I never worry about them going broke financially.

Wealthy people can lose their fortunes, and those with less face constant worldly anxieties, but those who tithe find that the Lord consistently ensures their true needs are met. That is the reliable reality of the Lord’s economy. I implore you to search your hearts, review your family budgets, and see where you can manage your finances to put the Lord first.

If you are not tithing today, let this be the moment you begin. I encourage you to make a meaningful provision for the District’s endowment fund. Trust God to sustain and bless you. Taking this step may feel like

Editor’s note: Jonathan S. Dean is an attorney practicing in Ocala, Florida, and serves as a member of the Florida-Georgia District’s Mission Advancement Initiative Council. He has more than 30 years experience in the practice of law. Jon also served as General Counsel for the Marion County Hospital District from 1998-2016; Chairman of the Board and board member for Florida Citizen’s Bank from 1999-2015 (now Seacoast National Bank); General Counsel and board member of Central Florida College Foundation, and has served as President of several private for-profit and not-for-profit corporations. Jon has served as lead counsel on hundreds of cases which resulted in favorable results for their clients, including obtaining millions of dollars in settlements and judgments for clients. Jon has managed and supervised the closings of over a billion dollars in real estate transactions through his law firm and title agency, Advantage Title, LLC. Jon is an active member of St. John Lutheran Church, Ocala, Florida. He raises Angus cattle with his brother former Marion County Sheriff, Ed Dean, raises and races thoroughbred horses, and enjoys fishing and playing golf.

Forged By Fire: How One LCMS

by John List, Editor



Forged By Fire Ministries is a faith-based, non-profit disaster relief organization, and Rev. Paul Ernewein is its full-time Director and President. The ministry operates under the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) umbrella, deploying mobile equipment and volunteers to provide physical, emotional, and spiritual care to communities devastated by natural disasters.

Headquartered in Louisiana, the ministry was born out of firsthand experiences surviving catastrophic Gulf Coast hurricanes, floods, and tornadoes. Forged By Fire Ministries has been extensively involved in major disaster relief operations across both Florida and Georgia. Because they are stationed in neighboring Louisiana, they are routinely deployed to the Southeast region during major weather events. They maintain a direct working partnership with the LCMS Florida-Georgia District and regional Lutheran Early Response Teams (LERT) to coordinate their massive food deployments.

The organization operates as a mobile rapid-response unit, moving into hard-hit disaster zones to offer "hope in a hot meal" and critical relief services. The organization is structured around four core pillars of crisis care:

• Mass Feeding Operations:

Utilizing custom-built mobile commercial kitchens and food trucks to prepare and serve up to 5,000 freshly cooked meals per day to victims and first responders.

• Mobile Laundry & Utility Units:

Providing heavily needed, functional aid like mobile laundry trailers to disaster areas where power and water infrastructures are down.

• Spiritual Care:

Distributing symbolic faith items, such as their "Crosses for Benny" initiative and sharing thousands of cross necklaces, while providing direct pastoral counseling to survivors suffering from trauma.



Paul Ernewein

• Rapid Response Boxes:

Delivering supply boxes filled with immediate emergency essentials directly to impacted families.

About Rev. Paul Ernewein

Pastor Ernewein is an LCMS ordained minister and a 2007 graduate of Concordia Seminary/ St. Louis, MO. After spending years simultaneously balancing his role as a local parish pastor at The Village Church Lutheran in Lacombe, LA, and volunteering in disaster sites, Ernewein officially stepped into the role of full-time director for Forged By Fire Ministries. Under his leadership, the ministry has executed

massive, rapid-response recovery deployments across the American South and East Coast, including responding to devastating tornadoes in Selma, Alabama and North St. Louis, Missouri, as well as providing extensive relief following Hurricane Helene in Asheville, North Carolina.

■ Work in Florida

Following the back-to-back devastation of Hurricanes Helene and Milton, Rev. Paul Ernewein and his team coordinated regional relief efforts directly alongside the LCMS Florida-Georgia District to serve impacted communities. Ernewein led a multi-week deployment of Forged By Fire volunteers to southwest Florida following the devastation of Hurricane Ian. Stationed out of **Zion/Fort Myers, FL** the team brought in their massive mobile commercial kitchen and cast-iron pots to cook and serve more than 6,000 hot meals (including giant batches of jambalaya and shrimp pasta) to victims, utility crews, and first responders.

When Hurricane Sally hit Pensacola, FL, the ministry deployed its mass-feeding units to the Florida Panhandle to support communities facing widespread infrastructure damage.

■ Work in Georgia

In late 2024, the Ministry launched massive rapid-response networks extending into Georgia and Western North Carolina to feed families facing catastrophic infrastructure failure and widespread power outages following Hurricane Helene. Forged By Fire works closely with Florida-Georgia Lutheran Early Response (FGLER) units.

Ministry Brings Hope to Ashes



Jay Wendland

The ministry helps equip local LERT chainsaw and muck-out crews who are deployed directly into hard-hit Georgia communities to safely handle fallen trees, clear debris, and rebuild homes.

■ LERT and Jay Wendland

Jay Wendland is the District Disaster Response Coordinator (DDRC) for the The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) Florida-Georgia District. Wendland acts as the primary administrative leader and strategic bridge between regional Lutheran Early Response Teams (LERT), local congregations, Forged By Fire and national relief organizations.

Following major regional crises — such as Hurricanes Ian, Helene, and Milton — Wendland was responsible for assessing structural damages to local ministries, coordinating financial assistance, managing incoming volunteer networks, and organizing local supply distribution points.

He oversees and helps sponsor LERT and specialized chainsaw training programs across Florida and Georgia. These programs equip local church volunteers with the safety skills needed to

clean debris, muck out flooded homes, and assist vulnerable community members. He serves as an advisory member for the specialized regional non-profit Florida-Georgia Lutheran Early Response (FGLER), directly collaborating with response chairs to organize boots-on-the-ground disaster relief.

In addition to his heavy volunteer coordination work, Wendland serves professionally as the District Vice President for the Lutheran Church Extension Fund (LCEF) within the Florida-Georgia District, supporting church funding and growth projects.

To arrange for Jay Wendland to visit your congregation and host a Lutheran Early Response Team (LERT) or specialized chainsaw volunteer training event, you can reach out to him directly through the LCMS Florida-Georgia District Office. His Email: jwendland@flgadistrict.org and his direct phone is 407-258-5041.

When you contact him to propose a training visit, it is highly helpful to have the following preliminary information ready for your congregation:

• Proposed Dates:

Have a few tentative weekend dates in mind for the workshop.

• Training Type:

Specify if you are looking for basic LERT Certification (classroom and basic safety) or advanced Chainsaw & Safety Training (hands-on debris clearing).

• Facility Availability:

Ensure your church has a meeting space or fellowship hall equipped with a projector or screen for the classroom portion of the training.



-- JL



Spiritual Care



Laundry Facilities



Shower Ministry



Relief Boxes

Remember the time when the phrase “Sunday best” meant something?

It did not necessarily mean expensive clothing. In fact, some of the people who took the greatest care with their Sunday appearance had fairly modest means.

Growing up in a Detroit, Michigan suburb, plenty of my friends’ fathers might have owned one or two suits and a few ties. A mother might have two or three dresses she wore to church, weddings, funerals or other special occasions. Friends shared hand-me-downs from older siblings, cousins, neighbors. Of course our shoes were carefully polished and hair was brushed, combed and trimmed — even if mom was our barber.

What mattered was not the price tag. It was the occasion.

Sunday was the day the family went to the Lord’s house. My dad was choir director and that meant my sister and I attended two Sunday morning worships and had to sit up front near the organ and choir loft. So dress code was expected to show respect for being in church.

That simple conviction raises an interesting question for Lutherans and other Christians today: Does what we wear to church really matter?

The answer requires

a little more thought than either “Absolutely!” or “Not at all.” It’s not about looking expensive — and not about dress pants versus casual jeans. It is not about dresses versus slacks. It is not about whether a person can afford designer clothing — or even whether he or she can afford “church clothes” at all.



Someone who is poor, struggling, homeless, visiting for the first time, or simply wearing whatever clothing he or she owns should never wonder whether there is a place for them in the Lord’s house. If you have nothing but jeans and a T-shirt, come to church in your jeans and T-shirt.

If your work clothes are the best you have, wear them. If you are visiting and have no idea what the congregation normally wears, don’t let that stop you from walking through the door.

The Gospel is not reserved for people with the right wardrobe. Jesus does not look at the label in our shirt before He gives us His grace.

And yet, there is another side to the question. If we do have choices about what we wear, perhaps it is worth asking what those choices communicate.

What Does Our Clothing Say? We make choices about clothing for all kinds of occasions. If we are invited to a wedding, we think about what we should wear. If we are attending a funeral, we dress differently. If we are interviewing for a job, we consider how we will present ourselves. If we are invited to an important dinner, most of us will look through our closets and ask, “What is the nicest thing I have that would be appropriate for this occasion?”

Why?

Because the occasion matters. The person we are going to meet matters. The place we are going matters. So consider what happens on Sunday morning.

We aren’t simply attending another community event. We aren’t gathering for a lecture, a concert, or a social club meeting. Depending on the congregation and physical worship space, it’s likely not dressing as if going to the beach.

We come into the presence of God. The Word of God is proclaimed. We confess our sins. We hear our Pastor declaring Holy Absolution: our sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. We remember the waters of Holy Baptism. We hear the Scriptures read and preached. And then, in the Holy Sacrament, Christ gives Himself to His people.

The King of creation comes among His people and places His very Body and Blood into their mouths for the forgiveness of sins. That is not an ordinary appointment. That is not a casual gathering.

It is worth asking whether our preparation — including the way we dress — can reflect something of our awareness of what is happening?

This is where Christian freedom enters the conversation. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod does not give us a dress code for Sunday morning. Scripture does not say that God accepts a person in a suit but rejects a person in jeans.

Thank God! Our standing before God does not depend upon our clothing. It depends entirely upon Christ.

We are sinners who come before a holy God, and Christ covers us — not with earthly fabric, but with His righteousness. So why talk about clothing at all?

Because Christian freedom is not merely the question, “What am I allowed to do?”

Christian love also asks, “What is helpful to my neighbor?”

Christian reverence asks, “What does this occasion deserve?”

The apostle Paul speaks of modesty and self-control in 1 TIMOTHY 2:9. Modesty is not exclusively a women’s issue, nor is it merely an old-fashioned concern. It is part of the Christian’s calling to consider how we present ourselves and how our choices affect those around us.

Clothing can communicate many things. It can draw attention to us — or allow attention to remain where it belongs. And when we gather for worship, perhaps the goal is not to make ourselves the most noticeable person in the room. Perhaps the goal is to help direct our attention toward Christ.

From “Come as You Are” to “Come Prepared” — there is something beautiful about the phrase come as you are.

The Gospel itself is a divine invitation to sinners exactly as they are.

Come with your failures. Come with your burdens. Come with your doubts. Come with your sins. Come empty-handed. Come, because Christ has died for you.

But “come as you are” was never meant to suggest that nothing matters once we have arrived. When we know where we are going, preparation is natural.

The question is not, “How little effort can I get away with?” A better question might be, “What is the best way I can

prepare, given what I have?”

For one person, that may mean putting on a suit. For another, it may mean a clean pair of jeans and a collared shirt. For someone else, it may simply mean wearing the cleanest and most appropriate clothing available. The important thing is not conformity. It is intentionality.

Perhaps this is what we can recover from the old idea of Sunday best.

Our grandparents may not have had much, but many of them understood something we sometimes forget: worship is worth preparing for.

They washed up. They combed their hair. They polished their shoes. They put on some of the best clothing they had. And then they went to church.

Not because God loved them more when they wore a tie. Not because the Lord’s Supper required a certain dress code. Not because the pastor was keeping score. They did it because they knew they were going to the Lord’s house.

There is something worth recovering in that attitude.

Not legalism.
Not judgment.
Not fashion.
Reverence!

And perhaps also a little humility.

We live in a culture that constantly tells us to express ourselves, display ourselves, promote ourselves, and draw attention to ourselves. Social media has fundamentally

transformed self-expression, identity display, self-promotion, and attention-seeking behavior by introducing algorithmic incentives and public performance metrics. This digital shift alters not just how people share, but also how they perceive themselves and their relationships with their audience.

a few weeks or months. Come if you are embarrassed. Come if you don’t know the liturgy. Come if you don’t know what to expect. Come because Christ invites sinners.

The Church is not a runway, and the sanctuary is not a place where we measure one another’s worth by



John List
Lutheran LIFE Editor
Florida-Georgia District
Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
lutheranlife@flgadistrict.org
561-212-2112

Perhaps even our Sunday clothing can become a small exercise in “How can I make myself stand out?”

But Christ says, in effect: Look here. Look to the cross. Look to the font. Look to the altar. Look to My Word. Look to Me. So we should be thinking “How can I honor this occasion and love the people worshiping beside me?”

There is, however, one principle that must remain above all the others: do not stay home because you think you aren’t dressed well enough for church.

If you’re reading this and wondering whether your clothing is “good enough,” please hear this clearly: Come!

Come if you have jeans. Come in your shorts, tee shirts and sun dresses. Come if your clothes are old. Come if you are visiting. Come if you have been away from church for years — or just

appearances. But for those of us who do have choices, perhaps we can recover a simple question from another generation:

What is the best I can do with what I have? Not because our clothing earns God’s favor. Not because a particular outfit makes our worship more acceptable. But because we know where we are going. We are going to hear the Word of God. We are going to receive Christ’s gifts. We are going to confess our sins and hear His forgiveness. We are going to kneel before the King.

And the King comes to us — not because we dressed well enough, but because He is gracious enough to come to sinners.

So wear what you have. Come as you are. And if you have the opportunity, perhaps dress like you know where you’re going. You’re going to meet the King! ■ — JL

Inside the Movement Reshaping

by John List, Editor

For years, the statistical narrative surrounding young adults in the church has been a solemn one. Church leaders nationwide have spent a decade diagnosing the “missing middle” — the abrupt drop-off in attendance that often happens when young believers cross the threshold from high school youth groups into the complex world of ages 18 to 29.

But a collaborative network of leaders in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) has decided that the era of diagnosing is officially over. It is time to start building. Enter Hodos, an independent, nonprofit ministry movement rapidly sweeping across the denomination. Named after the Greek word for “road” or “way” — a nod to how the earliest Christians described their community in the Book of Acts — Hodos is blazing a fresh trail for young adult discipleship.

“Eventually, you stop diagnosing and start building,” announced visionary author and church planter Zach Zehnder during the public launch of the movement. The Rev. Zach Zehnder is a highly prominent pastor, author, and church planter within the LCMS. He comes from a deep generational legacy of ministry and has a strong background in developing church resources.

“If Gen Z is spiritually open right now (and Zehnder emphatically believes they are), we can’t afford to just talk about it. We have to move! This is about forming disciples, connecting young adults, and building a bold future for the Lutheran Church.”



Setting the Table

The initiative took a major step forward this summer at **King of Kings/Omaha, NE**, where a foundational group of 50 hand-selected young adult “influencers” and ministry leaders gathered to pray, dream, and plan.

According to The Rev. Steve Carretto, Senior Pastor at **St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL**, and one of the “influencers” driving Hodos, “this will answer a profound longing for community among college students, young professionals, and those navigating the transitional years of early adulthood. Zach has designed this to be an independent movement built out of deep affection for the heritage and theology of the LCMS — operating not as a breakaway group, but as an invitational resource to strengthen local congregations.” Carretto is on the welcoming and hospitality team for the 2027 event.

What’s Coming in 2027

The primary catalyst on everyone’s mind? The 2027 National Young Adult Gathering, scheduled to take place July 28–31, 2027, in Omaha. Centering around the theme “Seated” —

derived from the comforting theological truth that Christ is confidently seated at the right hand of the Father — the four-day national event promises a mix of robust preaching, deep community, and honest conversations surrounding vocational discernment.

“The King is seated,” Zehnder emphasized, pointing to the foundational hope driving the ministry. “It’s time to build.” What’s Coming in the Next Year

While the countdown to Omaha 2027 is ticking, the leadership behind Hodos makes it clear that they are not just event planners; they are ecosystem builders. The upcoming year serves as the critical runway for the movement’s long-term infrastructure.

Getting Involved

For young adults and churches looking to get involved, here is what is on the prospective horizon for the next 12 months:

Fall 2026 Housing & Group Portals

In the coming months, Hodos will officially unveil its dedicated lodging blocks and meal packages

the Next Generation of Lutherans

for the Omaha gathering, allowing church groups and individual registrants to begin coordinating travel logistics.

A \$1 Million Endowment Drive

Throughout the next year, the Hodos network is actively raising a \$1 million fund designed to keep registration accessible and provide substantial scholarships for young adults who might otherwise struggle to afford the trip.

Digital Discipleship Drops

Recognizing that the digital square is where Gen Z lives, Hodos is preparing a roll-out of Jesus-centered, confessionally grounded digital media, including podcasts, scripture-engagement assets, and leadership modules to bridge the gap between regional events.

Local Network Expansion

Organizers will continue to connect scattered young adult

ministries across various LCMS districts into a synchronized national pipeline, ensuring that a young adult moving to a new city can instantly find a “Hodos-linked” community.

A Defiant Hope

Though skeptics often look at the generational gaps in modern church pews with worry, the mood inside the Hodos movement is distinctively vibrant. It is a posture built entirely on a missional imagination and a deep reverence for the Lutheran confession of faith. Registration for the landmark gathering is already officially open on the Hodos Portal, inviting a generation to claim their spot.

“As the movement builds momentum heading into the new year, the collective focus remains on giving a generation a voice, a purpose, and most importantly, a seat at the table,” Zehnder concludes.

If you’d like to check out more details about the movement, you can explore Hodos’ strategy or

register an early bird ticket directly on the official Hodos Website: www.hodosway.com/

If you’d like to make a donation to support their efforts, use the QR code below. ■



SCAN TO GIVE TO HODOS



*Zach Zehnder is an author, speaker, and fourth-generation Lutheran pastor who serves as a Teaching Pastor and Senior Director of Young Adult Ministry at **King of Kings Church in Omaha, Nebraska**. He is widely known as the founder of **Red Letter Living**, an organization dedicated to creating resources that challenge people to become greater followers of Jesus Christ. Since 2018, Zach has written and co-authored about 10 books. His most popular 40-day church challenges include the **Red Letter Challenge**, **Being Challenge**, **Forgiving Challenge**, **Serving Challenge** and **Giving Challenge**.*

Zach holds a Master of Divinity (M.Div.) in Pastoral Ministry from Concordia Seminary/St. Louis, MO, which he attended from 2005 to 2009. He completed his undergraduate studies at Concordia University/ Wisconsin. He is part of a deep-rooted ministry legacy. His father, Mark Zehnder, is a Pastor Emeritus at King of Kings, and both his grandfather and great-grandfather were ordained Lutheran ministers.

Zach is married to Allison and has two sons, Nathan and Brady.



Empowering the Future: More Than \$100,000 in New Educational Scholarships Unlocked

Reported by Rebecca Hartmann

Rebecca Hartmann serves as an elected Lay Representative for Region 3 on the Board of Directors for the LCMS Florida-Georgia District. The District's student scholarships are formally administered through the FLGA District Student Resources Committee. Hartmann chairs the committee and primarily serves as the official reporter and communicator between the students, congregations and Lutheran LIFE. She tracks, documents, and reports on the distribution of funds, highlighting milestones such as the district awarding more than \$100,000 in new educational aid and providing specific sabbatical and student scholarships to individuals preparing for full-time church work.

In 2026, a total of \$100,425 in scholarships is being awarded to 28 Florida-Georgia District students who applied and met the requirements for District education

scholarships. These future church workers are pursuing professional church work education and attending Synodical seminaries or one of the Concordia universities.

Supporting the District Scholarship Fund

To discover how you can support the FLGA District Scholarship Program through Mission Advancement, please visit flgadistrict.org/mission-advancement.

The District takes great joy in coming alongside our future church workers. Congregations are encouraged to utilize the resources available by *Set Apart to Serve* — a synodwide effort to build a culture of church work formation and recruitment throughout the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The goal is to ensure that the church continues to have pastors who proclaim Christ and administer the Sacraments, as well as

commissioned church workers who assist in teaching and sharing God's Word in various full-time vocations. The initiative emphasizes that God calls workers through influential adults such as parents, pastors, and church workers, who can guide youth toward considering church work. (lcms.org)

On the adjacent page is an introduction to our scholarship recipients who are attending one of our Synod's seminaries to become a pastor or deaconess. Future issues will introduce students from our Concordia universities as well as those pursuing their education through ELIT and CHS. These church workers are truly a part of God's answer to our District's 10:02 prayer which is based on LUKE 10:2, asking God to provide workers for the harvest. We thank God for them and for God's call on their lives to connect people to our Savior! ■

Meet Just a Few of the Scholarship Recipients



Emily Christman is entering Concordia University/Seward, NE for her freshman year. She started playing the piano at age five, later learned to play the organ, and is now planning to get her Bachelor's Degree in church music. Her home congregation is **Grace/Naples, FL**, where The Rev. Keith A. Lings serves as Senior Pastor.

Evelyn Schwartz has entered her last year at Concordia University/Seward, NE, where she is working toward her Lutheran Teacher's Diploma as an elementary education major with a middle school minor. Her home congregation is **St. Paul/Peachtree City, GA**. That congregation is served by The Rev. Mark D. Dahn and The Rev. Dr. Joel Mark Dietrich.



Caroline Michael has entered her first year at Concordia University/Mequon, WI, and will be studying to become a Lutheran school teacher. Her home congregation is **Christus Victor/Athens, GA**, our Lutheran church and campus student ministry located directly in the middle of the University of Georgia (UGA) campus. The Rev. Greg Michael, Caroline's father, serves this ministry, offering a hybrid and in-person options, keeping a strong focus on developing student leadership.

Jane Michael has entered her fourth year at Concordia University/Mequon, WI, and will be studying to become a Lutheran K-12 music teacher. Like her sister, Caroline, her home congregation is **Christus Victor/Athens, GA**, at the University of Georgia (UGA) campus. Her father, The Rev. Greg Michael, serves this ministry.



The Kingdom is thriving

Ministry missions are fueled by LCEF investors

LCMS churches, schools and organizations grow more each day, extending the news of Christ's love and mercy further into their communities. LCEF solutions drive ministry empowerment through investor support. Explore real partnership impact stories by visiting the LCEF Ministry Stories Map.

See where your support makes a difference:
lcef.org/SeeTheStories



LUTHERAN CHURCH
EXTENSION FUND



LCEF is a nonprofit religious organization; therefore, LCEF Investments are not FDIC insured, are not a federally insured savings or deposit account or insured by any state or federal agency. This is not an offer to sell investments, nor a solicitation to buy. LCEF will offer and sell its securities only in states where authorized. The offer is made solely by LCEF's Offering Circular. Investors should carefully read the Offering Circular, which more fully describes associated risks.



I read recently that many young people are returning to the Roman Catholic Church for Mass and spiritual direction. They are returning to an unchanging liturgical service in use for more than 1900 years. I thought to myself: What would these young people find in our Lutheran-

Missouri Synod churches?

Since our retirement more than 20 years ago, Eileen and I have visited many different congregations with many different worship styles and practices. So why are our liturgical practices so different and how did these differences come about?

Let's go back in history.

Imagine the shock and disbelief when Frederick William III of Prussia, a Calvinist, forced the Lutheran and Reformed churches into a single Protestant church body called the "Prussian Union of Churches" or ("*Uniert*" Church.") Lutherans were exposed to unfamiliar worship styles and practices such as black Geneva gowns, bare crosses, laymen in street clothes leading some parts of worship. Many Lutherans decided to leave their land and sail by ship to the new country – America. They agreed to form, fund and contract with their own clergy and Lutheran Bishop, Martin Stephan, to make all arrangements for the pilgrimage. This "Saxon Immigration" of 700 German Lutherans left their homeland in 1838 sailing on five ships from Bremerhaven, a port city on Germany's North Sea coast, through the Gulf of Mexico to New Orleans, LA, up the Mississippi to St. Louis, MO and then south to Perry County. Farmland would be purchased, churches and schools

built and businesses established. Their life would be centered around the Lutheran Church, and the love of Christ would energize their business and work.

These immigrants were ultimately part of a larger group that under the leadership of Carl Fernand Walther, an influential theologian, established the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. Walther became the first president and taught theology out of a log cabin in Perry County. In 1849, the decision was made to move the school from rural

books, candlesticks, chasubles, stoles – and a brand new small pipe organ. *All lost!*

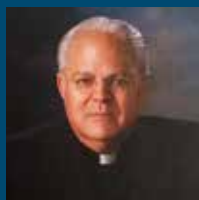
Arriving in St. Louis, this pioneering Lutheran community looked forward to worshipping together, but they had to borrow from many churches who would lend to them. They were happy to receive these items, but many were not in the Lutheran tradition: Geneva gowns, reformed music and hymns, and of course, they were without the Lutheran liturgical music of introits, graduals, offertories, and more.

This is where some of those borrowed items became familiar to later Lutherans who in not knowing the history accepted the reformed practices as being "Lutheran."

An interesting side note – individual communion cups were first introduced in 1881 at a Methodist Church in Cleveland Ohio, addressing public health concerns . . . even though no disease had been linked to the common cup for at least 1900 years since it contains both an alcohol content and uses a silver/

gold chalice with officiants diligently wiping the rim after each communicant.

Luther's view – and that of the Lutheran reformers – was to retain all elements of the Mass that were in harmony with the Gospel. The Reformed Church retained only that which was commanded by Scripture, and so the Reformed churches rejected the chasuble (the outermost liturgical vestment worn by Christian clergy – primarily in Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran traditions – during the celebration of the Mass or Eucharist and other



John Frerking
Emeritus Senior Pastor
Faith/North Palm Beach, FL
Ejfrerking@yahoo.com
561 252 5250

Perry County to St. Louis, MO, a transition completed in early 1850 and the establishment of Concordia Seminary – today one of the largest, esteemed, prestigious seminaries worldwide.

Tragedy Strikes!

Tragedy struck when the smallest of the five ships, AMALIA, never arrived in New Orleans. These immigrants were devastated to learn that this ship had been lost at sea due to a huge storm. On board that ship was cherished cargo. All of the altar ware, chalices, vestments, altar

vestments because they were detestable reminders of the Papal church.

Article XXIV of the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* states that the Lutherans have not abolished the mass but celebrate it every Sunday and other festivals and maintains "traditional liturgical forms, such as the Order of Lessons, prayers, vestments, etc." These historic vestments, (chasuble, alb, stole) continue to be used within the Lutheran Church.

These vestments were rejected by the proponents of Calvinism, Pietism, and Rationalism. It was under these influences that the black gown of the Academy (Judges) entered into the Lutheran Church. (see article by Professor John T. Pless of Concordia Seminary, Ft. Wayne, under the title "The New Liturgical Movement" pp. 221-2).

A Kidnapping!

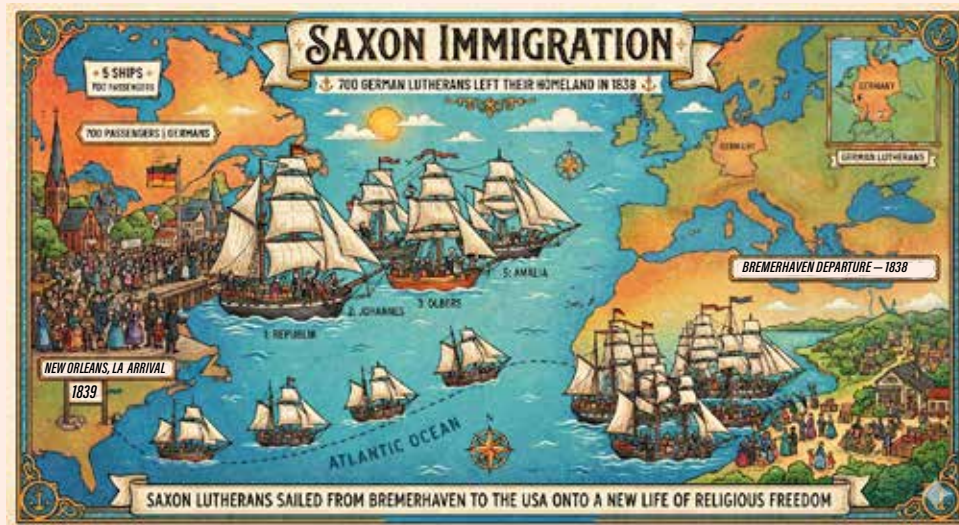
Martin Luther, after his "Here I Stand" confession at Worms, was secretly "kidnapped" by Elector Frederick and taken to the Wartburg Castle and lived there disguised as a knight. Letters came to him concerning a fellow professor who was leading a "revolution" in the churches in Wittenburg and surrounding areas. Karlstadt believed that the Reformation called for a Revolution and radical changes in church practices and liturgy. He led peasants to smash the stained-glass windows of churches, to destroy statues, to abolish

traditional vestments, to allow laity to take the elements of Communion into their own hands and to allow priests to celebrate the Mass in their street clothes.

Luther left Wartburg Castle and confronted Karlstadt and ordered him to leave Wittenburg. Luther then remained in

times within the family. As the years passed, other denominational groups wanted to attend the society's meetings, and so attendance grew. But this growth made it more difficult to focus on Lutheran concerns and objectives. Ultimately, O.P. Kretzmann suggested that this group make

their home at Valparaiso University, and this group became known as "The Liturgical Institute at Valparaiso." The Society of St. James disbanded in 1947 with the hope that having planted the seeds a greater appreciation of the Lutheran heritage in Lutheran



Wittenburg and preached in area churches for several weeks emphasizing that sacred art and treasured liturgical traditions were to be respected and retained in the spirit of the Gospel.

In 1929 a group of pastors on the east coast, who had been meeting informally, was organized as The Liturgical Society of St. James. This society focused on what had happened to Lutheran worship as a result of the loss of the AMALIA, the borrowing of worship aids from Reformed congregations, and the effects of the sad history of the Saxons in having to expel their bishop, Martin Stephan, from their community. Their goal was to restore and encourage traditional Lutheran liturgy and its historic rites and ceremonies.

A major goal was to establish one model liturgical parish in every large city. Another goal was to encourage students at Lutheran parochial schools to learn the liturgy and to practice devotional

worship would flourish. Some of the churches who sought to carry out the objectives of the St. James Society were: St. Lorenz, Frankenmuth, MI; St. Lukes, Chicago; Ascension, Charlotte, NC; St. Paul's, Hamel, IL; Redeemer, Ft. Wayne IN; Historic Trinity, Detroit; Holy Cross, St. Louis; and St. Paul's, Ft. Wayne, IN.

The Lutheran Church has an excellent theology and a history of beautiful and colorful worship that inspires all in attendance when it is planned and executed well. Billy Graham said that we Lutherans are a "sleeping giant" that needs to affirm its historic roots and Biblical teachings and worship history. Can we recover more fully the heritage passed on to us by the giants of music and preaching and offer a vision of joy and thanksgiving to Christ Jesus and use the Liturgy to help us and others "be carried into the seventh Heaven?"

I sincerely hope so.

History is not just a collection of dates; it is a living testament to God's enduring faithfulness. This year, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) stands on the threshold of a momentous milestone: the 150th Anniversary of Black Ministry.

"As we prepare to gather in Concord, North Carolina, to celebrate this rich legacy, our eyes are fixed firmly on the horizon," offers Shikina Bodley, a member of the 150th Anniversary planning team. "We are honoring our past, but more importantly, we are preparing the next generation of Christian leaders to carry the Gospel into the future.

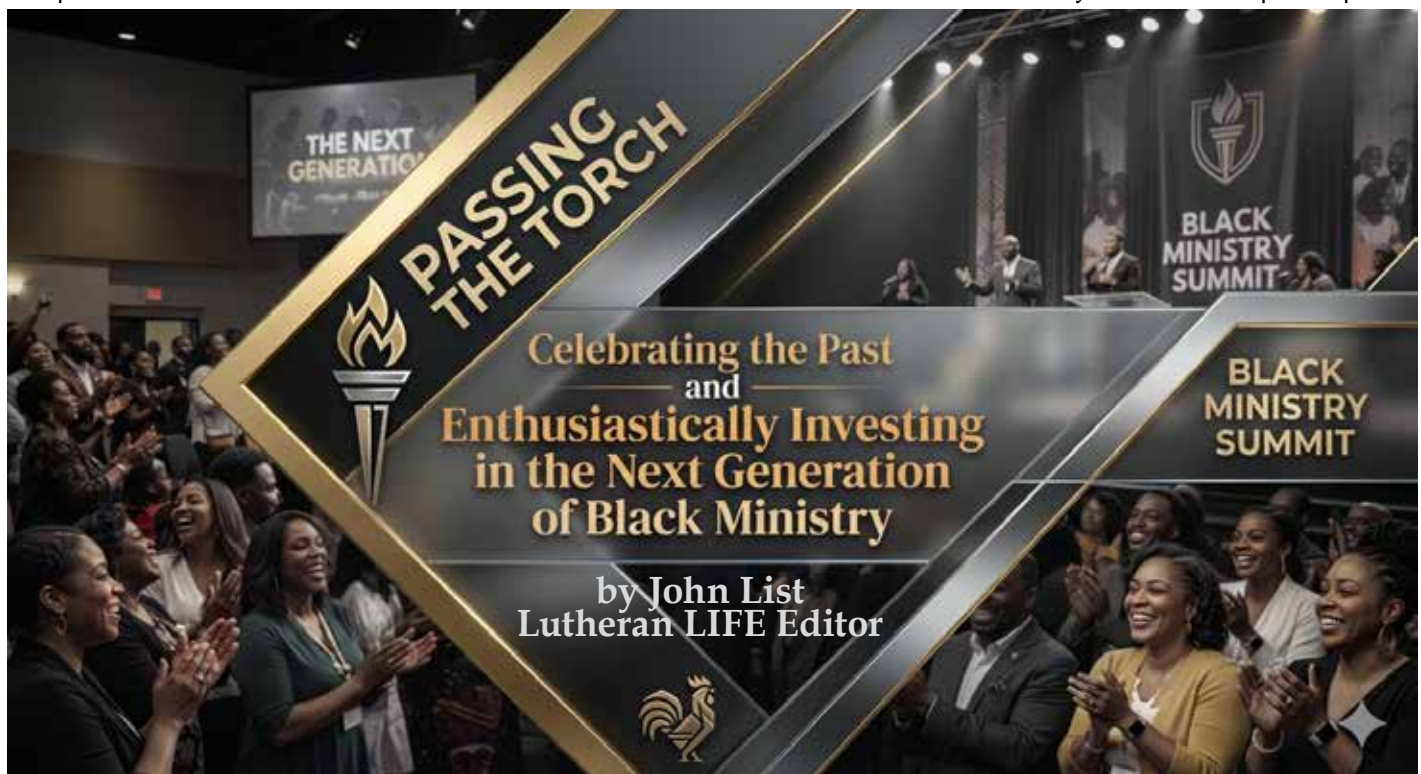
of Black Ministry in the LCMS. "Our ultimate prayer is simple yet profound: that every young participant leaves knowing they are unconditionally loved by Christ, deeply valued by His Church, and fully equipped to serve wherever God calls them," Bodley continues. "We want to empower and advance the next generation of worshipers, church workers, pastors, teachers, musicians, and faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Bridging the Generations

Our mission connects beautifully to the truth of Psalm 145:4: — *One*

particularly North Carolina — emerged from African Americans seeking spiritual and educational autonomy post- emancipation. Congregations became centers for worship, cultural preservation, and community uplift, blending Lutheran theology with rich cultural traditions.

"In honoring this legacy, we are launching a National Black and African Lutheran Worship Arts and Ministry Gifts Survey to identify and cultivate talents within our congregations. This initiative aims to create a resource pool for musicians, artists, and leaders, supporting future ministry efforts. Your participation



"This historic gathering is designed to be a launching pad for our children, youth, and young adults. Participants from kindergarten through young adulthood will immerse themselves in Christ-centered worship, deep Bible study, leadership development, and hands-on service projects."

Through fellowship and age-appropriate activities, participants will discover the profound history

generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.

"As we celebrate the past 150 years, we must simultaneously invest in the next 150 years. We are calling on our ministry leaders, partners, congregations, and friends to help us support the young leaders God is raising up today," she says.

"The roots of Black Lutheran ministry in the Carolinas —

is crucial for preserving our legacy and shaping a vibrant future. We invite you and your congregation to share your gifts for God's glory.

"Together, we celebrate our past, embrace our present, and invest in future generations. Every prayer, gift, and act of service will help create a life-changing experience where young people can grow in faith and experience the love of Christ."

How Can You Partner With The Planning Team

Every prayer, gift, and act of service will help create a life-changing experience where young people can grow in faith and experience the love of Christ. Here is how you can make a direct impact:

- Pray for our planning team, volunteers, presenters, and participants.
- Sponsor a child, youth, or young adult to attend the gathering.
- Provide financial support for essential materials, activities, worship, and service projects.
- Donate needed items, resources, or your own time as a volunteer during the celebration.
- Share this incredible opportunity with your congregation, family, and friends.

"We look forward to celebrating with you in Concord, North Carolina. Together, let us honor our history, rejoice in God's present work, and enthusiastically prepare for the future of His Church," Bodley concludes. ■

The 150th Anniversary of Lutheran Black Ministry

The dates are July 7 - 10, 2027
Hotel is the Embassy Suites,
Concord Mills, Concord, NC
Registration opens October 1, 2026
For adults and youth of all ages
Worship leaders interested in
participating should contact
Shikina Bodley at this email:
mrsbodley@gmail.com
Youth are encouraged to
submit content for our
social media platforms
General inquiries to:
bcclc.150@gmail.com
Additional information on pages
26 & 27 of this issue of
Lutheran LIFE

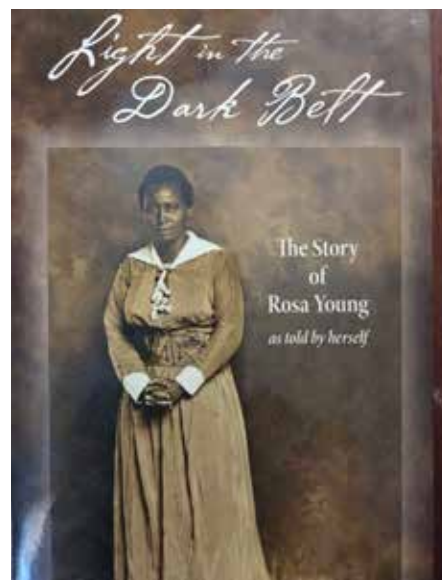
Meet Dr. Rosa Young – *LIGHT in the Dark Belt!*

One of the most remarkable and impactful chapters in American church history includes Dr. Rosa Jinsey Young (1890-1971), the woman at the center of this movement. She was widely revered as the "Mother of Black Lutheranism" in the United States. Her missionary and educational work laid the foundation for African American Lutheranism in the Deep South.

Rosa was born in the small, rural community of Rosebud, Alabama, located in Wilcox County — an area known as part of the "Black Belt." In the post-Reconstruction South, rural African American children faced severe poverty, prejudice, and a near-total lack of public schooling options. In 1912, passionate about education, Rosa opened a private school in her hometown called the Rosebud Literary and Industrial School to give local children basic academic and religious instruction. The school quickly grew to more than 100 students, but by 1914, a boll weevil infestation devastated the local cotton economy, leaving families unable to pay the nominal tuition. Desperate to keep her school alive, Rosa wrote to the famous educator Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute to ask for financial guidance. While Washington could not fund the school himself, he gave her a life-changing piece of advice: write to the Lutheran Synodical Conference, a predominantly German-American church body (which included the LCMS) that had a history of supporting Black missions. Rosa wrote the letter, and the Lutherans responded *enthusiastically*.

In 1916, they sent a missionary named Rev. Nils

Bakke to Rosebud. Rosa fell in love with Lutheran theology, was confirmed, and turned her school over to the Lutheran church to



manage. On Palm Sunday in 1916, the mission bore its first fruit when 58 people were baptized and 70 were confirmed, forming Christ Lutheran Church—the first Black Lutheran congregation in the region. The first Black congregation in the United States was St. Paul's Colored Lutheran Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, founded in 1877.

The church Rosa Young planted in Rosebud, Alabama served as the massive epicenter for the explosion of Black Lutheranism across the Deep South, quickly sparking 35 more congregations and 30 schools throughout rural Alabama.

As Rosa Young and LCMS missionaries successfully planted dozens of rural Black Lutheran schools and churches across Alabama, they faced a massive problem: they desperately needed Black teachers and pastors to staff them. Rosa Young heavily influenced the LCMS Synodical

[continued next page]

Celebrating & Investing in Black Ministry

[from previous page]

Conference to open the Alabama Lutheran Academy in Selma in 1922. Its core purpose was to act as a preparatory and teacher-training school to fuel the rapidly growing “Alabama Field.” Concordia College (originally founded as the Alabama Lutheran Academy) was the crown jewel and intellectual engine of the Black Lutheran explosion in the Deep South.

Rosa Young didn’t just help start it; she lived out much of her legacy there. She served on the faculty at the Selma campus from 1946 to 1961, directly teaching the students who would become the next wave of Black Lutheran leaders. Because of Concordia/Selma, the “Black explosion” didn’t stay contained to the Deep South. During the Great Migration, graduates of the college moved to major northern cities like Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and New York. They carried their education and Lutheran faith with them, planting new Black LCMS congregations across the United States. By the late 20th century, dozens of Black LCMS pastors nationwide could trace their roots directly back to the Alabama field and the Selma campus.

For nearly a century, Concordia College Alabama stood as the nation’s only Black Lutheran College (HBCU — Historically Black Colleges and Universities), serving as a direct monument to that remarkable era of spiritual and educational growth. Concordia College Alabama was forced to close its doors in 2018 primarily due to severe, unsustainable financial hardships

Even though students were still coming, the economic model

keeping the school afloat collapsed under pressures that have impacted many small, private, religiously affiliated liberal arts colleges.

The closure came down to several critical factors:

- ◆ 1. The Commitment to Low Tuition — To honor Dr. Rosa Young’s original mission—educating the most underserved students in the Alabama Black Belt—the college intentionally kept its tuition and fees as low as possible. In fact, it had the lowest tuition of any four-year college in the state of Alabama. While this kept the school accessible, it meant that tuition revenue covered only a fraction of the actual cost of operating the campus. The school relied heavily on outside philanthropy to fill the massive gap.
- ◆ 2. Rising Debt and Lack of Investors — By 2018, the college had accumulated at least \$8 million in debt. The Board of Regents set a deadline to find an external investor or partner to infuse a minimum of \$8 million to clear the debt and provide a year and a half of financial stability. School administrators aggressively pursued deals with seven different potential investors, but unfortunately, none of those deals materialized.
- ◆ 3. High Demographics of Financial Need — More than 90% of Concordia Selma’s student body was eligible for federal Pell Grants, meaning the vast majority of its roughly 400 students came from low-income families. This economic reality meant that raising tuition to offset skyrocketing institutional costs was not a viable option, as it would have priced out the very students the college existed to serve.
- ◆ 4. A Small Endowment and Alumni Base — Unlike older or larger institutions, Concordia Selma did not have a massive financial endowment to generate investment income during lean years. Furthermore, because many of its graduates went into the ministry or teaching professions—which are inherently service-oriented and lower-paying—the college’s alumni base

could not provide the multi-million dollar donor support that larger universities rely on.

- ◆ 5. Overwhelming Strain on the Synodical Budget — The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) did not abandon the school lightly—or without substantial prayer. Over the final decade of the college’s operation, the national church injected \$5.2 million in direct grants into the Selma campus. Between 2006 and 2018, Concordia Selma swallowed up more than 44% of the entire subsidy budget distributed across all 10 campuses in the Concordia University System combined. Despite this disproportionately massive support, the school could not achieve a self-sustaining financial equilibrium.

The Legacy Continues

When the school held its 92nd and final commencement ceremony in April 2018, it marked a painful day for the community and the LCMS. However, Church leaders often emphasize that while the institution closed, the mission most certainly did not fail! The thousands of Black clergy, deaconesses, teachers, and lay leaders trained at Selma continue to serve in congregations across the country today.

Without a dedicated Historically Black College (HBCU) campus, the LCMS Black Ministry family and the Black Clergy Caucus (BCC) have had to pivot intentionally to secure future pipelines. They have adapted through decentralized recruitment, alternative seminary paths, and localized, mission-focused capital campaigns.

Alternative Paths to Pastoral Ordination

With the traditional undergraduate pipeline at Selma gone, Black leaders have increasingly utilized alternative, flexible seminary programs designed for

non-traditional or second-career students.

The SMP & EIIT Paths:

Programs like the Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) and the Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology (EIIT) at the LCMS seminaries allow men to receive high-quality theological education while remaining in their local contexts. Men are trained contextually via mentorship while actively working in urban or ethnic ministries.

The Alternative Route program allows older, second-career individuals with extensive ministry experience to enter the seminary and become ordained more quickly than traditional Master of Divinity paths.

Instead of waiting for students to arrive on a dedicated Black campus, leaders are now proactively going to where the youth are. The Black Clergy Caucus has partnered deeply with recruiters — such as the Rev. Micah Glenn, Director of Recruitment at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis — to actively scout and mentor young Black leaders across various LCMS districts.

The Remaining Concordia University System

The church encourages young African American students who desire a Lutheran university experience to attend other campuses within the Concordia University System, where regional Black ministries support them.

The 150th Anniversary Capital Campaign (Looking to 2027)

As the LCMS Black Ministry family approaches the historic 150th anniversary of Black Ministry in the LCMS, the BCC Executive Committee launched an ambitious new capital campaign focused on building the future. This campaign revolves around five key pillars of ministry, with a massive emphasis

on funding pastoral formation, leadership development, and structural support to ensure a strong, self-sustaining financial foundation that doesn't rely on a single institutional campus.

Relying Heavily on the Black Ministry Family Convocation

The Convocation, which has been a staple of the church since its inception in 1978 in Selma, has taken on a much greater tactical role: to act as a “think tank” to find the next generation of leadership — what church leaders call finding the “Joshuas” who will step up to carry the torch from the older generation of church workers.

Urban and Inner-City Mission Mergers

The Synod has increasingly tied the LCMS Black Ministry to its Urban and Inner-City Mission sector. By treating Black Ministry as a vital, active domestic mission field, districts are helping local congregations plant multi-ethnic or predominantly Black mission outposts in urban centers, shifting the focus from a rural southern base to broader, nationwide metropolitan centers.

The transition hasn't been without systemic hurdles, but the core focus remains clear: *honoring the legacy of Dr. Rosa Young* by shifting from an institutional model to a community-driven, relational model of leadership.

Formally recognized by the Synod at the national level, this sesquicentennial is being treated as a historic pivot toward a self-sustaining future.

The Five-Fold Capital Campaign established by the Black Clergy Caucus (BCC) Executive Committee, alongside leadership like BCC Secretary Rev. Micah Glenn, designed a dedicated capital campaign explicitly timed around the 150th milestone. Rather than

funding a single bricks-and-mortar institution, the 150th campaign relies on a “five-fold vision”:

◆ **1. Communication:** Re-establishing dynamic messaging across the church to share the unique history of Black Lutherans. Ministry

◆ **2. Focus:** Direct programmatic funding for existing urban and ethnic missions.

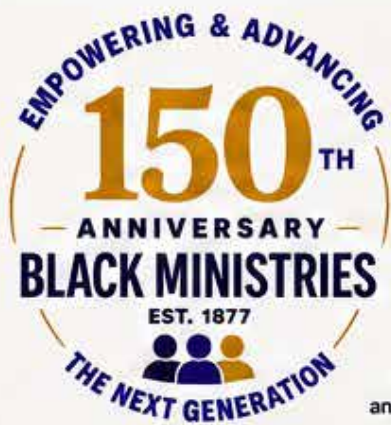
◆ **3. Ownership:** Empowering local congregations to fund and sustain their own neighborhood outreach.

◆ **4. Recruitment:** Building deep scholarship funds to cover seminary and church-work education for Black, Caribbean, and African immigrant candidates.

◆ **5. Revitalization:** Pouring physical and financial resources into historic but struggling inner-city parishes.

The Rosa J. Young Academy Initiative

A massive long-term structural goal peaking in 2027 is the rollout of a decentralized network of **Rosa J. Young Academies**. The strategic plan set a goal to establish a total of 10 specialized academies throughout the United States by 2027. This allows the educational fire of Rosa Young to live on in urban centers. The anniversary acts as a catalyst to push Black Lutheran history to the forefront of the Synod's memory. The Synod officially passed Resolution 1-03A (“To Give Thanks to God for 150 Years of Black Ministry”), standardizing recognition of this history at the district level. Organizations like the Black Lutheran Alumni Scholarship Team (BLAST) are actively coordinating with the seminaries and publishers to rerelease historical texts and use tools like the biographical film *The First Rosa* to inspire new generations of youth during the 2027 events. ■



**Dear Parents, Families,
Pastors, Congregational
Leaders, Children, Youth,
and Young Adults,**

Grace and peace to you in the name of
our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In 2027, we will gather to celebrate a
remarkable milestone—150 years of
Black Ministry. We honor the faith, sacrifice, and
service of those who came before us and
look forward to the future God is preparing.

That future includes you.

The Black Ministry Family Convocation is more
than a conference. It is a gathering of generations
committed to growing in faith, building relationships,
developing leaders, and strengthening Christ's
Church for years to come.

Our theme for this historic celebration is:

*Empowering and Advancing
the Next Generation*

We invite children, youth, and young adults to join us
for four days of worship, learning, fellowship, leadership
development, service, and celebration.

***Come celebrate the legacy.
Strengthen the present.
Help shape the future.***

We look forward to seeing you in Concord, North Carolina!

In Christ's Service,
The Black Ministry Family Convocation Planning Committee

“One generation shall commend Your works to another
and shall declare Your mighty acts.”
Psalms 145:4

A PLACE FOR EVERYONE



THE DISCOVERERS AGES 5-11

A fun, faith-filled experience where children learn about their faith, build friendships, and engage in crafts, games, and more.



THE EMERGERS AGES 12-18

Interactive sessions focusing on leadership development and service projects to help young people grow in their faith and their schools.



THE FUTURE LEADERS AGES 19+

Meaningful networking opportunities and service projects where young professionals can connect with mentors and call on one another for support.

YOU CAN EXPECT



**DYNAMIC
WORSHIP**



**ENGAGING
WORKSHOPS**



**LEADERSHIP
DEVELOPMENT**



**REGISTRATION DATES
OCTOBER 1, 2026 –
JUNE 1, 2027**

Stay connected for more details!



**SAVE
THE DATE!
JULY 7-10, 2027**

EMBASSY SUITES HOTEL
CONCORD MILLS
CONCORD, NORTH CAROLINA

EMPOWERING AND ADVANCING *the Next Generation*



**THE DISCOVERERS
AGES 5-11**

***Save the Date!*
JULY 7-10, 2027**

EMBASSY SUITES HOTEL
CONCORD MILLS • CONCORD, NC

EMPOWERING AND ADVANCING *the Next Generation*

EVERY GENERATION

THE DISCOVERERS

AGES 5-11

A faith-filled experience where children learn about Jesus, discover God's love, build friendships, and grow in their faith through worship, Bible stories, music, games, and more.

THE EMERGING LEADERS

AGES 12-18

Active sessions on faith, identity, leadership, ministry, communication, and service. Youth will be challenged to live in Christ and use their gifts to impact schools, congregations, and communities.

THE FUTURE BUILDERS

AGES 19-35

Meaningful conversations on faith, vocation, relationships, leadership, mentoring, and service. Connect with peers and mentors while exploring how God is calling you to lead and serve.

WHAT TO EXPECT

LEADERSHIP
DEVELOPMENT



SERVICE
OPPORTUNITIES



MULTI-
GENERATIONAL
FELLOWSHIP

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Rev. Stephen Wiggins Sr.
(404) 710-4662
Rensaw4@aol.com
www.bcc-lcms.org



Save the Date!

EMPOWERING AND ADVANCING
the Next Generation



JULY 7-10, 2027

EMBASSY SUITES HOTEL

CONCORD MILLS • CONCORD, NORTH CAROLINA

Celebrating the Legacy. Equipping the Present. Empowering the Future.



THE EMERGING LEADERS

AGES 12-18

Save the Date!

JULY 7-10, 2027

EMBASSY SUITES HOTEL
CONCORD MILLS • CONCORD, NC

EMPOWERING AND ADVANCING *the Next Generation*



THE FUTURE BUILDERS

AGES 19-35

Save the Date!

JULY 7-10, 2027

EMBASSY SUITES HOTEL
CONCORD MILLS • CONCORD, NC

EMPOWERING AND ADVANCING *the Next Generation*

A Charitable Remainder Trust (CRT) is sometimes called a "pay it twice trust" a CRT can be a tax-wise way to provide payments to family members over time. Typical time is 20 years. The remainder in the trust at the end of the 20 years is directed to go to one or more ministries that you chose to bless when the trust was established. While living, the trust recipients and ministries can be changed. Where does the name "pay it twice" come from and how does it work? If the recipients are paid at a rate of 5% and the underlying investments in the trust earn 5% after fees, both the family or recipients will receive the amount that is placed in the trust and the ministries after 20 years will receive this same amount. Example – \$1 million dollars of

What is a Charitable Remainder Trust? How Does it Work?

"Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plans. How much better to get wisdom than gold, to get insight rather than silver!"
– PROVERBS 16:3,16.

estate assets are placed in the CRT at the time of death. In the case of a husband and wife, the CRT would be funded at the death of the second person. If recipients are paid 5% for twenty years, they will receive in total \$1 million dollars.*

With the magic of investing the estate assets, at the end of the 20 years assuming a 5% return, your

church or other ministries of your choice will also receive gifts of \$1 Million dollars! Since inception (1/1997) the LCMS Foundation's Standard Moderate Balanced Fund has earned 6.32% annually.

CRAT VS CRUT AND OTHER OPTIONS AND FACTORS

While the 5% payout works nicely and can lead to the

ministries receiving the same amount, the 5% is not a fixed amount. You could pay out a higher percentage to the recipients which

could lead to a lower gift to ministry. Again, using the above example with \$1 million of estate assets, a 6% percent payout would give recipients \$60,000 per year or \$1.2 million dollars over the 20

years. With the higher payout, the expected ministry gift would be around \$770,000.⁰⁰ – smaller but still a significant gift to ministry. This brings us to the difference between a CRAT and a CRUT. The CRAT is a Charitable remainder annuity trust which means the payout is fixed as a percentage of the original trust. A 5% annuity payment of \$50,000 would be fixed for each year. With a CRUT which is a Charitable remainder unitrust, the payout is calculated on the balance of the trust each year. So, if the investments in the trust exceed the 5% payout, next year's payment would be slightly higher. However, if the return is lower than 5%, the payments would decrease slightly.

Stated another way, with the CRAT, recipients aren't concerned about market risk, but the gift payouts to ministry could be higher or lower at the end based on market performance. With the CRUT, the recipients will receive more when the market returns are high but could also receive a lower payment if market returns are lower or even negative.

The bottom-line difference is that the CRAT locks in the payment and the CRUT fluctuates with the market. This can be a complicated concept to follow, but it is important to know, especially for recipients whose payments might vary over time. But now you know the difference between a CRAT and a CRUT.

While the options and flexibility of a CRT can be complex, with the help of the Lutheran Foundation the difficulty of establishing a CRT



Tony Hunt
Florida Region
Gift Planning Counselor
LCMS Foundation
tony.hunt@lfnd.org
260-222-129

can be greatly reduced. Consider reaching out to your LCMS Foundation Gift Planning Counselor to see if a CRT would help you accomplish your planned giving goals when you are called home. The counselor will work with you free of charge and help you create a God Pleasing plan. Consider blessing both your family and the ministries that you love. ■

—TH

** Your chosen family/friends would receive \$50,000 per year for 20 years. This can help avoid a large tax on lump sum payments of retirement accounts and could help recipients manage the money better. Note: Annual payments to recipients of \$50,000 if the market return is 5% net of expenses and chosen ministries receive after 20 years the balance of the trust which should also equal \$1,000,000 if the market return is 5% net of expenses.*

FLORIDA GEORGIA

Out and About in the District

Amazing Grace/Oxford Partners With Kids Central Foster Care

A passionate group of mission-minded individuals came together with hearts full of compassion and hands ready to serve. Celebrating small group ministry at **Amazing Grace/Oxford, FL**, they gathered and delivered a variety of essential resources to Kids Central – an organization that supports children and youth in the foster care system.

"From school supplies, clothing, and personal care items to books, toys, and encouraging notes, every contribution was thoughtfully chosen to meet real needs and bring joy," The Rev. Dr. Paul Burtzlaff reported. "The team connected with the staff at Kids Central, learning more about the challenges these young people face daily and seeing firsthand how these resources will help equip and uplift them. Whether it's a new backpack for the school year, comfortable clothes, or simple items that provide a sense of normalcy and care, these gifts remind every child that they are seen, valued, and loved."

Events like this perfectly embody the heart of Live Love Together – moving beyond words to put love into tangible

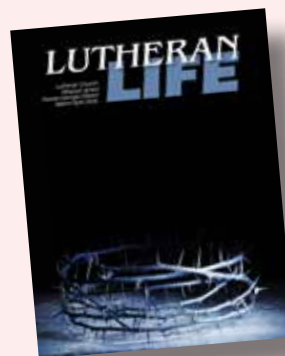
action. It's a beautiful picture of community coming alongside vulnerable kids and families,

offering hope and practical support during times that can feel uncertain. ■



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. Want to subscribe?



It's **FREE!** Send your name and address to LutheranLife@flgadistrict.org. Want your entire congregation to receive LIFE? Send your mailing list in any format supported by Excel. Please send address corrections or deletions, to

LutheranLife@flgadistrict.org

Atlanta Mekane Yesus Church Sends Vicar Gechena Denu to Seminary

Dr. Gechena Denu, the spiritual leader of the **Atlanta Mekane Yesus Church/Lilburn GA**, and his mentor, the Rev. Dr. Peter Meier, attended the week-long Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology (EIIT (EIIT) at Concordia Seminary/ St. Louis, MO, August 17-21, 2026. The EIIT program is a distance learning program which enables ethnic leaders to complete their seminary training while serving their congregation. Each student is matched with a mentor who walks alongside the student throughout their four years of study. EIIT Students are supported by their congregations, and student financial aid from the District and the Seminary.

The Atlanta Mekane Yesus Church was planted four years ago by Dr. Denu and a team of leaders. The church had their inaugural service in September of 2024. Dr. Meier, the FLGA Director of Mission and Outreach at the time, preached for that service and has worked with the congregation in their formation. Pastor Victor Belton and current District Director of Mission and Outreach, the Rev. Eric Sahlberg, together with prominent Ethiopian pastoral leaders in the US have assisted in the process.

This year's group of new EIIT students included men from California, Wisconsin, and Washington states, as well as Dr. Denu from Atlanta GA. The FLGA District currently has one other EIIT student, Vicar Phanet Metayer, who serves at Grace Tabernacle Evangelical Lutheran Church/ Fort Lauderdale, FL, a French/ Creole Haitian congregation and is mentored by Pastor Tony Durante.

Meier noted a particular "God Moment" during the Vicarage Assignment service. At precisely 10:02 am, Professor Joel Fritche,

Director of Vicarage, began to introduce distance learning students, including EIIT, Specific Ministry Pastors (SMP), Center for Hispanic Studies (CHS), and Deaconess. Meier's watch alarm went off as the names of the interns were being announced.

Meier noted, "This was God's response to the 10:02 prayer which many of us pray daily, asking God to send workers into His Harvest Fields (LUKE 10:2). "Let's continue to pray for more workers in the Harvest Fields, which includes every baptized believer!" Meier emphasized. ■



*Meier and Denu visiting a replica of the first Concordia Seminary building. The replica on the St. Louis campus was originally constructed using historical logs from a Perry County farm. It was built to celebrate the seminary's centennial anniversary and was featured in historical films like *The Call of the Cross* (1938) and *Walther* (2011).*



EIIT students with Seminary Faculty: President Dr. Thomas Egger; EIIT Director Dr. Ely Prieto; Dean of Ministerial Formation Dr. Kevin Golden; Director of Vicarage Dr. Joel Fritsche.



The Rev. Scott Gress serves as a special coach and consultant for the Florida-Georgia District. He works through the District and the LCMS to provide professional leadership training, consulting, and coaching services to local pastors, church leaders, and congregations. He led the training for the mentors.

Port St. Lucie Congregation Successfully Creates Alternative to Traditional VBS: Summer Bible Club

In the summer of 2022, a small group of families at **Grace/Port St. Lucie, FL**, worked with Coli Escher, Children's Ministry Leader to create "**Summer Kids' Bible Club**." They knew that with their group of no more than six children, there was no way to compete with the extensive layouts that Vacation Bible School (VBS) had come to be in their neighborhood. They also knew they didn't want to compete. They wanted to try something different.

"We established weekly gatherings throughout the whole summer," Escher offers. We still purchased Concordia Publishing House materials – but adapted them to multi-week, 75-minute sessions. This way, if a child was out of town for one session, they could pick back up the following week. It was something to look forward to all summer rather than a single week." According to Escher, offering this format also limited volunteer burn-out and fatigue from the younger attendees. Week-long VBS programs might often have kids either stop attending before the end of the week or have trouble staying engaged due to tiredness.

"As Grace's summer program has grown in the past five years, the approach for family ministry has changed," she continues. "We now offer parent activities during the children's programming, such as crafting for shut-in gifts as well as Bible study. These activities are positioned in proximity to the nursery, so parents with children too young for Bible Club can still be involved.

"Churches with smaller children's groups – it's okay to create something small yet still meaningful. Burned out VBS teams, it is possible to re-imagine what you offer by revisiting expectations and formatting the program a different way. Spanning the whole summer promotes simple decorations and planning, putting the energy into community building and Bible study."

If a congregation is in need of ideas about how to reset and scale back – or a way to begin something small, Escher encourages reaching out to her at coliescher@gmail.com. ■



Photos – clockwise from above: Grace chooses one theme-related song – one that students will continue to hear on Sundays. If the curriculum provides many options, you need not use all of them. Creating a culture of all ages gathering together has been integral to the program. Decorations can be as basic as the posters provided in the curriculum and a few minimal props for object lessons. Games can be simple, fun and memorable. Early years may have just been a few students, but as you can see (below) the program has successfully grown.



Trinity Tigers Welcomed Back

The strategic partnership expanding **Trinity Lutheran Church & School** across two counties — Palm Beach and Martin — exemplifies the innovative growth of multi-site ministry opportunities within the Florida-Georgia District of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. By unifying the historic campus in Delray Beach with a newly established presence in Hobe Sound, Florida, this collaborative effort demonstrates how a single spiritual heartbeat can transcend geographical distance to strengthen Christian education and local outreach.

“Multi-site ministries are becoming an increasingly vital model for regional congregations aiming to maximize resources, share administrative strengths, and revitalize local communities,” explains The Rev. Jake Roedsens, Senior Pastor of the ministry. In May 2026, the congregation formalized this cooperative approach to missional expansion.

According to an update from Trinity Church and School on their Facebook page, “Our church and Bethel Lutheran/Hobe Sound, FL officially voted to approve a strategic partnership as a church and school. Hobe Sound is officially a Trinity campus!”

“This structural integration allows both locations to operate under one cohesive mission and one team, optimizing pastoral leadership and educational excellence,” Roedsens continues. “Within the broader context of the Florida-Georgia District LCMS, such partnerships reflect a deliberate focus on regional development and sustainable multiplication. Instead of operating in isolation, regional ministries can pool theological resources, curriculum frameworks, and community outreach strategies.



While the physical campuses remain miles apart, the synchronized vision ensures that families at both the central hub of

Trinity Church and School and the newly transitioned Hobe Sound campus experience identical pastoral care and a faith-filled

to Delray Beach, Hobe Sound

educational environment. This cross-county campus unity serves as a powerful testament to the district's overarching objective: staying deeply rooted in the Gospel while structurally adapting to expand its impact across Florida and Georgia."

After months of quiet anticipation, both campuses burst into vibrant life as doors swung open to welcome students, faculty and administration. High above the entrances, colorful banners danced, signaling the start of a highly anticipated new chapter. Pastor Roedsens (at left) even dressed as Trinity's Tiger mascot.

More than 500 children walked through the entryways, their faces lighting up with bright smiles as they spotted friends and familiar teachers. Hugs were shared, high-fives echoed down the corridors, and the entire campus was instantly filled with a lot of love.

Inside the classrooms, teachers gathered their new students to establish a foundation for the months ahead. The initial day focused entirely on building connections, sharing summer stories, and easing the nerves of the youngest learners. There was an overwhelming feeling of gratitude among the staff for the incredible, supportive community that makes Trinity such a special place to grow and learn.

"This collective spirit transformed the typical first-day jitters into a shared celebration of faith, friendship, and education," Roedsens affirms. "Faculty and ministry teams from both campuses have officially integrated. Trinity hosted its first joint "All Staff" event to bring the Delray Beach and Hobe Sound teams together to coordinate for the academic school year. ■

Near right — Logan Werner, Trinity's new Worship Arts Leader, greets students as they arrive on campus.





First/Gainesville Kicks Off New School Year

August at **First/Gainesville, FL** was full of excitement, as their congregation came together to kick off a vibrant new season of ministry, learning, and fellowship. The church building was buzzing with energy as both adult and children's Sunday School classes officially restarted, bringing disciples of all ages back into community to study the Word.

They also marked an important milestone for their faith family by commissioning their church leadership — praying for wisdom and guidance as they step into their roles for the coming year. A major highlight of the month was a special back-to-school morning, which combined meaningful traditions with unforgettable moments of fun.

Students, educators, and professionals brought their backpacks and briefcases to the altar to be blessed for the

upcoming academic season. The service took an exciting turn when a Roman soldier seemingly stepped right through a "time tunnel" to deliver a powerful message to First's children about putting on the full armor of God. The energy continued into the afternoon with our annual Welcome Back BBQ, where we happily greeted students and families returning to the University of Florida, Santa Fe College, and our local schools. Our worship and spiritual life were further enriched this month by beautiful music and timely teaching. The Mighty Ringers Bell Choir shared their incredible musical talents, elevating our praise and filling the sanctuary with a joyful noise. At the same time, we began a vital new sermon series focused on the biblical principles of resolving conflict, offering our congregation practical, Christ-



centered tools to foster peace and understanding in our daily lives and relationships. True to our mission of meeting human needs, the First Presbyterian family also put faith into action through powerful outreach initiatives this August. Our congregation generously donated many bags of food to support Gainesville Community Ministries, helping to fight local hunger. Additionally, we collected an abundance of school supplies to benefit our ongoing mission partnership with Lake Forest Elementary, ensuring local students have the tools they need to succeed. After such an impactful and spirit-filled month, First Presbyterian Church is looking forward to a joyful year ahead serving Christ and loving our neighbors. ■



Amazing Grace/Oxford, FL celebrated America's 250th with a meaningful and patriotic gathering alongside American Legion Post 347. Members of the congregation joined together in gratitude, unity, and remembrance as they honored our nation's history, freedoms, and those who have served to protect them. ■

Reaching Out to Our Neighbors with the Gospel of Hope: Engaging and Learning from Our Global South Partners

Christ commissioned His apostles to be His witnesses “to the ends of the earth,” calling them to make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching (Acts 1:8; MATTHEW 28:19–20). For centuries, going abroad has been a central mission endeavor of the Christian church — and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) continues to faithfully participate in that global mission. However, shifting immigration patterns have opened new doors for outreach.

The U.S. itself has become a mission field, as many immigrants arrive not only to receive the Gospel, but also to proclaim it. These brothers and sisters from the Global South bring with them vibrant faith and a passion for sharing Christ.

How, then, can our LCMS congregations engage in meaningful outreach alongside these mission-minded partners — reaching into the diverse neighborhoods of our own nation

with the love and truth of Jesus?
Learn how to reach out to

our neighbors with Professor Rev. Dr. Ely Prieto at **Trinity/Ft. Lauderdale, FL** on November 9–11, 2026 (cost \$160). The deadline for registration is October 26. Pastor Jeff Wilhelm at Trinity is hosting.

Dr. Prieto is associate professor of Practical Theology, the Lutheran Foundation Professor of Urban and Cross-Cultural

Ministry, associate dean for Urban and Cross-Cultural Ministry,

and director of the Center for Hispanic Studies at Concordia, Seminary/St. Louis, MO. A faculty member since 2021, Dr. Prieto has an extensive academic background teaching in the areas of homiletics, pastoral theology, church planning and administration.

For more information, please email ce@csledu. ■



Ely Prieto

Schedule

Monday, 11-09-26 | 1 pm – 4 pm

Tuesday, 11-10-26 | 9 am – 4 pm

Wednesday, 11-11-26 | 9 am – 12 noon

Registration fee: \$160 • Registration deadline: Oct. 26, 2026

Contact: Pastor Jeff Wilhelm 954-463-2450

e-mail: trinityftlauderdale@gmail.com

Trinity Lutheran • 11 SW 11th Street • Fort Lauderdale, FL 33315

Trinity/Albany Celebrates the Rite of Confirmation



Trinity/Albany, GA recently celebrated confirmation. Pictured are —from left — Michael Grebel (father) confirmands Michael Lee Grebel III, Joseph Grebel, Pastor Bowan, Katy Grace Grebel and Jenny Grebel (mother). The Grebel confirmands publicly professed their Christian faith, renewing the vows made on their behalf at their baptism. They selected meaningful lifelong Bible verses and professed their faith statements with the congregation. The service marks a transition into adult membership within the church, granting full participation in Holy Communion.

The congregation, located at 1508 Whispering Pines Road, regularly streams its weekly services online. ■

Reformation Festival Planned in Bonita Springs

Hope/Bonita Springs, FL is hosting a special Reformation Service featuring renowned theologian and guest preacher Dr. James G. Bushur. He is an acclaimed professor from Concordia Theological Seminary/ Fort Wayne, IN (CTSFW). The event will take place on Sunday, October 25, 2026, at 4:00 PM.

Dr. James Bushur is the Carl and Erna Weinrich Professor of New Testament and Early Church Studies at CTSFW. He is widely recognized as an exceptional

preacher, specializing in patristics and early church history. Having spent decades serving both in parish ministry and academic leadership – including long tenures as a pastor and director of formation – Dr. Bushur brings a deep, engaging, and faithful perspective to the pulpit.

Attendees can look forward to a powerful, historically grounded message tailored for the 509th anniversary celebration of Luther nailing the 95 Thesis to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg. ■



Bethlehem/Fort Myers, FL

regularly takes time to honor and celebrate the dedicated military service members and veterans within its congregation. Led by Pastor Rev. Karl Glander, Bethlehem emphasizes the biblical call to service, sacrifice, and community support. The congregation routinely recognizes active-duty service members, retirees, and veterans during special designated worship services on Memorial Day, Independence Day, and Veterans Day weekends. ■

An abundance of joy mixed with sweet coffee scents swirled about at **Bethlehem/Jacksonville, FL** this past August when more than 150 people gathered for a free evening out with Lutheran 'stand-up poet theologian' Tanner Olson and Dove Award-winning musician Josh Wilson. "With music, stories, laughter, and honest reflections on faith amidst struggles, the duo shared hope and healing found in Jesus," states Heidi Wuggazer, Director of Christian Education at Bethlehem. "Their relaxed style, whimsical banter, authentic vulnerability, and easy friendship made the night personal and uplifting for everyone in attendance." Guests also enjoyed fellowship around an iced coffee bar and had the opportunity to visit with both artists after the event. Guests of all ages left encouraged, inspired, and grateful for a memorable evening together. ■





Stuart Kicks Off New School Year

Redeemer/Stuart, FL recently celebrated its church and school staff with a special dedication during the worship service, marking an inspiring start to the new school year. The event brought the community together to honor the educators, administrators, and support staff who dedicate their time and talents to the ministry and academy. Pastor Billy Brath led the dedication, offering prayers of blessing and encouragement for the staff members as they embark on this upcoming academic year. The service highlighted the vital role these leaders play in shaping the hearts and minds of the students and congregation alike. Following the worship service, the celebration continued with a wonderful community potluck celebration that perfectly set the tone for a blessed, connected, and successful school year ahead. ■



Marco Lutheran Launches Community Faith-Based Luncheon Series

Looking to nourish both your body and your spirit? **Marco Lutheran/Marco Island, FL** has announced upcoming community luncheons scheduled for February 2 and March 2, 2027. The first luncheon took place on October 6th and was well received.

"These free gatherings offer the perfect opportunity to enjoy a great lunch, build meaningful connections, and engage with uplifting, faith-based messages centered on Christian living and spiritual growth," explains Christine Mastrangelo, Communications Coordinator for Marco Lutheran.

"Each luncheon explores a different theme. The luncheons are free and open to the public but we encourage attendees to make reservations to ensure we prepare properly. Come as you are, bring a friend, and enjoy an afternoon of community and encouragement. Bring an appetite for good food and spiritual growth."

Topics may include discussions pertaining to finding God's presence and purpose in ordinary routines, work, and household responsibilities; cultivating meaningful, Christ-like relationships within our local neighborhoods and community; Biblical strategies for managing anxiety, busyness, and the pressures of everyday life; the power of gratitude – how practicing daily thankfulness transforms our perspective, attitude, and spiritual health. To learn more or reserve your place, call (239) 394-0332. ■

St. Paul/Boca Raton Commissions Staff for the New Ministry Year

St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL, moved forward into a milestone season as the church and school staff gathered to celebrate and commission the group for the 2026-2027 school year. The dedication ceremonies took place during the congregation's Sunday morning worship services. The event served as a formal introduction of each staff member to the congregation, bridging the

classroom and the church pews in shared mission. Following personal introductions, church leadership and the congregation joined together to pray over the educators, administrators, and support staff, asking for blessings on the upcoming year of ministry and academic instruction.

This year's commissioning aligned with the school's annual theme: #rootedinJesus, inspired

by Colossians 2:6-7. Pastor Steve Carretto (in photo at far left) emphasized that the faculty's role extends beyond traditional academics to fulfilling the community's mission of providing comprehensive, Christ-centered parochial education. Dr. Jeffrey Krempler is serving the St. Paul Falcons as Interim Principal during their current transitional period. ■



AS LIFE HAPPENS, WE'RE HERE TO HELP.

Personal Loans

Auto Loans

Credit Cards

Refinances



LF LUTHERAN
CU FEDERAL CREDIT UNION

We are *the* credit union of The LCMS.



Faith/Sebring Had Active Summer, 2026



Faith/Sebring, FL's food pantry feeds approximately 200 people weekly through a drive-thru distribution. Pastor Rob Maulella offers a different devotion each week and prays for all families in English, Spanish, French or ASL for their deaf community. Arch Books are given to the children thanks to Concordia Publishing House. Volunteers include members of Faith along with other community participants including ARC, a premier non-profit organization dedicated to serving and advocating for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. There is music, dancing, and joy as the Lord feeds the community of Highlands County physically and spiritually! ■

The first week of preschool began with a special commissioning of the teaching staff during Sunday worship, followed by a reception hosted by the School Board. As part of the celebration, staff members were presented with items from the school's Amazon Wish List—generously purchased by congregation members as they prepare for another year of ministry. Faith Child Development Center (FCDC) provides year-round care for infants through 5-year-olds, sharing the love of Jesus with children and families each day. Throughout the year, children enjoy weekly chapel, "Sticker Wednesdays," a special visit from the Cat in the Hat, participation in Lutheran Schools Week, and an end-of-year festival. With a capacity of 70–90 students, FCDC is excited to begin another year of nurturing children, supporting families, and sharing the love of Christ! ■



At right, Pastor Rob Maulella with Javier Rivera at one of the summer events. Rivera is involved with the preschool and day development programs.



Faith/Sebring, FL welcomed the community for a special celebration honoring the 250th anniversary of our nation. Approximately 70 members gathered for an afternoon of fellowship, food, and fun. Guests enjoyed hot dogs, chips, ice pops, and strawberry shortcake, followed by some lively line dancing! Everyone went home with a door prize and, most importantly, a renewed sense of gratitude for our nation and the blessings we share. ■



Trinity of SW Florida Installs Richard Cox

The Reverend Richard Cox was installed at **Trinity Lutheran Church/SW Florida** in a Divine Service on Sunday afternoon, August 9th in the church sanctuary



in the Gulf Cove area of Charlotte County. The service was officiated by Rev. James Rockey, President of the Florida-Georgia District. Along with President Rockey eleven pastors from the area of Manatee, Sarasota, and Charlotte Counties participated.

Pastor Richard hails originally from Maryland. He comes to TLC from Trinity/Fort Pierce, FL and assumes the office of the pastor following the retirement of Rev. Brian Albrecht in January. Pastor Albrecht served from 2018 until 2026.

Trinity was chartered in October of 2015 and was initially led by Rev. Earl Schmidt. In its short 10-year history the church has grown to more than 225 members.

Following a ceremonial groundbreaking in early 2025, construction on new, massive campus facilities has progressed into advanced building phases. The extensive expansion and construction updates include:

- **Massive New Sanctuary:**

The center of the project features a vast, newly constructed worship sanctuary. Concrete reinforcement of the cinder block walls has recently been finalized as teams prepare to install the structural roof trusses. The new interior is designed to exponentially increase seating capacity to support their rapidly growing congregation.

- **Worship Center and Foyer Revitalization:**

The expanded facility introduces a completely updated foyer designed to enhance hospitality. It features welcoming seating alcoves, specialized lighting to define the space, and modern stack-stone accents flanking the entry doors. The interior aesthetic showcases cohesive wood-slat elements that extend directly into the main worship space.

- **Connecting Campus Structures:**

Part of the architectural master plan is to seamlessly link the campus buildings. This physically unifies the learning center, administration offices, and new sacred spaces to significantly improve both daily operations and overall security.

- **Infrastructure and Parking Expansion:**

To support the increased attendance, the church is fully redeveloping and expanding its existing parking areas to create better traffic flow and accessibility. ■



Shared Faith, Two Languages: Messiah Celebrates Unity at Bilingual Worship and Picnic

On a warm afternoon on Sunday, September 13, 2026, the grounds of Messiah/Tampa, FL transformed into a lively tapestry of culture, faith, and shared community. Members from both the English-speaking and Hispanic congregations gathered not as two separate groups, but as one single family in Christ.

The day began in the sanctuary with a special bilingual worship with voices lifted in harmony, weaving together prayers and hymns in both English and Spanish. For those in attendance, the service was a moving reminder that while language may differ, the Gospel remains universal.

The shared liturgy set a profound tone for the day, centering the community on their common foundation of faith. Following the benediction, the pews emptied into the fellowship hall for a classic picnic. The air filled with the delicious aromas and the sounds of laughter bridging any language barriers.

Children played together while adults engaged in deep conversations, sharing stories of their lives and faith journeys. "The purpose of this special event was to bring our congregations together, strengthen our bonds, and truly celebrate the unity we have in Christ," noted Hispanic Ministry Pastor John Cobos. "It was a beautiful opportunity to worship, share a meal, and simply enjoy one another's company."

As the afternoon wound down, it was clear that the event achieved its goal. The day provided more than just a good meal; it offered a vibrant vision of the Church's future—one where diverse communities walk hand-in-hand, united by love and faith.



The congregation gathered for food and fun in the fellowship hall after worship. Both the Hispanic and English-speaking congregations participated in the celebration.



Children from Messiah's Hispanic Ministry celebrating their Confirmation, Baptism and receiving Holy Communion together with their families and congregation. It was a beautiful and meaningful celebration of their faith and continued growth in Christ.

Jacob Anderson, Florida-Georgia District Vicar Graduates Seminary, Ordained in Wichita, Kansas

The journey through the halls of **Concordia Seminary/ St. Louis, MO**, is a rigorous path of spiritual shaping, academic excellence, and deep prayer. For newly ordained Rev. Jacob Anderson, that journey culminated in a milestone celebration filled with the undeniable joy of the Lord. "From his early days in college through his final seminary years, Jacob's preparation for ministry stands as a beautiful testament to the power of a walking community, intentional district support, and the unfolding plan of the Good Shepherd," emphasized FLGA District President, James Rockey.

"Preparing a new worker for the harvest field is a shared mission. Reflecting on Jacob's path, Anderson highlighted the vital role that the District's Student Financial Aid played in sustaining him throughout his studies. This critical funding directly addresses the growing shortage and critical need for church workers nationwide," Pastor Rockey continued. "The impact of such aid is expanding rapidly; where the District supported just eight

students in 2022, that number has grown exponentially to 34 students in 2026.

"This tangible blessing ties directly into the district's newly launched **Mission Advancement Initiative**, an ambitious effort to raise \$10 million to perpetually endow new church plants, outreach ministries, and worker student financial aid. With \$2 million of that goal *specifically earmarked* for New Workers – Student Financial Aid, Jacob's successful graduation and ordination serve as a firsthand example of how these investments bear fruit for the future of the church."

The season of preparation also brought beautiful milestones to Jacob's personal life. While serving faithfully on his vicarage at **Mount Calvary/Warner Robins, GA**, (2024-2025) under Pastor Andrew Howe, Jacob began dating a young lady, Brianna, who would ultimately walk alongside him into public ministry. Brianna was baptized and completed adult confirmation at Mount Calvary. In a deeply meaningful

ceremony, Jacob was united in Holy Matrimony to his new bride on July 24 at Mount Calvary – a service officiated by a proud and joyful Pastor Russell Anderson, Jacob's dad.

Shortly after their wedding, the couple prepared to transition to their very first ministry assignment **Holy Cross/Wichita, KS**. Shortly after his installation he was involved in a serious motorcycle accident. "We praise God that he is currently stable and smiling. We ask that God would provide a swift recovery. We also pray for his new congregation as they navigate this unexpected season," Pastor Russell Anderson offered.

Pastor Russell Anderson has been serving **Trinity/Holly Hill, FL** as vacancy pastor. He'll complete that assignment in October as The Rev. Steven Frenz, a Concordia/ St. Louis, MO 2010 graduate, has accepted the call to serve Trinity. Frenz is transitioning to Florida from his previous placement serving a dual parish at Bethany & St. Peter's Lutheran Churches in Lake City, MN. ■



Jacob Anderson with his wife,
Brianna (nee Sanders)



Jacob Anderson with his dad,
Pastor Russell Anderson



Steven Frenz with his wife, Victoria
and his son, Matthew

From a Casual Lunch to Hands-On Ministry: How Abiding Savior Lifted a Teacher's Burden

Sometimes, the Holy Spirit takes the simplest conversations and turns them into something far greater than we could ever imagine. What began as a casual lunchtime discussion at **Abiding Savior/ Gainesville, FL** about the need for minor tree work quickly unfolded into a massive, life-changing undertaking.



Daniel Schmitt

"As our conversation progressed, it revealed a much deeper, pressing need for one of our ministry's beloved preschool teachers," Daniel Schmitt, interprets. "Faced with a sister in Christ carrying a heavy burden, the Abiding Savior church family did what it does best— they showed up."

What started rather small, the project rapidly grew into an extraordinary demonstration of Christian community. Members, local businesses, and district disaster response teams poured out their time, physical strength, technical skills, and financial resources. Most importantly, they brought the tangible love of Jesus to someone who needed it most.

Through the incredible, coordinated efforts of volunteers and professionals, a staggering amount of structural and property work was accomplished to secure and refresh the teacher's home.

A large, hazardous oak tree was safely removed, and its stump was ground down to secure the property. Workers installed a brand-new roof and a fresh A/C unit to bring long-term structural comfort and relief. To ensure safe and easy entryways, teams built two new sets of steps alongside a brand-new ramp.

Each physical improvement stands as a direct reflection of a community unwilling to look away when a neighbor is in need. Because of this collective effort, a heavy burden was lifted, and a dedicated educator felt deeply seen, supported, and cared for by her church family.

"Christ's love was not just spoken — it was lived out in real-time," Schmitt emphasizes. "An effort of this scale requires a village, and Abiding Savior is deeply grateful for the unique ecosystem of volunteers, local contractors, and district support that brought this mission to life."

Special recognition goes to the dedicated individuals and businesses who answered the call, including John Schmitt, Joel & Kathy Mathews, McFall Construction, Stellar Services, Top Tier Site Prep, and Gainesville Stump Grinding. The technical heavy lifting of the A/C installation was expertly handled by Daniel Schmitt, Mike Arden, and Liam Hernandez.

Essential backup and coordination came from both the Florida-Georgia Lutheran Early

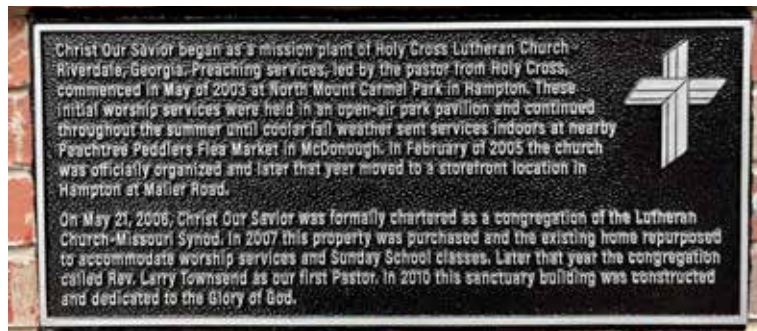
Response Team (LERT) and broader organizational support from the Florida-Georgia District LCMS. Ultimately, what took place wasn't just a home renovation project — it was an act of building hope. It served as a powerful reminder of what happens when a community comes together not out of strict obligation, but out of genuine, Christ-centered care." ■



Christ Our Savior Celebrates 20th Anniversary With Dedication of Commemorative Marker

This summer Christ Our Savior celebrated their 20th anniversary with the dedication of a commemorative marker placed on the cornerstone of the church. Originally begun in 2003 as a mission plant of **Holy Cross/Riverdale, GA** to the Henry and Spalding Counties community south of Atlanta, worship services shifted to several temporary locations before property was eventually purchased for a permanent home.

On May 21, 2006 **Christ Our Savior/Griffin, GA** was officially chartered as a congregation of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Later that year The Rev. Larry Townsend was called as the first pastor and in 2010 the present sanctuary building was constructed. ■



Top photo – participants at the 2026 Anniversary Celebration. At right, The Rev. Larry Townsend (retired) talks about the congregation's journey during the past 20 years after Pastor Joe Warnke dedicated the new commemorative marker. Warnke graduated from Concordia Seminary/St. Louis, MO and was ordained in 2017 and installed as sole pastor at Christ Our Savior.



God has truly been faithful to Redeeming Life Outreach Ministries in Sanford, FL, these past few months. His love for the women and their babies in the maternity homes continues to shine through the dedicated staff as they faithfully walk alongside and pour into each family.

These recent months have been filled with reasons to celebrate! The ministry welcomed one new resident in Florida and one new resident in Illinois. One of the greatest joys has been celebrating three baptisms. Pastor Ed DeWitt officiated these services—a beautiful reminder of God's ongoing work in the lives of these women and the ways He continues to use this ministry to share His love and truth. ■

Hope/Orlando Celebrates Tina Eaton's 20th Anniversary as Early Childhood Director

On Sunday, August 9, 2026, **Hope/Orlando, FL** celebrated Mrs. Tina Eaton's 20th year as Director of their Early Childhood program. Tina, an Orlando native, began working with the pre-school in 2000 as a volunteer, and determined that she would become a rostered teacher in an LCMS school.



Atleft – Tina Eaton holds a Certificate of Appreciation from Hope Congregation on the celebration of her 20th Anniversary of service as the Early Childhood Director. Above – Pastor Paul vonWerder dedicates Hope's Early Childhood Staff. Pictured from left, Paul VonWerder, Cathy Setorie, Linda Tootle, Tina Eaton, Skylar Ead.

Eaton completed her degree and began her ministry as the school's director in 2010. Tina is not merely the "Pre-School Director," but serves in a much larger role with the congregation's many ministries. Her latest venture is joining with five other Hope members to study with the Southeastern District's Lay Deacon program. They are currently in their second year of the two-year training program.

In addition to celebrating Tina's significant anniversary, Pastor Paul vonWerder rededicated the entire Early Childhood staff, and led the congregation in a "Blessing of the Backpacks" for those children who brought their packs to worship. Hope has 17 students enrolled in the pre-school this Fall. Additionally, Hope is a Neighborhood Partner with Arbor Ridge Elementary where Tina is part of their School Advisory Council. Several teachers from Arbor Ridge who placed their children in our care now attend Hope congregation ■



A team of six from **St. John/Ocala, FL** headed out to Scammon Bay, Alaska on the edge of the Bering Sea from July 9th-19th to provide VBS for 75 children and Youth Nights for about 20 middle and high school students. This is the ninth year for the St. John team and the 16th year for team leader Anette Shanks to be in the village. ■



Trinity/Rockledge, FL has successfully ended its prolonged pastoral vacancy. The congregation recently called and installed Rev. Eric Luhman as their permanent, full-time pastor, concluding a multi-year search. The vacancy began following the departure of Pastor John Rallison. Pastor Luhman relocated from St. Louis, Missouri to accept the call. He holds a Master of Divinity (M.Div.) from Concordia Seminary/St. Louis, MO specializing in Pastoral Studies and Counseling. He also has specialized Clinical Pastoral Education training from NYU Langone Hospital. He brings more than 10 years of ordained ministry experience in preaching and teaching. Outside of traditional ministry, he is also a writer of Christian devotionals and fiction. ■



St. Paul/Boca Raton, FL installed Isaiah Duport in all three weekend services August 8th and 9th, 2026. He is shown with several ministry partners throughout the Florida-Georgia District. ■

Son Life Holds 250 Year Flag Ceremony



On Sunday, July 5, 2026 at **Son Life/Boynton Beach, FL**, Boy Scout Troop 395 and Packs 224 & 296 participated in a 250 year Flag Ceremony. As each flag was presented, a different Scout would solemnly enter holding the flag while it's story was shared with the congregation. The ceremony was both solemn and deeply inspiring, offering a powerful glimpse of today's youth dedicated to their country. Scout Master, Chase Miller, stated this ceremony was never done before as it was written specifically for the July event. ■



Vicar Claubert Perrie was welcomed to **Grace/Port St. Lucie, FL** in June. He is enrolled in the The Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology Program (E.I.I.T.) at Concordia Seminary/ St. Louis, MO. The E.I.I.T. offers a specialized program of preparation for men who want to serve as pastors and women who want to serve as deaconesses in immigrant and ethnic minority communities in North America.

Students who successfully complete the program receive the Certificate of Vocation that enables men to receive a call into the ministry of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) and women to be commissioned to serve in deaconess ministry. The four-year vicarage at Grace also includes online classes while he is supervised by The Rev. Cris Escher, Grace's pastor.

Vicar Claubert originally began his program in Los Angeles, but the supporting church faced financial challenges. When The Rev. Eric Sahlberg, FL-GA District Executive Director of Mission and Outreach, learned of the situation, he reached out to Pastor Escher and helped find a better fit.

Vicar Claubert's goals include completing his CSL program, growing in his ability to speak and lead in an English-language setting, and eventually launching a Haitian ministry in Port St. Lucie.

Grace is the United States base for Habitat for Children Ministries and has been extremely supportive of them for nearly 20 years. (see page 54 of this issue). ■

Grace Port St. Lucie Installs Haitian E.I.I.T. Vicar



Participating in Vicar Claubert Perrie's installation at Grace were Pastors Ed Scott, Cris Escher, Vicar Clauber and Eric Sahlberg. Pastor Scott is the retired pastor from Grace and is recognized in theological circles for his writing, including historical analyses on faith during times of trial. He serves Grace in collaboration with Pastor Escher in the spiritual and educational life of the congregation.

Off To School In Haiti

September, 2026 was a joyful milestone for Mesach St-Amour, Habitat for Children Ministries; President, His girls began school in Haiti. They gathered for prayer and hugs. "I thank God for His provision last year and for His continued guidance and success on this journey," he said. "Truly, every child deserves a place they can call home, a mother they can turn to, and a father who is present in times of need." ■



Evandro Kopper Installed in Vero Beach

The Lutheran Church of the Redeemer/Vero Beach, FL installed The Reverend Dr. Evandro Kopper, Sr. as their new pastor on Saturday, September 12 in an afternoon festival service.

The formal installation rite was presided over by Pastor James Rockey, District President of the Florida-Georgia District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, marking a significant milestone for the Vero Beach faith community.

Dr. Kopper brings more than a decade of dedicated ordained ministry and global perspective to the congregation. Born in Capanema, Brazil, in 1973, he has actively served in the ministry since February, 2014. He is a 1996 graduate of Concordia Seminary/St. Louis, MO. Demonstrating a diverse intellectual background, holding a Pre-Seminary Accounting Degree (1990) and has completed post-graduate work in regional sciences (2015).

Prior to accepting the call to Vero Beach, Pastor Kopper served a variety of ministerial roles across several congregations since 1997. Most recently, he served as the Senior Pastor at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in California, MO.

"We are thrilled to welcome Pastor Kopper and his family to our community," said Robert Spadaccini, Head Elder for the congregation. "His unique international experience, deep theological background, and passion for ministry make him the ideal leader to shepherd our congregation into its next chapter."

President James Rockey's sermon celebrated Redeemer's "first call" to Pastor Evandro Kopper — an unprecedented event that reflects God's undeserved mercy and grace. He challenged the congregation to think of this as a congregational reboot. Drawing from the Old Testament story of Elijah in 1 KINGS, Rockey noted that while Redeemer has been zealous in ministry for more than a century, this new leadership marks an exciting "reboot" for the church.

Rockey cited statistics showing that Christianity is the fastest-



Evandro Kopper with wife Paula and their daughter Melina

declining major religion in the U.S., with less than 50 percent of Americans identifying with any house of worship (including Christians, Jews, Muslims, and even Wiccans). This cultural shift driven by the religiously unaffiliated means the congregation must focus heavily on changing lives.

Rockey charged the congregation to pray for all types

of workers — not just pastors and teachers, but laypeople who can act as witnesses in their everyday occupations. Church members were urged to stop sitting back as passive observers (whether in the choir, on committees or boards, or in Bible studies) and to not expect Pastor Kopper to do all the heavy lifting.

"Instead, you must come alongside him to equip the community for service! Redeemer's core mission and vision statements, are clear and you have been blessed specifically 'to be a blessing' to others."

Rockey compared Holy Baptism to a navy ship's christening, which invokes protection and charges the vessel with entering active service. "Through baptism, believers are given a new identity. Even though you "hull number" may have changed with a new pastor, the church cannot stay tied to the 'dock of comfort.' To fulfill your spiritual purpose, you must slide into the water and face the waves of a hurting world."

Dr. Kopper moved to Florida alongside his wife, Paula Oliveira Kopper, and their daughter, Melina.



The attending pastors, front row from left: Craig Bode, Cris Escher, Evandro Kopper, James Rockey, Miguel Sanabria, Eric Sahlberg, and back row: Dave Albers, Ray Huddle, Jeff Niederstadt, Scott Gress, Andy Schermbeck and Richard Lohmeyer

Nathan Hausch Accepts Call to Trinity Hobe Sound Campus

The Rev. Nathan Hausch has accepted the call to serve as the **Trinity/Hobe Sound, FL** campus Pastor. He comes to Hobe Sound from St. Paul's/Pacific Beach, CA — a neighborhood of San Diego, CA. Prior to leading the congregation in San Diego, he served as the Executive Pastor of Discipleship at St. Matthew/ Rocklin, CA.

"We are grateful the Holy Spirit has led Nathan Hausch to sunny Florida. We look forward to seeing what God has in store for this next chapter of both his ministry and our new Trinity campus in Hobe Sound," declares The Rev. Jacob Roedsens, Lead Pastor at **Trinity/Delray Beach, FL**. This past summer Trinity assumed operation of **Bethel/Hobe Sound, FL**, integrating it into the northern campus of Trinity where Pastor Nathan will be Associate Pastor. Hausch has more than 15 years of pastoral ministry experience, marked by a strong focus on discipleship, cross-cultural outreach, and community engagement. He is a **Concordia/Ann Arbor, MI** graduate where he actively competed in collegiate track and field and cross-country events for the university. He graduated from **Concordia Seminary/St. Louis, MO**, in 2010.

Pastor Hausch's wife, Lindsay, a California native, is a professional author, Bible study writer, and public speaker. She writes published faith-based curriculum, books, and online devotionals focusing on family dynamics, marriage, and personal Christian growth. She works extensively as a guest speaker and community trainer for Christian leadership programs, notably collaborating with groups like PLI (Pastoral Leadership Institute) to lead learning communities and workshops centered around spiritual development.



The Hausch Family

"We met at the baggage claim of the San Diego airport after getting to know each other over the course of a year through messages and phone calls. A year later we were engaged, and a year after that we married and I moved with Nathan to St Louis for him to finish seminary," Lindsay offers.

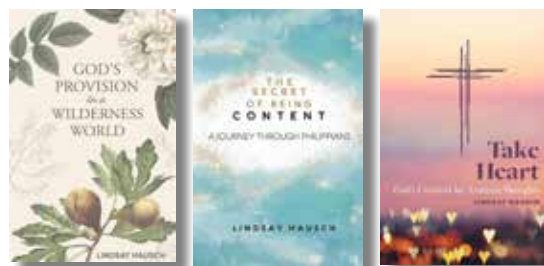
Both Nathan and Lindsay graduated from PLI's core training programs — specifically Leadership Essentials and Discipleship to Missional Community. Following her graduation from the programs, Lindsay transitioned from being a student to an official leader within the organization. She joined the PLI team as a coach and content teacher and has been serving on their leadership teams to train new cohorts.

Lindsay's publications include *"Take Heart: God's Comfort for Anxious Thoughts"* — her debut book and interactive Bible study exploring how feelings of anxiety can serve as a training ground for spiritual growth and drawing closer to God. "God's Provision in a Wilderness World" — a 40-day study guiding readers through the Book of Exodus,

drawing parallels between the Israelites wandering the desert and navigating life's dry, uncertain seasons, and "The Secret of Being Content: A Journey Through Philippians" — a study focused on finding true contentment through God's Word, exploring biblical themes like the Sermon on the Mount and applying them to modern life.

Pastor Hausch is known for an unconventional, highly relational approach to connecting with non-Christians. An avid home brewer since 2004, he actively participates in local brewing clubs to build genuine relationships with people outside the church. His guiding philosophy is to dismantle traditional social barriers so that people feel comfortable discussing questions of faith without fear of judgment. His preaching style reflects his overarching philosophy of ministry: it is relational, conversational, and highly practical, bridging the gap between ancient theology and everyday modern life. His delivery communicates a profound personal confidence in his own faith. Rather than lecturing from an academic distance, he is known to integrate personal stories, life lessons, and raw elements of the "valleys" of faith, modeling transparency from the pulpit.

Nathan and Lindsay have three children — all active in church life, community outreach, and neighborhood events. The whole family enjoys the beach. ■



All three publications are available on Amazon

A New Horizon for Haiti: How Re-Directed Funds are Transforming Lives in La Jeune, Haiti

A legacy of generosity has found a vibrant new home in the heart of Haiti. Following the closure of "Mission: Haiti" this past summer, dedicated funds from **St. Paul/Weston, FL** were swiftly re-directed to **Habitat for Children Ministries**. "This strategic pivot has not only kept vital ministry work alive in the country but has also accelerated a series of life-changing campus upgrades," stated Mesach St-Amour, a Haitian-born humanitarian and the founder and president of Habitat for Children Ministries.

St.-Amour was born and raised in Haiti, he moved to Florida when he was 25 years old. He currently resides in Port St. Lucie and is a member of **Grace/Port St. Lucie, FL** where The Rev. Cris Escher serves as pastor. This past summer Vicar Claubert Pierre began serving. Born in Haiti, he emigrated to the United States in 2010. In 2024, he began his pastoral studies at Concordia Seminary/St. Louis, MO. He is currently completing his fieldwork/vicarage requirements and is expected to graduate with his Master of Divinity in the summer of 2028.

Thanks to these newly funneled resources, Habitat

for Children Ministries has officially completed the physical construction of its care center building. "The impact didn't stop at the brick-and-mortar foundation; the funds also fully equipped a brand-new, state-of-the-art medical lab and secured a cutting-edge solar power system to bring sustainable, reliable energy to the entire Habitat campus," St-Amour explained.

The tangible fruits of this partnership were recently on full display during a visit by Mesach St-Amour to the community of La Jeune, Nord, Haiti. Standing inside the newly minted care center, St.-Amour hosted a "Backpack & Back-to-School" blessing and giveaway. The event was a powerful milestone, capturing the pure joy of local children as they were handed backpacks bursting with essential school supplies just in time for the new academic year.

Reflecting on the milestone, St.-Amour shared a message of deep gratitude for the collaborative effort that bridged Florida and Haiti: "Thank you to all the volunteers who helped make the event possible and to our generous donors – particularly **St. Paul/Weston, FL**! We greatly appreciate and love you, and



the team at Habitat for Children Ministries sends its heartfelt thanks." With a fortified campus and a community unified in hope, the future in La Jeune looks brighter than ever.

The Rev. Cris Escher, also serves as the Vice President of Habitat for Children Ministries, working side-by-side with St.-Amour, to manage the operations and raise awareness. Grace's campus physically acts as the local operational center where supplies are organized and gathered before being flown to Haiti. ■



At left – St-Amour; Coli & Cris Escher; above, Vicar Claubert Pierre; at right, Kathy and Scott Henze of St. Paul/Weston, FL.

God's Orchestrated Evangelism: From Daytona Beach to China

The best way for the church to carry out God's mission in the world is simple: do it God's way and allow Him to orchestrate it through us. According to The Rev. Russ Anderson, who has been serving as the Vacancy/Interim Pastor at **Trinity/Holly Hill, FL**, "Scripture is filled with these divine appointments. Remember Philip the Evangelist? The Holy Spirit directed him to a desert road to meet an Ethiopian official, explain the Gospel through the prophet Isaiah, and baptize him on the spot.

"Remember the Apostle Paul? Led by a vision to Macedonia, he and Silas ended up beaten and imprisoned in Philippi. Yet, after a midnight earthquake and a powerful testimony of faith, their jailer famously asked, 'What must I do to be saved?' He and his entire household were baptized. It is amazing how God orchestrates His people to cross paths with those who do not yet know Jesus."

This past summer, God did it again at Trinity/ Holly Hill! "Back in June, God brought Shiyi Liu (Lynn), a young college student from China, to the Daytona Beach area through a Summer Work and Travel program," Anderson explains. "She was placed with Aileen Band, one of our members, to live and work in housekeeping at a family hotel. Aileen brought Lynn to our worship service and guided her to the altar rail during Holy Communion to receive a blessing. I later learned this was Lynn's very first time inside a Christian church, and she wanted to learn more. God had perfectly orchestrated this encounter.

"Thus began our journey. I gave Lynn an English Bible (she also found a Chinese translation online) and challenged her to read the

Gospel of John while pondering three questions: Who is Jesus? What did He come to do? What is my response? We also studied *According to Plan*, a book detailing God's salvation story, alongside *Luther's Small Catechism*. By the time we finished the Apostle's Creed, Lynn beautifully confessed



The Rev. Russ Anderson with Shiyi Liu (Lynn) and Aileen Band

her faith in Jesus as her Savior."

This past September 6, after Shiyi Liu completed her catechism studies, Lynn was baptized and confirmed. God orchestrated her time together so that Lynn, through faith, is now a child of God.

"Lynn left us in late September to return to China for a 'gap year,' with hopes of eventually continuing her education in Australia. As I sit in my office, I wonder how God will continue to grow her in grace, especially given how highly restrictive China is toward Christianity,"

Pastor Anderson continues. "Lynn shared that customs will likely confiscate her physical Christian books. In China, minors under 18 are legally barred from entering churches or being baptized, and all Protestant churches are heavily supervised by the government. Because of this, many believers quietly worship in unregistered 'house churches.' Thankfully, the Lutheran Heritage Foundation (LHF) has found ways to get Christian literature into China digitally via PDFs, allowing believers to safely receive and share the Word.

"As Lynn departed, we placed her into the caring hands of our Good Shepherd, who promises that no one can snatch us from His care. We're asking everyone to please join the family at Trinity in the months ahead by lifting Lynn up in prayer. Pray that she continues to be strengthened in her faith through reading her Bible daily. Pray that God orchestrates a meeting with a Christian friend so they can encourage one another. Pray that God directs her to a house church that teaches His Word in its truth and purity. Pray that the Lutheran Heritage Foundation discovers even more ways to encourage God's people in China. Give thanks and praise to God for orchestrating Lynn's time with her 'adoptive Trinity/Holly Hill family.'"

Pastor Russ Anderson concludes — "We look forward to seeing what great things God will continue to orchestrate through Lynn's life, trusting the promise of Ephesians 3:20: 'Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us...'" ■

Meet the Walking Minister of the Sunshine State —

by John List, Editor

The autumn air of October 1894 carried a rare, crisp chill as 22-year-old Edward Fischer stepped onto the train platform in Ocala, Florida. Pastor Fischer was newly ordained by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and he carried little more than a suitcase, his Bible, and a monumental mandate.

A notice in the church publication *"Der Lutheraner"* had summed up his daunting new reality in tight German script: *"Candidate Edward Fischer has been ordained and installed as Missionary at Large for the State of Florida."* He was the *only* Missouri Synod pastor in the entire state.

Formed in the Fire of Loss

Pastor Fischer's relentless drive was forged through childhood adversity. He was orphaned by age six — his mother died during childbirth, and his father passed away just six years later. With no immediate family, his community placed him into the strict, structured world of Lutheran boarding schools.

This marked the beginning of a marathon academic journey: early foundational schooling in St. Louis, MO; preparatory college work in Milwaukee, WI, pre-seminary studies in Fort Wayne, IN, advanced classical studies at Concordia Seminary/St. Louis, MO.

By the time he graduated, the orphan boy had been transformed into a highly disciplined, deeply faithful theologian ready for the frontier. As the only Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor in the entire state, the task must have seemed somewhat overwhelming. His instructions were simple enough, travel from town to

town, village to village, locate families with German names and encourage them to form a Lutheran Congregation where they could hear the Word of God and receive the Sacraments and listen to a good sermon —preached in German of course.

The Frontier Circuit Rider

Florida in the 1890s was not a vacation paradise; it was a rugged wilderness of swamps, pine forests, and isolated settlements. Fischer did not even own a horse. To begin his ministry, he boarded a train from Ocala to a tiny town called Orlando. From there, he walked miles through the heat to Gotha, a small colony of German immigrants. Gotha was home to Zion Lutheran Church, which possessed a brand-new building but no pastor. Fischer made this his base, but he could not stay still.

His instructions were simple: search for German surnames, knock on doors, and gather people to hear the Gospel preached in their native tongue. Where the train tracks ended, Fischer kept walking. He traveled hundreds of miles on foot, planting seeds of faith in Tampa, Palatka, Vero Beach, Delray Beach, and Miami.

During a historic stop in Tampa in 1898, his ministry met global history. As the Spanish-American War flared, Tampa became the primary staging ground for American troops preparing to invade Cuba. Amid the chaos of thousands of soldiers getting ready to charge up San Juan Hill, Fischer ministered to the troops, offering spiritual comfort on the brink of battle.

It was a momentous year for the young pastor. While working the Tampa mission field, he met a

pretty young lady named Sophie. The young missionary made quite an impression; they were married the following April, settled in Gotha, and were eventually blessed with 10 children.

As the years rolled on, Florida's population boomed. Fischer continued working the mission field, establishing congregations in Gainesville, Rockledge, Titusville, and Ocala. The Gotha congregation eventually grew enough to purchase and move into a "new" church building — the historic structure standing today directly across the road from the Yellow Dog Cafe. But in 1925, disaster struck the family home. Sophie was baking bread in the kitchen. As she added firewood to the woodstove, rogue sparks flew out of the chimney and landed on the wooden shingle roof.

The house quickly caught fire and burned completely to the ground. Fischer had routinely brought the historical church records home to keep them safe in case the church ever caught fire. Tragically, everything —including all the foundational church records — burned to ashes.

Pastor Fischer's son recalled that when the smoke cleared, all the family had left in the world were the clothes drying on the line outside. With nowhere else to go, the Fischer family moved into the original, empty church building. They lived inside the sanctuary for about a year while saving enough money for a regular house. They eventually purchased the property directly across from the church, right next to the Yellow Dog Cafe. In 1928, Fischer's son purchased the original, now-vacant church building, tore it down, and

The Rev. Edward Fischer, First LCMS Pastor in Florida

recycling history, used the lumber to build a family home in Gotha.

Preaching to the Enemy

With Florida's surging population, other pastors arrived to take over Fischer's early missions. Yet, his greatest test of faith came decades later during World War II. The U.S. government established a German prisoner-of-war (POW) camp in nearby Leesburg. While many saw these captured troops as the enemy, Fischer saw souls broken by the horrors of war and blinded by Nazi

their constitutional right to vote. As African American citizens were hunted and fled for their lives, a group of terrified refugees sought shelter in Gotha.

Pastor Fischer found the men and women hiding beneath the floorboards of his house. Risking his own life, his family, and his church, he did not hesitate. He invited them inside, kept them safely hidden from the Ku Klux Klan, and provided them with life-saving food and shelter. Because of the severe and lingering danger of the KKK in Central Florida, this act of mercy remained a

Two Humorous Side Notes from the Pulpit

Grandma Sophie loved to tell the story of the time Grandpa Fischer was trying to plant a brand-new congregation in a small Florida town. He had even taken out an advertisement in the local newspaper to promote the evening service. When the time came, only two men showed up – and both were heavily intoxicated. Hardly had the service begun when both men passed out cold on the front

bench and began snoring loudly. When asked later if Grandpa actually bothered preaching to an audience of two

sleeping drunks, Sophie replied with a smile: "Oh, yes he did!"

Another note, if you look closely at the gable end of the historic Gotha church building across from the Yellow Dog Cafe, you will see a beautiful blue stained-glass window. Fischer's son recalled that during the hot Florida summers, wasps would frequently fly into the building and buzz around the glass. Directly underneath that window sat a church bench pushed flush against the back wall. On occasion, an angry wasp would drop straight down and sting whoever happened to be sitting there. Right in the middle of a serious sermon, a parishioner would suddenly jump into the air, yell, and start wildly dancing around the sanctuary – a highly dramatic, very un-Lutheran sight! ■

Edward Fischer's 16-Year Footprint from 1894 to 1910
Gotha » Tampa » Palatka » Vero Beach » Delray Beach » Miami

propaganda.

Every Sunday afternoon, the aging pastor traveled to Leesburg. Fluent in German, he preached a message of grace and redemption to the prisoners. His impact didn't end when the barbed wire came down. When the men returned to a devastated, starving post-war Germany, Fischer organized and shipped massive care packages of food and clothing to his former wartime congregation.

A Closely Guarded Secret: The Ocoee Massacre!

Fischer's ministry was defined by a quiet, radical courage that went far beyond the pulpit. The infamous Ocoee Massacre of November 2, 1920, is the bloodiest day in American political election history. It was a racially motivated mass attack on Black residents in Ocoee, Florida (located in Orange County, just northwest of Orlando), sparked by African Americans attempting to exercise

closely guarded family secret for generations. Today, enough time has passed to safely reveal the truth of a pastor who chose human life and Christian charity over fear.

God's Little Acre

By the time "Papa Fischer" (as he was affectionately known) retired in 1955, his ministry had spanned an incredible 61 years. He passed away to his heavenly rest in 1958, leaving deep roots in Gotha's soil. The church cemetery, known as "God's little acre," remains a testament to the community he built. Historically, a person had to be a confirmed Lutheran and a member of the congregation to be buried within the main graveyard.

Recently discovered, unmarked graves resting along the very edge of the cemetery solve an old family mystery: these were local Gotha residents who were not members of the church, yet were granted a respectful final resting place on holy ground. ■

PASSAGES



Remembering Daryl Pichan, District Coach and Consultant

Daryl E. Pichan, a dedicated servant of Christ and former Director of Christian Education (DCE) in the Rochester, NY area, entered his eternal rest on Saturday, August 29, 2026. Daryl spent decades dedicating his life, energy, and unique talents to the ministry of the Lutheran church.

As a DCE, he had a profound impact on the faith journeys of countless youth, young adults, and families across the country, serving congregations with deep humility, theological integrity, and a passion for teaching.

For more than 30 years, Daryl was also a valued business partner with Les Stroh and Kurt Bickel at Cornerstone Consulting. Together, they collaborated on strategic ministry initiatives to strengthen local congregations. A champion for the future of the church, Daryl was instrumental in shaping the Florida-Georgia District's "Emergent Leader" training program. Through this initiative, he poured his wisdom, experience,



and encouragement into the next generation of church workers and lay leaders.

Kurt Bickel shared the following reflection on his long-time business partner and close friend: "Daryl Pichan, my beloved brother in Christ, has died and joined the saints triumphant. For more than 30 years, Daryl was a valued partner with Les Stroh and me at Cornerstone Consulting. He was known as a visionary leader and mentor. He lived out his mission of

clarity, connection, and courage, bringing insight, wisdom, and faithful support to our partnership and to the many people he served. I especially benefited from our phone calls when we talked for hours with conversations that were both fun and serious. He was a reliable source of support, encouragement, and counsel. He taught me and many others to 'Pull up oneself' and to better understand how we function in emotional systems. He is a wonderful example of a Christ-like servant leader. Even as his earthly ministry comes to a close, the ripple effects of his leadership, mentorship, and steadfast faith will continue to bear fruit for generations to come. I will cherish his friendship until I see him in heaven."

Daryl will be remembered by his family, friends, and colleagues as a faithful servant who brought light, structure, and joy to every ministry he touched. He was laid to rest in Pittsford, New York. ■

Faithful Counsel. *Real Solutions.*

Lutheran Legal League provides trusted legal support for congregations, schools and ministries across the country — so you can focus on the mission God has given you.

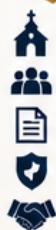
"Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."
1 Corinthians 10:31



**LUTHERAN
LEGAL LEAGUE**

SERVING • EQUIPPING • ADVOCATING

Legal Help for a Higher Calling.



Church Law

Nonprofit & Tax-Exempt Matters

Real Estate & Property

Governance & Risk Management

Ministry Transitions



LEARN MORE
AT LLL.ORG

A RECOGNIZED SERVICE ORGANIZATION OF
THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

PASSAGES

Pastor Juan Martin Enters Eternal Rest

The Reverend Juan M. Martin, 92, of Hollywood, Florida, peacefully entered his eternal rest on Friday, August 21, 2026, surrounded by the peace of the Lord he served so faithfully.

Born on June 12, 1934, Pastor Martin dedicated his long life to spreading the Gospel, shepherding communities with deep humility, compassion, and open arms. For decades, he was a pillar of faith in Broward County, FL, most notably serving as the longtime pastor at **Prince of Peace/Hollywood, FL**, where he led his beloved congregation, "Tu Iglesia amada Príncipe de Paz," with unwavering love.

Known for his gentle wisdom and joyous celebration of life, Pastor Martin was a devoted neighbor, a trusted mentor,

and a spiritual father who left an indelible inheritance of love in the hearts of everyone he touched. He is survived by his loving family, including his eldest son and namesake, Juan Manuel Martin, Jr., who remembers him as a deeply supportive presence. He is also lovingly remembered by his daughter, Georgina Mejia Martin, who shared that he "asked for nothing but gave everything, teaching us that the truest inheritance is the love we leave behind in the hearts of others." Pastor Martin leaves behind a large community of friends, neighbors, and extended family members who continue to celebrate his incredible legacy.

Funeral services were held on Friday, August 28, at Baird-Case Jordan-Fannin Funeral



Home in Fort Lauderdale, FL. Interment took place at Forest Lawn Central Memorial Gardens. The family suggests that those wishing to honor Pastor Martin's lifelong dedication to the Gospel and community service make a meaningful donation to the ministry he loved so dearly, Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Hollywood, Florida. ■

Pastor David Mennicke Called Home

The Reverend David G. Mennicke was called to his heavenly home on August 25, 2026, entering into the eternal joy of the Lord whom he faithfully served throughout his long life.

Before his well-deserved retirement, Pastor Mennicke was a cornerstone of Florida's faith community, shepherding **Christ/Cape Canaveral, FL** for 21 vibrant years. His long legacy of active ministry also stretched back decades



into the Midwest, where he served with distinction as a pastor for **Immanuel/Des Plaines, IL** throughout the 1970s, and later at Living Lord/Bartlett, IL during the early 1980s.

His life was defined by his steadfast faith, his profound love for the Scriptures, and his deep devotion to the spiritual care of his family and the people of God. He was known to be a Biblical scholar. "When I first called Christ Lutheran after receiving my call at Seminary,

he greeted me with 'Happy St. Michael & Archangels Day!'" offered Pastor Gregory (Greg) Le Sieur, who was installed there in 2005.

He is survived by his beloved wife, Judith. A private family graveside service was held on September 1, 2026, where he was laid to rest. The service was beautifully led by the Rev. James Fernandez of **Hope/Melbourne, FL** (SELC) where he and his wife, Judith, had been members since his retirement.

May the Holy Spirit grant them peace as they grieve his death and comfort as they celebrate his glorious homecoming. ■



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

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

Charging Our Congregations to Celebrate Our Shepherds

October, 2026 is officially Pastor Appreciation Month, meaning it is once again time for congregations worldwide to face their greatest annual challenge: figuring out how we thank a person whose actual job description can include listening to our deepest secrets, remaining cheerful and focused while attending multiple evening church council, boards of elders, and endless school board and committee meetings most evenings of the week.

Pastoring our congregations is a massive, life-altering responsibility. Yet, when October rolls around, our collective gratitude often manifests in rather questionable ways. Stop with the well-meaning but terrifying gifts — ranging from generic “Participation Trophies” to faux-crystal plaques that look like they were salvaged from an elementary school sports banquet. If we are being completely honest, your pastor already has roughly fifteen decorative crosses hanging in his office and a dozen more at home! They do not need another.

And please, let us collectively agree that a tin of breath mints or a bottle of wine does not accurately scream, “Thank you for guiding my spiritual formation.”

The truth is, pastoring is a sublimely chaotic, exhausting endeavor. One seasoned District pastor once jokingly told me, “The sheep can stink sometimes.”

In my position in Florida-Georgia, I get around. I can promise you, our guys preach with absolute conviction, crafting personal introductions and meaningful messages that transform our lives. They also handle the administrative burdens, navigate theological (Synodical?) debates, and somehow manage to avoid telling the

church board what they really think during during a three-hour discussion about the proposed new color of carpet or paint for the sanctuary.

Beneath that humor lies a serious, profound reality. Our pastors carry an immense weight. They are the ones we call when a marriage is fracturing, when a diagnosis is grim, when a family members challenges or when the world simply feels too heavy to bear. They spend their weeks

card or note (with a gift card in it!). Get your congregation to put a giant box in the narthex during October and present your pastor(s) with it on Reformation Sunday! And when you give them the box, pray over them!

Those notes and cards might include offering them a week at your cabin or cottage or a local resort or hotel (with a promise not to text them!) Or it might be an afternoon on the golf course, tennis court or your boat. Take them to lunch or dinner at a premium restaurant. If funds are tight, volunteer for yard work, detailing their car or providing home maintenance repairs.

Importantly . . . stand up for your pastors when you hear complaints, and actively commit to praying for their specific personal challenges every single day. Pastors choose to serve because they believe deeply in the mission of Christ. Let’s make sure that by the time Thanksgiving rolls around, they feel deeply loved, fiercely protected, and profoundly reminded that they are not walking this path alone.

And by all means . . . don’t forget their wives! These women are their spiritual anchors, their silent partners who are their true grounding force who hold down the fort, stabilizes the home, and provides a safe harbor for the pastor to rest amid intense ministry storms. Some hold part- and full-time jobs. We’re blessed in Florida-Georgia to have women who are devoted prayer warriors who stand guard over their husband’s heart and mind, deflecting the heavy spiritual warfare that comes with leadership. No doubt they, too share some of the sleepless nights while rebounding to emphasize the profound joys of serving the body of Christ. ■ —*JL*

The LAST WORD



John List
FLGA District
Communications Director
Editor, Lutheran Life
lutheranlife@flgadistrict.org
561-212-2112

praying for our families, preparing messages to anchor our souls, and quietly carry burdens. They are not “professional Christians” performing for an amateur audience; they are fellow sheep who have stepped up to lead the flock at immense personal sacrifice. They routinely carry the weight of their community’s deepest traumas, including divorces, terminal illnesses, suicides, and abuse. And beside that, their spouse and children are often held to unrealistic, unwritten behavioral standards by the congregation.

This October, let’s skip the cheesy, religious bookstore knick-knacks and give gifts that actually show we care. If you want to make a real impact, write a heartfelt personal